



## CHAPTER 1

# An Exposition of Karl Barth's Doctrine of Revelation

## Introduction

**I**N THE INTRODUCTION to his book *Christology*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes an observation that is indicative of some of the central themes that will unfold in this and the subsequent chapters. He writes:

Teaching about Christ begins in silence. “Be still, for that is the absolute,” writes Kierkegaard. That has nothing to do with the silence of the mystics, who in their dumbness chatter away secretly in their souls by themselves. The silence of the Church is silence before the Word. In so far as the Church proclaims the Word, it falls down silently in truth before the inexpressible: “In silence I worship before the unutterable” (Cyril of Alexandria).<sup>1</sup>

In making this comment, Bonhoeffer strikes at the heart of what ought properly to be said of revelation. We must begin with something that is given to us. We do not start with ourselves—with our religious views or spiritual experience—but with the Word that enters the sphere of our existence. This is an event that does not happen at our bidding, but in the freedom of God. The Word is God in person: the transcendent one.

This Word—the Logos—cannot be circumscribed, defined or captured in any human scheme of categorization (human “logoi”) because it is a reality that transcends the human sphere in which these schemes are founded and established. Thus, to every human logos the Word is the “counterlogos,” and as such, it calls all forms of human classification (and the forms of life in which they are established) into question.

Bonhoeffer goes on to point to the paradox that it is precisely this Word (which he calls “inexpressible”) that must be proclaimed by the church. Even

1. Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, 27.

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as the church proclaims this Word, Bonhoeffer claims, it remains inexpressible. The church can speak of the Word, but its words cannot encompass the reality of which it speaks. The presence of the Word in the church is an ineffable presence. It can transform the life and the speech of the congregation, but it cannot be assimilated, possessed, or demarcated.

Bonhoeffer writes: “to speak of Christ will be . . . to speak in the silent places of the Church. In the humble silence of the worshipping congregation we concern ourselves with christology.”<sup>2</sup> Christology may be taught in the academy, but the reality of which the theologian speaks is the reality that confronts the church in its prayer and worship. On the one hand, we are concerned with the objectivity and inexpressibility of the Word that is given to the worshipping community of the church, and, on the other, with the church’s commission to proclaim this Word. This is the paradox that must shape ecclesial life, practice, and self-understanding.

These themes will never be far from view in the following exposition of Karl Barth’s understanding of the Word of God.

### **The Nature of the Word of God**

“[T]he reality in which the New Testament sees God’s revelation taking place is utterly *simple*, the simple reality of God.”<sup>3</sup> It is Barth’s belief that in revelation God is present, and is present in his freedom. In a statement reminiscent of Bonhoeffer’s, Barth writes: “[W]e must first understand the reality of Jesus Christ as such, and then by reading from the tablet of this reality, understand the possibility involved in it, the freedom of God, established and maintained in it, to reveal Himself in precisely this reality and not otherwise, and so the unique possibility which we have to respect as divine necessity.”<sup>4</sup>

The revelation of God is not God’s answer to the religious questioning of humanity. In revelation humanity is confronted with the reality of God. This confrontation is God’s decision and God’s act, and there is no possibility of such a revelation for humanity apart from this decision and act of God. Nevertheless, “real revelation puts man in God’s presence.”<sup>5</sup> This is the gift of God’s self-presentation to humanity; but because it is God’s decision, in which a human decision has no part in it, it is a decision that God makes in freedom.

Consequently, Barth is able to say:

When revelation takes place, it never does so by our insight and skill, but in the freedom of God to be free for us and to free us from ourselves, that is to say, to let His light shine in our darkness, which as such does not compre-

2. *Ibid.*, 27.

3. Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2*, 11; Barth’s emphasis.

4. *Ibid.*, 8.

5. *Ibid.*, 237.

hend His light. In this miracle, which we can only acknowledge as having occurred, which we can only receive from the hand of God as it takes place by His hand, His kingdom comes for us, and this world passes for us.<sup>6</sup>

It is received "as it takes place." This is important for Barth. Revelation is not a commodity that passes from God to the person; it is the reality of God that becomes present to the person. It is an event. Barth says: "This is something God Himself must constantly tell us afresh."<sup>7</sup> He further asserts that "there is no human knowing that corresponds to this divine telling."<sup>8</sup> In this "divine telling," there is an encounter: there is a human-divine fellowship, but God does not give himself to humanity as a possession. Rather, there is a fresh divine telling. It is out of the encounter of these events that we must speak.

