To: BTS colleagues
From: Matthew Myer Boulton
RE: BTS essay:
"God Against Religion: A Theological Critique of Christian Worship"
Date: March 20, 2005

Dear colleagues,

Many thanks for your willingness to engage this essay, and to engage in conversation on April 7th. Briefly, some context:

This essay is excerpted and summarized from a book-length manuscript, *God Against Religion: Rethinking Christian Theology through Worship* (due out from Eerdmans next year). The book is divided into two parts: Part One, a critique of worship as "fall," and Part Two, a soteriological account of worship as "reconciliation." What you have in hand here is a much-condensed version of Part One, with a brief coda gesturing toward Part Two.

As a whole, the book is an attempt to sketch a brief, systematic, liturgical theology in the Reformed tradition, i.e., to think the big thoughts of Christianity by thinking them "through" Christian worship. Most of this essay summarizes a way to think "sin" through worship: that is, not to think of sin as a form of distorted worship, but to think of sin as Christian worship itself, or at least as "seizing an opportunity" in and through Christian worship itself (Rom 7:8).

At the same time, the book is a proposal of a new reading of Karl Barth, whom I take to have "thought through worship" his whole theological career, and a new reading, too, of certain streams in Reformed traditions more generally (represented in this essay, albeit briefly, by Bonhoeffer and Luther).

Again, with many thanks, and looking forward to our conversation,

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God Against Religion: A Theological Critique of Christian Worship

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I. Prelude: God Against Religion

From a Berlin prison cell in 1944, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote of his most celebrated theological teacher, Karl Barth: "Barth was the first to realize the mistake…of clearing a space for religion in the world." Instead, Bonhoeffer wrote, Barth "called the God of Jesus Christ into the lists against religion, '*pneuma* against *sarx*.' That was and is his greatest service."[1]

It is a remarkable assessment. By 1944, Barth's chief interpreters had all but left this "greatest service" behind, lapsing, as Bonhoeffer put it, into "positivism," and "from positivism into conservative restoration."[2] Likewise, in the decades that followed, Barth's principal advocates and critics – conservative, liberal, and otherwise – have only rarely treated, much less featured, the idea that "the God of Jesus Christ" is a God "against religion." And yet for Bonhoeffer, that idea is the most important, enduring one of all in Barth's work.

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[1] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1953), p. 198. "*Pneuma* against *sarx*," i.e., "spirit against flesh."

[2] Ibid, pp. 198-9. In Bonhoeffer's view, Barth himself encouraged and participated in the first lapse, a fall into what Bonhoeffer famously called a "positivism of revelation." However, if Barth's expressly liturgical account of divine revelation is kept in view (i.e., his account of revelation as addressed to the Church, and as such, pronounced in and through biblical texts liturgically proclaimed "in the form of preaching and sacrament"), the charge of "positivism" appears out of place. Indeed, on the contrary, since Barth figures divine revelation as emergent in and through concrete human liturgical acts of communal interpretation (reading, preaching, sacrament), God's "Word" always resounds in and through human "words," i.e., in contestable, provisional, finally indeterminate fields of play, where ongoing interpretive criticism is always humanity's proper *modus operandi.* For Karl Barth, when it comes to divine revelation, the Church invariably finds itself in an acutely vulnerable hermeneutic position; hence his definition of Christian dogmatics as vigilant, continual criticism of "Church proclamation." See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), I.1, e.g., pp. 47, 14.

These prison papers are interesting, too, because they include Bonhoeffer's preliminary thoughts on how he hoped to develop this idea himself. He wrote boldly and suggestively of a "religionless Christianity"[3] – and precisely here, he parted company with his illustrious teacher in a way that helps illumine both sides of an intriguing divide. For Bonhoeffer, Barth had correctly diagnosed the problem of "religion," but finally remained caught up within its bounds, since he failed to provide a "non-religious interpretation of theological concepts."[4] Bonhoeffer believed, to put it briefly, that religion is a "temporary form" of human life, that the world had "come of age," and that "we are proceeding towards a time of no religion at all." To thrive in this new "stage" of "being radically without religion," he wrote, Christianity must change just as radically, becoming "worldly" and "secular" in ways as yet unimagined.[5]

In other words, Bonhoeffer envisioned a "religionless" way of Christian life. He pictured religion as "no more than the garment of Christianity," and so as something that could and would be cast aside – not traded for another (equally religious) vestment, but rather sloughed off altogether.[6] Karl Barth, Bonhoeffer charged, had not taken his own critique of religion to this "logical conclusion," and this charge, in turn, helps clarify Barth's distinctive case. For as early as 1922, in the second edition of *The Epistle to the Romans*, Barth anticipated this kind of criticism, and gave his answer.

His answer is twofold. First, he argues that there is no "religionless" way of life, and certainly no "religionless Christianity," available to human beings this side of Eden.

[3] Ibid, p. 163.

[4] Ibid, p. 198.

[5] Ibid, pp. 162-4.

[6] Ibid, p. 163.

Any simple and apparently radical “war against religion,” as Barth puts it, is only “pseudo-radicalism,” only a sideways step into another religious form.[7] For as soon as we begin to specify the protocols, values, and regulations of such “religionlessness,” we thereby take up again the religious project, formulating and following a particular way of life, a program for righteousness, a new *torah*, “law,” “instruction” – and so another perfectly “religious” form of Christianity. We may, Barth contends, quite triumphantly declare ourselves free of our neighbors’ “religious” difficulties, but this declaration is, after all, the standard cry of a new religious sect. Accordingly, Barth insists that any sound theological critique of “religion” must be a self-critique first of all, a careful demonstration that the lead defendant in the case we bring against religion is none other than our own “Christianity,” “worldly” or otherwise.

Second, Barth’s answer is that God is “against religion” not by annihilating it, or by establishing a human way of life beyond or beside or without it – but by transforming it, so to say, from within. For Karl Barth, the good news of the Christian gospel is that God saves humankind from religion by undertaking religion in Jesus Christ. Religion is, in Bonhoeffer’s phrase, a “temporary form” – but for Barth, it will pass away not in some imminent historical “stage” of civilization, but rather at history’s finale, in the boundless daylight of God’s redemption. In the meantime, Christians may foretaste religion’s end in liturgies of the Lord’s Supper, or in practices of Sabbath-keeping (and this means foretasting liturgy’s end, too, and Christianity’s end besides), but true “religionlessness” is, for Barth, an eschatological reality. In the New Jerusalem, there will be “no temple” (Rev 21:22); until then, however, the old Jerusalem teems with religious life.

[7] Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 241.

If religion is a "garment," then, for Barth it cannot be cast aside by modern men and women in a world "come of age." Rather, it is a garment like the garments of exile in Genesis 3: first, a desperate, makeshift garment of shame, the sad camouflage of "leaves" sewn together into "loincloths" (Gen 3:7); and second, a beautiful garment of care and good shelter, the clothing gracefully made and put on human bodies by God's own hand, covering and so transforming the human veil into a divine gift of refuge and protection (Gen 3:21). Both garments are signs of exile, negative reminders of a lost state of living "naked and not ashamed" (Gen 2:25). And on Barth's account, both garments are provisional, "temporary forms," transitory just to the extent that the exile itself is transitory. Religion is a pilgrim's garb, shed only at the end of the journey.

