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Commencement, Continuation, Consummation: Karl Barth's Theology of Hope

Dr. Reist is Head of the Christian Studies Program at Hillsdale College in Michigan, and has taught English and American literature and theology in a number of colleges. This wide range of experience gives him a broader context for the study of theology than is sometimes the case, and readers will find proof of it in this careful analysis of an important aspect of Karl Barth's doctrine.

1. Introduction: Futurism, Futurology, or Faith in Christ?

In a letter to Prof. Jurgen Moltmann, one of the primary theologians of hope whose book *Theologie der Hoffnung*, published in the early 1960's, powerfully propelled eschatology into the foreground of theology, Karl Barth stated:

It was most kind of you to have a copy of your *Theologie der Hoffnung* sent to me . . . I have been looking for decades—I was looking even in the twenties—for the child of peace and promise, namely, the man of the next generation who would not just accept or reject what I intended and did in theology but who would go beyond it positively in an independent conception, improving it at every point in a renewed form. . . .

But, dear Dr. Moltmann, I do not find in your *Theology of Hope* what is really needed today to refine C.D. and my own theological thrust. . . . To put it pointedly, does your theology of hope really differ at all from the baptized principle of hope of Mr. Bloch?¹

Thus Barth continued to the end of his life to question all attempts by humankind to understand the world without beginning with God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Whether it is creation, redemption, ethics and epistemology, Barth always insisted that Jesus Christ must be the controlling focus and foundation which determines Christian theology; there are no human principles, insights, or conceptions which may be baptized into Christian faith.

¹ *Karl Barth: Letters 1961-1968* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 174-75.

Three years later (1967), in a letter to Dr. Tjarko Stadtland, Barth reiterated the same theme:

... this eschatology can hardly be recognized or taken seriously as *Christian* eschatology. Instead of starting out joyfully with the confession of Jesus Christ it seems to have painfully pasted his name on its own *futurism*. It certainly promises all kinds of fine things in terms of *his* individual and social perfection but at root, in the light of what is now being proclaimed in full chorus by *futurologists*, champions of the principle of hope, and conjurers up of the future of every type of belief and unbelief—yes, I must throw back your objection in all seriousness—it announces *nothing new*.

... We must concentrate strictly on the one thing by which Christian eschatology distinguishes itself from all other possible eschatologies, namely, on the *one* person, the *new* person, in whom God 'was and is and is to come' (Rev. 4:8). We would not be speaking of him as he is and as he reveals himself to be, we would not be speaking of the God who is eternally rich and kind, the coming God, if we were to speak of him *only* as the one who comes and not also and at the same time as the one who was and is.²

Just as he had earlier attacked the analogy of being, natural theology, and adoptionist Christology in the first volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*, so he also asserts that 'futurology' without Jesus Christ becomes mere 'futurism' and thus offers to the world a philosophy or project about the future, but not the promise of God.

This paper will seek to show that an exposition and explication of *Church Dogmatics* IV. 3/2 offers a telling critique of contemporary theologians of hope who take their cues from Marxism, socialism, evolution, existentialism, and process principles and thought; Barth's doctrine of the threefold parousia of Jesus Christ securely roots eschatology in a genuinely Christian hope, and distinguishes it from mere religious hopefulness, or personal wishful thinking, or melancholy resignation, or political projections and programs based on an historical *élan vital* by which society might thrust itself revolutionarily into the future. Without Jesus Christ, eschatology exists *in vacuo*, without any *credo ad expectationem* that is recognizably Christic, for the earnest expectation of the church is empowered by the Holy Spirit enabling it to believe that God's gift in Jesus Christ and his resurrection informs our hope with a richness of knowledge and power that moves us forth into the future, towards his coming again. As he developed his eschatology, Barth defined the problem this way:

... we have still to consider and clarify the attitude to be taken in face of what seem to be contradictory christological insights, of the

² Karl Barth: . . . , 235. (Emphasis on *Futurism* and *Futurologists* is mine.)

