

Neediness: the anthropology of Karl Barth

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Abstract

The article argues that Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* presents human 'neediness' as the constitutive element of his theological anthropology. Since this element has had little notice in Barth scholarship, the article focuses on describing the consistent reiteration of this theme in theologically substantive locations throughout the *Dogmatics*. It begins with Barth's observation that the emergence of humanity on the sixth day discloses humans to be 'the neediest of all creation'. Barth elaborates the dimensions of human neediness in his discussion of 'the readiness of humanity for God', propounding the human need for God as the precondition of knowledge of God that is in actuality undercut by the sin that denies any such neediness. Barth thus describes a potential 'blessed neediness' and an actual 'wretched neediness' that together define the glory and the tragedy of all that is human, and which inform not only Barth's epistemology and hamartiology, but also his accounts of christology, forgiveness, redemption, worship and Christian witness.

Keywords: anthropology, Karl Barth, christology, creation, neediness, neighbour

In an under-noticed comment, Karl Barth asserts that the circumstances of the creation of humans demonstrate them to be 'the neediest of all creatures' (*das bedürftigste von allen Geschöpfen*), particularly as they emerge on the penultimate day of creation after all else has been created and is functioning quite well.¹ Tracing the language of 'needy' humanity through the *Church Dogmatics*, one finds it used in a surprisingly extensive and intentional way that can sharpen and even correct aspects of the subsequent discussion of Barth's theological anthropology. It is even possible to argue that Barth understood neediness as the most characteristic human attribute: constitutive and intrinsic, even definitive. This is a finding that is in some contrast with the broadly received construal of Barth's anthropology as

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (hereafter CD), 13 vols, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–75), III/1, p. 143 (trans. emended). Eberhard Busch cites the passage and comments briefly on its relation to human responsibility toward creation, in *The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth's Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), p. 191. I find no other notice taken of it in the literature.

determined relationally by God's encounter with humanity – determined extrinsically as it were, as 'the one who exists in relationship with God', rather than by an inherent or subjective element in the creature itself.² Barth's anthropology has even been described as 'passive'³ – one in which 'the embeddedness of humanity in the nonhuman and inanimate creation plays only a small part'.⁴ In fact Barth understands humanity as created in radical need, in need of God, of other human beings and of creation itself as it exists in its entirety, a need which necessarily propels humans into a lifelong and vulnerable pursuit of some sort of resolution, whether it be in fulfilment or in destruction.

The purpose of this article is to follow Barth's use of the language of human neediness (especially *darfen/bedürftig/Bedürftigkeit*) as it appears in substantive discussion in certain sections of the *Church Dogmatics*. Given restrictions of space, the primary intent is to clarify the substance and implications of Barth's usage, although some implications for the recent discussion of Barth's anthropology are also noted.

'The neediest of all creation'

Barth's comment comes in the context of his discussion of the third day of creation (Gen 1:9–13), in which the dry land appears and then is clothed with vegetation. According to Barth, this 'twofold work' first separates out a habitable space, and then initiates life for the first time – life that is both good for its own sake, and that will in turn provide the necessary support for other life forms that have yet to be created. 'The vegetable kingdom which grows out of the dry land in obedience to the Word of God will not be the only living creature. But it is the first, and the presupposition of all the rest.'⁵ Barth underlines the significance of this 'presupposition' by anticipating the events of the sixth day:

When man finally appears at the centre of all the older circle of creation, and when it is shown that everything must serve him, it must not be overlooked that man is thus revealed to be the neediest of all creatures. ... In this way, as the 'highest' of the living creatures among which the

² George Hunsinger, 'Barth on What it Means to Be Human: A Christian Scholar Confronts the Options', in *Evangelical, Catholic, and Reformed: Doctrinal Essays on Barth and Related Themes* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2015), pp. 145–6.

³ Dominic Robinson, *Understanding the 'Imago Dei': The Thought of Karl Barth, von Balthasar, and Moltmann* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), p. 47.

⁴ J. Gordon McConville, *Being Human in God's World: An Old Testament Theology of Humanity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), pp. 24–5.