In this essay, I outline this portrait and critique of religion, and show how at its heart, it is a portrait and critique of worship. It is worship, most fundamentally, that has this double aspect, both veil and clothing, "fall" and "reconciliation," and so it is worship, finally, that God will cast aside. Along the way, I take cues from Karl Barth and Martin Luther – but my primary mode in these pages is constructive and theological, building up from their ideas the outline of a brief, systematic, liturgical theology in the Reformed tradition, a case that "the God of Jesus Christ" is a "God against religion," a God who saves human beings from religion – that is, from Christianity, and most fundamentally, from Christian worship – by entering it, transforming it, and finally, by ending it. At the last, then, there will indeed be a "religionless" new life for humankind, a new life without worship, and Christians today properly pray for it, call for it, and may foretaste it – in Christian worship and religion.

II. The Work of "Religion"

An angry pope, the story goes, at last convinced Michelangelo to paint the vaulted ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The artist protested that he was not a painter but a sculptor at his best, unfit for so difficult a task, and sure to fail. But Julius II, temper flaring, insisted – and so Michelangelo began his work. He drew up designs, consulted theologians, and built his wooden scaffold to the chapel sky.[8]

Down the center of the ceiling, Michelangelo painted nine scenes from the Book of Genesis: nearest the altar, three scenes from the story of creation in Genesis 1; three from the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2-3; and nearest the chapel entrance, three from the story of Noah in Genesis 6-9. Thus at the heart of the ensemble, flanked on one side by pictures of God, and on the other by pictures of wayward and vulnerable humanity, are three pictures portraying the intimate life of God and humanity together: *The Creation of Adam*, *The Creation of Eve*, and *Temptation and Expulsion from Paradise*. The second of these, then, itself the fifth fresco in the nine-fold sequence, is the central image of both this key trio and the entire work. At the apex and center of the papal chapel, the first man sleeps, and the first woman rises out of his side, stepping

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8. For an account of the meeting between Pope Julius and Michelangelo, see Ascanio Condivi, *Vita di Michelangelo Buonarroti*, trans. A.S. Wohl, ed. H. Wohl (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999). Most critics agree that to produce such a complex and allusive work, Michelangelo probably consulted theologians in print and in person – but there is no surviving record of such consultation. The artist himself wrote that Pope Julius simply permitted him to "make what I wanted, whatever would please me," and so the possibility remains that the theological vision reflected in the ceiling belongs to Michelangelo alone. See, e.g., Ross King, *Michelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 59ff; Sydney J. Freedberg, "Michelangelo: The Sistine Ceiling," in *Michelangelo: The Sistine Chapel Ceiling*, ed. Charles Seymour, Jr., (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1972), p. 190; and Howard Hibbard, *Michelangelo* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 105.

toward God with her hands clasped, raised, and pointed as if in prayer – the first human prayer – to her creator.

Some four centuries after Michelangelo painted it, this central image caught the attention of a young Swiss pastor from Safenwil.[9] If the painter put the image at the architectural center of his vision, the pastor, too, put it at the heart of his first major theological work – though he did so by way of his own, perhaps surprising, interpretation. In *The Epistle to the Romans*, Karl Barth contends that humankind's "fall" away from intimacy with God is itself occasioned by none other than the act of "worship." And so for Barth, the infamous alienation of humanity from God is best pictured not only as an illicit eating of fruit, but also as the first human prayer. In what follows, I first spell out Barth's argument in the context of *The Epistle to the Romans*; and second, I briefly sketch his Christological solution, the idea that the saving "reconciliation" to full humanity takes place as *leitourgia* – the "work of people" – is taken up, fulfilled, and so transformed in the work of Jesus Christ. Precisely as fully human and fully divine, this saving work overcomes the separation of sin, and so vicariously restores human beings to their proper and original humanity – with, in, and through God the Son.

Barth cites Michelangelo's *The Creation of Eve* in a comment on Romans 7:7-13, a passage in the thick of Paul's discussion of the relation between "the law" and "sin." "Apart from the law," Paul writes, "sin lies dead…but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died" (Rom 7:8-10). For Barth, "the commandment" in Romans is no

9. Barth would not visit Rome in person until a decade later, in 1928. See Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, pp. 186ff.

archaic cultic or moral code, no narrow, strictly Jewish regulation from which Christians are simply exempt. Rather, Barth argues that "the commandment" is best understood as religious law in general, as *torah* or "religious instruction" in the broadest terms – indeed, as religion itself. On this reading, not only Jews but every religious adult is *barmitzvah* or *batmitzvah*, a son or daughter of the commandment, and in that sense a son or daughter of religion. Accordingly, Barth's own heading for this section of his commentary is "The Meaning of Religion": reading Paul's "law" as "religion," Barth sets out what he takes to be religion's crucial relation to sin – and here he makes his appeal to Michelangelo.[10]

As a preliminary, however, it is worth spelling out just what Barth means in *The Epistle to the Romans* by "religion."[11] Barth reads Paul's "law" as "religion" – and so Barth's "religion" in *The Epistle to the Romans* fundamentally concerns "moral and legal ordering."[12] For Barth, "the possibility of religion" is the possibility not of any particular set of beliefs, practices, or regulations, but rather of believing, practicing, and regulating at all, of "moral and legal ordering" *per se*. Its varieties are abundant, and we may and do move between them: we may, as Barth pictures it, occupy one and then another "shelf in the emporium of religion," alternately "ticketed and labeled with this or that philosophy of life." Indeed, such change is a characteristic mark of both the religious marketplace and the religious person, who typically "changes color like a film of oil on

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10. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 240ff.

11. For a general discussion of Barth's "theory of religion" in both *The Epistle to the Romans* and *Church Dogmatics*, see Garrett Green, "Challenging the Religious Studies Canon: Karl Barth's Theory of Religion," *The Journal of Religion* (October, 1995). See also Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, pp. 98ff, 130ff, 282ff; and J. A. Di Noia, "Religion and the Religions," in John Webster, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 243 – 257.

12. Ibid, p. 232.

the top of water." But while we can and do move between departments in the "emporium of religion," on Barth's account, as long as we work along human labor's maximal frontier, "we cannot escape the store." We may trade one platform for another, but we cannot reside "in the air." Barth puts it this way: "living in the world, and being what we are, we cannot hope to escape the possibility of religion." The flower of "the law," of "religion," of "moral and legal ordering" will variously but assuredly bloom. The Jew, the Christian, the humanist, the vendor of any "philosophy of life" whatever – each goes about her peculiar business inside the "religious" horizon. "Moving within the frontier of human possibility," Barth contends, "I have no alternative but to appear as, and actually to be – a religious man."[13]

Thus whatever the term "religion" may indicate elsewhere, for Barth in *The Epistle to the Romans* it points to that fundamental human procedure whereby we carry out "moral and legal ordering," take and issue instructions, compose and live out "philosophies of life," subject and are subject to decrees, prohibitions, advice, applause – and so "religion," for Barth, is the procedure whereby we endeavor, in short, to stand aright. Precisely as "law," "religion" presents a program – *torah*, law, instructions, rules – for this good standing. Along and within "the frontier of human possibility," wherever human beings strive, achieve, and seek to stand, there is "law," and so there is "religion," in both implicit and explicit forms.