difference between the revelation of Jesus Christ as it has already taken place in its *commencement*, and is still taking place in its *continuation*, and the revelation of Jesus Christ as it has not yet taken place in its *consummation*. . . . The Already and Even Now are no less forms of the one *parousia*, presence and action of Jesus Christ in His prophetic action than the Not Yet. The *commencement*, *continuation* and *consummation* of His prophetic activity are all equal in this respect.³ (Emphasis mine)

2. The Issue: Is Jesus Christ our Hope?

Emil Brunner, Barth's great contemporary *provocateur*, has stated, 'The Christian hope is not only the last chapter of theological doctrine; it is itself the goal to which the Christian reaches forward.'⁴ Barth himself declares that a study of Christian hope seeks to answer how a man can exist prophetically in the present; his answer is that ' . . . this is not only made possible but actually achieved as Jesus Christ causes the Christian to become a man who may stride towards his future in hope of him' (CD IV.3/2, 902).

The Christian then looks forward to this hope because of what has already happened. Speaking of the resurrection of Christ in the context of I Corinthians 15:20, Barth declared even as the *Church Dogmatics* had only begun to appear: 'The metaphor of the firstfruits derives from the Old Testament. God claimed *this* portion of the harvest Himself and thereby gave to understand that the other part, the whole, belongs to Him'.⁵ Because Christ, the firstfruits, has been raised from the dead, we too shall be raised; because the *parousia* of Christ occurred at Easter as the foundation of our hope, and at Pentecost as the sustenance of our hope, it is also certain to occur for all men at the end. Similarly, Barth states, 'If God is not God in *our* life, then He is also not that in the life of Christ. . . . If no dead are to rise except the One, then the resurrection of even this One, is an offence dispensable, unimportant. . .'.⁶ According to Barth, in I Corinthians 15:17-18, Paul concludes:

. . . if the resurrection of Jesus were only an isolated miracle and not the revelation of the miracle that God worked on men, if it is only to

³ *Church Dogmatics*. IV. 3/2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1962), 910. (Emphasis mine). All further references to the *Church Dogmatics* will appear within the text itself, by volume number and page number.

⁴ *The Christian Doctrine Of The Church, Faith And The Consummation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), 346.

⁵ Karl Barth, *The Resurrection Of The Dead* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1933), 165.

⁶ Barth, *The Resurrection* . . . , 154.

mean 'Christ rose again', but not 'Resurrection of the Dead', then even this miracle is not true, then Christ is not risen. . . .⁷

Christians, then, are begotten to a lively hope, even though some who actually saw the Lord 'have fallen asleep' (I Corinthians 15:6-7). Thus, the error of the Corinthian church, that of limiting Christ's resurrection to himself and not extending it to all men—even so in Christ shall all be made alive—is merely an early manifestation of the church's willingness to reject revelation, to reject the reality of the miracle of God's act in history. Then churchmen become

. . . theological auguries and auspices, who cannot meet without significantly smiling at each other, in the consciousness of the fatal secret of the utter insignificance of their activity. Of parsons it can be simply said that they talk of things which they understand no more than anybody else. We stand, then, in the shadow of the curse which lies over all religions. Religion appears with the claim, with the dignity of revelation. What becomes of it when it secretly renounces such claim, when it has not the courage to believe in revelation? Then, Feuerbach is right. Then, it is to be explained as no more than the dream of human wishes.⁸

Is not this situation of the church reflected in much recent literature? Think of the Church of England as depicted in the nineteenth century novels *Barchester Towers* and *The Warden*, by Anthony Trollope, in which bishops and curates, deans and vicars, are tirelessly and tiresomely interested in stipends, ecclesiastical prestige, and land grants for churches; a church in which Joseph Butler wrote his accommodating *Analogy of Religion* which Sir Leslie Stephen declared was one of the most terrible persuasions to atheism ever produced, because it so lucidly presents the irresolvable problems of religion. Compare this group of comfortable and rational churchmen with the apostolic ecclesia and its witness to the resurrection and its pointing to the lively hope.