⁵ CD III/1, p. 143.

plants now appear as the 'lowest,' he will really have to be and remain the lowest.⁶

Barth then goes on to make another anticipatory jump, relating the passage directly to the well-known theme of this section, 'Creation as the External Basis of the Covenant':

What is proclaimed in this teleology of creation is not the glory of man but the glory of the God who has turned to him in His mercy. What is prepared is the table of the Lord to which man is invited and admitted. What is prefigured in nature is the covenant of grace – the order in which only the last can be first, but the first must be, and remain, and continually become the last.⁷

From this brief summary it is already clear that this description of humanity as 'the neediest of all creation' is more than a passing phrase, but has significant theological substance. Barth goes on to refer to human neediness several times in this section, for instance asserting that humanity can never be viewed 'in isolation but in this environment and company', since 'if it is true that man is more noble than these creatures, it is also true that he has just as much need of them as of all that went before, whereas they for their part have no need of him'.⁸ It characterises the basic relationship of humanity to the totality of the creation that is now their home as one of fundamental need, and so characterises their creaturehood as such, in the perfect will and work of God, and prior to any depredations of sin. This neediness then is far from a flaw or a disadvantage; rather it is the precondition in relation to which provisions and blessings can be known and enjoyed. But the neediness of the innocent human creature also has direct correlation with that of the human sinner, the object of the movement of God's 'prefigured' grace in salvation, in which God will provide by grace all that sinful humanity needs and lacks. Barth's exploration of the radical nature of God's grace in the covenant of redemption is a hallmark of his theology and influence. That he does not develop an anthropology of neediness more thoroughly in this context – and in fact it does not receive full focus in any extended paragraph or section of the *Dogmatics* – may be due to his overriding

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 143–4 (trans. emended).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 177. See also (in the same volume) the human 'need' of provision for plants and animals (p. 150); the 'need' for light (p. 57); and the 'creaturely necessity' addressed by the order of all creation, including humanity as male and female (p. 212). Barth notes that Calvin saw in God's gift of creation as provision to humanity in Gen 1:29–30 'a modification of man's dominant position on the earth' (p. 210).

interest in expounding his ideas of covenant. But the idea does re-emerge in substantive and significant ways throughout the *Dogmatics* in a surprising number of connections.

Needy but not ready

Barth's most nuanced development of human neediness is found in CD II/1, §26, 'The Knowability of God'.⁹ This section comprises two subsections: Barth first explores 'the readiness of God' to be known by humans, and then 'the readiness of man' to know God. Barth discovers God's readiness to be known in God's own triune existence and action, an existence and action that mean that God is 'open' to us. We know God, because God knows himself in trinitarian being, and is therefore open to himself, and gives us graciously to know himself.¹⁰ 'Because God is open to Himself – the Father to the Son and the Son to the Father, by the Holy Spirit, He, the Lord of all things – all things are open to Him ...'¹¹ God's openness to us is then entirely a function of grace, of self-revelation:

In His good-pleasure God is among us and for us – in the encroachment, proceeding from Him alone and effected by Him alone, in which He makes Himself ours. In His good-pleasure He is open to us in the openness in which He is open to Himself.¹²

When Barth turns to considering the readiness of humanity for knowing God, he describes that readiness in comparable terms: 'As we have seen, the readiness of God is God's grace. Hence the readiness of man must be the readiness for God's grace.'¹³ This readiness can be explored in relation to human 'openness' for grace. And this 'openness' Barth describes with recourse to the 'neediness' of humanity. In fact he draws attention to both of these terms, *Offenheit*, 'openness', and *Bedürftigkeit*, 'neediness', emphasising them with spaced type in the German text.¹⁴ It is the need of humanity that in fact constitutes human openness for God and for grace. Barth describes this openness by making 'a three-fold distinction': first, this openness involves the human need for God, both for human existence itself and for knowledge of God; second, this openness involves the human's knowledge of both human need and God's grace as objective realities; and third, this

⁹ CD II/1, pp. 63–178.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

¹⁴ Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (hereafter *KD*), 13 vols (Zurich: EVZ, 1952–67), II/1, p. 143.

openness involves the human's subjective willingness to accept God's grace as the only resolution to human need. So here again Barth finds neediness to be fundamentally descriptive in understanding the human being standing before God. Human neediness is the precondition for knowledge, for love, for human blessedness. And this is a true theological anthropology, one untainted by the spectre of sin, though he will quickly turn to the way that sin vitiates the situation. The human as such is in need of God for everything, beginning with existence itself, and moving towards knowledge of God, of self, of human community, and of all created provision. Humanity is characterised and even defined by utter vulnerability, by neediness.

