

Humanity matters: The strange priestly yes of God actualised amidst the struggles of life

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Abstract

Barth's rejection of natural theology gives the impression that his theology holds only negative views of anthropology. A description of the office of the priesthood of Christ offers insight into how humanity matters in the theology of Karl Barth. The article argues that Christ, the priest, actualised and effectuated the strange priestly yes of God to humanity. The strange *priestly yes* of God to humanity can be understood, as grounded upon the radical yes of God to humanity, revealed and actualised in the incarnated person and redemptive history of Jesus Christ as the one who is the Son of God and the Son of man.

Key words

Humanity; the priesthood of Christ; incarnation; actualised verdict; corresponding partners; suffering

1. Humanity in the theology of Karl Barth

Does humanity matter in the theology of Karl Barth? Barth remains suspicious of over-emphasising the role of humanity in religion, and consequently, scholars remain sceptical of his anthropology.

Two aspects have partly fuelled this sceptical interpretation of his work: firstly the strong emphasis he placed on the deity of God in order to describe God as transcendent to human beings.¹ Secondly, his vigorous

1 "It is God whom they encounter, from whom they have their being, whom they can lay hold of but not apprehend or exhaust", in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/1: The Doctrine of God*, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2004). *Church Dogmatics* hereafter referred to as *CD*.

rejection of natural theology, as seen in his response to Brunner, whereby he questioned human beings as the locus (object and subject) of religious knowledge, wisdom and traditions.²

The focus on the deity of God is a strong characteristic of Barth's theology. This focus enabled him to critique theologians of German liberal protestant theologies and to remind them, that they indeed face God; God, as the one who transcends and interrupts worldviews, politics, religious practices and biblical interpretations. It was especially amidst the reality of the many sufferings of people (sometimes theologically endorsed and upheld)³ that Barth remained very cautious of the capabilities of humanity, also in their claims about the knowledge of God. He thus minimised his trust in human capabilities in any political, social project or religious ideals and Barth never tires of arguing that the emphasis is on God who transcends the world and the One who is more than human reason, knowledge, tradition, wisdom, experience and pietism.

Barth argued in his critique against German liberal protestant theologies, against independent reason (Kant) or immediate religious experience (Hegel), as pure forms of the revelation of God. For Barth, the starting point of theological reflection cannot be independent human knowledge or experience and can thus not serve as the guiding or normative principle in theology. Already in *CD I*, Barth argues that the knowledge of God is faith-knowledge. Faith-knowledge implies to him, the dynamic and relational

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- 2 E. Brunner and K. Barth, *Natural Theology: Comprising "Nature and Grace" by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the Reply "No!" by Dr. Karl Barth* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002). Brunner begins his response to Barth, pointing out that in many ways their description of the gospel is similar and that Barth indeed succeeded in reminding liberal protestant theologians that the 'theme' of theology should be reflections about God instead of religion or the spiritual human being. Several theologians were engaging with this critique of liberal protestant theology, but for Brunner it was the forceful magnitude of the work of Barth that prompted a change in the direction of the theological theme to God, the Word and Jesus Christ, which evoked consequently disruptive discussions on the nature of religion. Brunner felt that he was in agreement with Barth on many aspects and that their differences could lead to an enrichment of the discussion on natural theology, rather than a polemical debate. Barth remained unchanged by the conversation and carried the burden of being understood as holding a sceptical view of anthropology.
 - 3 The draft of the Barmen Declaration serves as an example whereby Barth disagreed with fellow theologians on how the Jews were treated and how the Church and her theology contributed to the upholding of the sufferings of people.

nature of the knowledge of God that embeds the relation of God with humanity by which humanity acknowledges God.⁴

Thus, despite, or rather because of, Barth's emphasis on the deity of God and his critique of natural theology, can one argue that humanity matters deeply in his theology?

2. Barth's Christological answer to an anthropological question

2.1 God turning to humanity: the humanity of God

In 1956, towards the end of his career, Barth gave a lecture series titled the "Humanity of God",⁵ and he remarked that about 40 years earlier it would have been an embarrassment to him to speak about the humanity of God.

The earlier focus in evangelical theology was on the deity of God, and the emphasis was to 'describe God as God, the Holy One, and the lofty and transcendent One, a reminder that it is indeed *God* that encounters humanity amidst the reality of suffering, apathetic and religious people.

