

# The Transcendence And God's Freedom: A Biblical-Theological Evaluation Of Karl Barth

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## **Abstract**

*This study explores Karl Barth's exposition of the transcendence of God, especially in light of current theological discussions about how to find a balance between God's immanence and transcendence. This study discovers Barth's idea of God as an elusive supernatural being existing outside of human consciousness. Its primary goal is to provide basic clarifications regarding Barth's interpretation of transcendence and how his perspective relates to contemporary theories of God. Scholars have long been intrigued by Barth's assertion that God is nonetheless obscure and elusive to us in spite of our best attempts to understand Him. This study aims to clarify Barth's conception of God's transcendence and investigate the effects of his ideas on contemporary Christianity. To conduct this research, a comprehensive approach is employed, utilizing a wide range of scholarly sources including books, journals, articles, periodicals, and online resources. This study aims to highlight Karl Barth's lasting impact on Christian theology and the ongoing discussions surrounding the concept of God's transcendence.*

**Keywords:** Transcendence, God's Freedom, Biblical, Theological, Karl Barth, evaluation.

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## **I. Introduction**

Numerous characteristics attempt to elucidate the divine essence of God, and two of the most conspicuous ones are immanence and transcendence. Immanence, which refers to God's near proximity to humanity, holds that He participates effectively in the universe and in the history of mankind. The biblical foundation for this notion can be found in Paul's address to the Athenians, when he said that God "is not far from each of us" (Acts 17:27–28). Reputable theologians like Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Fredrich Schleiermacher, and Albert Ritscht have supported this perspective, affirming that God is present within creation. However, a contrasting viewpoint arises in Ecclesiastes 5:2, which asserts, "God is in heaven, and you are on earth," underscoring God's separation from creation. This perspective, known as the transcendence of God, underscores His autonomy from His connections with the universe.<sup>1</sup> These conflicting doctrines have ignited extensive debates in Christian theology, with scholars endeavoring to strike a harmonious balance between them.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, this study centers on Karl Barth's stance regarding the transcendence of God. Due to his revolutionary theological contributions, Karl Barth, whom scholars consider to be one of the Christian philosophers of the twentieth century, is frequently compared to Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Schleiermacher.<sup>3</sup> His impact endures, with ongoing conversations and conferences dedicated to his theological legacy. Barth's perspective on God's transcendence continues to be a subject of theological discourse. Barth's theological framework revolves around the notion that God possesses a transcendent nature that is beyond human comprehension, rendering Him unknowable and indescribable. Even when individuals claim to possess knowledge of God, their understanding merely skims the surface of an incomprehensible reality.<sup>4</sup> The idea of

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<sup>1</sup> Raoul Dederen, ed., *Handbook of Seventh-Day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald Pub Assn, 2000), 112.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th-Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005), 43.

<sup>4</sup> Eberhard Jüngel David F. Ford, "Karl Barth. A Theological Legacy. By Eberhard Jüngel. Translated by Garrett E. Paul. Philadelphia, Westminster Press; Edinburgh, Scottish Academic Press, 1986. Pp.168. £10.50.," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 43, no. 2 (May 1990): 22.

God's transcendent nature has presented difficulties and theological conundrums throughout history. The study aims to provide answers to the question: How does Barth perceive and interpret the idea of transcendence in the theory of God? What are the current philosophies and how do they affect the transcendence of God? What are the scriptural perspectives on the matter at hand? This investigation aims to clarify Karl Barth's comprehension and interpretation of God's transcendence while examining contemporary perspectives and their impact on this concept. Moreover, the study endeavors to evaluate Barth's conceptualization of God's transcendence and align it with biblical teachings, utilizing an array of scholarly sources, such as books, journals, articles, periodicals, unpublished online writings, and other reputable references.

## **II. A Brief Description of Barth's Life and Work**

Karl Barth, born in Basel, Switzerland, in 1886, embarked on a transformative journey through theology and philosophy. His early life was marked by his father's role as a preacher's college lecturer, and his mother's dedication to their family.<sup>5</sup> Barth pursued his education at esteemed universities in Bern, Berlin, Tübingen, and Marburg, initially influenced by thinkers like Harnack and Herrmann. However, he ultimately rejected the liberal theology associated with Ritschlian ideas. In 1911, Barth moved to Safenwil, a Swiss-German border village, where he initiated a theological revolution. He challenged the practicality of liberal theology in daily gospel preaching, supporting the transcendent word found in Scripture over neo-Protestant philosophical theology.<sup>6</sup> His convictions solidified in 1914 when he witnessed respected theological teachers endorsing German imperialism during World War I.<sup>7</sup> This event led Barth to critically examine liberal Protestant theology, culminating in his work "Der Romerbrief" (The Epistle to the Romans).<sup>8</sup> In it, he stressed the importance of both historical-critical Scripture study and the doctrine of verbal inspiration, asserting that liberal theology elevated human divinity rather than recognizing Scripture as God's divine word.<sup>9</sup>

