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**THE WORD OF GOD AND
THE WORD OF MAN**

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THE WORD OF MAN

by KARL BARTH

translated with a new Foreword by
DOUGLAS HORTON



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TO HIS MOTHER
THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED
BY THE AUTHOR

TO THE MEMBERS OF THE
COMMISSION ON EVANGELISM
AND THE DEVOTIONAL LIFE
OF THE
CONGREGATIONAL CHURCHES
IN THE UNITED STATES,
IN RECOGNITION OF
THEIR BROAD INTEREST
IN THE THOUGHT OF THE WORLD,
THIS TRANSLATION IS DEDICATED.

THE WORD OF GOD AND THE WORD OF MAN
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CONTENTS

FOREWORD by Douglas Horton	1
AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION	7
I. THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD	9
II. THE STRANGE NEW WORLD WITHIN THE BIBLE	28
III. BIBLICAL QUESTIONS, INSIGHTS, AND VISTAS	51
IV. THE NEED AND PROMISE OF CHRISTIAN PREACHING	97
V. THE PROBLEM OF ETHICS TODAY	136
VI. THE WORD OF GOD AND THE TASK OF THE MINISTRY	183
VII. THE DOCTRINAL TASK OF THE REFORMED CHURCHES	218
VIII. THE CHRISTIAN'S PLACE IN SOCIETY	272

which is also the ultimate answer. They are not *the* question by virtue of which theology, once the mother of the whole university, still stands unique and first among the faculties, though with her head perhaps a little bowed. However adroit in the eyes of other men I may be in manipulating theology as a science, I have not thereby necessarily lifted one finger to meet their deeper expectations of me.

Let me conclude this part of our discussion with a historical note. Those who accept the thoughts I have brought forward as germane to the essential facts thereby acknowledge themselves descendents of an ancestral line which runs back through *Kierkegaard* to *Luther* and *Calvin*, and so to *Paul* and *Jeremiah*. There are others, to be sure, who claim the same ancestry. Perhaps, therefore, for the sake of clearness I ought to add that our line does *not* run back through *Martensen* to *Erasmus*, and through those against whom the fifteenth chapter of *First Corinthians* was directed, to the prophet *Hananiah*, who took the yoke from the neck of the prophet *Jeremiah* and broke it.

And to leave nothing unsaid, I might explicitly point out that this ancestral line — which I commend to you — does *not include Schleiermacher*. With all due respect to the genius shown in his work, I can *not* consider *Schleiermacher* a good teacher in the realm of theology because, so far as I can see, he is disastrously dim-sighted in regard to the fact that man as man is not only in *need* but beyond all hope

of saving himself; that the whole of so-called religion, and not least the Christian religion, *shares* in this need; and that one can *not* speak of God simply by speaking of man in a loud voice. There are those to whom Schleiermacher's peculiar excellence lies in his having discovered a conception of religion by which he overcame Luther's so-called dualism and connected earth and heaven by a much needed bridge, upon which we may reverently cross. Those who hold this view will finally turn their backs, if they have not done so already, upon the considerations I have presented. I ask only that they do not appeal *both* to Schleiermacher *and* the Reformers, *both* to Schleiermacher *and* the New Testament, *both* to Schleiermacher *and* the Old Testament prophets, but that from Schleiermacher back they look for another ancestral line. In such a line the next previous representative might possibly be *Melanchthon*. The very names Kierkegaard, Luther, Calvin, Paul, and Jeremiah suggest what Schleiermacher never possessed, a clear and direct apprehension of the truth that man is made to serve *God* and not God to serve man. The negation and loneliness of the life of Jeremiah in contrast to that of the kings, princes, people, *priests*, and *prophets* of Judah — the keen and unremitting opposition of Paul to *religion* as it was exemplified in Judaism — Luther's break, not with the impiety, but with the *piety* of the Middle Ages — Kierkegaard's attack on *Christianity* — all are characteristic of a certain

way of speaking of *God* which Schleiermacher never arrived at.

