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Title: 'Jesus is victor': Passing the impasse of Barth on universalism

Date: 2007

Originally published in: *Scottish Journal of Theology*

Example citation: Greggs, T. (2007). 'Jesus is victor': Passing the impasse of Barth on universalism. *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 60(2), 196-212.

Version of item: Publisher version

Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10034/255056>

## ‘Jesus is victor’: passing the impasse of Barth on universalism

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### Abstract

This article examines the question of Karl Barth’s stance on universalism. Setting the question within the wealth of contradictory accounts of Barth on this issue, it seeks to find a way through the opposing views represented in the secondary literature. Following a brief examination of the doctrine of election which is the source of the charge of universalism, Barth’s response to Berkouwer’s *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* will be considered in detail. This passage helps to place Barth’s own reaction to the charge of universalism in a broader framework than that of a simple denial or acceptance, and helps to highlight what Barth does and does not reject regarding universalism. It will be argued that it is the replacement of the person of Jesus Christ with a principle, rather than any limitation of the salvific work of God, that Barth rejects in rejecting *apokatastasis*. Barth’s denial of universalism marks a dismissal of the problematic elements associated with the word, not a denial of the ultimate friendliness of Jesus Christ. The radical newness of Barth’s own approach to universalism cannot be overemphasized, and marks the means by which one may pass through the impasse of differing accounts of Barth’s eschatology.<sup>1</sup>

Barth once stated with characteristic wit: ‘There is a certain merit to an unfinished dogmatics; it points to the eschatological nature of theology!’<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the incomplete nature of *Church Dogmatics*<sup>3</sup> has led to a literature of speculation on what his doctrine of redemption might have looked like, taking its lead from Barth that the answers are to be found within the thirteen volumes already written.<sup>4</sup> We are left to wonder, and are charged with the

<sup>1</sup> This article is the result of discussions with a number of people who must be acknowledged and thanked. Prof. David Ford, Dr Paul Nimmo and Jeff Bailey have all graciously given their time and wisdom in its formation.

<sup>2</sup> Recorded by John D. Godsey, ‘Barth as a Teacher’, in G. Hunsinger (ed.), *For the Sake of the World. Karl Barth and the Future of Ecclesial Theology* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 214.

<sup>3</sup> K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956–75). Henceforth cited as only as volume/part, page (for example, I/2, p. 3 etc.), or referred to as CD.

<sup>4</sup> E. Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (London: SCM, 1976), p. 487.

task both of addressing ourselves to the clues left in the existent volumes and of constructing a dogmatics of Christian eschatology in keeping with the ground Barth has already cleared.

This article is an exercise in the former of these tasks. It seeks to consider the much discussed question of Barth's attitude towards universalism. There seems at times here to be an impasse. While the tenor of Barth's soteriology clearly points in a universalist direction, Barth on a number of occasions specifically and emphatically rejects the doctrine of universalism or *apokatastasis*.<sup>5</sup> This denial has been seized upon by a variety of commentators, desirous of defending Barth against his opponents from what is a definite charge of universalism.<sup>6</sup> Scholarly and sympathetic as these are, they miss at times the exciting, radical newness of Barth's work, taking Barth so far from the door of universalism on which it appears he has been knocking that one is left to wonder why the charge was ever brought before him. Certainly the tone of some such pieces does not reflect that of Barth's theology. Bettis's defence of Barth, for example, does not seem satisfactory when he states:

[Barth] rejects universalism because the future of all men is uncertain. Rather than ask whether Barth attributes too much to Christ's work, the question is whether Barth attributes enough to Christ's work.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, Colwell (perceptive as he is on the relationship between Barth's understanding of eternity and election) states the need to be cautious in creating too simple a relationship between the ontological definition of the election of all humanity in Christ and the actual election of the individual. The Church must proclaim the election of Jesus Christ on behalf of all humanity, but this does not imply ultimate salvation for all individuals as its consequence.<sup>8</sup> Better are studies which not only recognize this tension in Barth but also the extremely optimistic and hopeful direction in which he tends with regards the issue of the salvation of all humanity.<sup>9</sup> However,

<sup>5</sup> See II/2, pp. 417 and 476–7; and also CD, IV/3, §70.3, 'The Condemnation of Man'. For the history of the word *apokatastasis* in the New Testament and antiquity, see M. Ludlow, *Universal Salvation: Eschatology in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), pp. 39–44.

<sup>6</sup> See the excellent pieces by J. D. Bettis, 'Is Karl Barth a Universalist?', *SJT* 20/4 (1967), pp. 423–36; and J. Colwell, 'The Contemporaneity of Divine Decision: Reflections on Barth's Denial of Universalism', in N. M. de S. Cameron (ed.), *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell: Papers Presented at the Fourth Edinburgh Conference on Christian Dogmatics 1991* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992), pp. 139–60.

<sup>7</sup> Bettis, 'Is Barth a Universalist?', p. 433.

<sup>8</sup> Colwell, 'Contemporaneity of Divine Decision', p. 148.