The term is generic; as Barth's figure of "the emporium" suggests, the genre "religion" includes any number of varieties (lists of commandments, codes of conduct, manifestos, practical manuals), and only some of these will make clear reference to "God," "gods," or "the spiritual plane." Such references are not requirements for

13. Ibid, pp. 230-2.

admission to the emporium. Rather, the retailer must only be peddling a program for standing aright, for “moral and legal ordering,” for implementing a “philosophy of life” – and for this purpose, explicit reference to divine things is incidental. Over the emporium entrance, so to say, hangs the question: *What then must I do?* To do right, to work well, to be, in the most elemental and far-reaching sense, “a law-abiding citizen” – and to receive, in due course, whatever benefits or rewards await such people – here, for Barth, is the fundamental “religious” project.

On this view, then, “religion” is by no means restricted to what most modern interpreters have taken it to be: namely, purported dealings between human beings and divine ones. Some religious programs may well claim to include such dealings, but others may not, and for Barth these others are no less “religious.” Wherever people carry out “moral and legal ordering,” specifying requirements and enforcing regulations, there is “religion.” Of course, for Barth the human attempt to stand aright is correctly understood by more fully explicit varieties of “religion” as an attempt to stand aright before God – which is to say, before an ultimate tribunal transcendent and superior to all merely human tribunals. On this view, in their “moral and legal ordering,” the most fully articulated species of “religion” turn overtly and in earnest to “the relationship between men and God.”[14] In this ultimate or maximally explicit form, “religion” is no less than the gesture in which humanity reaches and confronts its own limit. It clearly identifies the human problem and task – to stand aright before God – and it sets about this mission with matchless vigor and imagination. Here is human accomplishment at full stretch: “In religion,” Barth writes, “the supreme competence of human possibility attains its

14. Ibid, p. 240.

consummation and final realization." Thus for Barth, full-blown "religion" – the human work of striving to stand aright before God – is the ultimate, noblest, preeminent human work.[15]

Precisely here, however, with this evocation of the prevailing positive view of religion – or at least of Christianity – among most Christian theologians, clergy, and laypeople of his day, Barth begins his notorious critique of religion. For as Barth reports it, the news regarding the exploits of the human "supreme competence" finally realized in full-blown "religion" is by no means good news. With Marx, Barth indicts religion as an ingenious narcotic: far from helpfully "transforming" human beings and communities, religion "acts upon them like a drug which has been extremely skillfully administered. Instead of counteracting human illusions, it does no more than introduce an alternative condition of pleasurable emotion." Moreover, religion's failure to "counteract human illusions" is equaled by its success in propagating them: Barth arraigns religion for presenting itself as not only opposed to sin and death, but also as standing over and against them – as standing, that is, on a specious "holy ground." Assured by this misleading presentation, with "earnest and vigorous acts of piety" religious men and women "cling to religion with a bourgeois tenacity, supposing it to be that final thing of soul and sense which is deathless and unshattered" – when in fact all human labor, and preeminently all religion, can only be shattered work carried out squarely "under the shadow of death."[16]

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15. Ibid, p. 236.

16. Ibid, pp. 236, 238.

Finally, with Feuerbach, Barth charges that "by the consciousness of religion we make human thought and will and act to be the thought and will and act of God," effectively rendering "human behavior" as "supremely impressive, significant, necessary, and inevitable."[17] In this way, religion performs an excellent and insidious sleight-of-hand. When a person acts "religiously…it is widely supposed that he does well, and is thereby justified and established and secure. In fact, however, he merely establishes himself, rests upon his own competence, and treats his own ambitions as adequate and satisfactory."[18] Thus Barth contends that "religion," as the "supreme competence of human possibility," is not so competent after all – or better, is all too competent as it carries out its treacherous work. Masked as an enemy of sin, religion invites us to imagine ourselves, as religious men and women, to be pious, sanctified, and free. In the guise of humility and the service of God, religion furtively extends – to itself – sincere congratulations.

In the end, then, Barth's account of religion – as "the last and most inevitable human possibility" and "the loftiest pinnacle of human achievement" – amounts to a thoroughgoing, trenchant critique. Even as "the last human possibility," religion is nonetheless a strictly human possibility, nonetheless "flesh" and not "spirit," and as such "stands within the bracket which is defined by the all-embracing word *sin*."[19] Accordingly, the "loftiest pinnacle of human achievement" turns out to be merely "the loftiest summit in the land of sin."[20]

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17. Ibid., p. 236.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid, pp. 238, 235-6.

20. Ibid, p. 242.

But the critique cuts deeper. Barth argues that the human work of religion is not only subject to sin, not only infected by it, but is in fact its principal occasion,[21] the original and continual circumstance for the human "fall" away from primordial intimacy with God. As "the last and most inevitable human possibility," religion is the consummation of human labor, the highest rung on the human ladder of endeavor. But to stand on this top rung, as any house painter knows, is the most precarious position of all – and it is by attempting to take up just this position, Barth contends, that humanity tumbles to ruin. In this sense, then, Barth charges religion with being nothing less than "the most radical dividing of men from God."[22] That is, the human being's fundamental alienation takes place just when he dares, "as a religious man," to ascend and take up the religious position and posture, "to leave the region of mere worldliness and press forward."[23]

For Barth, this fatal "leaving" and "pressing forward" can be located more exactly, even within the "religious" sphere. It has coordinates. It has a name. It is, predictably enough, the very gesture that presents itself within religious life as most laudable, blameless, devout – and so beyond critique. In this way, it hides in plain sight.

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21. Here we must part company with Bruce McCormack. First, he describes Barth's "critique of religion" in *The Epistle to the Romans* as "not directed against religion as such but against *Religion an sich* – religion for its own sake." Put briefly: for Karl Barth, there is no other kind. If we flee "religion for its own sake," there is no "religion as such," or any other kind of religion, for that matter, where we may take up a new position. There is only "religion for its own sake." Though religion may repeatedly claim to "point beyond itself" (indeed this is religion's characteristic mark), it is always, Barth contends, precisely "for its own sake" – thus Barth's critique. Second, McCormack maintains that for Barth "the Church is the *locus* of divine judgment." And so it is – but as we shall see, Barth's critique of religion, and indeed of "the Church," strikes deeper. Most fundamentally, McCormack's language of "*locus*" misses or elides Barth's case that religion is not only the "arena" in which the disaster under judgment comes into view; it is also the perpetrator of that disaster in the first place. Relative to divine judgment, "the Church" is less "*locus*" and more "offender." See McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, pp. 282ff.

22. Ibid, p. 241.

23. Ibid, p. 245.

As the “pressing forward” that is also “fall,” it occurs in the last place the “religious” person would expect to find it – for it occurs at the very heart of “religion” and “piety,” not without but within the “holy of holies,” not peripheral but central to the sanctuary. Its name is “worship.” To illustrate how this is so, Barth turns to Michelangelo, and to the central image on the Sistine Chapel ceiling.