Barth's theology called for a revolution, placing God at the forefront and challenging human-centered theology. He acknowledged Soren Kierkegaard's influence, emphasizing that God's truth and human cognition cannot be rationally synthesized. Instead, faith must embrace the enigmatic truths of God's self-disclosure. Barth believed that reducing the gospel to human rationality and societal norms was its greatest peril, a critique of German liberal theology that led him to renounce systematic theology in favor of understanding through faith.<sup>10</sup> In the early 1930s, Barth actively opposed the Nazis through the Confessing Church movement. He saw Jesus Christ as transcending human reason and warned against idolatry in any attempt to prove Christ's existence. Barth's involvement in the Barmen Declaration in 1934, affirming Christ as the sole Lord for Christians, led to his dismissal from his teaching post for refusing to salute Hitler. In 1962, Barth retired from full-time teaching, disheartened by the rise of secular theology and the notion of God's demise in theological discourse. However, he found encouragement in the transformations within the Roman Catholic Church during the Second Vatican Council. Karl Barth's life and theological journey, marked by his rejection of liberal theology and emphasis on faith, left an indelible mark on contemporary church thought, challenging the theological status quo and advocating for a more profound understanding of God's divine word.<sup>11</sup>

## **III. The Theological Approach of Barth**

Barth's theological approach encompassed both positive and negative aspects. From a negative standpoint, he rejected any form of natural theology and persistently emphasized how it unintentionally and inherently results in the cultural domination of the gospel. Christian natural theology, in a courteous and humble manner, alters revelation into a novel form of its own creation. Nevertheless, natural theology has already triumphed, transforming revelation into non-revelation, despite its respectful and forgiving demeanor, as well as its conscious and consistent submission. This will undoubtedly be evident in the manner in which it handles the revelation it has assimilated and nurtured. Barth sought to show how the gospel had been misrepresented in both Roman Catholic and traditional liberal Protestant theologies, as well as in the embrace of Nazi ideology by German Christians. Barth came to the conclusion that the logical path of action requires a rejection of God's

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<sup>5</sup> Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th-Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 66.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, Trans. Douglas Horton (Boston, MA: The Pilgrim Press, 1928), 43.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Barth, *God, Grace and Gospel*, trans. James S. McNab, *Scottish Journal of Theology Occasional Papers* No. 8 (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1959), 57.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Karl Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quarens Intellectum*, trans. I. W. Robertson, English ed. edition. (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Publications, 1979), 34.

revelation in Jesus Christ, even if we only criticize natural theology, by drawing on the history of theology and his concept of God's absolute power in the message of the gospel. It is not regarded as natural theology if it does not aim to be the only master. Assigning it any position at all unintentionally puts one on the road to this exclusive sovereignty.<sup>12</sup> According to Barth, the only place where it is possible to learn about God's Word is in His Word. The positive and negative facets of his theological philosophy are summarized in this remark. God has revealed Himself throughout human history and enabled the extraordinary phenomena of understanding Him by means of His sovereign freedom and grace, despite humanity's inexperience with God and the difficulty of learning about Him authentically through reason, nature, or culture. Barth claims that the coming of Jesus Christ marks a singular historical moment in which God is made known. Furthermore, God reveals Himself through Christ, not only giving knowledge or a way of life. In accordance with Barth, the eternal God can solely be apprehended in Jesus Christ and nowhere else.<sup>13</sup> But how can one confirm that this claim is true? According to Barth, the statement of faith serves as proof of that religion. Confirmation of comprehension is provided by the act of professing the word of God. In other words, believing that Jesus Christ is the revelation of God's truth is intrinsically self-justifying. This is the basic reality for a Christian, the one thing upon which all other realities are based. As a gift from God, faith is given.