Has not T. S. Eliot, the modern Anglican poet, pointed out in his poetry the absurdity of a church not faithful to her message, when he likens her to a huge, sleeping hippopotamus, mired knee-deep in mud, occasionally snorting, but never transcending or transforming its environment?

The broad-backed hippopotamus
Rests on his belly in the mud;
Although he seems so firm to us
He is merely flesh and blood.

⁷ Barth, *The Resurrection* . . . , 144.

⁸ Barth, *The Resurrection* . . . , 156.

The hippo's feeble steps may err
 In compassing material ends,
 While the True Church need never stir
 To gather in its dividends.

The hippopotamus's day
 Is passed in sleep; at night he hunts;
 God works in a mysterious way—
 The Church can sleep and feed at once.

He shall be washed as white as snow,
 By all the martyr'd virgins kist,
 While the True Church remains below
 Wrapt in the old miasmal mist.⁹

Is it not true that with the church standing in this position and deserting or demythologizing its message, that the Christian hope is not one of glory, but one in which, as Eliot suggests,

This is the way the world ends,
 Not with a bang but a whimper.¹⁰

Currently, in the novels of John Updike, we read of clergymen more interested in social causes and sexual escapades than in the salvation hope of the world in Jesus Christ. From *Rabbit, Run*, to 'Pigeon Feathers', through *A Month of Sundays*, to his latest work, *The Witches of Eastwick*, pastors and priests in Updike's world seek other men's wives or other religious options, rather than declaring the gospel of hope that Barth espouses. My point is not that one must be Barthian in order to avoid such clerical deviousness; it is that a focus on Jesus Christ is essential to maintaining a Christian theology of life here and now and in the world to come.

It seems that the Corinthian error of rejecting the resurrection of the dead, the first form of the threefold parousia, is still persistently with us. Brunner has properly assessed the drift of much of modern Christian thought in this way:

Bultmann's view is that the New Testament eschatology was dependent on Jewish apocalyptic, and became such an embarrassment when the Parousia did not occur, that it called for a re-interpretation . . . he replaces Eschatology, the hope of the Christian faith, by a radical historical self-understanding which he calls eschatological existence. That in doing so he can appeal neither to Paul or to John is clear to himself. But he believes that he owes such an 'existential interpretation'—a demythologization which leads to

⁹ 'The Hippopotamus', *The Complete Poems And Plays 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. 1962), 30-31.

¹⁰ Eliot, *The Complete Poems* . . . , 59.

an elimination of eschatology—to the man of today, who can no longer believe in such a consummation of history.¹¹

Barth, himself, succinctly and precisely proclaims the Christian hope: 'There can be no doubt as to its foundations, since the Christian derives securely from the resurrection of Jesus Christ' (CD IV. 3/2, 904). This powerful act offers the Christian, not plangent uncertainties or political-social causes, but a powerful vision and impetus for the future. 'Nor can there be any doubt as to its present constitution and the step which the Christian has to take at the moment, since every action may be performed within the sphere of lordship of the Holy Spirit' (CD IV. 3/2, 904). He clearly joins the issue between Christian hope and secular hopes:

For the issue is quite simply whether the Christian has any option but in his own most proper concern to be like the poor heathen who optimistically or pessimistically can proceed only with uncertainty into a neutral, ambivalent and therefore obscure future. If he could not hope as a Christian, it would be all up with him. But since he may, all is not lost but won (CD IV. 3/2, 921).

Stated again, the question is:

... how the Christian may maintain himself as such, i.e., as a true and faithful and servicable witness of Jesus Christ, when he moves towards a dark future full of conflicting possibilities and thus seems to have ground only for a divided expectation fluctuating between confidence and uncertainty (CD IV. 3/2, 928).

