

Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans* (1919; 2nd ed., 1922)

[On Rom. 1:18] . . . But what does “apart from and without Christ” mean? “The wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” [Rom. 1:18]. These are the characteristic features of our relation to God, as it takes shape on this side [of] resurrection. Our relation to God is *ungodly*. We suppose that we know what we are saying when we say “God.” . . . We dare to deck ourselves out as His companions, patrons, advisers, and commissioners. We confound time with eternity. This is the *ungodliness* of our relation to God. And our relation to God is *unrighteous*. Secretly we are ourselves the masters in this relationship. . . . And so, when we set God upon the throne of the world, we mean by “God” ourselves. . . . Under the banners of humility and emotion we rise in rebellion against God. We confound time with eternity. That is our *unrighteousness*.—Such is our relation to God apart from and without Christ, on this side [of] resurrection, and before we are called to order. God Himself is not acknowledged as God and what is called “God” is in fact Man. By living to ourselves, we serve the “No-God.” . . .

[On Rom. 1:21] . . . And so the light has become in us darkness, and the wrath of God is inevitable—“They became vain in their reasonings, and their senseless heart was darkened” [Rom. 1:21]. The barrier is now indeed a barrier, and the “No” of God is now indeed negation. . . . Unbroken thought thereby divests itself of any true relation to the concrete world, and, contrariwise, the unbroken heart, that is to say, that sensitiveness to things which is guarded by no final insight, divests itself of the control of thought. Dark, blind, uncritical, capricious, mankind becomes a thing in itself. Heartless, perceiving without observing and therefore empty, is our thought: thoughtless, observing without perceiving and therefore blind, is our heart. Fugitive is the soul in this world and soulless is the world, when men do not find themselves

within the sphere of the knowledge of the unknown God, when they avoid the true God in whom they and the world must lose themselves in order that both may find themselves again.

This is the Cause of the Night in which we are wandering: this also is the Cause of the Wrath of God which has been manifested over our heads.

[On Rom. 1:22] “Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools.”

The picture of a world without paradox and without eternity, of knowing without the background of not-knowing, of a religion without the unknown God, of a view of life without the memory of the “No” by which we are encountered, has much to be said in its favour. It evokes confidence, for it is simple and straightforward and uncramped; it provides considerable security and has few ragged edges; it corresponds, generally speaking, with what is required by the practical experiences of life; its standards and general principles are conveniently vague and flexible; and it possesses, moreover, a liberal prospect of vast future possibilities. . . .¹ That God is not known as God is due not merely to some error of thought or to some gap in experience, but to a fundamentally wrong attitude to life. . . . The more the unbroken man marches along his road secure of himself, the more surely does he make a fool of himself, the more certainly do that morality and that manner of life which are built up upon a forgetting of the abyss, upon a forgetting of men’s true home, turn out to be a lie. It is indeed not difficult to show that this is so. . . .

[On Rom. 9:20] “Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God?” All that must be said about the objection is comprehended in the words—*O man*. The objector overlooks the infinite qualitative distinction between God and man. He proceeds as though God and man were two things. He speaks of men as though they were God’s partners, junior partners perhaps, but

¹ Barth is here describing the apparent advantages of liberal Protestant theology, to which he was formerly attracted.

nevertheless competent to conduct an argument with Him. . . . It is precisely the man who respects God as God who will have no occasion to object, for he will neither fear nor desire the dissolution of his responsibility: such a man will become NOT insane, NOT immoral, NOT a criminal, NOT a suicide. . . . If, on the other hand, the tribulation be accepted, men will discover that their relative sense of responsibility is thereby guaranteed—“These things have not been said in order that we might by our lethargy checkmate the Holy Spirit, who hath given us a spark of His brightness, but in order that we might perceive that what we have comes from Him, and in order that we may learn to hope in Him, to surrender ourselves to Him, and to pursue our salvation with fear and trembling” (Calvin). . . .