<sup>9</sup> See J. C. McDowell, *Hope in Barth's Eschatology: Interrogations and Transformations beyond Tragedy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001) and his 'Learning Where to Place one's Hope: The

even the best of these only recognize the 'tension' as being the key to understanding the issue, presenting Barth's position on universalism as 'reverent agnosticism'<sup>10</sup> and 'holy silence'.<sup>11</sup> Such views are correct in asserting the danger of saying too much on either side;<sup>12</sup> just as they are also correct in recognizing the biblical foundations for such inconsistencies.<sup>13</sup> However, there is a danger in such studies that Barth is almost perceived as neutral on the issue, and that election becomes no news rather than good news. Although unwilling to judge on the plight of individuals (and therefore all),<sup>14</sup> to say that Barth 'points' in the direction of universalism is not the same as saying he is 'agnostic' or 'silent'.<sup>15</sup> Silence hardly seems appropriate to a theme which not only occurs in the doctrine of election but also throughout the doctrine of reconciliation. Furthermore, it does not seem to capture the wealth of material in Barth's occasional writings which point in the direction of universal salvation. There is an almost inexhaustible list of Barthian aphorisms on this: 'The dogma is that Hell exists, not that people are in it';<sup>16</sup> or 'We believers . . . must always become what we are . . . The others are already what they are to become.'<sup>17</sup> Most powerfully, silence does not seem to give full weight to Barth's words regarding universalism:

It would be well not to yield to that panic fright which this word seems to have a way of spreading around it, at least before one has come to an understanding with regard to its possible sense or nonsense . . . It would be well, in view of the 'danger' with which the expression is ever and again seen to be encompassed, to ask for a moment, whether on the whole

Eschatological Significance of Election in Barth', *SJT* 53/3 (2000), pp. 326–38; and G. Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of his Theology* (New York and Oxford: OUP, 1991), pp. 128–35, in which he claims that Barth tends in a 'universalist direction' (p. 132).

<sup>10</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Barth*, p. 134.

<sup>11</sup> G. Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 243.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. II/2, p. 417 with p. 418; and IV/3, p. 477 with p. 478.

<sup>13</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Barth*, p. 132.

<sup>14</sup> One should note well the order in which Barth addresses election: first Jesus Christ, then community, and lastly the individual.

<sup>15</sup> D. Fergusson, 'Will the Love of God Finally Triumph?', in K. J. Vanhoozer (ed.), *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God. Papers from the Sixth Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 186–202, esp. p. 195, n. 20. Fergusson correctly indicates, however, that the leaning of Barth's theology is clearly in a universalist direction, and not simply at an equidistant point between limited atonement and universalism.

<sup>16</sup> Busch, *Barth*, p. 362.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 446.

the 'danger' from those theologians who are forever sceptically critical, who are again and again suspiciously questioning, because they are always fundamentally legalistic, and who are therefore in essentials sullen and dismal, is not in the meantime always more threatening among us than that of an unsuitably cheerful indifferentism or even antinomianism, to which one could in fact yield oneself on one definite understanding of that conception. One thing is sure, that there is no theological justification for setting any limits on our side to the friendliness of God towards man which appeared in Jesus Christ . . .<sup>18</sup>

Thus, it seems that there is an apparent impasse between a theology which seems to point in a universalist direction and one which simultaneously denies that charge.

This essay seeks to argue that Barth's rejection of universalism or *apokatastasis* does not involve a limitation of God's ultimate salvific work as some of Barth's commentators seem to imply. Rather, it marks a dismissal of the problematic elements associated with universalism. I argue this specifically by considering what Barth does and does not reject when he claims he is dismissing universalism: outlining the origins of the so-called 'charge' of universalism; examining Barth's own response to the charge of universalism, looking specifically at his dialogue with Berkouwer, and highlighting what precisely of Berkouwer Barth is rejecting and the implications of this; demonstrating that it is the replacement of the person of Jesus Christ with a principle, rather than any limitation of the salvific work of God, that Barth dismisses in rejecting *apokatastasis*; and concluding with a consideration of whether the matter should be rendered a 'charge' at all. It is hoped thereby to clear a path through the contradictory and mutually exclusive studies of Barth on this issue.

### The roots of the so-called 'charge': the doctrine of election

The roots of the charge of universalism lie within Barth's radical re-description of the doctrine of election.<sup>19</sup> Barth's departure from traditional

<sup>18</sup> K. Barth, 'The Humanity of God', in *God, Grace and Gospel* (Scottish Journal of Theology Occasional Papers, 8; Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1959), pp. 49–50. Henceforth referred to as 'HoG'.

<sup>19</sup> It should be noted, however, that Barth does see himself standing in line with scripture in his articulation of the doctrine, which is the reason he gives for departing strongly from the tradition (II/2, pp. 3–4), and in some line of continuity with the positive elements of Augustine, Lombard, Aquinas, Isidore of Seville, Gottschalk and the Reformers (II/2, pp. 16ff.). Most especially, Barth sees himself as in line with what he finds in the Synod of Dort (II/2, pp. 17–18).

understanding of the doctrine is most clearly seen in his assertion that the doctrine of election must be understood christologically. Jesus Christ is the subject and object of election as electing God and elected human. Jesus Christ as God and human stands as a mediator: in him, God reveals himself to humanity and humanity knows God; in him, one sees the will, judgment, deliverance and gift of God (II/2, p. 94).