Barth's answer is that '... the statement about Christian hope also tells us positively that the future to which only the Christian as such can look is the *parousia* of Jesus Christ in its final form, His coming in completion of His prophetic work and to His consummating manifestation' (CD IV. 3/2, 929). Thus, the Christian hope is not 'a shot in the dark', but the final *parousia* of Jesus, whom we already know in his resurrection power and in the power of Pentecost. 'It is to be noted that here, too, it is simple and concrete expectation of a new being and action of God, of the God already known to the Christian by His past and continuing self-declaration' (CD IV. 3/2, 909). This Christian hope is rooted retrospectively in Jesus Christ; hope toward the future is substantiated by knowledge of the first two forms of Christ's *exousia*, his authoritative, powerful, and effective presence. Cf. Matthew 28:18, where Jesus declares, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me'.

¹¹ Brunner, 350.

3. The God, 'Hope', or the God of Hope?

Barth divides his treatment of hope into two sections, 'The Subject of Hope and Hope', and 'Life in Hope'. This part of my paper will be an exposition and analysis of these two sections.

3.1. The Subject of Hope and Hope

The concern for the meaning of Christian hope lies in the fact that although God has announced the destiny of humanity in the first form of the *parousia*; i.e., the resurrection, he has 'not yet spoken of it in such a way that the ears and reason and hearts of all must receive it' (CD IV. 3/2, 903).

This last, comprehensive, immediate and definitive Word has certainly been announced in His resurrection and is declared in the power of His Holy Spirit, but it has not yet been spoken (CD IV. 3/2, 903).

Thus the Christian is 'in tension'. Having been established in the 'Now' of the resurrection, the first form of the *parousia*, he is still incomplete because of the 'Not Yet' of the final *parousia*.

Yet the fact remains that the consummating revelation of Jesus Christ and its redemptive work have not yet taken place. . . . Thus even Christian hope, for all its clarity and certainty, for all its participation in the One hoped for, cannot be more than hope. It is clear and certain in the power of the One hoped for who is its origin, theme, and content. And in its clarity and certainty it threatens all the present elements which contradict it. Yet it is also threatened by these elements. . . . What is true in itself has yet to become true. . . . We are yet in the sphere of warfare, though in hope and not without hope like the heathen (CD IV. 3/2, 917).

Because of the *parousia* of the sustaining Holy Spirit, who has regenerated us to the vivid hope by which we live, the Christian, being aligned against such opposition as provided by this world, realistically and honestly encounters this world as challenge and opportunity. Brunner emphasizes this also when he writes:

The existence of the believer is therefore in reality 'eschatological existence.' . . . but that means an existence that points beyond itself, an existence conscious of its own incompleteness. It is impossible to stand in the faith, without moving towards the goal.¹²

But Brunner goes on to say that "eschatological existence" is existence certain of its future liberation from this contradiction.¹³

What, then, is the significance of the Christian hope in the final

¹² Brunner, 342.

¹³ Brunner, 343.

fifth of the twentieth century? Can we really confess the positive and affirmative proclamation of hope in the face of current challenges and doubts? G. C. Berkouwer has stated:

A long series of revolutionary and catastrophic events has made an almost undeniable empirical fact of the meaninglessness of human life. . . . Can life then still make sense? Dare one call this life meaningful?¹⁴

Can the Christian really hope in the modern context, without naively and piously contending, as Pangloss did in Voltaire's *Candide*, that this is the best of all possible worlds, and that all light and shadow, good and evil, comprise one complete, harmonious whole? Spouting Voltaire's satire of Leibniz's theodicy, Pangloss explains away the occurrence of misfortune thus:

'All that was indispensable', replied the one-eyed doctor, 'and individual misfortunes create general welfare, so that the more individual misfortunes there are, the more all is well'. While he was reasoning thus, the air grew dark, the winds blew from the four corners of the earth, and the ship was assailed by a terrible storm in sight of the port of Lisbon.¹⁵

Voltaire's satire of Leibniz's theodicy is devastating; but Barth's theology of hope is not naive or Olympian. It is based squarely

Not on the basis of anthropological construction, but on that of definite and theologically valid, i.e., christological insights, on the basis of the revealing work of Jesus Christ which has already commenced and continues but is not yet completed. . . . (CD IV. 3/2, 909-10).