IV. The Invention of God

To return to Paul: “Apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law” (Rom 7:8-9) – which is to say, on Barth’s reading, “I was once alive apart from religion.” Barth locates this “once,” this human situation prior to religion, in the Book of Genesis and the story of humanity’s original life in the garden of Eden. There “sin,” the movement away from God, existed only in its “primal form,” only as “the possibility that the union between men and God may be broken” – and only, as Barth puts it, “in the secret of God,” hidden and unknown to God’s creatures. The original man and woman did not know about “the possibility of rebellion,” of breaking from intimacy and “dependence upon God,” the very intimacy and dependence that makes for genuine human being. They did not know about the possibility of taking up a posture of alleged independence and self-sufficiency, of doing exactly what they ought not do, namely, “as creatures, to be some second thing by the side of the Creator.”[24]

This position “by the side” of God is prohibited, on Barth’s account, because human beings in their original and intended state are not “some second thing”:

24. Ibid, pp. 246-7.

“Originally, there was no separation…The world was originally one with the Creator, and men were one with God.” Thus according to Barth’s interpretation of Romans 7 and Genesis 1-3, in the first place there were not two things or many, but one. God was all in all. The rebellion of sin was only a possibility, “God’s secret” withheld from human knowledge. The “once” before law, before religion, was characterized first of all by the “union” of God with God’s creation.[25]

This “union,” however, was not the union of identity, since even in Eden, human beings were human beings, and God was God. Humanity – *’adam*[26] – lived and acted in the garden with genuine human freedom, but this freedom was always with, in, and through God. For Barth, the garden originally was not void of difference – only “separation.” Accordingly, the original union was the union of intimate fellowship, communion, and above all “the equality of friendship.”[27] Human beings were free to live and act – but only in this communion, only “in dependence upon God” as creator, sustainer, partner, and friend. In this original partnership, God always occupied, as God, the position of priority and power; in this sense *’adam* was always properly “dependent.” But precisely as “upon God,” this human dependence was neither restriction nor forfeiture, but was instead constitutive of full humanity. In the garden, to be fully and freely human was to be “in dependence upon God.” Human beings were not created to

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25. Ibid.

26. Hebrew *’adam*, “humanity,” “the human being.” At least some of the controversy and confusion, especially among readers unfamiliar with Hebrew, over whether Genesis 1 – 3 should be read as “history” or “myth” might be clarified if this term’s meanings were more widely known. The English terms “Adam” (KJV, RSV) and “the man” (NRSV), for example, give no indication of the comparatively broad semantic range of the Hebrew word, and so they effectively present *’adam* as an apparently specific historical individual. Fewer readers in English, however, would be tempted to read this way if the story of *’adam* were rendered as the story of a person named “Humanity.”

27. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 247.

be “some second thing,” but rather to be in “union” with God, partners in “the equality of friendship.”

And yet in light of this “dependence,” this “equality” could only be apparent: on Barth’s view, God and creatures as such were not, are not, and can never actually be equals. Nonetheless, the intimate friendship of equals – and decidedly not the mere “friendliness” and good manners possible between superiors and inferiors – is what God wants with humanity. Here, then, is the meaning and purpose of “God’s secret”: the radical inequality or “infinite qualitative distinction”[28] between God and human beings was as real in the garden as it is outside it, but originally the fact of this distinction was mercifully withheld, lovingly hidden from humanity, this concealment in effect making possible Eden’s apparent “equality of friendship.” If human beings were made aware of this distinction, their “dependence” discovered and their apparent “equality” revealed as merely apparent – then for them, precisely as creatures, the idea of any “equality of friendship” with God could only appear as preposterous and impossible.

Aristotle defines “perfect friendship” as “the friendship of men who are good, and alike in excellence” – but for Barth, with respect to “excellence” God and humanity are in no way “alike.” As the philosopher puts it, since “the gods…surpass us most decisively in all good things,” they are from us far “removed;” and “when one party is removed to a great distance, as God is, the possibility of friendship ceases.”[29] Once the secret discrepancy of “excellence” between God and creatures becomes known to human

28. The phrase is Kierkegaard’s; see ibid, p. 10.

29. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1156b 7; 1159a, 4. See also 1158b, 33-35: “if there is a great interval in respect of virtue or vice or wealth or anything else between the parties…then they are no longer friends, and do not even expect to be so.”

beings, once their utter "dependence" on God is unveiled, then for them "the equality of friendship" with God, the genuinely intimate posture of true fellowship, becomes inconceivable.

But God desires just this fellowship, and so withholds this knowledge. Amid all the gifts of the garden, an entire landscape of permission and enjoyment – there is this one exception, this single secret. God prohibits eating the fruit of one tree: "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil," which Barth glosses as the tree of "the knowledge of the contrast between the primal state [i.e., good] and its contradiction [i.e., evil]" – the contrast, that is, between the union of friendship and the separation of sin. As long as human beings were ignorant of the radical inequality between them and God, friendship with God was possible; and as long as the "contradiction" of this friendship, separation, was likewise unknown, it could not and would not arise.

Thus on Barth's account, the divine discretion amounted to nothing less than the gift of life with God. With respect to the infinite distinction and radical dependence between creator and creature, so long as creaturely "ignorance prevailed, the Lord walked freely in the garden in the cool of the day, as though in the equality of friendship." Everything hangs on this "as though." To allow for a fellowship of apparent equals, the radical inequality and dependence between God and humanity could only remain "God's secret," hidden because God desires this fellowship with human beings, this intimate friendship, this walking together in the cool of the day.[30]

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30. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 247. Though Barth does not mention it, Kierkegaard may be influential here, as well. For Barth's theme of divine secrecy as a condition of divine-human friendship recalls Kierkegaard's "poetic" treatment of the Incarnation: "the king could have appeared before the lowly maiden in all his splendor…and let her forget herself in adoring admiration. This perhaps would have satisfied the girl, but it could not satisfy the king, for he did not want his own glorification but the girl's." Thus: "In order for unity [of love] to be effected, the god must become like this one. He will appear, therefore, as the equal of the lowliest of persons…consequently, the god will appear in the form of

But on Barth's reading of Genesis, this "once," like every mythological "once," was and is disrupted by a disastrous "and then." The original man and woman do take up the fatal position as "some second thing by the side of the Creator"; they do discover the "as though"; they do realize "the possibility of rebellion," embarking on a course of alleged independence and self-sufficiency. They do, in a word, "fall" – away from intimate union with God and into the disunion and separation of sin. In a key sentence, Barth glosses the original divine "secret" this way: "Men ought not to know that they are merely – men."[31] And yet this is just what the first man and woman come to know, not only that they are "merely" man and woman, but also that God is "merely" God.

For humanity, the departure from union and friendship with God is also an arrival at an entirely new vantage point. Once the radical distinction between God and humanity is laid bare, human beings for the first time appear to themselves as "merely" human beings – that is, human beings conceived as mere creatures apart from intimate union with God – and so we might say that "mere humanity" is, in this sense, an idea invented in Eden. And likewise, "mere God" comes into human view at precisely this point – that is, God conceived as apart from intimate union with human beings – and so the story of the break from divine-human friendship is also the story, from the human point of view, of the invention of God. In this way, the "possibility of rebellion" becomes a reality. Just as the Latin *invenire*, "to find out, to come upon," is the root of the English word *invention*, the first couple's discovery of "God's secret" is, on Barth's account, the root of twin conceptual inventions: *'adam*-alone, and God-alone. Intimate friendship is broken.