However, as Barth continues, the fact that humanity is open to God does not mean that humanity is ready for God: 'This openness in itself and as such is still not that readiness.'¹⁵ Sin, as the human turn from God, means that the human turns also from the acknowledgement of its own need. The result is a tragic and hopeless deepening of need. Thus 'the deepest and most real need of man for the miracle of grace does not lie in the fact that he needs it objectively, ... but in the fact that he is in a position to cover up and hide from himself this need of his; to be to himself and – even if illusorily – to God also, not this needy man, but a rich man who can live without God's grace and who can even allot it to himself'.¹⁶ Thus whereas God's openness to humanity equates to God's readiness for humanity, in Barth's terminology the potential openness of the needy human to God and God's goodness is overwhelmed by the denial of that need. The result is human closedness to God instead of readiness.¹⁷ If humanity is defined anthropologically by need, in sin it is crippled by the refusal to acknowledge its own nature as needy.

The section, in other words, presents two aspects of human neediness: a neediness that, when it is acknowledged and embraced, is the precondition of all blessing in the realisation of the free and gracious knowledge of God; and that, when it is denied, is actually the source of all human wretchedness and misery – as we might put it, a potentially 'blessed neediness' and an actual 'wretched neediness' that together define the glory and the tragedy of all that is human.

This section also provides another example of the way that the language of need in the *Dogmatics* fails to hold the centre of discussion for very long, despite its use in contexts of deepest theological import. Having raised the problem of the radical distancing of human and divine as a

¹⁵ CD II/1, p. 130.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 130–4.

problem of neediness, Barth does not resolve it with attention to the same language. The exposition becomes dominated by another pressing concern.

In characteristic fashion, Barth finds that it is in Jesus Christ, and only in Jesus Christ, that the human is in fact ready for God; 'Jesus Christ is the knowability of God on our side, just as He is the grace of God itself, and therefore also the knowability of God on God's side.'¹⁸ But rather than explore this resolution in reference to human neediness, Barth shifts to the lens of human enmity towards God: 'And in this place He has not only borne man's enmity against God's grace, revealing it in all its depth. He has borne the far greater burden, the righteous wrath of God against those who are enemies of His grace, the wrath which must fall on us.'¹⁹ If it is surprising that someone so attentive to language would switch tracks in this way, an explanation is at hand. In this section, Barth has spliced into his discourse on knowing God his weighty and much longer polemic against the validity of natural theology in all its forms. Thus in the first subsection the discussion of 'the readiness of God' (pp. 63–73) is followed by three arguments against the possibility of natural theology (pp. 73–128); the second subsection moves quickly from expounding the problem of 'the readiness of man' (pp. 129–34) to propounding a fourth argument against natural theology (pp. 134–42), turning then to the resolution of the problem of 'the readiness of man' in Jesus Christ of (pp. 142–62); and finally the section closes with concluding thoughts on natural theology (pp. 162–78). Since for Barth the perennial pursuit of natural theology arises from 'unbelief' as 'an active enmity against God', it is in that regard understandable that the christological resolution at the section's close addresses the 'enmity' of humanity, as the language of 'neediness' drops out of the exposition.²⁰

Nevertheless in this section the fundamental importance to Barth of neediness in his theological anthropology is clear. Human existence is characterised by the gift of vulnerability and therefore openness to God, tragically transposed by denial into a wretchedness that has no prospect of relief. The passage also makes a clear connection between the inherency of neediness in humanity, and the inherency of grace in God; the grace of salvation comports admirably with the crippling need of sinful humanity, because grace comports already with the natural fundamental vulnerability of humanity itself.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

The neighbour in need

Barth makes significant use of the language of the constitutive neediness of humanity in his discussion of the double love commandment, regarding the identity of the 'neighbour'.²¹ Referencing Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, Barth notes the dire neediness of the distressed man, and the tendency of much exegesis to conclude that the parable teaches that one finds one's neighbour in those who need our help.²² But he rightly points out that the parable reverses the roles of the Samaritan and the victim: it is the victim who finds his neighbour in the Samaritan who shows him mercy. The apparent intent of Jesus in telling the parable to the self-important lawyer who has asked him 'Who is my neighbour?' is to help the lawyer 'first to see that he himself is the man fallen among the thieves and lying helpless by the wayside ... He will then know who is his neighbor, and will not ask concerning him as if it were only the casual clarification of a concept.'²³

The context of this insight and the use Barth makes of it informs the church's fundamental task as witness, as well as the nature of the incarnation itself. It comes as he is exploring 'The Life of the Children of God' (CD I/2, §18) under three subsections: 'Man as the Doer of the Word', 'The Love of God' and 'The Praise of God'. In the third subsection Barth asserts that the life of the church in the praise of God is fulfilled precisely in the double commandment, to love God and to love neighbour. In this theologically weighty frame, the neighbour here properly stands in for the fellow-human as such, so that the answer to the question 'Who is my neighbour?' carries full implications for theological anthropology. And Barth finds that the basic characteristic of the biblical account of the neighbour is that he or she is fundamentally needy, 'so that with corresponding frequency reference is made to his poverty and want and need of assistance and the like'.²⁴ The common denominator of humanity as such is need.