[On Rom. 9:32b, 33] “They stumbled at the stone of stumbling; even as it is written, Behold, I lay in Sion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence: and *only* he that believeth on it shall not be put to shame.”

This admirable Biblical citation is composed by bringing together Isa. viii. 14 and xxviii. 16. The stone of stumbling, the rock of offence, which is, however, at the same time the precious corner-stone laid in Sion, is—Jesus Christ. In Him God reveals Himself inexorably as the hidden God who can be apprehended only indirectly. In Him He conceals Himself utterly, in order that He may manifest Himself to faith only. . . .² He that is of the truth heareth His voice. And yet, who is *of the truth*? Who sees God as He is? Who does not advance a thousand excuses for keeping out of His way? We do not endure the truth. . . . When this offence and scandal is encountered, only the believer will not be put to shame. He that *follows after* (ix. 31) but does not believe will inevitably gather nothing but empty nuts; he will run like a man who charges up a blind alley. And so there breaks forth the KRISIS of knowledge and the catastrophe of religion. There is no avoiding the shame and nakedness which accompany an impracticable undertaking.

² In this section, as in many others, Barth reflects the influence of Kierkegaard.

The Church of Esau is, and remains, what it is. It must nail Christ, its only hope, to the Cross. . . . Were the Church to appear before men as a Church under judgement; did it know of no other justification save that which is in judgement; did it believe in the stone of stumbling and rock of offence, instead of being offended and scandalized at it; then, with all its failings and offences—and certainly one day purified of some of them—it would be the Church of God. The Church, however, which sings its triumphs and trims and popularizes and modernizes itself, in order to minister to and satisfy every need except the one!; the Church which, in spite of many exposures, is still satisfied with itself, and, like quicksilver, still seeks and finds its own level; such a Church can never succeed, be it never so zealous, never so active in ridding itself of its failings and blemishes. With or without offences, it can never be the Church of God, because it is ignorant of the meaning of repentance. . . .

[On Rom. 12:1] I beseech you—“by the mercies of God.” We are not now starting a new book or even a new chapter of the same book. Paul is not here turning his attention to practical religion, as though it were a second thing side by side with the theory of religion.³ On the contrary, the theory, with which we have hitherto been concerned, is the theory of the practice of religion. We have spoken of the *mercies of God*, of grace and resurrection, of forgiveness and Spirit, of election and faith, of the varied refractions of the uncreated light. But the ethical problem has nowhere been left out of account. The questions “What shall we do?”—“How are we to live?” have nowhere been excluded. We have not been searching out hidden things for the mere joy of so doing. . . . We have found the world one great, unsolved enigma; an enigma to which Christ, the mercy of God, provides the answer. . . . Once again, then, we are confronted by the problem of the “This-sidedness” of the whole course of our concrete existence. Once again—

³ Romans 12 is normally seen by commentators as a new, practical section that follows doctrinal instruction. Barth challenges the dichotomy to which this point about literary structure often leads.

and now quite unavoidably—our life and will and acts are brought in question. For the freedom of God, the “Other-sidedness” of His mercies, means that there is a relationship between God and man, that there is a dissolution of human “This-sidedness,” and that a radical assault is made upon every contrasted, second, other, thing. . . . This means that very great reserve is necessary when judgements concerning human capacity of will and action, whether they be positive or negative, have to be made—not for fear lest the criticism should be too sweeping, but lest it should not be sweeping enough. . . . The decisive word about ethics must disclose their full ambiguity, an ambiguity covering every aspect of human behaviour. The decisive word must be the word which cuts down to the roots. . . . EXHORTATION lets what is be as it is, because of what it is not. Grace means not judging, because the judgement has already taken place. Grace means the recognition that a bad conscience must be assumed in the daily routine of an evil world. . . .