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a *servant*." See Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 31.

31. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 247.

In their rebellion, human beings strive to be "some second thing," and likewise God, once an intimate friend, now for the first time in their eyes becomes merely – God. The "once" gives way to the "and then." The original situation, prior to religion, gives way to religion. For in and as religion, Barth contends, this rebellion, this invention, this "fall" takes place.

"Look how Michelangelo has depicted the 'Creation of Eve,'" Barth writes, turning to the heart of his case:

> in the fullness of her charm and beauty she rises slowly, posing herself in the fatal attitude of – worship. Notice the Creator's warning arm and careworn, saddened eyes, as He replies to Eve's gesture of adoration. She is manifestly behaving as she ought not. Eve – and we must honor her as the first 'religious personality' – was the first to set herself over against God, the first to worship Him; but, inasmuch as *she* worshipped *Him*, she was separated from Him in a manner at once terrible and presumptuous.[32]

Religion breaks onto the scene, not as dogma, or creed, or charity, but precisely as "the gesture of adoration," precisely as "worship." Here is "the fatal attitude," the model performance of the "ought not": for here, Barth contends, the first woman sets herself "over against God," and is thereby "separated" from God and from all possibility, as far as she is concerned, of intimate friendship with God. Worship, with its characteristic "adoration" and reverence and confession and praise, effectively excludes all "equality of friendship" from the relation of humanity to God. Indeed, Barth charges that worship is in fact this friendship's reversal, testifying as it does – in prayers and hymns and sermons and ceremonies – to the most drastic inequality between creator and creatures that human beings can imagine. At every turn, worship reminds and insists that "God is in heaven, and thou art on earth" (Eccl 5:1); at every turn, *leitourgia*, the proper "work of people," is

32. Ibid.

understood and carried out as the work of "adoration." And yet for Barth, this liturgy is exactly the work that God originally did not intend for human beings: "Notice the Creator's warning arm and careworn, saddened eyes." Insofar as worship adores and reveres and sets God apart, it is "the fatal attitude," the gesture that in effect sets human beings apart and away from the union and intimate friendship with God for which they were and are created. Humankind's "fall," we might say, is a fall to our knees, a "terrible and presumptuous" fall – into prayer.

This fall is "terrible," on Barth's account, insofar as it disrupts and breaks off the intimacy of the garden. As the "gesture of adoration," worship is also a withdrawal from the original face-to-face encounter with God. Bowing their heads and closing their eyes, so to say, liturgists retreat from divine intimacy, and instead take up the work of obeisance, praise, and supplication. Moreover, for Barth this work amounts to injurious gossip: carried out from and in the knowledge of the radical distinction between God and human beings that is properly only "God's secret," worship also lays bare that distinction, broadcasts it, makes it just what no divine secret should be – that is, manifest – and so takes place as a consummate breach of confidence, a preeminent "talking out of turn." In this way, the practice of worship arises as a continual disclosure of precisely what should not have been disclosed.

Further, Barth argues that worship not only proceeds from the knowledge of the secret, not only discloses it, but realizes it, transforming the possibility of sin into its "terrible and presumptuous" actuality. Worship takes place "over against God" – which is to say, it takes *a* place over against God, beside God, as "some second thing." What thing? The thing that presents God with "offerings," makes sacrifices, delivers and

dedicates goods and services – the thing that presents God with, in a word, *works*, or perhaps better, *leitourgia*, the "work of people." And here above all, Barth contends, this whole procedure emerges as not only "terrible" but also "presumptuous."

Engaged in the original partnership, human beings were fully intimate and dependent on God for life and act and freedom; for them, God was all in all, and so human beings, as God's intimate friends, undertook every aspect of their work in the garden with, in, and through God. To pick out any particular task or activity from this original work as strictly human labor, accomplished apart from God, would be to presume a fantastic and audacious brand of human sovereignty. It would require the creature to claim for herself exactly what she cannot rightly claim: a base of operations beside or beyond God. Once the "and then" arises, however, and the infinite distinction – in terms of both divine "excellence" and human "dependence" – is unveiled to human beings, then for them intimacy and friendship with God appears as impossible, and a brand new task appears as altogether fitting and compulsory. The new task is this: in order to stand aright before God, mere humanity, as utterly dependent and less excellent in every respect than (mere) God Almighty, shall present this God with earnest and suitable "offerings."

And yet this new procedure could only take place under a new presumption. Instead of intimacy and friendship with God, a clear separation must supposedly emerge between the partners, a "stepping back" from the original embrace in order to make room both for the formal presentation of gifts and its alleged corollary, the act of standing aright before God. That is, as a strictly human performance of offering, this new task demands clear positions, distance, and roles: a position from which to offer (presenter), a

position to which to offer (recipient), and so a separation, a distance across which an offering, in all its earnest sincerity, can be conspicuously delivered. "Notice the Creator's warning arm and careworn, saddened eyes." "Union" is forgotten, One becomes two – and human beings, precisely as "merely" human, busy themselves with *leitourgia*.

Put another way, in worship *'adam* for the first time carries out "independent action" – and this, according to Barth, is expressly prohibited: "Men ought not to be independently what they are in dependence upon God," for "when their direct relation with Him gives birth to independent action, then all direct relationship is broken off."[33] The human "offering" of worship is only possible by way of a stepping back, a bowing out, and an attempt to stand aright – in short, a setting "over against," and so a grasping at a specious and illicit "independence" on the human side. Withdrawing from the original posture of graceful dependence and recline, now human beings stagger to their own feet, raising holy hands in prayer. Insofar as worship undertakes this retreat and this offensive, insofar as it recoils from God and lunges for autonomy, then for Barth its "terrible" fall is also "presumptuous." *Leitourgia*, the "work of people" as distinct from the original work of people-with-God, is the particular work that people "ought not" do. Only dependent action – human action "in dependence upon God" – is genuinely and properly human, undertaken within the bounds of original friendship between creature and creator. Pressing beyond these bounds, humanity fashions itself as "some second thing." Under the sign of devotion, *'adam* secures a supposed sovereignty, and so dissolves the primal communion.

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33. Ibid.

This stance of opposition takes place in and as "religion," but this does not imply, Barth contends, that "religion" and "sin" are simply equivalent terms. Rather, religion is sin's principal "occasion," the circumstance within which the possibility of separation, once "God's secret," is unveiled and realized in human life:

> The commandment [i.e., law, religion] is therefore the lever or *occasion* of sin: clothing time with eternity, it presents piety as a human achievement, evokes worship which knows not how to be silent before God, and names such worship 'religion'; concealing from the worshipper, not merely how questionable the world is, but how utterly questionable religion is, it compels him to lift up hands in prayer, then lets them drop back wearily, and in this weariness spurs him unto prayer again.[34]

Draped in the dazzling promise of holiness – the promise, that is, of "piety as a human achievement," of "standing aright before God" as a human possibility – religion conceals how "utterly questionable" it actually is. Its impressive regalia, these garments of alleged "eternity," may be opulent or austere, extravagant or modest, high church or low church, since in any case the pretense is the same. For all its incessant talk of "piety" and "prayer" and "relationship to God," and indeed by way of this talk, religion emerges as the "occasion of sin," the tragic "means of separation." Barth puts it this way: "Religion is the working capital of sin; its fulcrum; the means by which men are removed from direct union with God and thrust into disunion, that is, into the recognition of their – creatureliness."[35] The infinite distinction between *'adam* and YHWH is unveiled, realized, and proclaimed in and as religion. Appearing on the "very brink of human possibility," religion presents human beings as "merely" human, God as "merely" God, and so itself as "a final human capacity – the capacity of knowing God to be unknowable

34. Ibid, p. 253.

35. Ibid, p. 248.

and wholly Other; of knowing man to be a creature contrasted with the Creator, and, above all, of offering to the Unknown God gestures of adoration."[36] Thus for Barth, religion is "above all" the *leitourgia* of "offering," and so on his view Michelangelo's *The Creation of Eve* portrays not only the first human prayer, but also the invention of religion and its tragic choreography of weariness and zealotry, withdrawal and offensive – even, we might say, "secular" and "sacred." In this way, the work of "offering to the Unknown God gestures of adoration" both inaugurates and epitomizes the whole religious project "over against" this God, once an intimate friend, now invented as "unknown."

