

Karl Barth (1886-1968), *Church Dogmatics* IV/1

Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death. We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation.

Theology responds to the Word which God *has spoken, still speaks, and will speak again* in the history of Jesus Christ which fulfills the history of Israel. To reverse the statement, theology responds to that Word spoken in the history of *Israel* which reaches its culmination in the history of *Jesus Christ*.

The history of Jesus Christ took place first and foremost for the benefit of Israel. It was the history of the covenant of God with Israel which attained its consummation in that subsequent history. And so God's Word, which was fully spoken in the history of Jesus Christ when it became flesh in him, remains first and foremost his concluding Word to Israel. This ought never to be forgotten!

The New Testament tradition—in this respect most clearly documented in the so-called synoptic Gospels—is self-consistent in one great truth. There can be no doubt about the full and genuine humanity of the man Jesus of Nazareth, but in that man there has entered in and there must be recognized and respected One who is qualitatively different from all other men. . . . [The New Testament tradition] lifts Him right out of the list of other men, and as against this list (including Moses and the prophets, not to mention all the rest) it places him on the side of God.

The New Testament does not speak of the One whom it calls "Lord" in the way we might expect, as a human lord furnished with sovereignty and authority and the plenitude of power, maintaining and executing his own will. According to this presentation what distinguishes the man Jesus as the Son of God is that which apparently stands in the greatest contradiction to the being of God: the fact that in relation to God—and therefore to the world as well—this man wills only to be obedient. The true God—if the man Jesus is the true God—is obedient.

The Word did not simply become any "flesh," any man humbled and suffering. It became Jewish flesh. And it is as such a one that He is the obedient Son and servant of God, and therefore the one who essentially and necessarily suffers.

"The Word was made flesh." The Old Testament testifies pitilessly what is meant by "flesh." The Old Testament was needed to testify this because the Old Testament alone attests to the election of God, and it is only in the light of God's election that we see who and what man is—his unfaithfulness, his disobedience, his fall, his sin, his enmity against God. The Son of God in his unity with the Israelite Jesus exists in direct and unlimited solidarity with the representatively and manifestly sinful humanity of Israel.

Because he negates God, the man elected by God, the object of the divine grace, is himself necessarily and logically, and with all that it involves, the man negated by God.

The Son of God in His unity with this man exists in solidarity with the humanity of Israel suffering under the mighty hand of God. In Him God has entered in, breaking into the *circulus vitiosus* of the human plight, making Him own not only the guilt of man but also his rejection and condemnation, giving Himself to bear the divinely righteous consequences of human sin, not merely affirming the divine sentence on man, but allowing it to be fulfilled on Himself. He, the electing God, willed Himself to be rejected and therefore perishing man. It is God Himself who takes the place of the former sufferers and allows the bitterness of their suffering to fall upon Himself.

In His person He has delivered up us sinners and sin itself to destruction. He has removed us sinners and sin, negated us, cancelled us out: ourselves, our sin, and the accusation, condemnation and perdition which had overtaken us. . . . For the sake of [the victory over sin], the worst had to happen to sinful man: not out of any desire for vengeance on the part of God, but because of the radical nature of the divine love, which could “satisfy” itself only in the outworking of its wrath against the man of sin, only by killing him, extinguishing him, removing him.

That God as God is able and willing and ready to condescend, to humble Himself in this way is the mystery of the “deity of Christ”—although frequently it is not recognized in this concreteness. The meaning of His deity—the only true deity in the New Testament sense—cannot be gathered from any notion of supreme, absolute, non-worldly being. It can only be learned from what took place in Christ. Otherwise the mystery would be an arbitrary mystery of our own imagining, a false mystery.

We must not deceive ourselves. The incarnation, the taking of the *forma servi*, means not only God’s becoming a creature, becoming a man—and how this is possible to God without an alteration of His being is not self-evident—but it means His giving Himself up to the contradiction of man against Him, His placing Himself under the judgment under which man has fallen in this contradiction, under the curse of death which rests upon him. The meaning of the incarnation is plainly revealed in the question of Jesus on the cross: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). The more seriously we take this, the stronger becomes the temptation to approximate to the view of a contradiction and conflict in God Himself. [However], a God who found Himself in this contradiction can obviously only be the image of our own unreconciled humanity projected into deity. If we think that this is impossible it is because our concept of God is too narrow, too arbitrary, too human—far too human.

We have to think something after the following fashion. As God was in Christ, far from being against Himself, or at disunity with Himself, He has put into effect the freedom of His divine love, the love in which He is divinely free. He has therefore done and revealed that which corresponds to the divine nature. This concealment, and therefore His condescension as such, is the image and reflection in which we see Him as He is.

Everything depends on our accepting this presupposition, the proper being of the one true God in Jesus Christ the Crucified. Granted that we do see and understand this, we cannot refuse to accept the humiliation and lowliness and supremely the obedience of Christ as the dominating moment in our conception of God.