#### **IV. Karl Barth's Perception of God's Word and the Bible**

Barth's theological framework relies solely on the Bible as its foundation. This Word assumes three distinct modes or forms. The primary form manifests in the embodiment of Jesus Christ, as well as in the comprehensive narrative of God's preceding and surrounding actions, including His birth, burial, and ascension. This authentic revelation, known as the gospel, constitutes the first mode. The next mode is represented by the Bible, which serves as a special testimony from God. Lastly, the third mode emerges as a result of the church spreading the word of God. The final two categories are regarded as the word of God solely due to their function in unveiling Jesus Christ. Consequently, the Bible does not embody God's word in a static manner. Instead, God's word always assumes an event-like quality, reflecting His active presence.<sup>14</sup>

Barth's interpretation of Scripture ignited extensive discourse and disapproval. He was accused by progressives of elevating the Bible to a status that was nearly identical to the conventional dogma of verbal inspiration, effectively shielding it from historical-critical analysis. Contrarily, conservatives condemned Barth's explicit denial of Scripture's infallibility and subordination to a nonpropositional event of revelation, with some criticizing his theology as an inventive form of modernism. In actuality, both criticisms approach the truth but fall short. Barth renounced the Bible and the authority bestowed upon it by traditional orthodoxy. Barth established a distinction between the scripture and the word of God, asserting that what we possess in the scripture are, in any case, anthropological endeavors to reiterate and replicate this message of God in human language, thoughts, and particular human circumstances.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, he strongly cautioned against interpreting the divine inspiration of Scripture, its unique role as a special testimony to Jesus Christ, as merely a matter of personal perspective. According to Barth, inspiration doesn't depend on assessment, feelings, or opinions; it is not determined by our beliefs as the reason for considering the Bible the word of God. However, there's no more effective way to ensure the objective truth that it is the word of God than to affirm that it both requires and sustains our faith, forming the core and vitality of our belief. By doing so, we assert that it embodies the truth of the living God, surpassing all other considerations, a force we shouldn't question in the face of human subjectivity, but instead must comprehend and acknowledge as such. Nonetheless, if this statement holds true, we must see the inspiration of the Bible as a divine choice made within the life of the Church and its members<sup>16</sup>

The assertion that the scripture is divinely inspired is not contingent upon an individual's subjective encounter or scholarly deductions derived from internal and external evidence. In Barth's argument scripture is regarded as the divine word due to its capacity to stimulate the transformative phenomenon of faith in Jesus Christ, which occurs repeatedly and independently of any human volition or initiative. As Jesus Christ stands as the sole authority above scripture, the appropriate stance of the church towards the Bible should be one of compliance and deference. The Bible serves as a channel through which Christ's authority is transmitted to the church. Moreover, the Bible holds authority within the church because it serves as a historical record and is, in fact, the oldest surviving text that outlines the beginnings, principles, and core identity of the Church.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>14</sup> Grenz and Olson, *20th-Century Theology*, 71.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 72

<sup>16</sup> Barth, *The Doctrine of God*, 534.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Barth attributed immense importance to the Bible, viewing it as surpassing any human authority but remaining subordinate to Jesus Christ. In his work, *Church Dogmatics*, he treated the Bible as though it were verbally inspired and incapable of doctrinal error. He consistently refrained from seeking authority beyond Scripture. Conversely, he argued that Christian belief, in complete harmony with Jesus Christ, is acceptable. "Ultimately, the crucial factor is whether a dogmatics is in accordance with Scripture." If it doesn't meet this standard, we must recognize that the church is preoccupied with other matters and is not carrying out its scientific duty as required by the complex nature of its message.<sup>18</sup>

#### **V. Karl Barth's Perspective on Christ-Centered and Trinitarian Theology**

Barth's theology demonstrates a steadfast focus on Christ, where the entire scope of Jesus Christ's life, death, resurrection, exaltation, and eternal connection with God the Father serves as the origin, center, and culmination of all theological principles. Throughout his theological framework, Barth consistently asks the question, "How should we properly understand this in light of God's action in Jesus Christ?" This Christ-centered approach creates the coherence and unity necessary for Barth's extensive theology to be considered a comprehensive system. According to Barth, Jesus Christ is the sole revelation of God, embodying the divine message. Barth derives the divinity of Jesus Christ from this core statement of faith, as it unveils God's self-disclosure. When we engage with His revelation, we are, in fact, engaging with God Himself, rather than a separate entity.<sup>19</sup>