In this lecture on the humanity of God, Barth was not arguing for a change of direction in his theological project, but rather for a distinction in the line of thought. The emphasis remains on *God*, but Barth points out how significant it is that this God is freely the God who is "God *with us*".

He first explains the meaning of the humanity of God as "*God with us*".

The humanity of God! Rightly understood that is bound to mean God's relation to and turning toward man. It signifies the God who speaks with man in promise and command. It represents God's existence, intercession and activity for man, the intercourse God

4 Acknowledgement involves (a) knowledge, b) the relation of one person to another, c) acceptance of control, d) an encounter in contingent contemporaneity, e) yielding to divine supremacy, f) decision, g) acquiescence before the enigma of God, h) genuine human movement, and i) responding to a centre or whence outside the self (*CD I/1*, 205–208).

5 K. Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960).

holds with him, and the free grace in which He wills to be and is nothing other than the God of man.⁶

A few pages later, Barth describes the deity of God as the sovereign togetherness with humanity.

The deity of the living God – and we certainly wanted to deal with Him – found its meaning and its power only in the context of His history and His dialogue with man, and thus in His togetherness with man? Indeed – and this is the point back of which we cannot go – it is a matter of God’s sovereign togetherness with man, a togetherness grounded in Him and determined, delimited and ordered through Him alone.⁷

This freedom of God to be the creator who remains in a covenantal relation with his creature is for Barth the deity of God. The deity is in his freedom to be not only God, but God who is freely the God with humanity, and it is from this freedom to love humanity that the redemption history revealed in the incarnation and atonement must be understood.⁸

It is in these lectures that Barth confirms that the humanity of God interweaves the cause of humanity and that his anthropology thus flows from a description of God.

2.2 The Doctrine of Reconciliation: God and the change of direction for humanity

In the broader description of the doctrine of reconciliation (CD.IV), Barth argues, that believers need to hold onto mainly two aspects concerning God and humanity. First that God is *God Emmanuel* in the fullness of the reality actualised in Jesus Christ and, secondly, that after the atonement history, whereby the direction of the relationship of humanity turns towards God, the call of human beings is awoken to the outcry of “*God help us*”.⁹

6 *Ibid.*, 37.

7 *Ibid.*, 45.

8 “In Christ the transcendent God is freely yoked to our tragic human cause – and this despite our own perduring inability to be yoked to the purpose of God or to live our lives for one another”, in Johnson, W. S., *The Mystery of God: Karl Barth and the Postmodern Foundations of Theology* (Louisville Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).

9 CD IV/1, 5-6.

He begins the narrative of the doctrine of reconciliation with a description of the faithfulness of God as the creator and reconciler of humanity as his creature. It is through his free act of faithfulness that He takes up the lost cause, in himself and restores humanity to her glory. The doctrine of reconciliation describes *the change of the direction in* the relationship of humanity with God, from being estranged from God to a condition where humanity turns towards God and exists within a restored, just and reciprocal relation with Him.

For Barth, it is Jesus Christ that actualises the reconciliation and effectuates the change of the direction of humanity in her relation with God. He begins his Christological account CD IV (Doctrine of Reconciliation), with the priestly office that focuses on the decent of Christ as his deity in his humanity, titled ‘Jesus Christ, Lord as Servant’. Thereafter follows a description of the royal office with the ascendance of Jesus Christ, as his humanity in his deity, titled ‘Jesus Christ, Servant as Lord’. Lastly, he treats the prophetic office, titled the ‘glory of the Mediator’ where he gives an integrated account of the two nature of Jesus Christ in the status of his humiliation and glorification.¹⁰

Unexpectedly, Barth describes that the “deity of God, true God”, is revealed in the incarnation and atonement of Jesus Christ. The decent of Jesus Christ in his humanity reveals for Barth the true deity of God. A description of the office of the priesthood offers thus an integrated Christology, holding together the person, both in Christ’s divinity and humanity, and the agency, in both the state of humiliation and exaltation of Jesus Christ, as the one who is the reconciling God for estranged humanity.¹¹

The article argues that for Barth, positive anthropology lies embedded in an Christological account of who God is for us and that this knowledge alters

10 There is critiqued of using the rubric of the *munus triplex* in the work of Karl Barth. See A. J. Johnson, ‘The Servant Lord: A Word of Caution Regarding the *munus triplex* in Karl Barth’s Theology and the Church Today’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 65, no. 2 (2012): 159–173.