On the other hand, for the church to construe its relationship to the neighbour simply as the benefactor of the needy neighbour would be, says Barth, to transgress the significance of the parable. 'It is not the fact that he is in need, and there is something we can give him, which makes him the neighbor we should love.'²⁵ Rather, as the Samaritan is revealed as the neighbour by bringing benefaction, the needy neighbour becomes the benefactor of the church; 'My neighbor is my fellow-man acting toward

²¹ CD I/2, pp. 414–50.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 416.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

me as benefactor.²⁶ And the particular nature of this benefit is to remind Christians of their own humanity and thus – precisely – their need of God, and the love that is owed to God by the church which, without God’s love, ‘would “fall among thieves” and be left half-dead and helpless by the side of the road’.²⁷ The neighbour as a needy human reminds the Christian that he or she is a needy human, and the neighbour therefore prompts the praise of God. ‘Through my neighbor I am referred to the order in which I can and should offer to God, whom I love because He first loved me, the absolutely necessary praise which is meet and acceptable to Him.’²⁸ The task of the church, then, in loving the neighbour-benefactor, is to ‘bear witness to my neighbor of the love with which God in Jesus Christ has loved me and him’, the love that is the only resolution of the neediness of humanity.²⁹

Barth then takes it a step further, turning characteristically to christology. The neighbour, reminding the Christian of the love of God, reminds the Christian most specifically of the salvific suffering of Jesus Christ, and especially of Jesus’ humanity: ‘Our fellow-man becomes to us the compassionate neighbor because he is seen in the reflection of the sign which gives to the great sign of the Church, in all its meaning for humanity generally, its origin, basis and stability, in the reflection of the human nature of Jesus Christ.’³⁰ And the human nature of Christ, the *vere homo*, is specifically characterised as ‘suffering, crucified, dead and buried man in his unity with the person of the Son of God’.³¹ Barth then can construe the incarnation as the union of the divine with the utter need which is humanity.

His benefaction to us as a suffering fellow-creature in need of help consists in the fact that even in his misery he shows us the true humanity of Christ, the humanity which was not triumphant but submissive, not healthy and strong, but characterized by the bearing of our sins, which was therefore the flesh of our flesh – the flesh abandoned to punishment, suffering and death. Our fellow-man in his oppression, shame, and torment confronts us with the poverty, the homelessness, the scars, the corpse, at the grave of Jesus Christ.³²

²⁶ Ibid, p. 420.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 440. Barth reiterates these themes, in connection with the Samaritan and the neighbour, in CD IV/3, §72, pp. 778–83, ‘The Holy Spirit and the Sending of the Christian Community’, subsection 2, ‘The Community for the World’ (especially p. 778).

³⁰ CD I/2, p. 424.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., p. 428.

In this passage, then, we again see neediness depicted as the fundamental characteristic of the human being, in the interaction of humans with other humans as such, and not least in the incarnation itself. Because here Barth is dealing with humanity as fallen humanity, we also see in this passage Barth's correlation of 'neediness' (*Bedürftigkeit*) with a number of synonyms that are explicitly negative, something which is also the case in other discussions in the *Dogmatics* of neediness in its tragic dimension; it is sometimes correlated with and sometimes replaced by terms such as 'poverty' (*Armut*), 'hunger' (*Hunger*), 'lack' (*Mangel*), 'peril' (*Gefährdung*), and especially in this section 'misery' or 'wretchedness' (*Elend*). These other terms are used to explore the dimensions of the tragic mode of human neediness, but never the original gift of 'blessed' neediness. 'Neediness' would seem to be the only such term that Barth employs to describe humanity whether in blessedness or in wretchedness. Thus the recognition of the neighbour is simply an anthropological or humanitarian question; the neighbour is relevant simply as a human being. Thus also God in taking up human need in Jesus Christ has taken up humanity itself.

