



# Barth

God Here and Now

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**"This volume brings together essays and addresses from the period of Barth's greatest maturity and breadth as a Christian theologian. Together they constitute some of Barth's best shorter work: rooted in prodigious knowledge of and love for the faith of the church, they are calm, concentrated statements of the Christian gospel as it addresses both the church and the world. Here in brief compass we can see Barth the dogmatician, Barth the ecumenist and Barth the Christian humanist allowing the gospel's wisdom to address central issues of Christian faith, action and witness in the world."**

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*The Times Literary Supplement*



Karl  
**Barth**

God Here and Now

Translated by Paul M. van Buren  
With a new introduction by George Hunsinger



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## INTRODUCTION TO THE ROUTLEDGE CLASSICS EDITION

It is almost always better to read Karl Barth than to read about him. He has a wonderful way of dispelling any caricatures that may have arisen at second hand. The essays collected in this volume are among his finest shorter writings. For those just starting out with Barth, they are an excellent place to begin. They are like foothills from which one might wish eventually to scale the lofty heights of his great work, *Church Dogmatics*. His theology at lower altitude is less demanding and more accessible. Yet it remains as bold, confident and provocative as in the higher reaches of his work.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once suggested that in Barth we find the same *hilaritas* as we do in Mozart. The good cheer which knows how to incorporate all that is negative within itself yet without losing its basic gladness is surely one of Barth's most appealing characteristics. It is a *hilaritas* informed by *gravitas*,

but which never succumbs to it. For all his greatness, or perhaps just because of it, Barth does not take himself too seriously. Along with *hilaritas* and *gravitas*, an element of *humilitas* pervades his work. Barth has no higher aspiration than to place his intellect in the service of God's grace. Grace inspires the cheerfulness, the gravity and the humility that he sees as proper to the theologian's task.

A crucial distinction recurs in these essays between abstract system and concrete history. Barth considers a viewpoint to be "abstract" if it mistakes the part for the whole. An abstraction is a kind of misplaced concreteness. It takes something that is necessary but not sufficient and treats it as though it were both. Although it is wrong to assign sufficiency to a view that lacks it, Barth almost never describes such a viewpoint as "false." He is more inclined to call it "abstract." It contains elements of truth configured into an improper whole.

Concreteness depends on ascribing centrality to Jesus Christ. He is the fulfillment of all the ways of God with humankind. In him revelation and salvation are one. According to Barth, Jesus Christ is primarily his life-history. His being is in his life-history even as his person is in his work. The Incarnation is the history of Jesus Christ as fulfilled in his atoning death and revealed in his resurrection from the dead. No system can account for the occurrence of this extraordinary history. It is either taken on its own terms, as attested by Holy Scripture, or not at all.

Theological concepts, metaphors and viewpoints that respect the significance of this history are not abstract but concrete. They are necessarily descriptive rather than explanatory, because what they are attesting—the mystery of the Incarnation—is unique in kind. Moreover, if they are to be concrete, they can never aspire to the kind of closure—the

unity and totality—that Barth associates with a system. They are concrete precisely by remaining open-textured in their orientation to the mystery of Christ. They point to a reality that can never be mastered by concepts, but which necessarily masters them.

The Incarnation—the history of Jesus Christ—as understood by Barth is not a system, nor does it compete with any system. Theology necessarily subjects all “systems” or “world-views” (whether overt or covert) to critical appraisal and dissolution, affirming what is valid, discarding what is not. It thereby orders all ideas, as far as possible, into a proper relation to Christ at the center, and just so to one another. There is no reason why theology might not learn a great deal from any worldview in the process, and every reason to expect that it would. Nor is there any reason for theology to set itself up as a kind of supersystem in which all questions can be arbitrated and resolved. Many questions remain beyond theology’s ken. In that sense Barth would reject the slogan that “scripture absorbs the world.” A modest revision—that by attesting the centrality of Christ, scripture reorients the world—would be more in the spirit of his thought.

In [Chapter 1](#) Barth interprets the Incarnation as the humanism of God. This move illustrates the method of critical assimilation. Rather than subjecting theology to any form of humanism, Barth reconfigures humanism by subjecting it to Christ. God’s humanism, the Incarnation, is “an event which has happened *once and for all time*” (p. 5). It is a particular, unrepeatable event, yet with universal significance. What it means for human beings to be human and what it means for God to be God are revealed by the particular human being, Jesus Christ (p. 6).

The centrality of Christ does not invalidate other forms of

human self-understanding. “The assertions of man’s understanding of himself need not thereby be ruled out as false” (pp. 6–7). After a quick survey of humanisms, Barth states:

In the light of the Christian proclamation, that may all be true, but it is true only if it comprehends, is subordinated to, and understood in connection with [. . . Jesus Christ . . .], man exists from God and for God, and as God’s creature is rushing toward Him and His eternal life.