Barth's central idea revolves around the necessity for actuality to correspond with possibility.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, if faith asserts that Jesus Christ is the unparalleled revelation of God, then he must not merely be an agent or representative of God, but rather identical to God himself. The potentiality of the Triune God exists behind the actuality of the revelation event. According to Barth, the Trinity doctrine is the only Christian response to the question, "Who is the self-revealing God?" Barth argues that it is indeed God Himself, in unbroken unity, who is both the revealing God and the event of revelation, as well as its impact on humanity, following the biblical understanding of revelation.<sup>21</sup> In contrast to Schleiermacher, Barth begins his theology with the Trinity doctrine. Unlike other possible doctrines of God or concepts of revelation, the Trinity doctrine fundamentally differs from the Christian doctrine of God as Christian, and therefore, the Christian concept of revelation as Christian.<sup>22</sup> According to Barth, God's revelation is nothing less than God himself, unveiling his true nature and personhood. As a result, Jesus Christ, as the unparalleled self-revelation of God, embodies both human and divine aspects. Importantly, Jesus Christ is not a representation of a divine entity, nor does he epitomize an immaculate human.<sup>23</sup> Instead, Jesus Christ represents the active presence of God in physical form, taking on the role of a genuine human being who acts.<sup>24</sup> Barth makes it clear that when he mentions Jesus Christ, he is referring to the embodiment of God's second "mode of Being (Seinsweise)," which is known as the Incarnation. He chooses to use the term "mode" instead of "person" because the latter implies "personality," and God only has one personality.<sup>25</sup> If Jesus Christ had a distinct personality from the Father, he couldn't serve as the means through which the Father reveals Himself. According to Barth, the eternal divine ways of existing within God exist in perfect unity as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. However, their distinctiveness is crucial for God's revelation in Jesus Christ and His spiritual presence in the church. Therefore, when Barth states, "God is Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ is God," he is doing so within the context of the Trinity.<sup>26</sup> Jesus Christ represents the second way of existing, a reemergence of the Father's personality.

#### **VI. Karl Barth's Viewpoint on God as "The One Who Loves with Liberty"**

Barth dedicated an entire book to exploring God's qualities and perfections, despite the fact that the Trinity is the central aspect of his understanding of God. He categorized these divine perfections into two sets: those related to God's love and those related to God's freedom, portraying God as "The One Who Loves in Freedom." This framework replaces the traditional division between God's transcendence and immanence. Barth contended that it was essential to give equal attention and arrangement to God's love and freedom in order to

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<sup>18</sup> Grenz and Olson, *20th-Century Theology*, 72.

<sup>19</sup> Grenz and Olson, *20th-Century Theology*, 72.

<sup>20</sup> Barth, *The Doctrine of God*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 301

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Barth, *The Doctrine of God*, 151.

truly represent the God revealed in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, God's love is manifested as His voluntary establishment of a relationship between humanity and Himself.<sup>27</sup>

The most compelling illustration of this concept can be seen in God's merciful connection with humanity in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, often referred to as "The Son of God's voyage into a foreign land."<sup>28</sup> The profound love of God is evident through these attributes: grace, sanctity, benevolence, integrity, endurance, and sagacity.<sup>29</sup> Without explicitly characterizing God's essence as love, Barth proceeded to emphasize the freedom inherent in this love. While it remains authentic and constant, God's affection for the world is a matter of choice.<sup>30</sup> If God had chosen not to love the earth, He would still be adored. He foresaw that "if we are not careful at this point, we shall inevitably rob God of his deity," In particular, Barth was considering Hegel-influenced liberal theology.<sup>31</sup> God experiences flawless love and communion within His triune existence, which exists independently of His love and communion with the world.<sup>32</sup> Karl Barth contended that in God's transcendence over the world, it follows that God no longer requires the world to be the recipient of his love. He argued that this assertion is necessary to avoid pantheism and to truly demonstrate God's gracious love for the world. God's status as God is solely due to his absoluteness apart from the world: he encompasses all that is supreme and proclaims his independence. Even if everything in the world did not exist or existed differently, God would remain unchanged and undifferentiated.<sup>33</sup> Barth offered a compelling interpretation of God's perfections, which encompass unity and omnipresence, constancy, and omnipotence, as well as eternity and glory.<sup>34</sup> Even though Barth stressed God's freedom, he didn't see God's love for humanity as a random or insignificant aspect of divine existence, to which God was indifferent. Instead, he believed that God's complete life within Himself naturally inclined toward unity with the lives of creatures.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the freedom of God transcends all boundaries, for He willingly extends Himself beyond His own limits. He embraces genuine communion with the world, finding its ultimate harmony in the person of Jesus Christ. Undoubtedly, in Barth's perspective, the deep yearning and conscious decision to unite with humanity in Jesus Christ served as the very origin and groundwork of the world's creation. Through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God initiated a covenantal relationship with the world, driven by a singular purpose: to fully immerse Himself within it.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, Barth agreed that there was only one God, the God of love revealed in Jesus. Even though God could have chosen to withhold his love and life from the earth and do so, He chose to create us instead of severing His relationship with us and making His exquisite existence, life, and act dependent upon ours.<sup>37</sup>