'Nothing more constitutive for the human than need'

An important test of the suggestion that neediness is a significant anthropological category for Barth would be its appearance in his principal discussion of anthropology in CD III/2, and indeed it is to be found there. He anchors his discussion of humanity in §44, 'Man as the Creature of God', by positing Jesus as 'the real man', and thus the pattern for understanding what is the human.³³ 'Basically and comprehensively, therefore, to be a man is to be with God.'³⁴ In this is to be found 'his singularity among all creatures'.³⁵ Human being derives from God entirely, especially in election and in relation to the Word of God: 'Man is the creaturely being which is addressed, called and summoned by God.'³⁶ Being thus utterly dependent (*abhängiges*)³⁷ upon God for existence and for blessing, '[t]o be what he is, to be a real man among all the creatures, man needs this event – that God should say that He is gracious to him'.³⁸ This section is also rich in language that expresses synonymously the positive side of 'neediness': humanity is a being which is dependent on God (*ein von Gott abhängiges Sein*), is

³³ CD III/2, p. 58.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

³⁷ KD III/2, p. 167.

³⁸ CD III/2, p. 165.

absolutely grounded, determined, and conditioned (*schlechthin begründetes und also ein durch jenes schlechthin bestimmtes und bedingtes*) by God, and is a being in relationship with God as one which derives from God (*Zusammensein mit Gott als 'Sein von Gott her'*) – all of which can be seen concretely in the man Jesus Christ.³⁹ In fact the positive synonyms dominate the discourse in §44; the language of 'neediness' is rare, possibly because it is the humanity of Jesus Christ that is most particularly in view, commending the positive aspects of 'dependence'. But 'neediness' is present also, for instance towards the close of the section, where Barth concludes with the human's only proper response to this gracious gift of existence and of blessing: gratitude for 'the benefit which he cannot do without, the perfect benefit which fulfils all his needs even to the point of overflowing'.⁴⁰

In §45, 'Man in his Determination as the Covenant Partner of God', Barth begins again with christology, describing Jesus in his humanity as 'man for man, for other men, His fellows'.⁴¹ That Jesus is human as well as divine implies 'first that Jesus has to let His being, Himself, be prescribed and dictated and determined by an alien human being (that of His more near and distant fellows), and by the need (*Bedürftigkeit*) and infinite peril of this being'.⁴² 'There is total sovereignty and grace on the part of God, but total dependence and need on that of man.'⁴³ It is striking that human nature, here in relation to the incarnation, is again so starkly defined in relation to neediness. But this then also informs the substance of the following subsection, 'The Basic Form of Humanity', which for Barth consists in humans responding to humans in need.

An action is human when a man who must help himself either well or badly also accepts the call for help issued by another and gives his need a place in the determination of his own action. ... To be human, and therefore to act accordingly, confessing both the need of assistance and the willingness to render it, is supremely natural and not unnatural. It is the most obvious thing to do, whereas the opposite is by far the most artificial.⁴⁴

It is worth observing that the humanity in view (1) expresses itself simply and solely in relation to need, and (2) is not one that is explicitly

³⁹ E.g. CD III/2, p. 140; KD III/2, pp. 167–8.

⁴⁰ CD III/2, p. 169.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 214–15; KD III/2, p. 256.

⁴³ CD III/2, p. 219.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

conditioned by sin. It is creational, positive, fruitful, in fact 'supremely natural'.

In §46, 'Man as Soul and Body', we have perhaps the most explicit statement in the *Dogmatics* of human need as definitive for anthropology. It appears in the midst of Barth's discussion of the relation of soul and body, and thus (for Barth) of the relation of will and desire.

Because God is man's Creator, and as such the source of all that is good for him, we have to do here with the human need and the human disquiet as such – the need which man cannot not have, and the disquiet in which he cannot not find himself. Just because there is nothing human that is more constitutive than man's need for God, his activity must be fundamentally and decisively a desiring of God.⁴⁵

This passage is remarkable for its clear statement that it is neediness that constitutes what is human. It is also remarkable in that it finds that sheer neediness to be the sole incentive for human 'activity', so that all human endeavour, whether obedient or disobedient, effective or ineffective, is spurred by the neediness that humanity cannot by or in itself resolve.

Three brief comments can be offered with a view to the secondary literature. First, regarding the assertion that 'there is nothing human that is more constitutive than man's need for God', the context is that of creation, so that neediness (*Bedürftigkeit*) is constitutive for a positive anthropology. But if neediness is arguably the fundamental category for Barth's theological anthropology, then the existing consensus that 'relationality' is fundamental needs at least to be nuanced. As George Hunsinger recently summarises the consensus, for Barth '[t]he real human being is the one who exists in relationship with God'.⁴⁶ His review is based on §44, and the passage most frequently cited from the *Dogmatics* in support is found in III/2, §44, 'Man as the Creature of God', in the third subsection, 'Real Man':

Basically and comprehensively . . . to be a man is to be with God. What a man is in this Counterpart is obviously the basic and comprehensive determination of his true being. Whatever else he is, he is on the basis of the fact that he is with Jesus and therefore with God.⁴⁷

John Webster's exposition of this passage (also recent) notes that this means for Barth that humanity 'derives' from God, in two very particular ways: God elects humanity to relationship and therefore to redemption, and God

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 412 (emphasis added).