[On Rom. 13:5] “Wherefore ye must needs be in subjection, not only because of the wrath, but also for conscience sake.” To experience the wrath of God as wrath only would be eternal death. It is, however, our *conscience* that understands the “Halt”! of the drawn sword, and recognizes God in His wrath. Our *conscience* prevents us from supposing that the evil we encounter is merely obstruction and fate. It reminds us that we are evil; but it also recognizes in the sword that is drawn upon us the righteousness of the hand of God. Conscience sees in the evil that is done against us the *minister* of good. It interprets our judgement, not to our advantage, but to our salvation. It makes of the injury done to us, not our justification, but our hope. Conscience, therefore, does not allow us to rise up from the severity of our lives—embittered and ready to revolt; rather, it pronounces the end of the grim cycle of evil unto evil. Conscience leads us out of the turmoil of human suffering back to our Primal Origin, back to God—*Wherefore ye must*

needs be in subjection. Revolution provides the great opportunity of willing to do what God does. And yet, such an intention is impossible; for we have to understand that our “new” is not THE “new.” We have therefore to return to the source of our rebellion, to the apprehension of the evil in the existing order before there had issued from it revolutionary thought and action, before ever revolution was born. Our terror then was a guiltless terror, for we were then terrified with God at the misery of the creature. Then we knew also—and this knowledge was our deepest, most assured knowledge—the hope of the creation. Then was the “Moment” when our most simple perception of the relation between God and man was identical with the doing *that which is good*. But this pure “Moment” was no moment in time; and therefore being *in subjection* is also no temporal human action. And yet, to know that we have no Right, even when we are in the right, is a knowledge in time. It is this knowledge which reveals that we have a hope—the hope of the Coming World where Revolution and Order are one. . . .

[*Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 44, 48–49, 355–56, 369–70, 426–28, 490–91]

Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (1932–1967)

THE KNOWABILITY OF GOD

The possibility of the knowledge of God springs from God, in that He is Himself the truth and He gives Himself to man in His Word by the Holy Spirit to be known as the truth. It springs from man, in that, in the Son of God by the Holy Spirit, he becomes an object of the divine good-pleasure and therefore participates in the truth of God.

1. The Readiness of God

To ask about the “knowability” of God is to ask about the possibility on the basis of which God is known. It is to look back from the knowledge of God and to ask about the presuppositions and conditions on the basis of which it comes about that God is known. Only in this way, only with this backward look, is it possible to ask about the knowability of God in the Church’s doctrine of God. We come to it from “the knowledge of God in its fulfilment.” It is from there that we go on to ask about the knowability of God. The type of thinking which wants to begin with the question of the knowability of God and then to pass on from that point to the question of the fulfilment of the knowledge of God is not grateful but grasping, not obedient but self-autonomous. It is not theological thinking. It does not arise from the Church, or rather, from the Church’s basis, and it does not serve the Church. What it affirms to be knowable and then to be actually known—whatever else it may be—is certainly not God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit whose revelation and work is attested by the Holy Scriptures and proclaimed by the Church. If this God is God—and there is no other God—there is no way from the question of the knowability of God to that of the actual knowledge of Him. There is only the descending way in the opposite direction. . . .

If this is to become quite clear, we must first go back to the decision which is prior to all our questions about the knowledge and knowability of God (and is therefore their origin and at the same time their answer). This decision was made from eternity and in eternity by the fact that God is who He is. . . . In this way and for this reason the power of what He is among us and for us is distinguished from all other powers by the fact that it is the divine power. . . . How can there be opposition, how can there be doubt and difficulty, when we have to do with the actualisation of an eternal possibility, God’s own possibility? . . . If there is any encroachment here, it is the encroachment which God Himself has made in His revelation in Jesus Christ by the