Because we are concerned with an event in which humanity is encountered, we *can* say what God's Word is, but we can only say this indirectly: "We must remember the forms in which it is real for us and learn from these forms *how* it is. This How is the attainable human reflection of the unattainable divine What. Our concern here must be with this reflection."<sup>9</sup>

The distinction here is a crucial one. Insofar as we are dealing with "this reflection," we are dealing with what can be said on the human side of the event of God actually speaking. The Word of God does, indeed, mean that God speaks. And, in view of this, Barth says: "For all its human inadequacy, for all the brokenness with which alone human statements can correspond to the nature of the Word of God, this statement does correspond to the possibility which God has chosen and actualised at all events in His Church."<sup>10</sup>

There is, in all forms of the Word of God, what Barth describes as an upper and lower aspect. First, there is the spiritual nature of the Word of God, as distinct from naturalness, or its nature as a physical event. Secondly, however, the Word of God is also natural and physical. Without this it would not be the Word of God that is directed to humanity. Were it not for this aspect, there would be no possibility of speaking of human participation in revelation.

God speaks to humanity because he *chooses* to, and not because he *needs* to. There is a distinction between what God says to himself and what he says to humanity. Barth states "What . . . [God] says by Himself and to Himself from eternity to eternity would really be said just as well and even better without our being there, as speech that for us would be eternal silence. Only when we are clear about this can we estimate what it means that God has actually, though not necessarily,

6. Ibid., 65.

7. Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1*, 132.

8. Ibid., 132.

9. Ibid., 132; Barth's emphasis.

10. Ibid., 133.

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created a world and us, that His love actually, though not necessarily, applies to us, that His Word has actually, though not necessarily, been spoken to us.”<sup>11</sup>

It is God’s purpose to speak to us. He wills to speak to us, and his speech bears the weight of the one who encompasses our existence. The Word that is spoken to us by God is the Word of reconciliation. As we hear the Word of God, so we are reconciled by the Word of God. He promises himself as the content of humanity’s future. He is the one who meets humanity on its way through time as at the end of time. Whatever God speaks to humanity, he does so as the basis of the renewal of humanity’s relationship with him. “We can only cling to the fact—but we must cling to it—that when He spoke it was, and when He will speak it will be, the Word of the Lord, the Word of our Creator, our Reconciler, our Redeemer.”<sup>12</sup>

It is possible to hear the words of Scripture—the human words—(which may or may not be understood) without there being an accompanying event. In this case, it is not the Word of God that has been heard. The Word of God is itself the act of God. In the Word is act: God’s act is the Word. But this is out of God’s freedom. When God’s Word is heard and proclaimed, something occurs that—for all our hermeneutical skill—cannot be produced by our hermeneutical skill. This act, in the freedom of God, is not ours to command.

But when the words of Scripture *do* become for us the Word of God, when Jesus Christ becomes contemporaneous through the Scripture or proclamation, the hearer “comes under a lordship.” This Word has a transforming power. Through it is created not only new light and a new situation, but a new person who did not exist before—the one who has heard the Word. But all this is *new*. Humanity is not claimed for God on the basis of a possibility latent in creation (which would imply that the fall had not been so radical in its consequences). It is not a matter of natural theology but of what Barth calls “supernatural” theology. However, as humanity “comes under a lordship,” the significance of this event opens out to encompass every sphere of human existence.

But such a [supernatural] theology, bearing in mind the power of God’s Word, will have to claim the world, history, and society as the world, history and society in the midst of which Christ was born and died and rose again. Not in the light of nature but in the light of grace, there is no self-enclosed and protected secular sphere, but only one which is called in question by God’s Word, by the Gospel, by God’s claim, judgment and blessing, and which is only provisionally and restrictedly abandoned to its own legalism and its own gods. What the Word says stands whatever the world’s attitude to it and whether it redound to it for salvation or perdition.<sup>13</sup>

11. *Ibid.*, 140.

12. *Ibid.*, 143.

13. *Ibid.*, 155.