⁴⁶ Hunsinger, 'Barth on What it Means to Be Human', pp. 145–6.

⁴⁷ *CD III/2*, p. 133. Cf. John Webster, *Karl Barth* (London: Continuum, 2000), pp. 100–1.

addresses humanity with the Word. In that regard, since to be addressed by the Word of God is also to be summoned by it (and here he quotes Barth), ‘When the reality of human nature is in question, the word “real” is simply equivalent to the word “summoned”’⁴⁸ – hence an anthropology of relationship, which might even be construed entirely passively as far as the human being is concerned. All this is quite true to Barth as far as it goes, at least in §44, where, as we noted above, the language of neediness was less prominent than in other sections of the *Dogmatics*. But what is missing is the element of vulnerability, the need, the ‘fundamental and decisive desiring’ that, as we see in a broader reading of the *Dogmatics*, underlies the relationality and marks the true character of this particular creature of God. The nature of neediness as Barth sees it places humanity in an off-balance position of ‘disquiet’, a tilt that propels humans into a yearning and an activism which in their very dynamic produce the actual fabric of human life. But then the human being whose ontology is need is hardly the passive recipient of relationship with God that is portrayed in some accounts of Barth.⁴⁹ Rather, to be human entails a powerful drive for constant and zealous resolution of need, whether productive or the reverse. It is either to discover a day-to-day creativity that partakes of the whole-hearted service of God such as we see in the life of Jesus Christ, or it is to spend the allotted time desperately pursuing needs unresolved and unresolvable in a black hole of impossible possibility.

Secondly, the same dynamic of need must characterise the relationship between human beings. To take the example of gender relations, it is well known that Barth’s depiction in §54 of the *Dogmatics* of the subordination of women to men, based on the so-called created order, has resulted in his rejection by feminist theology as a whole. One ‘retrieval’ of Barth suggests adducing ‘Barth against Barth’, by arguing that the relational nature of humanity set forth in §44 and §45 undercuts the narrower discussion in §54.⁵⁰ It may be that the starker nature of humanity as irretrievably needy, for each other as much as for God, may speak to this discussion.

⁴⁸ CD III/2, p. 147; Webster, Karl Barth, p. 103.

⁴⁹ E.g. Robinson, *Understanding the ‘Imago Dei’*, p. 47: ‘For Barth we must understand our relationship with God from the perspective of how God has placed us in partnership with him, not from the standpoint of our searching for God. Our searching for God is always in vain. ... The fallen human being is human in that he simply stands before the mystery of the hidden God who in Jesus Christ has reconstituted him in faith. ... [This is] what seems to be a theology of relationship understood as passive.’

⁵⁰ E.g. Katherine Sonderegger, ‘Barth and Feminism’, in John Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), pp. 258–73, esp. 268–71.

Thirdly, the same ‘needy activity’ must characterise the relationship of humanity to the rest of creation, whether resulting in fruitfulness or unfruitfulness. Currently there is a low opinion generally speaking of what Barth has to offer a theology of engagement with creation.⁵¹ J. Gordon McConville writes:

For [Barth], the point of the ‘image’ language is to express, not inherent qualities of the human or even his superiority over other creatures, but rather the fact that in humanity God created ‘the future partner of the covenant, the kingdom and the glory of God.’ ... [T]he embeddedness of humanity in the nonhuman and inanimate creation plays only a small part in his analysis.⁵²

In fact the one who is ‘the neediest of all creation’ is thoroughly embedded in the environment, though it is quite true that Barth does not draw out consequences that we would like to hear today as we explore our responsibilities to a world that is more clearly vulnerable to human depredation than was obvious fifty years ago. But it is possible to see ways in which the perspective of human neediness might contribute to the discussion. One of the more contentious issues among philosophers and theologians of ecotheology is the place of the human in addressing the damage: is humanity central to the problem and thus to the solution (anthropocentrism), or must creation be served in its own non-human integrity (the position of ‘intrinsic value’)?⁵³ The human that approaches the question in the humility of the one who is ‘neediest’, looking not to dominate or control but simply to live, may offer something of a bridge in this particular debate.

Deus pro nobis and the need for reconciliation

To touch more briefly on the instances of ‘neediness’ in CD IV, ‘The Doctrine of Reconciliation’, Barth continues the language of neediness in consistent ways; that is, it is found in theologically critical contexts, without however the benefit of extended treatment. Noticeable in these part-volumes is the emergence of the phrase ‘radical need’ (*radikale Bedürftigkeit*).