11 John Webster in *Karl Barth* (2nd ed., London: A & C Black, 2004), 115 further suggests that a Barthian description of the priestly office of Christ needs to take into account that Barth addresses three aspects of Christology in the section titled, ‘Jesus, Lord as a servant’. The Chalcedonian character of Jesus Christ that emphasis that Jesus Christ is true God, combining it with the state of humiliation in the incarnation and the priestly office by which Christ effectuates the reconciliation of God and sinners.

and effects the anthropological descriptions. It is from the actualisation of the reconciliation in Jesus Christ that Barth's anthropology could be understood and described as that humanity is a *corresponding partner* of God¹². The article uses the description of the priestly function of Christ to show how a Christological account¹³ effects the anthropological sphere to describe humanity as a corresponding partner of God.

3. The strange priestly yes of God to humanity

In CD IV, Barth describes the priestly office of Christ as part of the doctrine of reconciliation, under the heading of 'Jesus Christ, Lord as Servant'. He describes the priestly office in the three subsections titled, the way of the Son into the far country, the judged Judge and the verdict of the Father.¹⁴

The strange *priestly yes* of God to humanity can be understood, as grounded upon the radical yes of God to humanity¹⁵, revealed and actualised in the incarnated person (the way of the Son into the far country) and redemptive history of Jesus Christ as the one who is the Son of God and the Son of man. It is Christ, in his priestly office as the judge and the judged, who carries the strange yes, as both the Yes in the incarnation and the No in the judgment of God to humanity that actualised and effectuated the endless yes, (the verdict of the Father) for humanity.

3.1 The strange priestly yes reveals in the incarnation of Jesus Christ

3.1.1 *Christ the priest becomes our brother and cries in solidarity with us*

Barth describes the incarnation as the journey of the son into the far country. God reveals himself to care for humanity, where He is God who

12 Barth, *The Humanity of God*, 52–65.

13 There is not a singular interpretation of Barth's Christology as seen in the many publications on the matter, for example C. T. Waldrop, *Karl Barth's Christology: Its basic Alexandrian character*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1984; J. Thompson, *Christ in Perspective: Christological Perspectives in the Theology of Karl Barth* (St. Andrew Press, 1978), T. H. L. Parker, *Essays in Christology for Karl Barth* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1956).

14 CD IV/1, 283–357.

15 See Webster, *Karl Barth*, 20–48. The radical Yes points to the overall love that God has for humanity and that He is graciously orientated towards humanity to and is thus for humanity and not against humanity. See the chapter titled, "The deep secret YES".

bound himself to humanity in the flesh and becomes our brother. God, through the incarnation, encloses humanity in himself and the incarnation shows his willingness to care about the condition in which humanity finds herself. Christ, the priest is prepared to enter the human condition marked by the estrangement and isolation from God, with no reservation.

Although he is *God*, he is willing to enter the most horrific conditions and to meet humanity in her context and condition. The priest is willing to be in solidarity with her, although she stands with ‘her back turned to God’.

Jesus Christ reveals in the priestly office that he remains the one that is for humanity. It is as our brother that he can represent humanity in the fullness of her predicament. The priest enters the sinful world as the entrance into the ‘far country’, and Barth points out that the priest is our brother standing in solidarity with our humanity and cries with us.¹⁶

The Priest is the brother unafraid of humanity in her most deprived and vulnerable condition.¹⁷ Jesus Christ cries out with her.

16 See P. D. Jones, *The Humanity of Christ: Christology in Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics* (Bloomsbury: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008). Also, P. D. Jones, ‘Karl Barth on Gethsemane’. *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9, no.2 (2007): 148–171. He describes the significance of the humanity of Christ seen in the outcry of Jesus to God in Gethsemane.