On Barth's account, then, human beings "fall" precisely when and where they seek to stand aright. The crisis of "sin," of separation, of being away and apart from God, takes place as the human attempt to carry out – apart from God – "the work of people." The original walking *with* God "in the cool of the day" could only be disrupted and displaced by an attempt to walk – indeed, to stand – *before* God; and this attempt, as we have seen, is exactly what Barth points to with the term "religion." Following this argument through, we might expect Barth to advise an immediate end to all such attempts, a boycott on all "religion." If the crisis of sin is a crisis of division from divine friendship, and if religion is in fact "the most radical dividing of men from God" – then should we not make haste to reject and dispose of religion? Might "salvation" from sin consist in just this disposal? And thereafter, should we not be constantly vigilant and on-

36. Ibid, p. 250.

guard, keeping everything "religious" firmly at bay? In short, as Barth puts it: "should we not embark on a war against religion?"[37]

To return to Paul: "What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means!" (Rom 7:7). Reading "the law" as "religion," Barth argues that while religion is sin's "occasion," the two terms should not merely be "identified." Indeed, for Barth no single human possibility – including the possibility of religion, the very "occasion" in and through which sin "comes into being" – should be understood as "identical" with sin, "for sin is not one possibility in the midst of others." That is, Barth argues that "sin" is not for us an alternative among other alternatives, one course of action on a menu of many. On the contrary, the departure from divine friendship casts its shadow over every strictly human course of action, and so our separation from God cannot simply be erased or evaded by our more prudent selection of a more pious or radical or intellectually radiant human possibility.

Accordingly, Barth contends, when men and women imagine themselves to forsake religion in favor of some "superior thing," they are doubly forgetful. First, they forget that religion is the "supreme possibility of all human possibilities," that to abandon one religious form can only involve either a demotion to an inferior position or a merely lateral step to another religious form in the "emporium of religion." The second oversight follows from the first: those who would wage a "war against religion" forget that "a like resentment must be applied to the totality of that new thing which they erect upon the ruins of the old." Pieties, Barth contends, may only be replaced by other pieties. The human attempt to stand aright – that is, "religion," in implicit and explicit varieties –

37. Ibid, p. 241.

cannot itself be abandoned without paradoxically undertaking that very attempt. As the "last and most inevitable human possibility," religion may and should be critiqued, reproved, and reformed – but it may not be discarded: "there can be no question of our escaping from this final thing, ridding ourselves of it, or putting something else in its place."[38]

But surely we can rid ourselves of "worship"? Even if Barth's "religion," defined as the basic human attempt to stand aright, is understood as finally inescapable, surely we are able to escape the temple, refrain from holy "offerings," shun the work of praise and prayer and supplication? Barth's answer here, via Paul, is again: "By no means!" Any particular liturgical form, of course, any given object, gesture, or design may be incidentally taken up or left behind, but as long as human beings carry out their work within the horizon of "moral and legal ordering" – that is, within the horizon of "religion" – that work will be "above all" *leitourgia*. If we cannot quit "religion" without at the same time settling for an inferior position, then it follows that we cannot quit "worship" – for Barth the gesture that "above all" constitutes religion – without incurring the same demotion.

How is this so? As we have seen, from Barth's point of view, the explicit, full-blown forms of "religion" correctly perceive human attempts to stand aright to be in fact human attempts to stand aright before God, and within these religious forms, gestures of "worship" – acts of "offering" to God in order to secure good standing – are numerous and clear. Whether these donations consist of goods, oaths, or acts of charity, whether they take place within or without any specific sanctuary, they are all *leitourgia*, the "work

38. Ibid, pp. 241-2.

of people" undertaken in order to stand aright before God. On the other hand, those forms of religion that make no mention of "God" or divine things are for Barth no less "religious," and so fundamentally no less liturgical. They may not be accompanied by incense or hymn-singing or solemn routines, but they are nonetheless *leitourgia*, nonetheless *works* carried out in order to stand aright. These labors may not be explicitly put forward as offerings to "God" or any divine tribunal, but they are put forward just the same, in that sense "presented" before an authoritative standard, registered as evidence of good legal standing and propriety.

In other words, for Barth *leitourgia* is in no way restricted to "Christian," "sacred," or even "ceremonial" practices. Rather, as the "work of people" to stand aright before God, liturgy in this sense spans the whole range of human programs for "moral and legal ordering." At the heart of any such program, whether or not it explicitly refers to "God" or divine things, lies an ideal posture of obedience to a particular "law," *torah*, set of instructions, and so a posture of deference and duty to a particular authority. That is, every endeavor to "stand aright" involves both a standard of righteousness and a program for meeting it, and whether I conceive this standard as divinely instituted, cosmologically intrinsic, or arbitrarily decreed by a concrete human community, I nonetheless effectively "present" my efforts before this authority in and through my attempts to stand aright. Put another way, any act of "moral and legal ordering" entails a moral rule, a legal order, and a regulative program for playing by this rule and maintaining this order – which is to say, a program for standing aright before a particular "moral and legal" tribunal. Again, this "tribunal" may be conceived as human or divine, anthropomorphic, impersonal, or some complex combination. The crucial issue is that in

any attempt to stand aright, the human being carries out this presentation for judgment, this offering that may or may not take the full-blown form of "adoration," but which in any case always takes the form of human achievement, of feats of excellence – in short, of *works*. Barth's "emporium of religion," then, turns out to be an emporium of *leitourgia*, stocked with the varied "work of people" carried out in answer to the emporium's defining question: *What then must I do?* That question is worship's question – and as catastrophic as worship is, Barth insists that the act of "leaving it behind" can only be an unwitting departure on yet another liturgical procession.