Barth insists that although the Constantinian illusion is now shattered, the Christian can still hope, although he finds himself in a dwindling and seemingly hopeless minority.

If the great Constantinian illusion is now being shattered, the question becomes the more insistent, though it has always been felt by perspicacious Christians. What can a few Christians or a pathetic group like the Christian community really accomplish with their scattered witness to Jesus Christ? What do these men really imagine or expect to accomplish in the great market, on the battlefield or in the great prison or mad-house which human life always seems to be? . . . The Christian is merely burying his head in the sand if he is not disturbed by these questions and does not find his whole ministry of witness challenged by them. . . . Nor is there any sense in trying to leap over this barrier with the confident mien of a Christian world

¹⁴ *The Providence Of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1952), 9.

¹⁵ Voltaire, *Candide* (New York: Bantam Books, 1959), 27-28.

conqueror. The meaningful thing which he is permitted and commanded and liberated to do in face of it is as a Christian, and therefore unambiguously and unfalteringly, to hope, i.e., in face of what seems by human reckoning to be an unreachable majority to count upon it quite unconditionally that Jesus Christ has risen for each and every one of this majority too; . . . (CD IV. 3/2, 918).

This specific Christian hope is that which sustains the Christian *in situ* and *in transit*, from the Then of the resurrection, through the Now of Pentecost, to the Not Yet, but equally certain Not Yet of the final form of the *parousia*. 'It will be seen that the lines between the Then, the Now and the One Day everywhere intersect' (CD IV. 3/2, 9). Thus, in this life here and now, hope, energized by faith and love, sustains the Christian in his work as witness to Christ. 'In hope, that which the Christian cannot reach is already near for all its farness' (CD IV. 3/2, 923). As Calvin states:

In fine, he makes the sum of our felicity consist in being sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise. Indeed, we have no enjoyment of Christ, unless by embracing him as clothed with his own promises. Hence it is, that he indeed dwells in our hearts, and yet we are as pilgrims in regard to him, because 'we walk by faith, not by sight' (2 Cor. v. 6, 7).¹⁶

No Christian can give away this hope as a gambit to the non-believer, for he could do so

. . . only by forgetting and denying that which makes him a Christian; i.e., his derivation from the resurrection of Jesus Christ and his present in the sphere of power of the Holy Spirit. . . his future as a Christian is in no sense open, neutral, and therefore divided (CD IV. 3/2, 907).

3.2. Past, Present and Prospect: The Relationship of Faith, Hope and Love

Barth speaks of the relationship of faith to hope in the life of the Christian:

He does not believe because he hopes, for he has no ground for hope apart from believing. But as and because he believes, putting active trust in the Word spoken to him as God's Word, he also hopes . . . faith believes that God is true; hope expects that in due season God will manifest His truth. Faith believes that He is our Father; hope expects that He will always act the part of the Father towards us (CD IV. 3/2, 912).

Alongside the famous Augustinian epigram concerning faith and knowledge, *credo ut intelligam*, Barth would state that faith and

¹⁶ *Institutes Of The Christian Religion*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), 366.

hope are related *credo ad expectationem*—I believe toward hope and expectation. Thus, faith is equally a being moved by God ('For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God' Ephesians 2:18); and faith blossoms in hope, a being moved toward God ('he delivered us from so deadly a peril, and he will deliver us; on him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again' II Corinthians 1:10). The Christian is started, continued and is consummated in salvation by the personal God who acts in his threefold *parousia* of resurrection, Pentecost, and fulfillment. And, *in medias res*, he is carried along by the power of the Holy Spirit, who constantly testifies of Jesus' historical revelation and also leads us toward Christ's future presence as pantocrator (Cf. John 14:25-27). Barth states that Jesus Christ is the past, present, and prospect of our life as Christians:

As the Subject of the faith and love of the Christian, Jesus Christ is also the Subject of his hope. . . . Nor is it that He merely *is* his hope. He was, and is, and, as the One Who was and is, He will be (CD IV. 3/2, 915).