17 The Belhar Confession in D.J. Smit *et al.* (eds.), *A Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church 1982* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984). The fourth article of the Belhar Confession describes God as the one who is the God of the vulnerable: “4. We believe that God has revealed Godself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace on earth; that in a world full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that God calls the church to follow in this; that God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; that God frees the prisoners and restores sight to the blind; that God supports the downtrodden, protects the strangers, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly; that for God pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering; that God wishes to teach the people of God to do what is good and to seek the right; that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream; that the church, belonging to God, should stand where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the Church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others. Therefore, we reject any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.” [Deut 32:4; Luke 2:14; John 14:27; Eph 2:14; Isa 1:16–17; Jas 1:27; Jas 5:1–6; Luke 1:46–55; Luke 6:20–26; Luke 7:22; Luke 16:19–31; Ps 146; Luke 4:16–19; Rom 6:13–18; Amos 5]”.

“But this participation of the world in the being of God implies necessarily His participating in the being of the world, and therefore that His being, His history, is played out as world-history and therefore under the affliction and peril of all world-history. The self-humiliation of God in His Son would not really lead Him to us, the activity in which we see His true deity and the divine Sonship of Jesus Christ would not be genuine and actual, the humble obedience of Jesus Christ would not be rendered, or the will of the Father fulfilled, the way into the far country would not be followed, if there was any reservation in respect of His solidarity with us, of His entry into world-history. However, the self-humiliation of God in His Son is genuine and actual, and therefore, there is no reservation in respect to His solidarity with us. He did become – and this is the presupposition of all that follows – the brother of man, threatened with man, harassed and assaulted with him, in the stream which hurries downwards to the abyss, hastening with him to death, to the cessation of being and nothingness. With him He cries – knowing far better than any other how much reason there is to cry: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mk 15:34). *God for us* means simply that God has not abandoned the world and man in the unlimited need of his situation, but that He willed to bear this need as His own, that He took it upon Himself, and that He cries with man in this need”¹⁸

4. The no of God as the yes of God

4.1 The priest as the judge in the Old and the New Testament

Barth argues that interpreters neglect the function of the judge in the description of the priestly office. This priestly function is referred to in the Old Testament as the one who judges the sinful condition of humanity and humanity herself¹⁹. Barth makes specific reference to Isaiah 7:14 where the ‘divine sign is both a promise and a warning’ and where Isaiah had to warn

18 *CD IV/1*, 215.

19 In *CD IV/1*, 217., “The so-called ‘Judges’ of the Old Testament in the early period of the occupation of Canaan are described as men awakened by God and their main office is to be helpers and saviours in the recurrent sufferings of the people at the hand of neighbouring tribes. It was only in addition to this activity in ‘foreign affairs’ that they engaged in judging in the narrower sense of the term. Similarly, in the New Testament – a fact which was later forgotten – the coming of the Judge means basically the coming of the Redeemer and Saviour.”

Israel that there was a change in their relation to God, as they continued to serve the foreign earthly rulers.

This change in the relation from the side of Israel, Barth argues, marks the movement from the radical Yes, the grace of God to Israel, to the No, the warning and the judgement of God to Israel. This change was not negating the faithfulness of God towards Israel but describing the dynamic nature of the relation of God and Israel, where the prophet calls in the wilderness for a return of Israel to worship the living God. The priest warns Israel to bring them out of their self-destruction which is their rejection of God and subsequently the negating of their being as the covenant partner of God

In *CD IV*, Barth continues with the description of the priestly role as the judge, and he describes the function of the priestly office of Christ, as the judge who is judged.²⁰ The article describes that Christ, the priest, judges sin and he does so by being judged himself and that this judgement is the verdict of pardon and the endless possibility for humanity.

4.2 The priest who judges sin as independence and dualistic living

The judgement of God in Jesus Christ points to the seriousness with which God views sin as it is the real barrier within the relationship of God and humanity. God is not oblivious or apathetic to the destructive force that sin has on human beings and the consequences of sin in human life. Barth argues that the sin is, in essence, the creature who denies her Creator as the only God and thereby has ruined herself as a creature.²¹

Barth explains to modern readers the sin that needs judgement are self-justification and the dualistic living of people. He describes that sin is the position of humanity that is marked by independence, as a life without God, mainly as she wants to be her own judge. This independence from God is for Barth the sin against God, and it results in nothingness and ultimately in the destruction of herself and others. He describes that this alienation, self-justification and independence from God leads “to the point of our perishing, our destruction, our fall into nothingness, our death.”²²

20 *CD IV/1*, 211-283.