In the humanity of Christ, in the Bible, and in proclamation the Word of God is also a human act and, therefore, temporal event. Nevertheless, it is in the decision of God that God's Word is identical with the humanity of Christ, Holy Scripture, and proclamation and, thus, temporal event. But certain distinctions must be made. The first is that the Word of God is not a reality in the same way as the so-called "laws of nature." Indeed, it is not a reality in the way in which we would apply the term to other phenomena. This must be said despite the fact that it shares in this reality and that we can know the Word of God only in the context of this reality. This must be said because, as Barth puts it, "[T]he Word of God is a reality only in its own decision."<sup>14</sup> The second is that the Word of God—unlike created reality—is not universally ascertainable. It is God's decision made in relation to humanity. The Word of God retains power over its own self-disclosure like no other object. It is new in each new situation and it cannot be anticipated in advance of its reality.

In the Word of God a decision is made, but it is not the choice or the resolve of the individual. It is the decision of God in which judgment and acceptance are announced in relation to a particular person. There is, also, a decision made on the part of the particular person, but this can only be made within the decision of God. Barth says: "I am wholly and altogether the man I am in virtue of the divine decision. In virtue of the divine decision I am a believer or an unbeliever in my own decision."<sup>15</sup>

## **The Mystery of God**

The speech of God is, in Barth's terminology, a mystery. Crucially, there is no possibility of proving the Word of God because there is no external basis upon which the Word of God can be judged. In this sense the mystery of God is the concealment of God. Here we touch again upon the paradoxical presence of God in the form of creaturely reality. When God speaks, he uses human words, and because he uses human words they *can* be understood as no more than just that. As Barth puts it, "Its form is not a suitable but an unsuitable medium for God's self-presentation. It does not correspond to the matter but contradicts it."<sup>16</sup> If God's revelation is really to come to us, it must come to us by way of a creaturely reality—even if this reality is opposed to God in its corruption and fallenness. If the Word of God is to come to us, it must come in creaturely form or it will not come to us at all.

14. *Ibid.*, 159.

15. *Ibid.*, 162.

16. *Ibid.*, 166.

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Even our knowledge of the Word of God is not through reason that has somehow remained pure and can thus pierce the mystery of God in creaturely reality. It is wholly through our fallen reason. The place where God's Word is revealed is objectively and subjectively the cosmos in which sin reigns. The form of God's Word, then, is in fact the form of the cosmos which stands in contradiction to God. It has as little ability to reveal God to us as we have to see God in it. If God's Word is revealed in it, it is revealed "through it," of course, but in such a way that this "through it" means "in spite of it."<sup>17</sup>

Revelation means the incarnation of the Word of God. Implied in this is God's actual entry into secular reality. If God did not speak to us in this way, he would not speak to us at all. To evade or deny the secularity of the Word of God is to evade Christ. God's unveiling of himself in secularity is his grace towards us. The desire to know God in a direct way is, therefore, a desire for righteousness by works: "We . . . must cleave to the true and actual Christ as He lies in the crib and in the Virgin's lap."<sup>18</sup>

In relation to this paradox Barth introduces the conceptuality of "veiling" and "unveiling." When God's Word is spoken to us, it comes to us veiled or unveiled—not partly veiled and partly unveiled. We do not receive God's speech as partly God and partly human but as wholly God or wholly human—either veiled in its unveiling or unveiled in its veiling. This must always be the case as the secular form apart from the divine content cannot be the Word of God. But, equally, the divine content without the secular form cannot be the Word of God. The secular cannot suffice, but nor can it be left behind. The former would give us realistic theology, the latter idealistic. Both would be bad theology. The convergence of form and content is discernible to God, but not to us: "What is discernible by us is always form without content or content without form. Our thinking can be realistic or idealistic but it cannot be Christian. Obviously the concept of synthesis would be the least Christian of all, for it would mean no more and no less than trying to do God's miraculous act ourselves."<sup>19</sup> According to Barth, "believing means either hearing the divine content of God's Word even though nothing but the secular form is discernible by us or it means hearing the secular form of God's Word even though only its divine content is discernible by us."<sup>20</sup> It is only in the consummation of God's purposes for his creation that we will be relieved of this alternation. To abandon the indirectness of the knowledge of God is to abandon true faith.

17. *Ibid.*, 166.

18. *Ibid.*, 169.

19. *Ibid.*, 175.

20. *Ibid.*, 176.