In seeing Christ as electing God, one sees who the 'Subject God' is (II/2, pp. 5–7), and in the primal history of the covenant of God with humanity in the union of his Son with Jesus of Nazareth, one sees the gracious relating of this God to humanity (II/2, p. 8). A true doctrine of God must not only speak of God in himself, but also of all his ways and works, and the way in which these have been determined – that is, in his primary decision to be electing God in Jesus Christ. In this way, one can begin to present a doctrine of the graciousness of God in the beginning of all of these ways and works (II/2, pp. 99 ff), through which one sees the self-determination of the electing God: 'In so far as God not only is love, but loves, in the act of love which determines His whole being God elects' (II/2, p. 76).<sup>20</sup> Throughout the doctrine of election, Barth's concern seems to be not to separate the will of God from the love of God as Calvinists traditionally had done. In his at times sermonic tone,<sup>21</sup> Barth does not want to confront humanity with a God who might as well condemn them as save them. Equally, the love of God cannot be separated from the will: for Barth, God 'loves in freedom' (II/1, §28; emphasis added). Although it is an eternal decision,<sup>22</sup> Barth wishes God's electing to remain a free decision in order to remain gracious. There must still be personhood and a centre of self-consciousness behind that loving in freedom (II/1, pp. 284 ff.).

The nature of Christ's electing to be simultaneously the elected human in the pre-temporal eternity of God means that there is no room for a prior decision of God to create or elect and condemn before the decision to elect

<sup>20</sup> For a fuller description of the effect of the placing of election in the doctrine of God see E. Jüngel, *God's Being is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth. A Paraphrase*. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2001). To test his statement that for Barth 'God's being is in becoming' he appeals to the doctrine of election (pp. 82ff.). For Jüngel, 'God's being-in-act' means God is his decision, and that the primal decision which is made by and determines God is the election of grace. This leads to the 'free self-determination' of God (p. 87).

<sup>21</sup> For example, his movement into the second person (for example, II/2, pp. 322–3). Interestingly, Berkouwer cites pastoral concerns as at the heart of Barth's reworking of the doctrine of election. G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*. (London: Paternoster, 1956), pp. 95ff. Henceforth cited as *T&G*.

<sup>22</sup> Here, one must be careful to remember Barth's particular understanding of eternity. See II/1, pp. 608–40.

Jesus Christ (no *decretum absolutum*); Jesus Christ is himself the ultimate *decretum absolutum* (II/2, pp. 100–1).<sup>23</sup> Indeed, in Barth's actualistic inner logics,<sup>24</sup> it might even be stated that God is this movement and turning towards humanity: his economy and ontology cannot be separated.<sup>25</sup>

What is most shocking and dangerous is that this election is a self-election to the negative part of predestination – perdition, death, rejection, exclusion, and the No of God (II/2, p. 166). These are the things humanity deserves, and yet God decides in his freedom to suffer them in his self-election of Jesus Christ. This does not excuse human sinfulness, but in election God irreversibly takes its torment to himself (II/2, p. 167). Predestination becomes, therefore, not simply one *modus* of salvation but the *modus* of the divine work of redemption, indeed of all of God's works *ad extra* (II/2, p. 191). In it, Christ has willed to take to himself rejection in order that rejection can never again become the portion of humanity: 'He is the Rejected, as and because He is the Elect. In view of His election, there is no other rejected but Himself' (II/2, p. 353). It is this which makes the election of humanity in Christ so drastic and radical. Belief in the simultaneous nature of Christ as elected and elector sees the self-election of Christ bringing rejection into the sovereignty of God, so that those who reject him are therefore simultaneously elected in him, since he has elected their rejection for himself. Barth goes, therefore, beyond the simple binary of Calvin's elected and rejected humanity,<sup>26</sup> by keeping the integrity of election and rejection and yet uniting these in the person of Jesus Christ in a chiasmic movement in which the elected of God elects rejection in order that the rejected may be elected. It is, therefore, in God's singularly positive turning towards humanity in the elected Jesus that one needs to consider the destiny of human nature (II/2, p. 118).

The soteriological implications of this cannot be overestimated. The election of the community and individuals (who are elect only for the sake

<sup>23</sup> Barth asserts here as elsewhere, that it is the election of God which is described in Jn 1:1–2 as the result of the repetition of  $\acute{\alpha}\tilde{\upsilon}\tau\omicron\varsigma \tilde{\eta}\tilde{\nu}$  which he considers refers to Jesus being 'the same' who was. In IV/2, p. 33, Barth draws attention to the further use of this  $\acute{\alpha}\tilde{\upsilon}\tau\omicron\varsigma \tilde{\eta}\tilde{\nu}$  in the proclamation of the Baptist in v. 15 referring to the incarnate Christ. He sees this incarnate one as the referent of the earlier  $\acute{\alpha}\tilde{\upsilon}\tau\omicron\varsigma$ .

<sup>24</sup> For a definition of 'actualism' see Hunsinger, *How to Read Barth*, esp. pp. 30ff. A slightly different account is given by B. McCormack 'Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology', in J. Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), pp. 98ff.

<sup>25</sup> This point must, however, be held in dialectic with Barth's continual and emphatic insistence throughout CD on the 'mystery' of God, for example, I/1, p. 321.

<sup>26</sup> On the logic of binaries and triads, see P. Ochs, *Peirce, Pragmatism and the Logic of Scripture* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), esp. ch. 8.

of the community<sup>27</sup>) comes to belong to the sphere of the simultaneous divine–human self-election in Christ. Human election occurs only in his prior election, and cannot be abstractly separated from this:

That which has been eternally determined in Jesus Christ is concretely determined for every individual man to the extent that in the form of the witness of Israel and of the Church it is also addressed to him and applies to him and comes to him, to the extent that in His Word the electing God enters with him into the relationship of Elector to elected, and by His Word makes Him an elected man. (II/2, pp. 309–10.)