21 *CD IV/1*, 458,573.

22 *CD IV/1*, 222.

She acts as her own and independent judge, and this results in relying on her reason, experience and tradition to guide her existence.²³ This reliance on the self, changes, for Barth, the person into the non-person or the anti-person, and this is the fall into *nothingness*.²⁴

Barth further argues that the condition of independence is whereby humanity is *trapped by the simultaneous living of the dualistic no and yes to God*, and with the burden that this dualistic living is the only possibility for humanity. Romans 7 gives an account of the dualism in human life marked by her No and Yes to God and that this dualism is true of all human beings in their best efforts of pietism, moralism and humanism. This dualistic living is the reality of her life which she cannot escape by herself, and the sin thereof is the *real barrier* in her relation with God and others and thus needs to be removed by God through his strange judgement.²⁵

4.3 The priest judges sin by being judged himself

The judgement of God is his sincere concern of the destruction of this independent, self-justifying, isolation and dualistic living, and therefore, it is God who offers himself to judge this sin with an eternal No. This judgement reveals the full seriousness of the human situation as it is *God who judges* and deals with the evilness of the world in order to restore humanity.

The manner in how this judgement takes place is through the Lord, who became a servant. In the movement of the Lord who became a servant, is the willingness of Jesus Christ to humble himself to live within the conditions of humanity and under the rule of God and not under the rule of the self and thereby the willingness to subject himself to the judgement of God on behalf of humanity.²⁶

23 See T. F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (A & C Black, 2000), ix-xii.

24 See W. Krötke, *Sin and Nothingness in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Princeton: Princeton Theological Seminary, 2005).

25 K. Barth, K. 1968. *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. E. C. Hoskyns (6th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 261.

26 See D. O. Sumner, *Karl Barth and the Incarnation: Christology and the Humility of God* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014).

This reflection preliminarily points out that Barth is not arguing only against human nature and for the grace of God, but that Christ himself carries the complexity of the Yes and No of humanity to God. It is in the act of atonement and his spontaneous obedience that He changes the binary options whereby human beings, by nature, live and where the redemptive work opens the possibility of a life of faith through the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

5. The judgement is the verdict of pardon and the new possibility of humanity

The verdict of the Father²⁷ actualised in the atonement history of Jesus Christ²⁸ takes effect in the anthropological sphere as the eternal Yes of God to humanity. The judgement points to God who eternally has judged, so that forgiveness and righteousness for human beings may flow.

Barth refers his readers to Roman 7 and 8 to describe the actualisation of the No and the Yes in Jesus Christ *as the eternal possibility of the “impossibility” for humanity*. The judgement is not only condemnation or mere pardon of wrong doings. Christ made the judgement and actualised a new possibility for humanity.²⁹

The verdict of the Father, in Christ, is the No to life separated from God and the Yes to being made rightful partners of God. This priestly No that judges sin of independence and dualistic living offered the priestly Yes of justification by Christ and to be justified *in front* of God. She is forgiven

27 CD IV/1, 284-357.

28 For many scholars the Christological focus of Barth is a too narrow description of the work God. Johnson places Jesus Christ as the mystery of God centrally in his exposition of Barth's Theology. For Johnson there is an open-endedness in the theology of Barth that describes Christ in such a manner that the fullness of Christ is not comprehensible by human thoughts and action. Christ remains more than our knowledge, worlds of experience, wisdom and insights. This, to Johnson, is an open ended description of Christology and our engagement with Christ. Our lives are therefore hidden in Christ, who is more than we ourselves can comprehend. This mystery of Christ opens up the unseen possibilities that surpass us and therefore invites us to journey with God. See Johnson, *The mystery of God*.

29 See Barth's comment on Rom viii: 2–3 “Therefore thou art free – in the knowledge of thy slavery; thou are righteous – in the knowledge of thy sin; and thou hast live – in the knowledge of thy death. The Spirit makes thee free and righteous and alive; and the Spirit is understanding,” in *The Epistle to the Romans*, 275.

in Christ and placed in an actualised relation of reconciliation and interdependence with God.

5.1 The verdict effectuates the endless possibility for humanity

This possibility of living the Yes is actualised amidst our lives, because atonement is at once history and a new beginning. The verdict as the Yes of God is *actualised (history) and effectuated (present and future)* as the endless possibility for humanity. The actualised verdict is not only true then and there, but it is valid here and now.