Holy Spirit. Of course, we accept the fact of this encroachment. We think of it when we look back to the fulfilment of the knowledge of God. There is real knowledge of God in the power of His self-demonstration. But this self-demonstration is His revelation as the triune God. We know God in consequence of God knowing Himself—the Father knowing the Son and the Son the Father by the Holy Spirit of the Father and the Son. Because He is first and foremost knowable to Himself as the triune God, He is knowable to us as well. We cannot speak of the knowability of God as an abstract possibility. For it is concretely realised by God Himself, in the Father and in the Son by the Holy Spirit. And by God’s revelation we, too, receive and have a part both in His self-knowledge and also in His self-knowability. Though mediated and not immediate, it is nevertheless a real part. . . .⁴

One would think there was nothing simpler and more obvious than this. God—the God in whom we believe as the Head and Shepherd of the Church—is the Lord, the Creator, the Reconciler and Redeemer. Therefore we can find His knowability only in the readiness of God Himself, which is to be understood as His free good-pleasure. . . . Therefore, we can only give thanks for His knowability. Therefore, we can find it, not in a place where to some degree we already have and take it for ourselves, not in an already existent analogy, but only in an analogy to be created by God’s grace, the analogy of grace and faith to which we say Yes as to the inaccessible which is made accessible to us in incomprehensible reality.⁵ One would think that nothing could be simpler or more obvious than the insight that a theology which makes a great show of guaranteeing the knowability of God apart from grace and therefore from faith, or which thinks and promises that it is able to give such a guarantee—in other words, a “natural”

⁴ Human knowledge of God begins not with humanity, but with God’s self-knowledge and his willingness to be known.

⁵ For Barth, there is no analogy by which humans can get to God, but only an analogy made possible by God’s grace. Barth’s critique of the *analogia entis* (analogy of being) is unusual in the history of Christian theology.

theology—is quite impossible within the Church, and indeed, in such a way that it cannot even be discussed in principle. . . .

Why is it, then, that our statement on the knowability of God is not so simple and self-evident that the question of a basis of our knowledge of God in ourselves and our relationship to the world cannot be settled once and for all, but seems as though it must continually arise again in different forms and phases?

1. It may perhaps be pointed out that the establishment of our knowledge of God in this way is in fact possible and practicable, and that it vouches for its own legitimacy and necessity by its actual fulfilment. But what does it mean to be possible and practicable? And what does it mean that it vouches for itself? We have to do here with the attempt of man to answer the riddle of his own existence and of that of the world, and in that way to master himself and the world; with his attempt to strike a balance between himself and the world; even with his attempt to put these questions in the belief that he can regard the supposed goal of his answers or even the supposed origin of his questions as a first and final thing and therefore as God. This attempt is, of course, possible and practicable. This attempt does really exist, of course, in an infinite variety of forms. . . . Does this attempt succeed? Certainly it succeeds. How can it fail to succeed, although not always so obviously and happily? With all the failures, the history of mankind and the history of the individual will always be in part and even in very large part a history of the success of this attempt. Our whole existence bears witness to the fact that we can know “God.” But for what does this witness vouch? For the knowability of God? In other words, is that which we can know (as, of course our whole existence bears witness) really God? that final goal of our answers, that origin of our questions? Do we really know a first and last thing which can even be measured or compared with what Holy Scripture calls “God,” let alone identified with Him in

such a way that, from the starting-point of Holy Scripture and hence of the basis and essence of the Church, we can and must say that God is known here and therefore that God is knowable? What is “God” to the natural man, and what he also certainly calls his “God,” is a false god. This false god is known by him and is therefore knowable to him. But as a false god it will not lead him in any sense to a knowledge of the real God. It will not in any way prepare him for it. On the contrary, it will keep him from it. Its knowledge and knowability will make him an enemy of the real God. Therefore, there can be no question of either a knowledge or a knowability of God. It is simply that the contradiction is ignored which Holy Scripture sets up against the identification of God with idols. Holy Scripture and therefore the basis and essence of the Church are abandoned. A general—and from the scriptural standpoint limited—concept of “God” is arbitrarily adopted as a criterion, and—measuring by this criterion—there is ascribed to the natural man, or to the witness of his life’s endeavour, a competence and trustworthiness which Holy Scripture at any rate does not ascribe to him. . . .