It is only ‘in Christ’ that this election of the community and individual has its meaning. One is able to see at work the dialectic of the particular and the universal. While the universal implications of the doctrine seem clear, the original election of Jesus Christ is what gives particular truth to individual election (II/2, p. 310), just as it is in witness to election that the particularity of Church and Israel is maintained: both witness to the self-elected rejection in Christ that is seen in the self-electing of rejecting humanity in the Church and Israel with respect to their positions pre- and post-crucifixion and resurrection.<sup>28</sup> Desirous to forward correct proclamation in the Church about election, Barth instructs the preacher to exhort: ‘In Jesus Christ, thou, too, art not rejected – for He has borne thy rejection – but elected’ (II/2, p. 322).

<sup>27</sup> ‘...it is not men as private persons in the singular or plural. It is these men as a fellowship elected by God in Jesus Christ and determined from all eternity for a particular service... (CD, II/2, p. 196). For him, the ‘other’ involved in election is designated as community. This term covers both Israel and the Church. See II/2, §34. It is important to note that this paragraph comes before §35 ‘The Election of the Individual’.

<sup>28</sup> There is a second almost chiasmic movement in Barth: the particular elect of Israel reject and are thus rejected in order that the mercy of God may be revealed in his eternal promise to them despite their rejection (for example, II/2, p. 305); just as the once rejected Gentiles elect and are elected in order that the universality of God’s election can be witnessed (for example, II/2, pp. 238ff.). These two communities must exist in simultaneity to indicate the simultaneous election and rejection of Christ and thus the simultaneous rejection and election of humanity in him (II/2, pp. 205ff.). When one considers the date of this volume’s publication (1942), the importance of Barth’s writing of the Church and Israel synecdochically as both elected and rejected cannot be underestimated. For more on Barth and the Jews, see E. Busch, ‘Indissoluble Unity: Barth’s Position on the Jews during the Hitler Era’, along with K. Sonderegger’s response, in Hunsinger (ed.), *For the Sake of the World*, pp. 53–87; M. Lindsay, ‘Dialectics of Communion: Dialectical Method and Barth’s Defence of Israel’, in G. Thompson and C. Mostert (eds), *Karl Barth: A Future for Postmodern Theology?* (Adelaide: Openbook, 2000), pp. 122–43; K. Sonderegger, *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew: Karl Barth’s ‘Doctrine of Israel’* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).



Election and rejection belong together in the primal decision of Christ to self-elect the rejection belonging to humanity.

Rather than simply instrumentalizing the 'in' under discussion of election 'in Christ', for Barth election is actual both in terms of the self-determination of God in his act in Jesus Christ and in the relationship that results from this between Christ and each member of humanity.<sup>29</sup> Barth summarizes this well:

Nor does it mean only through Him, by means of that which He as elected man can be and do for them. 'In Him' means in His person, in His will, in His own divine choice, in the basic decision of God which He fulfils over against every man. (II/2, p. 117)

Jesus Christ elects humanity as electing God, 'electing them in His own humanity' (ibid.). While his election is unique, it must also be said that

His election is the original and all-inclusive election; the election which is absolutely unique, but which in this uniqueness is universally meaningful and efficacious, because it is the election of Him who Himself elects. (Ibid.; emphasis added)

One can easily see where the charge of universalism in Barth stems from, if all of humanity is elected 'in Christ', even in their rejection of God (seen typologically in Israel), and, if this has its origins in pre-temporal eternity, it is difficult to find space logically for God's rejection of those who reject him. It was following such logic through that led to Berkouwer's monumental study *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*.<sup>30</sup> In this work, Berkouwer believed that Barth's doctrine of election involved the eventual salvation of all, and that Barth was, therefore, being inconsistent in his rejection of universalism.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> In his doctrine of creation, Barth states: 'a decision has been made concerning the being and nature of every man by the mere fact that with him and among all other men He too has been a man' (CD, III/2, p. 133).

<sup>30</sup> C. E. Gunton asserts that such a view of Barth is also evident in a different form in the work of David F. Ford: Gunton, 'The Triune God and the Freedom of the Creature', in S. W. Sykes (ed.), *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays* (Cambridge, CUP, 1989), p. 55 n. 8. Certainly, Ford's excellent study of Barth's use of the character of Judas indicates such a position, in which the reality of the Gospels is swallowed up by a less realistic *Bildungsroman*. D. F. Ford, *Barth and God's Story: Biblical Narrative and the Theological Method of Karl Barth in the Church Dogmatics* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Peter Lang, 1985), pp. 91–2.

<sup>31</sup> For example, *ToG*, pp. 111ff.

### Getting the matter straight: not the 'triumph of grace' but 'Jesus is victor'

Given this charge by Berkouwer, it is my argument that the clearest sense of what Barth is rejecting in 'universalism' comes in his discussion of Berkouwer's work in CD, IV/3. In examining this, therefore, one can truly understand whether Barth is posting a limitation on the ultimate salvation of all people. For all of Berkouwer's criticism of Barth, the great polemicist is extremely praising of Berkouwer's work (IV/3, p. 173). He observes that 'Berkouwer has undoubtedly laid his finger on an important point' (ibid.). Barth's concern is the book's title, which indicates that Christianity is for Barth is an absolutely 'triumphant affair' (ibid.). One who has understood Barth so well (albeit critically) is criticized thus:

If I am in a sense understood by its [*The Triumph of Grace's*] clever and faithful author, yet in the last resort cannot think that I am genuinely understood for all his care and honesty, this is connected with the fact that he tries to understand me under this title. (Ibid.)