V. A Reformed Theology of Invocation

The modern category of "religion," as Barth employs it, was of course unavailable to Martin Luther, but it is nonetheless possible to trace parallels between Barth's critique of "religion" and Luther's critique of "works righteousness." Luther launched his doctrine of "justification by faith" as a broad attack on the Christianity of his day, which he eventually judged to be not just mistaken, but in fact no less than the chief demonic power on earth. Against the idea that "we have forgiveness of sins and eternal life…through the observance of [Christian] traditions" rather than strictly "through [Jesus Christ's] death and resurrection," Luther vowed to "constantly cry out": such Christianity, he cried, is Antichristianity, the domain of "the Antichrist; and I shall announce that all your ceremonies and religion are not only a denial of God but supreme blasphemy and idolatry."[39] In this way, Luther identified the present power of sin and

39. *LW* 26, p. 224.

death in the world not with non-Christian activity, but rather with Christian activity – or rather, with activity masquerading as Christian, "works righteousness" cloaked in the consummately "religious" forms of "brotherhoods, indulgences, orders, relics, forms of worship, invocation of saints, purgatory, Masses, vigils, vows, and the endless other abominations of that sort."[40] Satan, wrote Paul, comes disguised as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14).

But this camouflage, Luther goes on to insist, though certainly at its most cunning and effective within Christianity, is by no means limited to Christian quarters. For him, "works righteousness" – the "supreme blasphemy and idolatry" – is evident not just in wrongheaded Christianity, but in other "religions" besides. He puts it this way: "if all the religions and forms of worship under heaven that have been thought up by men to obtain righteousness in the sight of God are not condemned, the righteousness of faith cannot stand."[41] Put conversely, Luther's argument for the "righteousness of faith" amounts to a condemnation of "all the religions and forms of worship under heaven" designed to "obtain righteousness in the sight of God." In other words, Luther's argument for the doctrine of justification by "faith alone" amounts to a condemnation of sin's patently "religious" form in human life.

In a characteristic move, in his *Lectures on Romans* Luther describes the extremity of human sin as not an escape from religion, but rather an escape into it:

> our nature has been so deeply curved in upon itself because of the viciousness of original sin that it not only turns the finest gifts of God in upon itself and enjoys them,…indeed, it even uses God Himself to achieve these aims, but it also seems to be ignorant of this very fact, that in acting

40. Ibid, p. 222.

41. Ibid, p. 231.

> so iniquitously, so perversely, and in such a depraved way, it is even seeking God for its own sake.[42]

For Luther, the ultimate "viciousness of original sin" manifests precisely in a self-serving form of "seeking God." Accordingly, on his view, it is not as if sinners merely hoard divine gifts and then flee or reject God and religion, leading profane lives of wickedness or debauchery. On the contrary, for Luther the depths of sin are evident precisely in so-called sacred precincts. There sinners, far from fleeing or rejecting religion, set about the task of "achieving" their aims in and through religion. There sinners, far from fleeing or rejecting God, set about "seeking God" for their own sake. Sin may take other forms, of course, but for Luther the tragedy of sin is finally and preeminently a religious tragedy. It is idolatry – not atheism or brute profanity. It is primarily "brotherhoods, indulgences, orders, relics, forms of worship, invocation of saints, purgatory, Masses, vigils, vows, and the endless other abominations of that sort."[43] It is perverted praise, misdirected glory, self-bestowed, disastrously and "deeply curved in upon itself."

For Luther, of course, this critique of "all the religions and forms of worship under heaven" applies to every religious community but one: namely, Christians who confess Luther's doctrine of justification, and live and act and worship in light of it. Luther attacked the Christianity of his day, but he did so from what he considered to be a Christian theological position safe from his own critique. All forms of worship must be "condemned," he wrote, *except* for those forms in which salvation is genuinely and absolutely attributed to God in Jesus Christ – and so his attack on "religions and forms of

42. *LW* 25, p. 291.

43. *LW* 26, p. 222.

worship" was not wholesale. He condemned "Masses," for example, not to dispose of them altogether, but rather to reform, reframe, and reorient them according to his doctrine of justification. Luther by no means rejected key Christian practices and "forms of worship"; instead, he subordinated them to "faith" with respect to salvation, and maintained their indispensability with respect to Christian life.

But in so doing, Luther laid out an alternative orthodoxy, an alternative version of Christian life – and this alternative itself is potentially open to his own charge. It is potentially open, that is, to being understood and practiced as a new technique for "obtaining righteousness in the sight of God."[44] Now "having faith in Christ," one might say, may become a new product peddled in Barth's "emporium of religion," a new answer to the question, *What then must I do?*

In this light, Barth's critique of "religion" may be read as a thoroughgoing extension, even a radicalization, of Luther's attack on "works righteousness." If Luther (and the Reformers generally) launched an attack on "works righteousness" aimed at "all the religions and forms of worship under heaven" *except* what they considered to be proper Lutheran (or Reformed) Christianity, Barth launches a similar attack, but now all "religion," bar none, is subject to the critique.

In this sense, Barth may be understood to follow through on the Reformation's founding and driving insight, the claim that human sin takes the form not of a-religiosity or even anti-religiosity, but rather precisely of religiosity, of well-orchestrated attempts to

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44. Luther would vehemently deny this charge; whether he can successfully do so is a complex question, and one I leave for another day. For my purposes here, it is enough to say 1) that Luther's doctrine of "the righteousness of faith" is plausibly open to being understood and practiced – with greater and lesser degrees of awareness – as yet another (well-disguised) form of "works righteousness," whereby one exalted work ("having faith in Christ") is the recipe for "obtaining righteousness in the sight of God," and 2) that in many Christian communities today (inside but certainly also outside Lutheran churches!), it is in fact understood and practiced as such.

"obtain righteousness in the sight of God." Barth's distinctive version of this insight, in effect, is to say that this kind of religiosity is the only kind available. He insists that there is no higher or purer or simpler or otherwise better religiosity. "Works righteousness" is not a deviant or distorted form of religion. It just is religion. And further, Barth contends that religion, as the "last and most inevitable human possibility," is finally unavoidable for human beings exiled "east of Eden." That is, there is no higher or purer or simpler or otherwise better non-religiosity, or so-called "secularity," or what have you. Thus for Barth, "works righteousness" is not a deviant or distorted form of exilic or "fallen" human life. It just is exilic human life. In a word, it just is exile. As *leitourgia*, "works righteousness" is the event of exile from God, its basis and its ongoing, ruinous, and ubiquitous maintenance.

On Barth's view, then, the Reformers were quite right to expose and attack "works righteousness" – but they were all too right, since "Reformed" religion is unmasked by the same exposé. Reformed religion, even the religion of "faith alone," is still the religion of Cain (the original Reformer!), a doomed attempt to present God with a precious gift – here "faith alone" – in order to win divine favor, to "obtain righteousness in the sight of God." Accordingly, as Barth puts it in *Romans*, "a like resentment must be applied to the totality of that new thing which they erect upon the ruins of the old."[45] God is not against every religion but one. God is against religion. Thus for Barth, whenever we pronounce judgment against a neighbor's "works righteousness" – that is, against her "religion" – the sentence we name is also our own. Or to shift the metaphor:

45. Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 241-2.

Protestants have correctly diagnosed the disease, but the epidemic has engulfed the whole hospital. Everyone is afflicted.