⁵¹ See the review by Willis Jenkins, ‘Karl Barth and Environmental Theology’, in Paul Jones and Paul Nimmo (eds), *The Oxford Handbook to Karl Barth* (London: OUP, forthcoming), retrieved Nov. 2016: http://www.academia.edu/22997297/Karl_Barth_and_Environmental_Theology.

⁵² J. Gordon McConville, *Being Human in God’s World: An Old Testament Theology of Humanity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), pp. 24–5.

⁵³ Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), pp. 7–15, and *passim*.

First, Barth uses 'need' to sharpen the relationship of the God who saves and us who need salvation. He frames his discussion of 'the obedience of the Son' as 'the judge judged in our place' in relation to the God who is *Deus pro nobis*; that is, his account of the atonement is an extended meditation on what it means that, in Jesus Christ, God is 'for us'. That God is 'for us' is a primary theological datum, the Creator God who now takes up the cause of the lost creation. As with any other fundamental theological truth,

We cannot deduce it from any principle, from any idea of God or man and the world. We can read it only from the fact in which the omnipotent mercy of God is exercised and effective and revealed, in which His own glory and our salvation meet, in which that which God does for Himself is also done for us.⁵⁴

When we ask how God is for us, the question involves acknowledging the reality of our neediness: 'How is God for us? How has He taken up the cause of the world in revealing and magnifying His own glory? How has He met its radical need? How has He arrested and reversed its course to the abyss?'⁵⁵ Barth depicts the cross as the place where *Deus pro nobis* engages the object of mercy, the human in 'radical' need. God is 'for us' because we 'need'. In so far as we are in need and acknowledge it, and only then, but then fully, we can know God as *Deus pro nobis*, as Creator, as Incarnate One, and indeed as triune saviour.

Secondly, in his related discussion of the incarnation, Barth uses 'neediness' again to sharpen his account of the divine assumption of humanity. The central paradox of incarnation is that the God in whom there is no need has assumed the creature who is defined by need.⁵⁶

God did not need this otherness of the world and man. In order not to be alone, single, enclosed within Himself, God did not need co-existence with the creature. He does not will and posit the creature necessarily, but in freedom, as the basic act of His grace. His whole relationship to what

⁵⁴ CD IV/1, p. 214.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Katherine Sonderegger mentions, but does not develop, Christ's assumption of human need in an essay on 'The Sinlessness of Christ'. Referring to CD IV §59, she describes how for Barth Christ is sinner 'not in some region of his person' but in the wholeness of his integrated humanity, so that 'He enters into the baptism of John ... as the One who stands in need of it'; in David R. Nelson, Darren Sarinsky and Justin Stratis (eds), *Theological Theology: Essays in Honour of John Webster* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), pp. 273–4.

is outside Himself – its basis and history from first to last – rests on this fact.⁵⁷

Need marks a fundamental distinction between God and the creature. Again, God is the one who is free of need, and humanity ('the world') is radically needy; freedom from need characterises the divine as thoroughly as neediness characterises the human. As this distinction informs the incarnation, Barth is willing for this characterisation to stand as an affirmation of the Chalcedonian faith:⁵⁸

[T]he mortal peril in which man stands becomes and is His peril, the radical need of man His own. The Son of God exists with man and as man in this fallen and perishing state. We should be explaining the incarnation docetically and therefore explaining it away if we did not put it like this, if we tried to limit in any way the solidarity with the cosmos which God accepted in Jesus Christ.⁵⁹

Thirdly, throughout these volumes Barth uses the language of human need to clarify the various implications of salvation in many passages; here a selection must suffice. That Jesus takes on the sins of humanity reveals that 'we are all in equal need of His acknowledgement and representation of us'.⁶⁰ The one who has received justification 'continues to understand forgiveness as something that continues to come to him, from God, in his absolute need of forgiveness'.⁶¹ The reality of the Holy Spirit in the 'being of the community' means that those 'gathered into the community and

⁵⁷ CD IV/1, p. 201; cf. pp. 212–13: 'But the world had radical need of His work as Creator, to which it owes no less than its very being. And, again, it has radical need that He should take up its cause in the work of atonement. ... But God reveals and increases His own glory in the world in the incarnation of His Son by taking to Himself the radical neediness of the world, i.e., by undertaking to do Himself what the world cannot do, arresting and reversing its course to the abyss.'

