

HUMANITY OF GOD

Karl Barth, *HUMANITY OF GOD*, John Newton Thomas, trans. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960),

Karl Barth was Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Basel, Germany.

This article is a lecture Barth delivered at the meeting of the Swiss Reformed Ministers Association in Aarau, on September 25th, 1956.

[The humanity of God](#) means God's relation to and turning toward man. It signifies the God who speaks with man in promise and command. It represents God's existence, intercession, and activity for man, the intercourse God holds with him, and the free grace in which He wills to be and is nothing other than the God of man (Barth P. 37).

Barth suggests the theme of the meeting he was speaking at was a *change of direction* in the thinking of evangelical theology. He was foreseeing the change of his day moving toward the one *distinctive* from an earlier change. He cited the theology 40 years ago from the time of his speech (approximately 1916) was about [a God who was absolutely unique in His relation to man and the world, overpoweringly lofty and distant, strange, even wholly other](#) (Barth P. 37).

Barth indicates the fact that theological paradigm always changes by saying "earlier change of direction was not the last word. The change he was engaged in 1956 could not be the last word" (Barth P. 38).

What played a decisive role for Barth was "the failure of the ethics of the modern theology of the time, with the outbreak of the First World War, which caused Barth and others to grow puzzled about its exegesis, its treatment of history, and its dogmatics. According to Barth, the stone wall they first ran up against was that the theme of the Bible is the deity of God – God's independence and particular character; God's absolutely unique existence, might, and initiative, above all, in his relation to man (Barth P. 41).

Barth wrote that people at the time viewed the deity of God, the "wholly other" in isolation, abstracted and absolutized, and set it over against man – in such fashion that it continually showed greater similarity to the deity of the God of the philosophers than to the deity of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Barth P. 45).

Then they arrived at searching the deity of God who is together with human beings; the God who exists, speaks, and acts as the partner of man, as absolute superior partner (Barth P. 45).

They reached to the point where they recognized that in Jesus Christ there is no isolation of man from God or of God from man. Rather, in Him, people encountered the history, the dialogue, in which God and man meet together and are together, the reality of the covenant *mutually* contracted, preserved, and fulfilled by them. Jesus Christ is His one Person, as true God, man's loyal partner, and as true *man, God's*. He is the Lord

humbled for communion with man and likewise the Servant exalted to communion with God.

He is the Word spoken from the most luminous transcendence and, the Word heard in the deepest, darkest immanence. He is wholly the one and wholly the other. Thus in this oneness Jesus Christ is the Mediator, the Reconciler, between God and man. Thus he comes forward to *man* on behalf of *God* calling for and awakening faith, love, and hope, and to *God* on behalf of *man*, representing man, making satisfaction and interceding. Thus He attests and guarantees to man God's free *grace* and at the same time attests and guarantees to God man's free *gratitude*. Thus He establishes in His Person the justice of God vis-à-vis man and also the justice of man before God. In the Kingdom of heaven which is at hand, in which God speaks and man hears, God gives and man receives, God commands and man obeys. This way, Jesus Christ, as this Mediator and Reconciler between God and man, is also the *Revealer* of them both (Barth P. 47).

In the existence of Jesus Christ, the fact that God speaks, gives, orders, comes absolutely first – that man hears, receives, obeys, can and must only follow this first act. In Jesus Christ man's freedom is wholly enclosed in the freedom of God. Without this condescension of God there would no exaltation of man. As the Son of God Jesus Christ is the Son of Man. This sequence is irreversible. God's independence, omnipotence, and eternity, God's holiness and justice and thus God's deity, in its original and proper form, is the power leading to this effective and visible sequence in the existence of Jesus Christ: superiority preceding subordination. Thus we have here no universal deity capable of being reached conceptually, but this concrete deity – real and recognizable in the descent grounded in that sequence and peculiar to the existence of Jesus Christ (Barth P.48).

God's high freedom in Jesus Christ is His freedom for *love*. The divine capacity which operates and exhibits itself in that superiority and subordination is manifestly also God's capacity to bend downwards, to attach Himself to another and this other to Himself, to be together with him. This takes place in that irreversible sequence. In that sequence there arises and continues in Jesus Christ the highest communion of God with man. God's deity is thus no prison in which He can exist only in and for Himself. It is rather His freedom to be in and for Himself but also with and for us, to assert but also to sacrifice Himself, to be wholly exalted but also completely humble, not only almighty but also almighty mercy, not only Lord but also servant, not only judge but also Himself the judged, not only man's eternal king but also his brother in time. And all that without in the slightest forfeiting His deity! (Barth P. 48-49).

God's deity *encloses humanity in itself*. God meets us in the existence of Jesus Christ. He wants in His freedom actually not to be without man but *with* him and in the same freedom not against him but *for* him, and that apart from or even counter to what man deserves. He wants in fact to be man's partner, his almighty and compassionate Savior (Barth P. 50).

God chooses to give man the benefit of His power, which encompasses not only the high and the distant but also the deep and the near, in order to maintain communion with him in the realm guaranteed by His deity.

He determines to love him, to be his God, his Lord, his compassionate Preserver and Savior to eternal life, and to desire his praise and service. In this divinely free volition and election, in this sovereign decision, God is *human*.

His free affirmation of man, His free concern for him, His free substitution for him- this is God's humanity. We recognize it exactly at the point where we also first recognize His deity. There is father who cares for his lost son, the king who does the same for his insolvent debtor, the Samaritan who takes pity on the one who fell among robbers and in his thoroughgoing act of compassion cares for him in a fashion as unexpected as it is liberal. And this is the act of compassion to which all these parables as parables of the Kingdom of heaven refer. The very One who speaks in these parables takes to His heart the weakness and the perversity, the helplessness and the misery, of the human race surrounding Him. He does not despise men, but in an inconceivable manner esteems them highly just as they are, takes them into His heart and sets Himself in their place. He perceives that the superior will of God, to which He wholly subordinates Himself, requires that He sacrifice Himself for the human race, and seeks His honor in doing this. In this mirror of this humanity of Jesus Christ the humanity of God enclosed in His deity reveals itself. Thus God is as He is. Thus He affirms him (Barth P. 51).