Similarly – and here, in closing, I point to Barth's Christological, liturgical solution to this liturgical dilemma – just as we may read Barth's critique of "religion" as a development and extension of Luther's critique of "works righteousness," we may read Barth's account of "reconciliation" as a development and extension of Luther's finally doxological portrait of Christian life. As Luther has it, a reconciled human being is "always a penitent" and thereby "truly glorifies God" by attributing all righteousness to God alone. This view follows from Luther's understanding of the crisis of "sin" as principally a crisis of religious "boasting," arrogant "works" designed to earn and retain divine favor. In Barth's work, too, a reconciled human being lives her life "as a form of praise," though for him the doxology of reconciliation is first of all "thanksgiving," and only then "praise" and "petition," since on his account, "only gratitude can correspond to grace," and so "basically all sin is simply ingratitude."[46] Thus from different starting points, both Luther and Barth sketch human reconciliation with God as fundamentally doxological, and reconciled human being as a being centered in God, fundamentally and continually upheld by gracious divine gifts, and so engaged in a radically intimate "exchange" (Luther) and "friendship" (Barth) between creature and creator. In both accounts, the shape of human salvation is a graceful movement from self-enclosure to "*ec*-centricity" (Barth), from a twisted posture "deeply curved in upon itself" (Luther) to an open posture of doxology and invocation.

46. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.1, p. 41.

On one hand, then, there are parallels and points of contact between Barth's critique of "religion" and Luther's critique of "works righteousness"; on the other hand, both men also put forward doxological accounts of human salvation. But these similarities point to an apparently paradoxical pair of claims: first, the idea that worship constitutes humankind's "fall" away and apart from God, and second, the idea that worship constitutes humankind's "reconciliation" and return to God, in and through lives of thanksgiving, praise, and prayer. In short, these accounts describe worship as both "fall" and "reconciliation." This contrast, however, may be understood not as a contradiction, but rather as a clear opposition marking out the brink and hinge of God's saving work, and so the brink and hinge of human salvation. Precisely as humanity's "fall," *leitourgia* is, after all, the expected locus of God's graceful rescue, the scenario in which the divine work of "reconciliation" must and does take place. It is only fitting that God's healing activity should occur in the fatal wound itself, that human salvation should mean the transformation of the "fulcrum of sin"[47] into the fulcrum of reconciliation, withdrawal into approach, separation into intimacy.

Accordingly, in posthumously published drafts for Chapter XVII of *Church Dogmatics*, set within Barth's "Doctrine of Reconciliation," Barth contends that by the Spirit's conspiracy and the Son's solidarity, our liturgical work "over against" God becomes work through God the Spirit and with God the Son.[48] Thus worship's dynamics of alienation are lovingly and mercifully recast into dynamics of participation in divine life and genuine humanity. Exactly along the rift of separation, the fault line where

47. Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, p. 248.

48. Karl Barth, *The Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981), pp. 43, 9.

human liturgists attempt to carve out a fantastic and devastating "us-without-God," God fashions the final and saving "God-with-us," the consummate *Immanuel*. In and through the saving work of Jesus Christ, the "work of people" is remade as the "work of people-with-God."

In this way, God stands with human beings in radical intimacy, in friendship, even in their very attempt to stand "over against" God. Put differently: in love and mercy, God enters into solidarity with sinners, and finally with sin. God becomes "a curse for us" (Gal 3:13). In Jesus Christ, God enters into "religion," into *leitourgia*, into the "work of people" against and away and apart from their creator – precisely in order to return and reconcile them with God. God is against religion – and for humanity. Indeed, building up from Barth's case, we may say that the Incarnation, God's life in history as a human being, does not take place in order for God to assume and redeem "history" or "humanity" as such – for these have already been created and deemed "very good" (Gen 1:31). Rather, the Incarnation takes place in order for God to assume and redeem a particular, ubiquitous, disastrous form of human life, what Barth calls "the last and most inevitable human possibility," and what we may call "the form of a slave" (Phil 2:7), the form of *leitourgia*, the "work of people" unto death. The Incarnation takes place in order for God to assume and redeem worship and religion.

Thus the gospel accounts of Jesus the rabbi, who both takes up and in the strongest terms repeatedly critiques the religious life of his day. Thus the gospel accounts of Jesus the religious man, who adopts and so transforms the whole length and breadth of that religious life, from baptism to prayer to the Passover meal – and then finally, at the cross, to the quintessentially religious maneuver: the act of sacrifice,

literally the act of allegedly "making sacred."[49] On this view, in Christ God assumes this particular form of life – worship and religion – in order to oppose it from the inside out, to revolutionize it, to return us to friendship, and so at the last to "redeem us from the curse" (Gal 3:13) – that is, to redeem us from worship and religion – once and for all.

As we have seen, on Barth's account, humanity's "fall" is finally a fall to our knees, a fall into prayer. With this gesture, human beings set themselves "over against" God as "some second thing," staking out in their kneeling a specious sovereignty and a tragic, destructive attempt at separation and security. Accordingly, the divine work of reconciling humankind to God means fundamentally transforming human prayer, renovating its foundations, reworking its basic choreography such that it no longer takes place as *leitourgia*, "in the name" of human beings apart from God, but rather takes place as the work of Jesus Christ, "in the name" of God, to be sure – and thus excluding any separation from God – but preeminently "in the name" of *Immanuel*, God-with-humanity. As the work of Jesus Christ, prayer is truly divine work; and as the work of Jesus Christ, it is truly human work, too. It is the work of humanity-with-God, the perfect reversal and reconciliation of *leitourgia*. In Jesus Christ, at once Son of God and Son of Humanity, all attempts at separation between creature and creator are overcome – overcome, that is, exactly insofar as Christ undertakes these very attempts, and refashions them.

Thus even and especially in the case of prayer, the prototypical picture of human alienation masquerading as intimacy, God does not annihilate the offending gesture. God reconciles it. God takes up and takes on the form of human estrangement from God – the form of worship, of *leitourgia* – and so transforms it into participation in God. God

49. "Sacrifice," from the Latin *sacer* ("sacred") + *facere* ("to make").

prays. Jesus Christ undertakes and overcomes prayer, worship, religion. And thus we, by divine grace and never strictly by our own achievement, "pray by His mouth" – and just for this reason, and just in this act, human alienation and exile, loneliness and sin, are undone. Precisely in prayer, we are reconciled to God, which is to say, God and humanity "reconcile," from the Latin *re* (again) and *concilium* (meeting). Precisely in prayer, the very picture of departure, we meet again.

Finally, and crucially: it is possible to understand this argument as a simple vindication of Christianity, a claim that acts of worship undertaken by Christians, in contrast to those acts undertaken by non-Christians, are "covered" or "lifted" by God in Jesus Christ. And in one sense, Barth intends just this kind of vindication: God's reconciliation of humankind in Jesus Christ is, after all, the "good news" proclaimed in Christian preaching. But alongside the vindication, Barth continues to register his critique of Christian worship, and so of Christianity: Christianity is "the true religion," he insists, "only in the sense in which we speak of a 'justified sinner.'"[50] Thus Luther's renowned – and classically Reformed – doctrine of *simul iustus et peccator*, the idea that a Christian is simultaneously "justified" and "sinner," "holy" and "profane," is a linchpin in Barth's case. Even as the gospel of God's reconciling grace for Christian worship and religion is proclaimed, the theological critique of Christian worship and religion should by no means be withdrawn. If anything, it should be heightened. Its withdrawal awaits another day, at the last, when in the New Jerusalem, as John of Patmos puts it, not only "the sea" but also "the temple" shall be no more (Rev 21:1, 22).

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50. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I.2, p. 325.