⁵⁸ Of course there has been debate whether Barth is truly Chalcedonian in his christology; see the review by Hunsinger, 'Karl Barth's Christology: Its Basic Chalcedonian Pattern', in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, pp. 127–42. If we grant with Hunsinger that a Chalcedonian christology is one that depicts one person complete in deity and complete in humanity, without separation or division, with an interest that is primarily soteriological (pp. 127–9), these passages in the *Dogmatics* which take up incarnation from the perspective of need are remarkably satisfying in their incisiveness.

⁵⁹ CD IV/1, p. 215. The English trans. is emended here in view of the German *radikale Bedürftigkeit*, KD IV/1, pp. 236–7.

⁶⁰ CD IV/1, p. 405.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 596.

acting as such still stand in need of the grace of God'.⁶² In the light of the lordship of the Son of Man, the 'need ... which consists in the untruth of our humanity' is exposed, and we are 'radically and totally shamed'.⁶³ Prayer in Jesus' name, as the Holy Spirit builds the community, 'is a spreading out of the totality of man's true need, and a reaching out for the totality of what God will be for him and give him'.⁶⁴ In its witness to the world the church may well consider 'the radicalness of the need of redemption' and 'the fulness of what is meant by redemption if it is to meet this need'.⁶⁵ 'As this man who lacks the Gospel he thus stands in supreme need of the knowledge of it. And in relation to this supreme neediness God takes up his cause ...'⁶⁶ And in the final 'Fragment' of the *Dogmatics*, 'Veni Creator Spiritus is the cry of need uttered by the very ones who know and have the Spirit of Christ in this beginning of His work.'⁶⁷

Lastly, there is in CD IV/2 a hint of what may have triggered for Barth this theme of anthropological need. In many ways it is certainly out of step with the generally more triumphant account of the *imago Dei* that we find in the theological tradition, which adduces more positive capacities and capabilities and a definite creativity that point more to the 'rich man' of whom Barth is so sceptical. Admittedly all of that is somehow more satisfying and substantial than an anthropological ontology of mere 'relationality', to say nothing of one framed merely as 'neediness'. How might this 'radical' theme have emerged? In his section on 'The Sanctification of Man' he asserts: 'Thus it follows that there is no man – even the doer of good (or the best) works, even the most saintly – who does not stand in lifelong need of the forgiveness of sins and therefore of that pardon, and is not referred wholly and utterly to the faith which grasps that pardon. "We are beggars; that is the truth" (Luther).'⁶⁸ It is intriguing to think that in some sense Barth's anthropology of neediness is an exposition of the famous deathbed words of the Reformer.

Conclusions

The aim of this article has been to draw attention to a pervasive and theologically weighty theme in the *Dogmatics* that has not yet had the benefit of wider discussion. It has been argued that Barth defines humanity in

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 658.

⁶³ CD IV/2, p. 387.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 705.

⁶⁵ CD IV/3/1, p. 125.

⁶⁶ CD IV/3/2, p. 125

⁶⁷ CD IV/Fragment, p. 125.

⁶⁸ CD IV/2, p. 587; trans. emended.

reference to its neediness – blessed in certain circumstances and wretched in others – a neediness that is constitutively and indelibly bestowed in creation, a neediness in relation to God, and fellow-humans, and everything that the created order has to offer. The turn of rebellious humanity from God also entails a denial of that neediness and a betrayal of created human reality, and thus inward contradiction, and leads to disastrous and irreversible consequences. Redemption brings the return of the human to the place of blessed neediness, and the life of action that it prompts in service to the Lord.

What has also come to light is the connection of the theme of human neediness with an array of topics that are of prime importance to Barth and Barth scholarship: human innocence and sin, epistemology, incarnation and Chalcedon, the cross, forgiveness, redemption, Christian worship and spirituality, and Christian witness in the world. In fact tracking this theme has disclosed a consistent usage virtually throughout the entire *Dogmatics*. It remains to be seen how this theme might impact current debates about Barth's theology beyond his theological anthropology.

One particularly intriguing possibility, however, to revert to the first passage discussed and Barth's depiction of humanity as 'the neediest of all creation', is a contribution to the dialogue regarding a Barth-inspired theology of creation care⁶⁹ – in this case, with creation providing the care, and the human community existing not over against a 'silenced creation', nor as the 'crown of creation', nor in a role of all-knowing universal dominion or even stewardship, but simply cultivating a garden plot, in concert with the energies of the created order, meeting together the needs of the human family and enjoying the gracious love of God.

⁶⁹ My comments on the possible shape of a such a theology of ecology are echoes of Richard Bauckham's discussions in *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010) – though he does not reference Barth.