This title, Barth feels, should be replaced with 'Jesus is Victor' (ibid.). Barth here reveals what he is rejecting in critiquing the thesis of Berkouwer, as well as what he is accepting. It is interesting to observe in this that Barth never overtly rejects (nor does he mention) universalism. What he rejects are some of the implications that Berkouwer draws from this, not the positively objective soteriology itself. This does not remove the emphatically positive ultimate message of the eternal election of Jesus Christ, but clarifies the sense in which this is to be understood – most determinately in Jesus Christ. This is explained by Barth in four points.

First, Barth accuses Berkouwer of presenting him as one whose work is underlined by a christological principle.<sup>32</sup> There is nothing worse to Barth's *Nachdenken* mode of theology.<sup>33</sup> Thus, not even election can take priority over Jesus Christ because 'we are not dealing with a Christ-principle, but with Jesus Christ Himself as attested by Holy Scripture' (IV/3, p. 174). By making Christ a principle, Berkouwer has wrongly understood Christ primarily to be the 'mighty executive organ of the divine will of grace' (IV/3, p. 175),

<sup>32</sup> Sauter is no doubt correct when, regarding a different issue, he writes: 'When Barth uses the word "principle", it connotes nothing less than the theological equivalent of a major industrial accident, if not a nuclear power plant explosion which can no longer be contained within tolerable limits.' G. Sauter, 'Why is Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics Not a "Theology of Hope"?' *Some Observations on Barth's Understanding of Eschatology*, *SJT* 52/4 (1999), pp. 407–29 (esp. p. 413).

<sup>33</sup> On *Nachdenken*, see D. F. Ford, 'Barth's Interpretation of the Bible', in S. W. Sykes (ed.), *Karl Barth: Studies in his Theological Method*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 55–87 (esp. pp. 81–6).

giving truly christological thinking only a secondary place. Thus, for Barth, one cannot even use even grace as a principle: election takes place in Jesus; it is in a person and not a principle that humanity is elected. The *Gnadenwahl* must be understood through the person of Christ, not the person through the *Gnadenwahl*.

Secondly, Barth asserts that in Jesus one deals with a free person and his free act that cannot simply be grasped 'in the sense of conceptual apprehension or control' (IV/3, p. 176). He is not an *in abstracto* engaged in a battle with evil in *abstracto*. Jesus is a living person. And yet this is a person in whom one cannot have limited confidence. Barth concurs with Blumhardt that the superiority of Christ over his opponent can only end in Christ's triumph: this is decided from the very start because 'the One who is the First will also be the Last' (ibid.). However, again, this is not to replace him with a 'principle'. Principles could be doubted in terms of the biblical message: there might be room for other interpretations. There is no room for an interpretation of scripture which does not recognize that 'Jesus is victor'. It is not the principle but this man in whom humanity is elected.

This does not, thirdly, deny the reality of evil (IV/3, p. 177). Barth defends his case regarding this. Berkouwer's believed that all of history was sewn up in Barth's theology which determined that Barth had denied evil its reality. Barth continues to be emphatic in his assertion that it is only through 'Jesus is victor' that one can understand the nature and reality of evil. Admitting that he has taken his terms from outside scripture, Barth still claims he has used insights from the Bible in shaping his doctrine. In speaking of 'nothingness' (*Das Nichtige*),<sup>34</sup> Barth speaks of something which does not exist as God or his creatures do. Rather, he speaks of something which has no basis for its being. Yet, this does not deny its existence to which it has no right (IV/3, p. 178). Evil has reality in the existence humans give it, but it is to be 'seen in Jesus Christ', and thus must be understood in its 'absolute inferiority' (ibid.).

Fourthly, Barth addresses the charge that his work removes the historical encounter between God and evil (IV/3, p. 179). Barth holds to his belief that 'from the very outset' (which Berkouwer finds so distasteful) God is infinitely greater and stronger than evil. However, one is not to understand this as a principle which dissolves history. It is in the narrative of the life of Jesus in God's encounter with the world that this is seen. Rather than removing any sense of history, it is this which establishes it: only in the history of Jesus can humanity know God and evil, and the relationship of each to the other. And in narrating the life of Christ, one sees that there is no 'easy "triumph of grace"' (ibid.). What is more, this is a history and a conflict in which

<sup>34</sup> See CD, III/3, §50, 'God and Nothingness'.

humanity must engage. Since it is his conflict, neither an easy gain nor an uneasy pessimism can be its end:

Only victory is to be expected in view of its commencement, in view of Jesus, who has already fought the battle. Yet we have this confidence only with the last and bitter seriousness enjoined and demanded by this commencement, by Jesus. Neither hesitant qualifications nor rash and slothful assurance are possible at this point. (IV/3, p. 180).

It is from this that Barth moves into his discussion of the drama, war and history of the reconciliation (IV/3, p. 180), a history into which humanity is drawn (IV/3, pp. 181ff.).

