



God and Modern Thought

Karl Barth

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Genesis 12: 1–4 Excerpt from Dogmatics in Outline

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth dominated the theological landscape of western Christianity from the publication of his first book in 1919 until his death in 1968. Pope Pius XII, who can hardly be said to have had much in common with the staunchly Protestant Barth, nevertheless counted him the greatest theologian since Thomas Aquinas, and though Barth has had as many opponents as supporters over the years, few would contest his significance as probably the most influential Protestant theologian of the 20th century.

And yet Barth was not the typical academic theologian. He did not study for a doctoral degree. Instead, he trained and for the first decade of his career served as a parish pastor before bursting on the theological scene with his ground-breaking commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans, a searing indictment of the cultural Christianity of his day which, in the words of the Catholic theologian Karl Adam, exploded 'like a bombshell on the playground of the theologians'.¹ Only thereafter was Barth appointed to a university post. And although he spent the rest of his life as a teacher, first in Germany and then for the final 25 years of his career, in his native Basel, he always charted his own path.

Now, there are plenty of debates about how to interpret Barth, but I think every serious reader of his work would agree that nothing would have pleased him less than to be the subject of a sermon in a service of Christian worship. For, as the short passage you have just heard suggests, Barth's constant theme throughout his long career was the centrality of God – and not human beings or human concerns – as the proper subject both of theology and of the work of preaching that he believed theology existed to serve. His favourite piece of pictorial art was Mathias Grünewald's famous Isenheim Altarpiece, a copy of which he kept over his desk as a reminder of the theologian's task. The painting features a depiction of the crucifixion as arresting as it is gruesome, and immediately to the right of the cross stands John the Baptist, with a preternaturally long finger pointing at the crucified Christ. It was Barth's contention that the job of the theologian was to emulate that finger, pointing resolutely away from him or herself and toward Jesus, the Christ.

Barth's insistence on this point was largely a reaction to the dominant style of theology that had emerged in the modern period and in which he had been trained. According to this perspective, theology was reflection on religion, and religion was understood as a

¹ Karl Adam, 'Die Theologie der Krisis' in *Hochland: Monatsschrift für alle Gebiete des Wissens, der Literatur und Kunst*, 23 (1926-27): 271–286.

human phenomenon, grounded in our need for meaning or order, or, alternatively, in a putative inbuilt orientation to the transcendent. Humans were religious beings, it was argued, hard-wired to ask questions about where we came from, where we're going, and how to manage the journey; and religion was the natural response to these inner impulses. In short, we human beings come with a God-shaped hole, and religion gives us the material with which to fill it.

Barth thought all this completely – and dangerously – wrong, for grounding religion in human needs and longings meant that God was defined in human terms, 'part of the intuitions and marginal possibilities of human thinking'. But, he insisted, what 'we think for ourselves ... as God' is not God at all, but an idol. For an idol is anything human beings construct, whether it be a statue or an idea, in which they place their trust. It was just such idolatrous worship of human desires, Barth believed, that led all his university teachers to give their enthusiastic support to the Kaiser's war policy in 1914, and which, two decades later, led German Christians, Catholics and Protestants alike, to pledge their allegiance to Hitler as the one who, in fulfilling the aspirations of the German people, also somehow fulfilled God's will for the world.

Barth would have none of it. Indeed, because he refused to swear the oath of personal loyalty to Hitler required of all German civil servants – one of only two academics to do so – he was dismissed from his post at the University of Bonn and had to return to Switzerland to teach. Barth's theological point was simple: the *reality* of God, he insisted, must not be confused with any of our *ideas* of God. To succumb to this confusion by thinking of God, as, say, the most perfect being, was to stand guilty of precisely what Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and other modern critics of religion accused Christians of doing: projecting their own hopes and values – as well as their prejudices and fears – on to the infinite and thus finally worshipping themselves. Against this perspective, Barth famously insisted that 'one can *not* speak of God simply by speaking of man in a loud voice'.² God – the true God – does not conform to our ideas about God, but overturns them, shattering our hopes and values no less than our prejudices and our fears, and forcing us to view our lives on entirely new and unfamiliar ground. As the essence of all reality, Barth argued, God is not one whom we find, whether by looking to the starry heavens above or the moral law within, but the one who finds us – and who does so on terms that we cannot dictate or even foresee.

And because for Barth God finds us pre-eminently in the words of Scripture, it is appropriate that we turn to the biblical text that we have heard today, the call of Abraham, which brings us face to face with this God. Abraham's call is the hinge on which the whole narrative of Genesis and, indeed, all the remaining books of the Bible, turns. All that has come up to this point in the first eleven chapters is a kind of prelude, a thoroughly depressing story of human declension from their origins as the pinnacle of creation to a scattered mob speaking mutually incomprehensible languages. But with the call of Abraham, the plot shifts, becoming a story – a long and tangled one, to be sure – of how God reverses this downward trajectory and seeks to bring humanity to glory. That story stretches from the patriarchs down through Moses, David, the prophets, Israel's exile and return, to its culmination in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. But it all begins here, with the call of Abraham. And Barth, I think, would draw our attention to how abruptly this story begins. 'Now the LORD ... said unto Abra[ha]m, "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee".'

² Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (Pilgrim Press, 1928), 196.

What are we to make of this, and, more to the point, what is Abraham to make of it? After all, at this point in the narrative he has only just been introduced to us as a character at the end of one of those many tedious genealogical lists that fill the first chapters of Genesis, and all we know of him is that he was married, and that he had followed his father Terah from their native home in Ur of the Chaldeans to settle in Haran (in what is today south-eastern Turkey). We certainly have no sense that Abraham was looking for God, that he was oppressed by a sense of his own sinfulness, that he was struggling to find meaning in life, that he had a God-shaped hole that needed filling. In fact, we are not told anything at all about his religious life here, though later on in the book of Joshua we learn that when 'Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor lived beyond the Euphrates', they 'served other gods' (Joshua 24: 2). And as far as we can tell, Abraham – who was seventy-five years old at the time and so presumably well-settled in his ways – was perfectly content in all this. There is no hint that he was in the throes of any spiritual crisis. The voice, the call, comes completely out of the blue.

And just who is this being who calls? No introduction is offered or, seemingly, requested. The reader of Genesis will know that the LORD who calls Abraham is God, the one who created the heavens and the earth, who saved Noah and his family from the flood, who scattered the builders of the tower of Babel – but there is no hint that Abraham, who, remember, was serving other gods at the time, knew any of this. So why did he obey that voice, rather than dismissing it as a dream or a hallucination, the ill effects, perhaps, of an 'undigested bit of beef', or, worse, as the voice of some malevolent spirit leading him to destruction? Why did he listen? We are not told. Evidently it's not our concern. We read simply, 'Abra[ha]m departed, as the Lord had spoken unto him'.

So what kind of deity is this God of Abraham, whom Christians (along with Jews and Muslims) worship, and who makes such imperious and inexplicable demands? Well, it's surely worth noting that this deity combines the command to follow with a promise of blessing: 'I will make of thee a great nation,' God says, 'and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.' Fair enough; but, frankly, these are not the sorts of promises that Abraham himself was likely to see fulfilled: great nations are not made in the span of a single lifetime, and the blessing of all the earth's families is an even more distant prospect. One might expect he would at least receive some sort of tangible down payment on these extravagant promises, but even this is lacking. For very soon after he is called it becomes clear that Abraham will remain a stranger in the land to which God calls him: he himself will own none of it, with the singular exception of a cave he purchases as the family tomb. Even the promise of offspring is not forthcoming: years pass from the time of his calling before even one child is born to Abraham. At best, God's promises seem to hang by a thread.

And yet Abraham obeys the voice that calls him and remains faithful to it through the subsequent one hundred years of his life. Apparently, he accepts that God's promises do not come on the terms that he himself would have chosen. And so the God he follows becomes the God of those who come after him, and who look to him as the ancestor and exemplar of their faith. Why does he follow? Again, we are not told. We can only assume that this God, the God who does not come at his bidding, or in answer to his need, or to solve his problems, is one whose command brooks no refusal. Such a God, who 'cannot be known by the powers of human knowledge, but is apprehensible and apprehended solely because of His own freedom, decision and action', is the God Barth was convinced

the church of his day had forgotten. For this God, the God of Abraham, has no patience with our agendas, driven as they are by suspicion, doubt, and fear, agendas whereby we either seek to dominate others or, contrariwise, allow ourselves to be dominated in order to gain some measure of peace and security. This God has no interest in our feeling secure and at no point gives us what we want, but rather in revealing himself to us transforms our wanting in ways we cannot imagine and which we can only dimly understand.

Is this God real? And, perhaps more importantly, is this God trustworthy? The story of Abraham shows that there is no way to answer this question in advance. We can't demonstrate that Abraham's trust in God – or our own – is justified, because God is not accessible to us, not a being we might go and investigate by our own power or ingenuity. Rather, as Barth insisted, precisely because this being is *God*, we can know and come to trust Him only as He comes to us, only 'where there is actual experience that God speaks, that He so represents Himself to us that we cannot fail to see and hear Him'. It is not a comfortable situation. On the contrary, when we encounter this God, we find ourselves made supremely uncomfortable, for, as the story of Abraham shows, an encounter with this God will completely disrupt our lives, upending our sense of who we are by calling us to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. If we follow, it will be because we, like Abraham, are convinced that the One who has called is indeed God, the one who formed us and sustains us and thus who intends our good, so that as we are confronted by this God, even though by that very fact we are placed in a situation 'in which we become incomprehensible to ourselves, we [nevertheless] see ourselves faced with the fact that we live with God and God with us'. And if we can accept this fact – that our lives are lived with God, upheld by God, and find their end in God – we can also trust, however unlikely it may seem, that the life we have been given, like Abraham's, is, and will be, a blessing. Amen.