The speech of God is and remains, for us, a mystery. Concluding his account of speech as the mystery of God, Barth draws attention to the person of the Holy Spirit. "To say Holy Spirit in preaching or theology is always to say a final word."<sup>21</sup> In Barth's view our hearing of the Word of God is a possibility only in and through the miracle that is the work of the Holy Spirit. To say that we can only hear the Word of God in faith is the same thing as to say we can only hear the Word of God by the Holy Spirit. There is no *method* whatsoever that can assure us of hearing the Word of God as it is not a possibility we have of ourselves. It is only by the Holy Spirit—by faith—that this is possible. We may speak only of how this event (our hearing of the Word of God) occurred after the event. In this way we may speak of "experiencing the Word of God," but, as Barth says, the only method of which we may speak is the "method of faith."

## The Knowability of the Word of God

Barth prefers to speak of the "knowability of God" rather than the "knowledge of God." In so doing, he hopes to guard against any idea that there is a method that can be adopted in which the knowledge of God may be achieved. "We cannot produce this event and so we cannot give a basis for our reference; we could do so only by producing the event to which it points and letting it speak for itself."<sup>22</sup>

### After the Event

The knowability of the Word of God is the presupposition of the church. If this were not so, both proclamation and dogmatics would be pointless and meaningless activities. So, when we ask about the "knowability" of God we "look back from the knowledge of God and . . . ask about the presuppositions and conditions on the basis of which it comes about that God is known."<sup>23</sup> Revelation is an event in the sphere of human experience, but it is always a movement from God, and all that we say of revelation must work from this "givenness." "God's revelation breaks through the emptiness of the movement of thought which we call our knowledge of God."<sup>24</sup>

It is inappropriate to speak in universal terms. We do not ask "How can *all* people know the Word of God?" because this is not a matter of universality. We do not speak of people in general, but rather we speak very concretely and specifically of people in the church. In the context of the church, the Word of God is

21. *Ibid.*, 182.

22. *Ibid.*, 228.

23. Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/1*, 63.

24. *Ibid.*, 74.

known and therefore can be known. This being so, it must have been spoken and it must have come as a divine call to specific people.

If the Word of God is addressed to humanity it is because it is intended that the Word of God be known in the sphere of human existence. It is given to men and women in order that they may hear it and be transformed by it. Barth does not generalize the point, and insists that humankind in general has no capacity for receiving the Word of God. Barth explicitly rejects the suggestion that God's encounter with humanity is to be understood as a human religious experience that can be established historically and psychologically—an experience understood as the actualization of a general, demonstrable religious human capacity. Understood in this way, knowledge of the Word of God is the actualization of a specific possibility residing in human nature. Barth is fundamentally opposed to the idea that the knowledge of God is an anthropological possibility.

Barth does not deny that the Word of God may become an experience for humanity. What concerns him is how such an experience can come about. He writes:

There can be no objection in principle to describing this event as “experience” and even as “religious experience.” The quarrel is not with the term nor with the true and important thing the term might finally denote, namely, the supremely real and determinative entry of the Word of God into the reality of man. But the term is burdened—this is why we avoid it—with the underlying idea that man generally is capable of religious experience or that this capability has the critical significance of a norm.<sup>25</sup>

The issue at stake here is whether or not the event in which the Word of God is experienced can be placed alongside other events of human experience. Does it require a human potential that must be employed to make it an event? Is it bound up with some human property? Barth is clear that the human capacity to hear the Word of God cannot be attributed to humanity in general or any human being in particular. “God’s Word is no longer grace, and grace itself no longer grace, if we ascribe to man a predisposition towards this Word, a possibility of knowledge regarding it that is intrinsically and independently native to him.”<sup>26</sup> The Word that God speaks is one of reconciliation between God and humanity, and if this Word leans upon a human potential then we cannot speak of a radical renewal. Such a radical renewal is not possible unless men and women understand themselves as sinners living by grace and therefore as sinners closed up against God.

[T]here can be no question of any ability to hear or understand or know on his part, of any capability that he the creature, the sinner, the one who waits, has to bring to this Word, but that the possibility of knowledge cor-

25. Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1*, 193.