### Beginning to pass the impasse

What, then, has this to say to the issue of universalism in general, and Barth's eschatology in particular? It will be argued that, in rejecting universalism, Barth is not rejecting the final victory of Christ, but rejecting a particular (and wrong) understanding of the *means* by which this is achieved. He is reinterpreting the matter, by carefully removing the negative charges involved with an ultimate salvation of all humanity, while still allowing for and pointing towards that ultimate salvation. Barth rejects universalism because 'universalism' itself can never be the victor: this victory is Jesus Christ's.

First, the most notable feature to emphasize is the continued and sustained sense of being in Christ. Salvation is offered to humanity in its election in Christ – the Christ of whom it must be said 'Jesus is victor'. It is in the eternal decision, and the history and narrative of the life of the incarnate Christ, that our election takes place. For this reason, those who criticize Barth's doctrine of election and objective soteriology on the grounds of their being no reason for the ongoing nature of history cannot be justified. The election of humanity in Christ means an election in a life, in a person. It is as a result of this that Barth's chapter on 'The Command of God' follows that on election. Since election is the election of a *person*, it is the determination of a person, and therefore the question arises of human self-determination which corresponds to this determination. Election in the person of Jesus allows the space for human freedom which a principle never can. Barth rejects universalism, therefore, as he is determined to keep the particularity of the person of Jesus Christ – a particularity which cannot be gained from a principle.<sup>35</sup> Here, John Webster is helpful in allowing one to recognize

<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Barth cites his allergy to metaphysics as the reason for his rejection of *apokatastasis*: 'His [God's] election and calling do not give rise to any historical

the room for human freedom this allows in his discussion of the ethical implications of *enhypostasis*.<sup>36</sup> Although *enhypostasis* is not a doctrine Barth uses overtly in his discussion of election, it is used clearly in Barth's thought both before and after the doctrine of election.<sup>37</sup> Because for Barth election is in the person of Jesus Christ, 'human reality, and therefore human agency, are "enhypostatically real", drawing their substance from the human reality of Jesus Christ'.<sup>38</sup> This is not to merge the two realities, but to recognize that our humanity exists from and in his. Against the charge of christomonism, Barth writes,

It does not mean that Jesus Christ has merged into world-occurrence and world-occurrence into Him, so that we can no longer speak of them as separate things. This would be Christomonism in the base sense of that unlovely term. What it does mean is that according to the true insight of the people of God the twofold form of world history loses the appearance of autonomy and finality, the character of an irreconcilable contradiction and antithesis, which it always seems to have at a first glance. (IV/3, p. 713)

World-occurrence and the history of humanity still continue after Jesus Christ (IV/3, p. 714), but the contradiction and antithesis is ultimately removed. It is not that reality is dissolved into a greater reality, but rather that the very particularity of the person Jesus provides the basis for the very existence of the 'twofold form of world history', and in that way the very existence of all particularity. Barth's discussion of 'Jesus is victor' allows the room for this in its consideration of the particularity of Jesus and the conflict with evil.

Secondly, the emphasis on the particularity of the person of Jesus Christ guards the freedom and sovereignty of God while still allowing for the salvation of all humanity. Emphasising the person Jesus allows for a freedom which cannot be espoused in a principle. It is not that God is bound by the Christ-principle, but rather that in his sovereign freedom he wills to be this God in self-limitation – to be Jesus Christ. It is not that Jesus Christ replaces the *decretum absolutum* as a principle: it is that he crowds it out as a person. Barth is clear that God is under no obligation to elect (II/2, p. 101). In Jesus Christ, one is able to see the mysterious sovereign will of God, as

metaphysics, but only to the necessity of attesting them on the ground that they have taken place in Jesus Christ and His community' (II/2, pp. 417–18).

<sup>36</sup> J. Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), pp. 88ff.

<sup>37</sup> On *an-* and *enhypostasis*, see CD, I/2, pp. 162ff., 216 (*anhypostasis* only); and IV/2, pp. 49–50. See also Jüngel, *God's Being is in Becoming*, pp. 96–7.

<sup>38</sup> Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology*, p. 89.

Jesus is 'the Prophet who knows and proclaims the will of God which is done in His existence' (IV/3, p. 180). While one might be concerned that a principle might bind the sovereignty of God in Barth's theology (especially the principle of universalism), the insistence on the will of God, found in the emphasis on the person of Jesus Christ, underscores God's sovereignty. This is a sovereignty God demonstrates in God's willed decision to be for humanity in the election of Jesus Christ.

Thirdly, related to both preceding points is the need for a full and proper sense of Barth's understanding of eternity and time, which means that there is no removal of time by eternity.<sup>39</sup> Suffice it to say, in Barth's theology, God's eternity is more than simply the unity of all times with the goal and purpose of his will. His eternity is not exhausted by this. God's eternity is rather the presupposition of this unity. For that reason, Barth speaks of pre-, supra-, and post-temporal eternity, which he believes is a biblical distinction within the unity of eternity in which it is possible to see eternity's positive relationship to time since in it God has the power to exist before, above and after time (II/1, p. 619). All too often, commentators on Barth have failed to see the importance of this distinction and this positive relationship of eternity to time. God's eternity is the precondition of temporality rather than a simple dialectic of time over and against timelessness. Eternity does not obliterate time; it allows for it. The simultaneous possession of all time does not mean the dominance of any one time: pre-temporal eternity does not have priority over supra- or post-temporal eternity as many commentators would have us believe. Rather it is *simultaneous*. This does not remove the integrity of any one moment of time or of eternity, but unites them. To suggest that in Barth all of time and history is sewn up by election is to fundamentally misunderstand both Barth's presentation of eternity and the election of Jesus Christ. Indeed, one should note well that §31 (in II/1) which ends with discussion of eternity and glory dovetails perfectly into §32 (in II/2) on election. The election of Jesus Christ is an election of time in the life and particularity of Jesus:

<sup>39</sup> In addition to the all too brief comments here, see CD, II/1, §31.3; I/2, §14; and III/2, §47. For the most thorough discussion of this, see R. H. Roberts, *A Theology on its Way? Essays on Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), esp. ch. 1. In this, Roberts engages in a thorough and fierce criticism of Barth on time, concluding that Barth is ultimately 'ambiguous' and seeing the dissolution of time by eternity in Barth's theory. While Roberts is undoubtedly correct in the emphasis he places on these concepts in Barth's theology and identifies the innermost logics of his work, his overall conclusions cannot be accepted. For a critique of Roberts, see B. D. Marshall, 'Review of Richard Roberts, *A Theology on its Way? Essays on Karl Barth*', *JTS* 44 (1983), pp. 453–8.

before all created reality, before all being and becoming in time, before time itself, in the pre-temporal eternity of God, the eternal divine decision as such has as its object and content the existence of this one created being, the man Jesus of Nazareth, and the work of this man in His life and death, His humiliation and exaltation, His obedience and merit. It tells us further that in and with the existence of this man the eternal divine decision has as its object and content the execution of the divine covenant with man, the salvation of all men. (II/2, p. 116)

One misses the radicality of this movement if one fails to see this particularity. To misunderstand eternity is to fail to grasp the particularity involved in the statement 'Jesus is victor' – a particularity that can never be involved in a principle. It is also to fail to see that there are few theologians who allow for so much time for humanity as Barth does. A principle may well dissolve or negate time; the life in time of a human person cannot. Barth rejects a universalism which removes temporality, but this in no way limits the ultimate victory of Christ.

Fourthly, the issue of ultimacy requires further comment. In dealing with the *eschaton*, one is dealing with that which is ultimate; in dealing with human history, one is faced with that which is penultimate. Each requires the other, and each is important, but the ultimate is always that – ultimate.<sup>40</sup> Barth finds room for the freedom of humanity and the continued existence of history and world-occurrence through his use of this concept. He rejects a universalism which does not allow for this distinction, but he still allows what is ultimate to be ultimate. It is this way that one is to understand the existence of the Christian

in the final manifestation of Jesus Christ. There can be no doubt, however, that in the liberation which comes to the Christian here and now, in that which is personally and specifically disclosed and given him in and with his calling, the Christian himself is not the end of the ways of God but only the preliminary sign of this end. (IV/3, p. 675)

Christianity and faith in the present are not an ultimate decisive factor, but a 'preliminary sign of this end'. Moreover, this sign is one

not only in anticipation of its own awaited completion but also in anticipation of what is truly and finally purposed in what God has done and revealed in Jesus Christ, namely, the liberation of all men. (Ibid.)

<sup>40</sup> See Bonhoeffer's discussion of the relationship between the ultimate and the penultimate: *Ethics*, ed. E. Bethge (London: SCM, 1955), pp. 98ff. (esp. pp. 103ff.).

The Christian is a penultimate sign of the ultimate; and she is one who cannot be separated from the ultimate (IV/3, pp. 351–2). Faith, however, must never be seen as being ultimate: '[in] the recognition of faith we are speaking of most important penultimate things, but not of ultimate things' (IV/1, p. 767). Penultimacy allows the room for human freedom in history. This is a history which is real and valid in its penultimacy. In it is the room for faith; just as in it is the room for rejection, condemnation and unbelief. But these are not ultimate. The ultimate is this: 'Jesus is victor'. Jesus' victory does not drown out but is the basis for human history – not simply through some single bang in a pre-temporal eternity which renders all notes in time meaningless.<sup>41</sup> This is the way in which one is to understand the discussion of rejection in Barth's doctrine of election (II/2, §35.2 and 4). The reality of rejection is there, indeed uncomfortably so.<sup>42</sup> As Berkouwer observes, this is a double predestination.<sup>43</sup> However, rejection is also elected in Christ. This rejection is not ultimate: the verdict of the Father is seen in resurrection.<sup>44</sup> To deny that the penultimacy of rejection makes it unreal is tantamount to the suggestion that the penultimacy of the cross makes it unreal. Both are necessary in the correct order: neither undoes the reality of the other. So, too, for Barth's soteriology, the penultimacy of human rejection cannot undo the ultimacy of God's election; yet this does not undermine the reality of either. In Barth's discussion of judgement, condemnation, and the threat of hell, rejection and the abyss, one deals with what is penultimate: the unbeliever is distinguished from the Christian in that she has the fear that these things are that which is ultimate.

## Conclusion

The emphatic sense of election in Christ and the reiterated point that 'Jesus is victor' determine that Barth's theology clearly points in a universalist direction. That Barth rejects *apokatastasis* is not because of a limitation of his hope for humanity or his belief in the all-encompassing nature of election and the objective nature of salvation. It is rather a rejection of a principle. In

<sup>41</sup> Here, one should see the reason for Barth's emphatic use of the biblical term 'covenant'. God is a covenantal God – a God of history.