(p. 7)

The centrality of Christ would affirm, and not exclude, any actually existing secular truth. “That is the basis on which the Christian proclamation may make peace with classical and every other humanism, though it might also be the cause of conflict with them” (p. 7).

The opening section of [Chapter 2](#) offers a glimpse of how *hilaritas* might incorporate *gravitas* without succumbing to it. The “god of this world,” who generates fear and wreaks havoc, is described soberly and in perplexity yet without despair. Whatever the appearances to the contrary, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ can and does, Barth believes, take care of himself—and at the same time also of us. Every obligation we might supposedly have toward this world’s god is dissolved by the cross of Christ. “Every (really every!) anxiety which we could have in this world was removed in Him. He, Jesus Christ, stands as Victor over our sins of yesterday, today, and tomorrow, over the hosts of temptation, over the horror of death and hell” (p. 19). It remains for us to live a life of gratitude in service to the triumph of grace.

Gratitude to Christ will not be uncritical of alien views. Other words may harmonize with God’s Word, but God’s

Word does not harmonize with them. "For there exists no second and third, but only one Word of God" (p. 22). God's Word, states Barth, can therefore "be heard only exclusively, or else not at all. Other words can be only its echo or a response to it, giving a contradictory or acknowledging answer. As God is unique, so is His Word" (p. 22). Solidarity with the world for which Christ died must be enacted, paradoxically, in solitary witness to exclusive truth. There is no solidarity without this witness, and no exclusive truth without this solidarity.

"God Himself . . . is free grace" (p. 35), writes Barth, setting forth the theme of [Chapter 3](#). Grace represents the "objective, ontological circumstance" in which we live out our lives (p. 39). Grace is free and sovereign. It is free to remain with the church despite all the church's obvious and hidden imperfections (p. 53). It is free also to operate outside the church in incognito ways. "We must reckon with the fact that it can always be at work outside the walls of the Church and can be announced even by quite other tongues than those that have been given to us" (p. 43). What the ultimate scope of grace will be we cannot say. "Strange Christianity, whose most pressing anxiety seems to be that God's grace might prove to be all too free on this side, that hell, instead of being populated with so many people, might some day prove to be empty!" (p. 42).

There is a *humilitas* involved when faith acknowledges the limitations of what it can know. We do not know, for example, how grace will take shape in its final revelation of exclusion and embrace. It is better not to speculate too closely.

For we do not know what will be revealed when the last covering is removed from our eyes, from all eyes: how we

shall behold one another and what we shall be to one another—men of today and men of past centuries and millennia, ancestors and descendants, husbands and wives, wise and foolish, oppressors and oppressed, traitors and betrayed, murderers and murdered, West and East, Germans and others, Christians, Jews, and heathen, orthodox and heretics, Catholics and Protestants, Lutheran and Reformed; upon what divisions and unions, what confrontations and cross-connections the seals of all books will be opened; how much will seem small and unimportant to us then, how much will only then appear great and important; for what surprises of all kinds we must prepare ourselves.

(pp. 45–6)

We know only one thing: that Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever, “that His grace is whole and complete,” that it endures “through time into eternity,” and that one day it will “exist and be recognized in a totally different way” than it is now (p. 46).

On the authority and significance of the Bible, the theme of [Chapter 4](#), the argument turns largely on Barth’s use of the term “form.” By saying that the Bible is the objective form of Christ’s presence and lordship here and now, Barth is ascribing sacramental status to the scriptures. The Bible functions, in effect, as the real presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ the incarnate Word is present in, with and under the written word of the scriptures. Two main ideas seem to be at stake here: mediation and witness.

Mediation involves the real presence of Christ here and now, while witness involves his saving accomplishment there and then. Although the scriptures function both to mediate

Jesus Christ and attest him, it is the concept of witness which receives the primacy. That is because, with Luther and the Reformation, Barth believes that the decisive locus of salvation is to be found in what Christ has accomplished apart from us (*extra nos*)—in his life-history as fulfilled in his death. “On Golgotha,” he writes, “everything was accomplished” (p. 19).

Scripture is the normative witness to that accomplishment. In Christ—in his life-history, in his incarnate person as found in his work, and in his saving work as bound to his person—we have been reconciled to God and made heirs of eternal life. In its witnessing function, therefore, Scripture points away from the present and back to what has been done for us on the Cross once for all. Witness is the controlling idea in Barth’s understanding of Scripture, because the “perfect tense” takes precedence over the “present tense.”