Barth also wishes to guard against giving to Christian hope more than it possesses. We must admit that the *parousia* begun in the resurrection has not yet been completed. 'The fact remains that the consummating revelation of Jesus Christ and its redemptive work have not yet taken place. . . . Thus even Christian hope, for all its clarity and certainty, for all its participation in the One hoped for, cannot be more than hope' (CD IV. 3/2, 917). We still walk by faith, not by sight, yet we are no less certain that he will yet deliver us.

The relationship of love to faith and hope is that love is both the content and the act of God (God is love in action) which through faith begets us to a certain hope. When God says to humanity, 'I love you', it is hope that enables this justified person to realize that God will consummate his love manifested in the Incarnation, and will love man eternally by the completion of his acts of resurrection and Pentecost through what is yet coming—the final appearance of his Son.

It is not the Christian trying to help out his feeble faith and love with a little hope, but Jesus Christ already present now as the One He will be in the consummation of His revelation, who actually makes his hope the power which sustains his faith and gives wings to his love tomorrow no less than today (CD IV. 3/2, 916).

However, still being in the flesh, we must play the part; i.e., we must participate in the reality that has come to us in Jesus Christ,

although it is not fully revealed. 'But the Christian has not merely to hope. He has really to show that he is a man who is liberated and summoned, as to faith and love, so also to hope' (CD IV. 3/2, 926). So, the Christian must witness to Christ, with a view toward the end which is much different from the conception of life and its end rendered by William Cullen Bryant in his poem *Thanatopsis*.

So live, that when thy summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan, which moves
To that mysterious realm, where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death,
Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,
Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.¹⁷

The Christian does not lie down to pleasant dreams, to quiet contemplation, either in this life or the next. Nor does he imagine that his works in this life will determine his destiny. To the contrary, he is always abounding in this life because of and on the basis of his salvation wrought by Jesus Christ, so that when his end—or rather, his real beginning—or also, his continuing and his consummation—comes, he can confidently accept God's judgment on his life, which has been worked out in hope. Yet, 'He does not guarantee his future by hoping any more than he justifies himself by believing or sanctifies himself by loving' (CD IV. 3/2, 914). At the Christians' death, 'it is all up with them, and you can expect no more. This was your life as a witness of Jesus Christ' (CD IV. 3/2, 926). The Christian will understand that, even for many Christians—perhaps for himself—the first shall be last and the last first; yet he still knows that, if he really hopes, he is 'restored and set in that service "in eternal righteousness, innocence and blessedness"' (CD IV. 3/2, 928). Not lying down to pleasant dreams, not absorption into the void, but awaking fit for true service is the Christian's destiny.

3.3. Life in Hope: Personal, Penultimate, and Powerful

This idea of the Christian life as a life lived in hope is developed under Barth's second subpoint, 'Life In Hope'. Having analyzed the content of hope, which is the surety of the third and final form of the *parousia*, the effective presence of God with his people,

¹⁷ In Sculley Bradley, Richard Croom Beatty, and E. Hudson Long (eds.), *The American Tradition In Literature: Third edition Vol. I.* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company), 475.

Barth presents an analysis of the Christian's life in this hope. He speaks of the legitimate Christian concern for self-authentication in this hope. Having established that the future is not dark, obscure or ambivalent, nor dependent on calamitous or uplifting circumstances, Barth feels that the Christian must still authenticate his life as a witness to Jesus Christ. There are three determinations of the Christian's life in hope.