## **VII. The Concept of Divine Election in Karl Barth's Theology**

Barth asserts that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ epitomizes the pinnacle of God's intercession in the annals of humanity. In this occurrence, the Son of God embarks on an odyssey to a distant realm, shouldering the righteous wrath and repudiation that morally culpable mankind justly warrants. Consequently, Jesus Christ becomes the designated and condemned figure who personifies the entirety of mankind and assumes their mantle. God transfers the love and divine choice that has perpetually existed onto Him, anointing Him as the chosen one who stands as humanity's foremost representative, in lieu of them.<sup>38</sup> Similar to Barth's overarching theology, his understanding of election centers on Christ. He believes that God's choice and condemnation are exclusively focused on Jesus Christ. There is no regrettable decree of dual predestination that separates people into the saved and the damned. Instead, every individual is encompassed within Jesus Christ, who embodies both the chosen God and the chosen human. The benefits of his redemptive work extend to all. He experiences God's rejection, and naturally, he is God disowning himself: "In the selection of Jesus Christ, which represents God's eternal will, God has designated election, salvation, and life for humanity; and for Himself, He has

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<sup>27</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/I The Doctrine of God, Part 1* trans. T.H.L. Parker et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), 1, 273.

<sup>28</sup> Grenz and Olson, *20th-Century Theology*, 73.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics the Doctrine of God, Volume 2, Part 1*, 311.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 677.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

<sup>36</sup> G. W. Bromiley, "The Doctrine of Reconciliation: A Survey of Barth's *Kirchliche Dogmatik IV/2*," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 10, no. 1 (March 1957): 50.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

assigned true repentance, everlasting punishment, and death."<sup>39</sup> However, Barth emphatically stated that God's mercy is extended to all humanity through Jesus Christ, who alone experienced true abandonment.<sup>40</sup> People might try to live without faith in opposition to God, but God thwarted their urges and initiated things before the world began. What's truly granted to humans is eternal life alongside God.<sup>41</sup> Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar noted that Karl Barth's discussion of election reveals the possibility and necessity of universal salvation. Grace is the ultimate truth, and judgment is temporary.<sup>42</sup>

### **VIII. Reassessment of Karl Barth's Understanding of God**

The story of modern Western theology centers on Barth's contribution, and he is still a key figure in current constructive theology. His written works have been carefully reviewed and reevaluated over the past 20 years, especially in regard to the idea of God's transcendence. Since Barth's theological career began with dispute, his theological philosophy has been the subject of intense discussion. His approach has frequently been characterized as fideistic by those who claim that adopting it requires giving up reason and turning back to religious authority.<sup>43</sup> However, despite Barth's claim that their theological strategy eventually harms Christianity's reputation in society, these opponents have found it difficult to successfully refute this claim. The charge that Barth's theology is fideistic has received support from some conservative Protestant theologians. According to them, it undermines any chance of apologetics, endangering Christian testimony and evangelization.<sup>44</sup>

The strength of Barth's style of theology is the total reliance on revelation, which enables his theology to adopt a prophetic position toward the globe. Due to its serious consideration of the autonomy of theology—despite the fact that this is Barth's greatest strength—the theological method has one major weakness. All intellectual justifications for the truthfulness of revelation are rejected by Barth. How might outsiders perceive Christianity if it lacks clear links to other fields and human life? Theology remains subjectivist notwithstanding Karl Barth's rejection of the axiomatic essence of God and His revelation. It is highly challenging to persuade people that the core concepts of theology are not the outcome of subjective interpretation when one holds a positivistic theology of revelation.<sup>45</sup> The alleged christomonism of Barth's theological approach is a second contentious issue. This phrase was coined by Barth to describe his theological system's intense focus on Jesus Christ. Barth's theology, described as "Christocentric" by Hans Urs von Balthasar, not only revolves around Jesus Christ but also limits our understanding of God to what Christ revealed. Balthasar likened it to an hourglass, emphasizing the unique union of God and humanity in Christ, with no other points of connection.<sup>46</sup> This approach's drawback is its tendency to reject a broader revelation, which is central to Paul's argument in Romans chapter one. Barth's emphasis on Jesus Christ as the pivotal point in his theology also fuels claims of christocentrism. Every doctrine assumes a manifestation, which is what a Christology represents. A striking illustration of this is seen in Barth's concept of election. Jesus Christ both impacts and is influenced by predestination. The exact place of mankind and God the Father in this system is yet unknown. To adequately describe Barth's theology, calling something "christomonism" might be using undue force. He firmly embraced the concept of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit existing separately. He also avoided blending Christ with the external world. Moreover, the phrase doesn't adequately capture Barth's significant role in reestablishing Christ as the central focus of Christian contemplation. Nevertheless, Barth's Swiss theology, with its strong focus on Christology, may come across as one-dimensional, overlooking the roles of the Father, the Spirit, and the individual in the salvation process. Conservative and liberal theologians have both harshly attacked Barth's understanding of the Bible.