5.1.1 *The possibility of a corresponding partner: awakened by the spirit*

Barth argues that the beginning is new as it is taking place from the renewed relation with God in Christ, whereby she is a *corresponding partner* of God, who is now able to encounter God. She is now able to live in and from the Yes of God in her relationships as justified by his grace.

The new beginning actualised, in Christ, gives the possibility for humanity to live as *cautious corresponding partners* of God and with others. She is not left to herself as being her judge, neither condemned to an existence of non-being and dualistic living.

It is by the power of the Spirit that she awakens to faith in Christ.³⁰ It is the Spirit that finally turns her to God so that her life is in partnership and communion with Him and whereby she becomes a living being who may know God and faithfully call out to him in prayer with the address “*God help us*”.³¹

God finally evokes the isolation, independence and dead end of human life with the awakening power of the Holy Spirit. This act of God in Jesus Christ awakens humanity to the possibility of the living of the Yes, as justified beings in a relation with God amidst the realities of the world.

The strange priestly Yes opens to the possibility to live from the implications of being forgiven, being justified, being awakened by the Spirit. This possibility is to live, by faith in interdependence as a corresponding partner of God.

30 CD IV/1, 643,649,652.740.

31 CD IV/1, 5-6; 766,770.

5.1.2 *The possibility of a corresponding partner: Call upon God and affirm interdependence with the neighbour amidst the struggles of life*

The priestly office actualised and effectuated the possibility to live as a justified³² human being *amidst* the continuous pain and suffering of the world.³³

The global world has many examples where the conditions of living remain inhumane, and conditions of oppression are kept intact by political and religious leaders, policy makers and fellow citizens. Many of the inhumane conditions are created by us in such a manner that fellow human beings suffer at the hands of leaders and neighbours. The world carries the marks and groans of the many consequences of structural and personal sins.³⁴

The priestly actualisation, therefore, asks that the Yes of God in Jesus Christ is no longer ignored or negated, but affirms humanity as truly corresponding partners of faith that are enabled to live the Yes of glorified lives towards God and towards one another.

Thus Christ the priest holds humanity in the rightful place, as human beings who are open to encountering God dynamically, always anew in any context, circumstance and any century and be therefore critical of political, social and religious ideals that negate the interdependence of humanity.

The wrong-doings of ourselves and fellow human beings hang on the cross as open wounds, with the cry of the lament of seeking and questioning God and ourselves amidst these sufferings. It is the redemptive work of Christ, the priest that gives the possibility and the “right” to call upon God and to question ourselves and our neighbour amidst a groaning and suffering creation.

32 Justified is here used as being put in the right with God and thus as a human being who is the rightful partner of God.

33 CD IV/1, 285. Barth points out that “God” is not a general or abstract truth but that his redemptive work of love and compassion genuinely apply to us, here and now.

34 See H. R. Botman, ‘Barmen to Belhar: A Contemporary Confessing Journey’. *NGTT* 47 (2006): 240–249. This article describes the structural economic and ecological sin and the possible responses of the church within the Barmen – Belhar confessional and ecclesial traditions.

The verdict of the Father enables humanity to live cautious lives as beings who are inter-dependent and open for the reality of God and new possibilities for fellow human beings and the self.

6. The strange priestly yes of God actualised amidst the struggles of South African life

The South African landscape, marked by the complex history of Apartheid, showed how race served as the guiding norm to define human beings. These racial classifications of people were embedded in harsh and inhumane political and theological-ideological systems³⁵ whereby the racial classifications of people resulted in discrimination and gross human violations. The worth of people politically defined by race and oppression was theologically legitimised, and still today, many injustices continue from this intersection of oppression by religion and the focus on the race of human beings.³⁶

Therefore, the strange answer of Barth that humanity matters in Christ is perhaps today also the challenge to the belief that nature, humanity, race, gender and the emancipation from many struggles follows from thinking and living *after* the atonement history of Christ. The history that gives the account that our lives are hidden in Christ and priestly awakened to the Yes of God in all of the realities. It is awakening to the possibility of being justified, free to act with righteousness³⁷ and with interdependence.