<sup>42</sup> Lindsay draws attention to the fact that the lectures which provided the basis for most of the analysis of election (including its understanding of the rejection of Israel) were given in the winter semesters of 1939–40 and 1941–2 – at roughly the same time as the Wannsee Conference of 20 Jan. 1942. Lindsay, 'Dialectics of Communion', p. 125.

<sup>43</sup> For example, *ToG*, pp. 105ff.

<sup>44</sup> See CD, IV/1, §59.3. For this connection, see also CD, II/2, p. 558, as well as Barth's thesis at §39, 'He judges us as in His Son's death He condemns all our action as transgression, and by His Son's resurrection pronounces us righteous' (II/2, p. 733).



Barth's own words: 'I don't believe in universalism, but I do believe in Jesus Christ, the reconciler of all.'<sup>45</sup> As Webster puts it:

we must not allow worries about the universal scope which Barth claims for the history of Jesus to crowd out that the most basic function of his presentation is to stress Jesus' particularity before his cosmic pertinence.<sup>46</sup>

The principle of universalism brings along with it certain dangers that the continued stress on salvation in the particular person of Jesus Christ can help to overcome. For Barth to place his faith in universalism would be to place his faith in something which was greater than Christ and undermined the sovereignty of God; to place his faith in 'Christ, the reconciler of all' and to proclaim 'Jesus is victor' is not to allow some a priori to govern God, but properly to allow God to be the subject of salvation. This is truly what it is to be elected in Jesus Christ. In a way similar to his rejection of the word 'person' regarding the Trinity,<sup>47</sup> Barth does not wish to be governed by a conceptual framework a word brings with it: in rejecting *apokatastasis*, he reveals an unease with the use of the word which might be an easy epithet with which to misconstrue his own particularist agenda in describing God's election; instead, he finds a new way to talk about such matters that this old word cannot convey. He does not wish to imply the charges so often brought against him regarding the meaningless of history or evil or rejection, which this term is insufficient in answering. If we are to charge Barth with universalism, we must be careful not to charge him with the universalism he so carefully and overtly denies and avoids. In Barth there is something new – not a limitation of the friendliness of Jesus Christ, but a limitation of the problems that can arise from such a universal scope for salvation.

Indeed, perhaps the impasse regarding Barth on universalism stems from how radically new his steps are. What is certain is that this radicality is all too easily removed when we seek to defend Barth by taking him away from his advances on his *theologia viatorum* back to the safe and entrenched comfort zones of orthodoxy. Then, we become those whom Barth charges with perceiving a 'danger' in universalism out of legalism and indifference.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Busch, *Karl Barth*, 394.

<sup>46</sup> J. Webster, 'The Grand Narrative of Jesus Christ: Barth's Christology', in G. Thompson and C. Mostert (eds), *Barth: Future for Postmodern Theology?*, pp. 29–48, esp. p. 42.

<sup>47</sup> On Barth's rejection of the word 'person', see A. J. Torrance, *Persons in Communion: Trinitarian Description and Human Participation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996).

<sup>48</sup> 'HoG', p. 50. Although by no means universalist, Hart too states the danger of Christians who might feel disappointed should God choose to save all humanity. See T. Hart, 'Universalism: Two Distinct Types', in Cameron (ed.), *Universalism and Hell*, pp. 1–34, esp. p. 34.

In an age of religious fundamentalism, it may well be that the danger lies on the other side. A positive message to humanity of salvation brought about by particularity (not the removal of it) and allowing for particularity is infinitely superior to the endless and dreadful dividing of humanity into categories.<sup>49</sup> This leads to an attractively radical reformation in the agenda of preaching and ethics, necessary for an age which sees religious intolerance and the divisive use of unhelpful binaries in religious language. It is necessary to recognize, as Barth records he did while writing *CD*, II, that as important as it is to say 'no', to say 'yes' is even more important and pressing.<sup>50</sup> As Barth wrote regarding the atheism of Max Bense:

I know the rather sinister figure of the 'atheist' very well, not only from books, but also because it lurks somewhere inside me too. But I believe I know even better the real God and the real man who is called Jesus Christ in the unity of both. He let the atheist depart once and for all and long ago, completely, and that goes for Max Bense as well as for me. Only in our bad dreams can we want to be 'atheists'.<sup>51</sup>

The differentiation of the Christian from the non-Christian is another discussion for another time.<sup>52</sup> What is important for Barth is that the Christian cannot view the non-Christian as anything other than the person for whom God elected, who is elected in Christ and whose rejection is all too well known by the reality of the faith community as well. If we are to charge Barth with universalism, it cannot be that universalism which has been articulated previously. What Barth cannot be charged with is a failure to recognize the monumentally and radically new situation of humanity eternally elected in Christ. Yes, Christ stands at the door and knocks; but in the power of his resurrection, he makes his way into locked rooms.

<sup>49</sup> It was this which Barth saw as being at the root of his disagreements with pietism. See Busch, *Karl Barth*, p. 445.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 284.

<sup>51</sup> K. Barth, *Fragments Grave and Gay*, ed. M. Ruscheidt (London and Glasgow: Collins Fortress Library, 1971), pp. 45–6.

<sup>52</sup> I feel this comes in Barth's discussions of the economy of the Holy Spirit who allows for the particularity of the Christian and the Church separate from the issue of ultimate salvation.