Now all this is in its own way very important and interesting. But it all boils down to the question whether in this sphere there exists as a possibility somehow attainable within the life-endeavour of natural man the knowability of a god whose disclosure will bear the character of an outstanding decision, of a decision which is previous to the decision of faith or unbelief, and for the sake of which theology must betake itself to this preliminary field of operation with at least a preliminary seriousness simply because this god is identical with the real God whom the Christian Church must proclaim, so that the establishing of his knowability in the natural sphere, in the sphere of the human life-endeavour, will in fact mean a preparation for the establishing of His knowability in His revelation. If this question has to be affirmed, the pedagogic necessity of a “natural” theology as a prelude to real theology will obviously force itself upon us. Man will

have to be incited and instructed to make the right use of this position of his, i.e., to make a general survey of his different possibilities and perhaps their gradation, in order finally to discover the possibility from which he can be told that it is not only his, but that as his it is the divine possibility attested in God's revelation. . . .

In the light of the recognised main line of the biblical statements, and of the biblical witness to revelation as such, how is it possible for man in the cosmos, and his witness, to arrive at this dependent position?⁶ On this main line the whole relationship of God and man is effected on the presupposition that God is holy but man a sinner fallen from Him and therefore lost; that God is eternally living in Himself, but man lies in death; that God is in light unapproachable,⁷ but man in darkness. According to the statements which follow on the main biblical line, what takes place between God and man takes place in the free election, calling and illumination, in the undeserved justification and sanctification of man by God! What unites man with God on this main line is, from God's side, His grace, in which, before all, there is disclosed to man the judgment under which he stands—and from man's side, the faith in which he bows beneath this judgment, and in so doing grasps the grace of God. If we look at the matter from the point of view of this main line, how can there possibly be this side line on which man in the cosmos can have another relationship with God, i.e., a relationship not founded by God's election and therefore not determined by the grace of God in judgment? From this point of view, how can he be in a position where we can appeal to him as an independent witness—independent of the order of revelation? . . .

Revelation is indeed the truth: the truth of God, but necessarily, therefore, the truth of man in the cosmos as well. The biblical witnesses cannot bear witness to the one without also

⁶ Barth is here wrestling with why "natural theology" is so strong in the Christian tradition and, specifically, why it seems to appear in Scripture. He thus distinguishes between a "main line" and a "side line."

⁷ See 1 Tim. 6:16.

bearing witness to the other, which is included in it. How can they proclaim the revelation of God as what it is, namely as God's seizure of power in relation to man, if at the same time they do not first bear witness to God as the One to whose power man is already subjected as it is proclaimed to him; if they do not testify to man that he is not concerned with a foreign Lord but with his own, not with a man but with his eternal Lord, i.e., his Lord who holds and rules his whole time in and with His hands. As they proclaim God's revelation to man they must claim man himself as the man already objectively changed by the event of revelation. It is because this last takes place that the side line of the Bible arises. Hence our answer to this question is: The biblical witnesses point also to man in the cosmos in order to interpret the revelation of God in its necessary and compulsive direction and relation to the one to whom it is addressed; in order to characterise his existence and all that it involves, including the whole place in which he exists, as one which cannot legitimately be withdrawn from the claim of revelation, because the most real and original right under which it stands is the right which the God has over it who claims it in His revelation, and because this very fact that God is its Lord, that it belongs to God and lives in His service, is its truth and its unveiled reality. Because this fact, too, must always be attested, this side line of the Bible exists. Our contention is that it is not drawn from any other point than revelation itself. And how can it be drawn to any other place than back to this main line?

Everything that can be said on this line means the objective otherness of man in the cosmos, which becomes audible as the echo of the Word of God, and visible as the reflection of His light. In Holy Scripture man in the cosmos is addressed upon this echo and reflection, and starting from revelation he is referred back all the more surely to revelation itself. . . .

[*Church Dogmatics* II/1 (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1957)]