Liberals claim that he treats the Bible as if it were verbally inspired and disregards the results of higher criticism. On the other hand, conservatives charge Barth with denying the Bible's infallibility and drawing an overly radical and making an extreme difference between "God's Word" and the Scripture.<sup>47</sup> The distinction between Barth's theory and the application of scripture is frequently overlooked by both sides. Liberals ignore

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<sup>39</sup> Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of God, Part 2*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, 1st ed. (London: T&T Clark, 1957), 123.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 320.

<sup>42</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1992), 163.

<sup>43</sup> L. Harold DeWolf, *The Religious Revolt Against Reason* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1949), 12.

<sup>44</sup> Clark Pinnock, "Karl Barth and Christian Apologetics," *Themelios* 2 (1977): 66–70.

<sup>45</sup> Jacobus Wentzel Van Huyssteen and Wentzel Van Huyssteen, *Theology and the Justification of Faith: Constructing Theories in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), 22.

<sup>46</sup> Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, 170.

<sup>47</sup> Klaas Runia, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), 174.

his forceful claim about humanistic essence and place more emphasis on his interpretation of the text. Conservatives concentrate on his idea while ignoring how Barth interprets the Bible, treating as though it were the only source of authority for theology. Indeed, Barth should be criticized for what seems to be a contradiction between his theory and practice. Would Barth have been able to produce his brilliant modern presentation of traditional Christian beliefs if he had continually adhered to his view of scripture? Simply expressed, his assertion that there is a contradiction between God's revealed word and biblical doctrine scarcely supports such a thoroughly established propositional interpretation of biblical teaching. His retrieval of the trinity dogma from oblivion is one of Barth's major accomplishments in twentieth-century theology. From Schleiermacher onward, liberal theology had dismissed this idea as a remnant of early Christianity's purported "Hellenization" and had failed to detect any ethical significance in it. Even if there is no agreement on the Trinity doctrine among theologians, this has changed under Barth's influence. However, not everyone has agreed with his treatment of the trinity idea.

Some detractors have claimed that Barth's handling of the trinitarian distinctions is implicitly modalistic and reduces God to a unique subject in associating God's one nature with his "person" and using the phrase "modes of being" to describe them.<sup>48</sup> This viewpoint holds weight regarding the Church doctrine book, as Barth connected God's personhood to His unique essence and inferred the Trinity from divine self-disclosure.<sup>49</sup> In this context, there is a kernel of truth. Nevertheless, he firmly opposed modalism, asserting that God's ultimate truth exists in three distinct forms within His essence. In subsequent works, Barth established a hierarchy of obedience within God's eternal nature, unequivocally rejecting modalism and any hint of subordination, firmly establishing the eternal and indivisible distinctions among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

### **IX. Contemporary Views**

Emil Brunner, Karl Barth, and Rudolf Bultmann were influential theologians in the 20th century who sought to respond to the rationalistic liberalism that had gained popularity in the late 19th century. While they initially collaborated, their perspectives eventually diverged.<sup>50</sup> Emil Brunner, in particular, made significant contributions to theological discourse through his three-volume work, "Dogmatics," written between 1949 and 1962. His primary objective was to counter the theological trends of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which sought to reconcile human reason with the concept of God. Brunner's theology emphasized the transcendence of God, distinguishing it from intellectual theism. He argued that if God were as described by intellectual theism, He would not align with the God depicted in the Bible.<sup>51</sup> Brunner contended that knowing God is a personal and relational experience that requires individual choice, activity, and commitment, rather than a purely intellectual endeavor. This emphasis on the relationship between God and humans was central to Christianity for Brunner. Furthermore, Brunner criticized attempts to understand God through natural reason or human philosophy, asserting that theology's main task should focus on kerygma (proclamation) and dogmatics (doctrinal theology).<sup>52</sup> He was influenced by the philosophy of Ferdinand Ebner and Martin Buber, particularly their concepts of "I-Thou" and "it-Thou," which shaped his views on humanity.<sup>53</sup> Brunner was part of the neo-orthodox movement, which aimed to reassert the transcendence of God in response to the immanence-focused theology of liberal theologians. In his view, knowledge of God could only occur through divine revelation, and this revelation would inherently involve paradoxes and contradictions.<sup>54</sup> These contradictions were best expressed through the use of paradoxical language, giving rise to the concept of dialectical theology.<sup>55</sup>

Rudolf Bultmann, another prominent figure in neo-orthodoxy, shared the goal of emphasizing God's transcendence. He believed that the traditional cosmological understanding of God's location in a three-story universe was incompatible with modern scientific views. Bultmann proposed a nonspatial understanding of transcendence, emphasizing God's absolute authority. He argued that God's transcendence should be understood

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<sup>48</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Die Subjektivität Gottes und die Trinitätslehre," *Grundfragen Systematischer Theologie*, Band 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977),

<sup>49</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 350.