Man is a riddle and nothing else, and his universe, be it ever so vividly seen and felt, is a question. God stands in contrast to man as the *impossible* in contrast to the possible, as *death* in contrast to life, as *eternity* in contrast to time. The solution of the riddle, the answer to the question, the satisfaction of our need is the absolutely *new* event whereby the impossible becomes *of itself* possible, *death* becomes life, *eternity* time, and *God* man. There is *no* way which leads to this event; there is *no* faculty in man for apprehending it; for the way and the faculty are themselves new, being the revelation and faith, the knowing and being known enjoyed by the new man. Jeremiah and the others — may I point out? — at least made a *serious* attempt to speak of God. Whether they succeeded or not is another story. They made at least the necessary start. At least they *understood* the need in which man finds himself simply by virtue of his being man. They *understood* the question man asks in his need. And they linked their attempt to speak of God with that need and that question and with nothing else. They tore aside every veil from that *need* and that *question*. They were in dead earnest. And this is the reason we claim descent from that historical line. We hear the imperative even from history: we ought to speak of God! It is an imperative which would give us perplexity enough even if we were in a position to obey it.

III.

I turn to my second sentence: *We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God.*

We may recall the words of the first of our authorities: "Ah, Lord God! behold, I can *not* speak." After twenty-three years of *preaching* he still allowed these words to stand — and not, certainly, as an evidence of his development but as an estimate of everything he had said: I could not really say it. And Jeremiah was a man called and consecrated by God himself.

We will not stop to ask whether it is possible to consider a church appointment in itself a call of God. Luther identified the two with arguments that are lucid enough. But even if we assumed that with our appointment we acquired also our spiritual equipment, that is, that we were thereby divinely called and endowed, we should still be men, and being such, could not speak of God. And yet our fellows in the community hold to the amazing idea that they can push us into saying the word which, as we know well enough, must be heard at any price, which they cannot say, but which, much as they desire to have us and we desire to do so, we can say no better than they. They delegate to us as ministers the same task assigned us by the university.

But we are men as well as they. We cannot speak of God. For to speak of God seriously would mean to speak in the realm of revelation and faith. To speak of God would be to speak God's word, the word which can come only from him, the word that

God becomes man. We may say these three words, but this is not to speak the word of God, the *truth* for which these words are an expression. Our ministerial task is to say that *God becomes man*, but to say it as *God's* word, as *God himself* says it. This would be the answer to the question put to us by frightened consciences. This would be the answer to man's question about redemption from humanity. And it is this which should be sounded as with a trumpet in our churches and our lecture halls, and out from our churches and lecture halls upon the streets, where the men of our time are waiting to have us teach them — and not as the scribes. The very reason we occupy our pulpits and our professorial chairs is to say *this* to them. And as long as we do not say it, however plausible we may be, we deceive them. The only answer that possesses genuine transcendence, and so can solve the riddle of immanence, is *God's* word — note, *God's* word. The true answer can hardly consist in neglecting the question, or merely underscoring and emphasizing it, or dauntlessly asserting that the question itself is the answer. Such an assertion may be true beyond dispute, but upon our lips it has a way of being now too definite, now too ambiguous. The question must *be* the answer, must *be* the fulfillment of the promise, the satisfaction of the hungry, the opening of the eyes of the blind and of the ears of the deaf. This is the answer we should *give*, and this is just the answer we can *not* give.

I see three ways we might take in the direction

of finding such an answer, and they all three end with the insight that we cannot reach it. These are the ways of dogmatism, of self-criticism, and of dialectic. They are distinguishable from one another, we may note, only in theory. No real religious teacher has ever lived who took only one of them. We shall meet Luther, for instance, on all three.

The first is the way of *dogmatism*. Leaning more or less directly upon the Bible and upon dogma, a man who takes this way comes upon the familiar Christological, soteriological, and eschatological ideas which grow out of the thesis that God becomes man. So far forth his need is satisfied and his question answered. Luther suggests in his sermons, and I agree, that it is better for us to take *this* way than to revert to and depend upon history, even Biblical history; better than to be satisfied with the mere forms of thought and worship, and so to forget what is essential and what *unessential*; better than to forget that it is our task as ministers to speak of God.