Witness gives us the identity of Jesus Christ, and mediation gives us his presence. He is present to us here and now, by virtue of his Resurrection, as the one who has accomplished our salvation there and then. The scriptures that attest him in his saving identity also mediate him in his saving presence. It is he himself, not the church, who is Lord of this event. He himself sees to it that he is acknowledged for who he is through the church’s faithful proclamation. He himself sees to it that the word of the prophets and the apostles functions in the community in this witnessing and mediating way.

The function of Scripture in witness and mediation, according to Barth, is best understood as “non-foundational.” It is something that is “purely given” (p. 56). It occurs as an ongoing event that is grounded in nothing other than itself. It is a high miracle occurring through the high mystery of the real presence of Christ the Lord.

The essence of the church, the theme of [Chapter 5](#), is best described, Barth suggests, as a history (p. 83). The church is a “dynamic reality” arising from Christ’s resurrection and hastening toward his future self-revelation (p. 76). It is essentially a happening that occurs “between the times.” It occurs as a community of remembrance, vocation and hope. It attests the reconciliation in Christ that has already taken place, and awaits the ultimate unity of all things to eternal life. In its vocation of attesting Christ, it is a living community—“the living congregation of the living Lord Jesus Christ” (p. 75).

This community is constituted, as Barth sees it, by the proclamation of the gospel. When the centrality of the Word is acknowledged, then the essence of the church can be expressed in any number of different ways. The church’s essence is a matter not only of witness but also of fellowship, not only of proclamation but also of sacrament, not only of being endangered but also of being preserved. In every aspect, however, it is always primarily a question of the Word. “It is a question of the congregation being ready, open, and free for God’s Word and for the renewal of the Church by God’s Word” (p. 101). The Christ who operates through the Word is the hope, comfort and renewal of the church. “The hope and the only hope of the Church is that He so speak His Word that the corresponding answer is found among Christians, that He accept and and make use of the witness of His apostles once again, that He make the exposition and application of this witness strong, deep, and contemporary in laying hold of men” (p. 93). Just so is the church’s essence a history.

Christian ethics, as explained in [Chapter 6](#), is a matter of work and prayer (p. 113). It involves the work that begins in prayer, and the prayer that ends in work. It calls continually upon God even as it seeks to live in accord with its petitions,

thanks and praise. Its ethics is an answer to the call and command of God. The primary acting subject who must always be taken into account is not the human being but God. "God does something and does it in such a way that man is thereby called to do something in turn" (p. 107). The call of God, as it goes forth in the history between God and all who know him in love by faith, is God's command. Human conduct is therefore good when it corresponds to the indicative of God's grace (p. 109). What God has graciously done for us includes the divine imperative within itself.

In the final chapter on "humanism," Barth reflects on the ten-day conference that he had attended with other European intellectuals and where he had presented what is now the first chapter in this collection. After summarizing what some of his secular colleagues had said in their lectures, he finds himself wondering whether the real human being, the contemporary human being, had come into the picture at all. "The problem of guilt was not so much as touched on in those ten days," he ponders, "and the problem of death was only barely touched" (p. 127). Moreover, how could the real human being be seen "where no one could speak out of a genuine, comforting certainty and hope?" (p. 127).

What it means to be human is not available concretely if the total relevant context is not taken into account, and that means taking into account human existence as determined by the centrality of Christ. It means taking human existence into account as defined by his judgment and grace.

How can we speak constructively about what is meant by the label "humanism," about real contemporary man and his future if we do not know and do not *want* to know that man is in fact lost and also in fact saved, if one does not know

and does not want to know the true horror and the true hope of our situation? The true man for all time is the lost and rescued man who is seen in the mirror of Jesus Christ.

(p. 128)

Only through Jesus Christ can what it means to be human be seen in the full depth of its misery and the full dignity of its hope.

In conclusion, it would be best not to mistake what Barth means when he compares the mission of the church to the task of being a letter carrier (p. 49). The church is commissioned to deliver a message not of its own devising and whose contents are not at its discretion. It is the message of the gracious mystery of the Incarnation. The grace of this mystery is sheer gift even as the mystery of this grace is better met with adoration than with grudging consternation.

While the content of this message is fixed, the mode of its presentation is a matter of keen responsibility. The church must not only place itself in the service of this message. It must do so with all “its own power, faith, [and] skill” (p. 49). Proclamation is a task requiring Christians who are “nimble, humble, questioning, seeking, asking, knocking” (p. 53). When we cease to be such persons and fall asleep, grace will rouse us like a trumpet blast from our slumbers (p. 53). We will then know anew that we are called to proclaim the mystery of Incarnation with all the intelligence, boldness, taste and good cheer that we can muster. But then we will also know that the outcome lies beyond our control, for “it is His decision, the decision of the Word of God, just when and where our choice is the choice of truth in adoration” (p. 23).

GEORGE HUNSINGER