The theological questions around the identity of people pose again the question of what serves as the guiding norm for thinking and expressing oneself on matters such as race, culture, religion and gender. The need for

35 See D. J. Smit, 'Reformed Faith, Justice and the Struggle against Apartheid,' in *Essays in Public Theology: Collected Essays 1* (Stellenbosch : SUN Press, 2007), 27–40.

36 See A. A. Boesak, 2015. *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation, and the Calvinist tradition* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015).

37 See D. J. Smit, 'The Doing of the Little Righteousness': *On Justice in Barth's View of the Christian Life*, in *Essays in Public Theology*, 359–378. R. S. Tshaka, On Being African and Reformed? Towards an African Reformed Theology Enthused by an Interlocution of Those on the Margins of Society. HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies 70, no.1 (2014). See also I. A. Phiri and S. Nadar, S., 2009. "Going through the Fire with Eyes Wide Open: African Women's Perspectives on Indigenous Knowledge, Patriarchy and Sexuality". *Journal for the Study of Religion* (2009): 5–21.

oppressed groups and marginalised voices to inform and set the tone of the discussion on identity remains pivotal. Barth warns that these judgements on who humanity is must not be isolated from the encounter of God

The strange priestly yes of God awakens the acknowledgment of God as both a simple and complex invitation where contextual strongholds of greed, neglect, and self-emancipation are all placed under the light of his righteousness and not under the self-justifications of social ideals. The South African society comes from corrupt systems that excluded people economically and socially from part-taking in the courses of their lives³⁸, but this challenge of greed and corruption remains part of the current political and economic systems. The emancipation from poverty is also not without the lurking dangers and strongholds of greed and the stronghold of the consumer culture. It remains challenging to strive for a good living for all embedded in a sound biblical liberation ethos that is not tainted by only serving the self or again certain interest groups.³⁹

The invitation to acknowledge God is not merely rhetorical, but it is the invitation to place the yearnings and strivings of humanity, once again, in light of who God is for our neighbour and for us and to learn once again the radical Yes of God in his humanity for humanity.⁴⁰

Barth is not against humanity or human participation in theological reflection, or against the capability of humanity to be and act responsibly in the larger human project of world histories, but Barth is against a humanity who is her judge and becomes thus the one who is against humanity and who is, therefore, the anti or non-person.

He merely invites humanity to be awakened to the possibility of becoming a correspondent partner of faith in God. It is the realisation that the correspondent partner, is in essence capable of a dynamic and reciprocal

38 S. Swartz, 'A Long Walk to Citizenship: Morality, Justice and Faith in the Aftermath of Apartheid.' *Journal of Moral Education*, 35, no. 4 (2006): 551–570.

39 M. J. Manala, 2010. "A Better Life for All": A Reality or a Pipe-dream? A Black Theology Intervention in Conditions of Poor Service Delivery in the Democratic South Africa. *Scriptura: International Journal of Bible, Religion and Theology in Southern Africa* 105, no. 1 (2010): 519–531.

40 See A. Boesak, 'To Stand Where God Stands: Reflections on the Confession of Belhar after 25 years'. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 34, no. 1 (2008): 1–29.

relation with God, that opens the endless possibility to encounter God in Jesus Christ - also and specifically in the context of current South Africa where identity issues and economic emancipation remains a necessary problematic for society.

7. Conclusion

So, does humanity matter in the theology of Karl Barth? In the classical description, the office of the priest describes the No of God to humanity. The article described the priestly office to indicate the Yes of God, as the actualised possibility of humanity grounded upon the atonement of Jesus Christ.

Christ, the priest, is at once flesh and the brother in solidarity with humanity that cries with her in her distress, alienation and suffering conditions. He is the incarnated priest who takes the judgment of the sin of independence, self-justification and dualistic living upon himself so that the verdict of the Father may follow for humanity. The verdict is the Yes of the Father as the possibility of humanity to be corresponding partners of God, awakened by the Spirit and orientated towards God and the neighbour.

Barth affirms humanity as a cautious corresponding partner of God through his Christological account of Christ, the priest. The priestly yes affirms human beings as rightful partners and places humanity in interdependent relations with God and others. In contemporary South Africa, the affirmation of humanity as cautious corresponding partners remains appropriate as the theological dialogue around identities and economic emancipation beg interdependent living and a critical awareness of forms of self-justification.

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