<sup>50</sup> Grenz and Olson, *20th-Century Theology*, 78.

<sup>51</sup> Paul King Jewett, *Emil Brunner's Concept of Revelation* (London: James Clarke, 1954), 12.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God: Dogmatics: Vol. I*, trans. Olive Wyon, (London: Lutterworth, 1949), 155.

<sup>54</sup> Edward J. Humphrey, *Makers of the Modern Theological Mind: Emil Brunner* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1977), 15.

<sup>55</sup> Emil Brunner, "Intellectual Autobiography of Emil Brunner," in *The Theology of Emil Brunner*, ed. Charles W. Kegley. Vol. 3, *The Library of Living Theology*. (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1962), 4. See also, Emil Brunner, *The Word and the World* (London: Christian Movement Press, 1931), 21.

existentially, focusing on how God's word confronts individuals and calls them to trust and respond in faith.<sup>56</sup> According to Bultmann, theological claims about God should also be anthropological claims, meaning that God is known through individual responses to divine self-disclosure. He posited that Christ represents God's word to each person, emphasizing a personalized, existential understanding of theology.<sup>57</sup> Bultmann's theology resulted in a narrower concept of God's activity in the world, primarily confined to individual faith. Despite his efforts to reconstruct theology, Bultmann struggles to fully affirm God's transcendence in his approach.

Reinhold Niebuhr, a 20th-century theologian, played a vital role in introducing neo-orthodox ideas to American theology.<sup>58</sup> He critiqued the modern mindset for prioritizing reason and nature over revealed religion.<sup>59</sup> Niebuhr sought to reestablish the biblical notion of divine transcendence, emphasizing the concept of the kingdom of God as a point of judgment and resolution for human issues. For Niebuhr, the transcendent God and the kingdom of God provided a basis for judgment against human self-assertion and pride.<sup>60</sup> The ultimate meaning of history, according to him, was rooted in God's transcendence, and human-created meanings were provisional and challenged by the Christian assertion of a divine purpose in history. Niebuhr also believed that the Bible's eschatological symbols, such as the second advent of Christ, the final judgment, and the resurrection, expressed hope and revealed the significance of history.<sup>61</sup> These symbols reflected faith in God's omnipotence, the distinction between good and evil, and the fulfillment of temporal processes by eternity.

In his work "The Nature and Destiny of Man," Niebuhr concluded that living by faith meant finding ultimate security in the transcendent God beyond the securities and anxieties of history. He hoped that this religious perspective would deter people from seeking false securities and salvation solely in the realm of human history.<sup>62</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr's 20th-century religious work aimed to shift Western society's focus from the immanence of God to balancing transcendence and immanence, but this approach shifted God's role in history away from current or past events.

## **X. Biblical perspective of God's Transcendence**

The concept of transcendence, though not explicitly mentioned in the Bible, plays a significant role in theological discussions concerning God's nature. Transcendence refers to God's freedom from any ties with the universe, emphasizing His distinctiveness from Creation.<sup>63</sup> This distinction is rooted in His timeless eternity and inconceivable immutability, setting Him apart from the time-bound and storied nature of the world. This theological foundation enables human reason to contemplate God and construct natural theology. Some even assert "absolute transcendence," which posits an absolute and complete difference between God's eternal being and His historical creation.<sup>64</sup> According to the Bible, God is portrayed as distinct from the world in both reality and nature. However, when viewed through the lens of "absolute transcendence," God becomes an unknowable stranger. The shift towards pantheistic conceptions of God's immanence in the last three centuries has been influenced by various approaches to interpreting God's transcendence.<sup>65</sup>

The creation narrative in the Bible forms the basis for understanding both God's and Creation's transcendence and likeness.<sup>66</sup> Genesis 1:1 and Hebrews 11:3 are two verses that emphasize the difference between God's reality and the reality of the world and the universe's dependency on God. Scripture begins with God's immanence in the sanctuary, as seen in the dedication of Solomon's Temple in 2 Chronicles chapters 5-7. This narrative establishes God's presence in both the earthly temple and heavenly realms. While heaven is a part

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<sup>56</sup> Norman Young, *History and Existential Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 39. See also, Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1989), 633.

<sup>57</sup> Rudolf Karl Bultmann, *The Presence of Eternity: History and Eschatology* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), 40. See also "Kerygma and Myth by Rudolf Bultmann and Five Critics," 11–32, accessed October 18, 2022, <http://media.sabda.org/alkitab-2/Religion-Online.org%20Books/Bultmann%2C%20Rudolf%20et.%20al.%20-%20Kerygma%20and%20Myth.pdf>.