Orthodoxy doubtless has much to live down, but it has nevertheless a powerful instinct for what is superfluous and what is indispensable. In this it surpasses many of the schools that oppose it. And this, and certainly not the mere habit and mental inertia of the people, is the primary reason why it still continues to be so potent both in cultus and church polity and even in state politics. In this respect it is quite superior.

We may also remark that there are times when even the most convinced heretic desires to depart from his customary psychologisms into positive statement, when, almost against his will, he wants to talk not of religion but of God; and on these occasions he can but employ dogmatic expressions.

When the minister is given the final insight that the theme of the ministry is not man becoming God but God becoming man—even when this insight flashes only occasionally upon his mind—he acquires a taste for objectivity. And he ceases to view objectivity as a mere psychic instrument for use in analyzing the Bible and the dogmas. He finds a world which previously he had despised and hated as “supernaturalistic” slowly but surely becoming reasonable and purposeful. He understands it, so to speak, from within, from behind. He sees that what is written must be written. He gains assurance and freedom of movement in corners of that world so remote and strange that he had not allowed himself to dream he could ever be at home there. And at last he is perhaps able to find in the Apostles’ Creed, with all its hardness, more truth, more depth, and even more intelligence than in any other that short-breathed modernism would put in its place.

But obviously one cannot speak of God even in the most powerfully and vividly conceived supernaturalism. He can only witness that he would like to do so. The weakness of orthodoxy is not the supernaturalistic element in the Bible and the dog-

mas. That is its strength. It is rather the fact that orthodoxy, and we all, so far as we are in our own way dogmaticians, have a way of regarding some objective description of that element — such as even the word “God” for instance — as the element itself. We have our myths and accept them pragmatically: a working faith! We have all come upon those places in Luther — in his teaching about the trinity, for instance — where we are simply left standing with instructions to give up thinking, lift our hat, and say Yes. We feel in spite of ourselves that it will not do thus to slay the harlot reason, and we remember with dismay how often we who are not Luther have done so, in public and even more often in private. Why will it not do? Because by this kind of answer a man’s question about God is simply quashed. He no longer has a question. In place of the question he has an answer. But as long as he remains a man he cannot let the question go. He himself, as a man, *is* the question. Any answer would have to assume his nature, and become itself a question. To hold the word “God” or anything else before a man, with the demand that he believe it, is not to speak of God. The fact is that a man can *not* believe what is simply held *before* him. He can believe nothing that is not both *within* him and *before* him. He can *not* believe what does not *reveal* itself to him, that has not the power to penetrate *to him*. God by himself is not God. He might be something else. Only the God who reveals him-

self is God. The God who becomes man is God. But the dogmatist does not speak of this God.

The second way is that of *self-criticism*. Here at any rate we have a very clear, a disturbingly clear, account of God's becoming man. On this way any man who desires to have part in God is bidden as a man to die, to surrender all his uniqueness, his selfhood, his ego-hood, and to be still, unassuming, direct, to the end that finally he may become as receptive as the Virgin Mary, when the angel came to her: Behold the handmaid of the Lord — be it unto me according to thy word! God is not this or that; he is no object, no something, no opposite, no second; he is pure being, without quality, filling everything, obstructed only by the particular individuality of man. Let this latter finally be removed and the soul will of a certainty conceive God.

This is the way of mysticism, a way that must be reckoned with! Who would turn his back upon a way along which, for a little, the best spirits of the Middle Ages inspired Luther to travel? We must reckon with the mystic's awareness that God never aids man in his growth but fundamentally aids him only in his decline. The mystic knows that man really desires One who is *not himself*. I call this the way of self-criticism — though it may also be understood as the way of idealism — because by it a man places himself under judgment and negatives himself, because it shows so clearly that what must be overcome is man as man. We have all at one time or another been found upon

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