26. *Ibid.*, 194.

responding to the real Word of God has come to him, that it represents an inconceivable *novum* compared to all his ability and capability, and that it is to be understood as a pure fact, in exactly the same way as the real Word of God itself.<sup>27</sup>

Barth discerns the ubiquitous influence of Renaissance philosopher Descartes in “modernist” theology. His proof of the existence of God derives from human self-certainty, but for Barth this will not do. He states emphatically that in theology it is impossible to think along Cartesian lines. “For we do not find the Word of God in the reality present to us. Rather—and this is something quite different—the Word of God finds us in the reality present to us. Again it cannot be produced again out of our direct experience. Whenever we know it, we are rather begotten by it according to Jas. 1:18.”<sup>28</sup> The Word of God, because it is not a human possibility (deriving from a human capacity), is grounded and established in itself. We do not ask, therefore, of the will or intent of humanity with regard to the Word of God, but of the will and intent of God. “Men can know the Word of God because and in so far as God wills that they know it.”<sup>29</sup>

In explicating his rejection of the “human possibility,” Barth asserts that “We possess no analogy on the basis of which the nature and being of God as the Lord can be accessible to us.”<sup>30</sup> But we do have a concept of lordship. Why should that not be extended “to the infinite and the absolute” of the lordship of God? Barth rejects this line of reasoning. *Our* ideas of lordship cannot help but rather hinder our understanding of the lordship of God. “For in the last resort they do not point us to God, but to ourselves, to our God-alienated souls, to our threatened life on this side of death, to a merely possible lordship set in the sphere of our choosing.”<sup>31</sup> If we know of the lordship of God, it is through revelation alone, to which our understanding of human lordship cannot make any contribution. Barth extends this analysis to reject, in the same way, any continuity between our human concepts of creation and reconciliation, and what we know of God as creator and reconciler through revelation.

These observations, which we will take up in the next chapter, underline Barth’s fundamental rejection of the supposition or speculation that “behind or above the fact of the real knowledge of God there is a kind of empty space which can be filled up by the assertions of an overlapping doctrine of being and knowledge in general.”<sup>32</sup> The knowledge of God is known in the event of God making

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, 195–96.

29. *Ibid.*, 196.

30. Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/1*, 75.

31. *Ibid.*, 76.

32. *Ibid.*, 65.

himself known. Apart from this event, there is neither knowledge of God, nor knowledge that there is no knowledge of God.

## The Fulfillment in Humanity

Barth affirms that God *is* known. Knowledge of God is a possibility for humanity because of God's grace and mercy. Barth refers to this as the "readiness of God."

If we are to inquire of the "readiness of humanity," as Barth does, it is necessary to affirm that this latter "readiness" is a possibility only insofar as it is encompassed by the former. Barth opposes natural theology because it attributes to the readiness of humanity an autonomous status. "In its own way all natural theology circles about the problem of the readiness of man to know God. It does so in its own way, i.e., by elevating the readiness of man into an independent factor, so that the readiness of God is not understood as the only one that comes under consideration, nor is the readiness of man regarded as included within it, and completely dependent upon it."<sup>33</sup> However, if in the readiness of God grace and mercy are bestowed upon humanity, the assertion of the readiness of humanity—*qua* autonomous humanity—is an assertion in defiance of God's grace and mercy. The person who makes such an assertion is one "who wants to carry everything, even—a very Atlas—the whole world. Under no circumstances will he let himself be carried. Therefore finally and at the deepest level he will always be an enemy of grace and a hater and denier of his real neediness."<sup>34</sup>

If there is no autonomous readiness, there must be, nevertheless, a readiness of humanity and as such a positive statement is to be made. To reach this positive statement, we must reach beyond our anthropology and ecclesiology to the readiness of humanity that is found in the one individual, Jesus Christ. "In Christian doctrine, and therefore in the doctrine of the knowledge and knowability of God, we have always to take in blind seriousness the basic Pauline perception of Colossians 3 which is that of all Scripture—that our life is hid with Christ in God."<sup>35</sup> Here the central christological aspect comes decisively into view. Barth explains, "Jesus Christ is the knowability of God on our side, as He is the grace of God itself, and therefore also the knowability of God on God's side."<sup>36</sup> In this it may seem that humanity is still left to "stand outside," but God in Jesus Christ is man, and as a consequence "In our flesh God knows himself. Therefore in Him it is a fact that our flesh knows God Himself!"<sup>37</sup> In Jesus Christ, what is impossible for humanity is, nevertheless, fulfilled in humanity.

33. *Ibid.*, 128–29.

34. *Ibid.*, 136.

35. *Ibid.*, 149.

36. *Ibid.*, 150.

37. *Ibid.*, 151.