<sup>58</sup> D. R. Davis, *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet from America* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 14.

<sup>59</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1937), 4.

<sup>60</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History* (New York: Scribner, 1949), 152.

<sup>61</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 2:288.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:288.

<sup>63</sup> Raoul Dederen, ed., *Handbook of Seventh-Day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald Pub Assn, 2000), 112.

<sup>64</sup> Dederen, *Handbook of Seventh-Day Adventist Theology*, 112.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

of God's creation, it doesn't represent the realm of His transcendence.<sup>67</sup> Instead, God's abode in heaven reflects His historical immanence and interaction with sin-free creatures.<sup>68</sup> Solomon's question regarding God's dwelling on Earth highlights the enigma of God's reality – He is present on Earth and in heaven (immanence) yet not limited by Creation (transcendence). This paradox demonstrates that God can be intimately involved with His creation while remaining utterly superior to it.<sup>69</sup> Worshiping and acknowledging God's full glory requires recognizing His creation. Human reason and imagination cannot grasp God's divine being beyond what He has revealed. The Bible rejects the notion of "absolute" transcendence, which severs all connections between God and the natural world.<sup>70</sup> While humans are made "in the image of God," this comparison doesn't support the use of reason alone to comprehend God. Only God can make accurate analogies regarding His existence within our created order. Consequently, no analogy from Creation can support the idea that God created humans' physical or intellectual form. This prohibition is reinforced by the second commandment, which prohibits the creation of graven images or likenesses.<sup>71</sup> Biblical anthropomorphisms attribute human traits to God, allowing for a partial understanding of His nature. These anthropomorphisms reveal who God is and what He can do within human realities. For example, when the Bible mentions God's "arm," it signifies that God's reality can accomplish anything a human arm can do and more. However, the precise nature of God's reality remains beyond human comprehension. God's true nature is shrouded in mystery, with some aspects revealed through analogies. While aspects of His being and celestial capabilities are disclosed, the full understanding of His transcendent essence remains elusive. Attributes like foreknowledge, omniscience, and omnipotence are connected to God's transcendence, as described in the Bible. The doctrine of the Trinity serves as a profound demonstration of God's transcendence.

### **XI. Theological Reflection of the Concept of the Doctrine of the Transcendence**

Theological repercussions of the contemporary debate on the subject include the following: First of all if God is "wholly other", no one can personally know him or relate to him. However, the biblical concept of transcendence portrays that God is both transcendent and immanent. Second, if God is not in communication with the universe, then the universe is not under his control. However, even while God is present on earth, in a temple, and in heaven (immanence), He is not limited by Creation (transcendence). Also, if God is not involved, he appears distant and uncaring. Meanwhile, scripture makes obvious reference to God's transcendence beginning with His immanence in the sanctuary. Moreover, if God is not involved in life, prayer is useless. God's people worship Him for who He is. His transcendence is an attribute of virtue and an essential part of His nature. God's transcendence is one of His manifold perfections and is a reason He should be worshipped. Furthermore, there is a being superior to us. God cannot be fully comprehended by man. Additionally, human concepts can never fully express what God is like. Human reason or imagination cannot delve deeper into God's divine being than what He has revealed., there will always be a distinction between God and man. However, deference is appropriate in our interactions with God. Finally, we should search for a truly transcendent creation by God.

### **XII. Conclusion**

Karl Barth's theology emphasizes God's complete separation from worldly and scientific ideas, highlighting the vast gulf between God and humanity. He rejects introspection, human emotions, and natural theology as inadequate means to discover God. Instead, he asserts that true transcendence is only revealed through sources like the Bible and Christ, but God's essence remains unknowable. Barth firmly denies any human-made path to God, as it falls short of the true God. Barth underscores God's transcendence and the importance of God's free love for the world. However, this emphasis on God's freedom might have led to a neglect of the human element in the God-world relationship, particularly in his doctrine of salvation. This could result in a simplified message lacking the necessary exhortation. In contrast to Schleiermacher, who emphasized humanity excessively when discussing God, Barth's mistake was a minor overemphasis on humanity while discussing God, as noted by his opponent G. C. Berkouwer. While Barth argues that a wholly transcendent God is unknowable, scripture suggests a God who is both transcendent and immanent. This debate has implications for prayer, God's involvement in human life, and the limits of human comprehension. Ultimately, it calls for a search for a creation by God that truly embodies transcendence.

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<sup>67</sup> *ibid*

<sup>68</sup> *ibid*

<sup>69</sup> *ibid*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

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