3.3.1. *The Christian in Community*

First, although the Christian is always personally concerned and involved, and religion is an individual affair, 'Christian existence, which is radically distinct from all religion, can never be the private affair of the Christian' (CD IV. 3/2, 930). Christian life is personal, but not private: 'Personal interest means the personal acceptance by the Christian of the function assigned to him rather than concentration of his will and desire and striving on personal advantage which might accrue' (CD IV. 3/2, 930-31). Christian hope means glory, reward, gain, pardon, and transformation, but only in 'the comprehensive context of the final redeeming act of God in full manifestation of the reconciliation of the world. . . .' (CD IV. 3/2, 931). Thus, the Christian hope is a hope in *community*. The Christian functions, in community, as representative; and this representation is twofold. First, there is the representation within the Christian community itself, where the Christian acts as Christ's representative to his fellows and prevents them from falling asleep;

There have to be men by whose irrepressible and constant unrest at least a few and even perhaps quite a number of their fellows are prevented from falling asleep as though nothing had happened and nothing out of the ordinary could happen in the future (CD IV. 3/2, 933).

Second, Christians are also representatives to God of the surrounding humanity which seems for the most part to slumber.

The Christian now can only wake up for others, for the sleeping Church and the world around. He can only appear to them from time to time as a watchman. Provisionally the Church and the world hope in him as their representative (CD IV. 3/2, 933).

3.3.2. *The Christian Penultimate and Ultimate*

Second, the Christian lives in constant tension between the existent penultimate kingdom of Christ, and the ultimate final

kingdom of God. 'No one is able to concentrate so rigidly on the ultimate denouement or to turn so resolutely from penultimate developments' (CD IV. 3/2, 936). The problem is obvious; how can the Christian really serve, if he has eyes only on the future kingdom? The penultimate will not be a reality to him.

If the sphere of the penultimate is left empty by pure hope of the ultimate . . . there will exult . . . in it demons of the crassest because uncontrolled and undisciplined worldliness . . . Only a Christian hope which is strong in this sphere, too, is a match for these demons (CD IV. 3/2, 936).

If he does not serve the Lord here and now in the time now given to the world and himself, what prospect is there for his future service 'in righteousness, innocence, and blessedness?' (CD IV. 3/2, 937).

The Christian concern for the penultimate is shown by the fact that: (1). 'it is not bound to either the lighter or the darker side which existence may alternately display' (CD IV. 3/2, 938). Hence, millennialists of whatever persuasion should not permit the wickedness of the world, its wars and famines, to blind them to their obligation to service for it, for God is still working whether the medieval church reigns supreme, or Nero does; (2). the Christian hope 'assumes at once the form of action, corresponding to its concrete object' (CD IV. 3/2, 938). Hence, the Christian has no excuse in the sovereignty of God for laziness; and (3). 'the Christian does not think or act as private individual' (CD IV. 3/2, 939); hence, he always looks for opportunities through which he can reflect the glory of the gospel hope—whether it be the United Nations or The World Council of Churches. All these are opportunities for acting for the community of fallen humanity.

3.3.3. *Life in hope from God*

Third and finally, the Christian hope is worked out in the surety that its hope is from God.

The only one who can secure and introduce this reality of the Christian who hopes is God Himself in whom he may hope with reference both to the ultimate and the penultimate, and whom he may thus serve in his prophetic existence in the world (CD IV. 3/2, 941).

Substitute hopes will not do. The idealistic hope of Woodrow Wilson; the chiliastic hope of Thomas Munzer; the grandiose hopes of socialists; the trickle down hope of Reaganism; the classless society of Marx—none of these will suffice.

But no man has this whole life in hope of himself. Not even the Christian can produce it of himself. The Christian, however, is the first to realize that neither he nor any other man can do this. If a man is to live a life in hope, it must be a life derived from God. This is the assertion with which we must, or may conclude (CD IV. 3/2, 940).

To live by surrogate hopes; to try to muster up merely human vision; to place hope in medicine, art, or politics; to imagine that ignoring the penultimate completely or treating it as if it were the ultimate, or only, reason that man may have to live—all of these would be idolatry for Barth. However vital the living of the life of hope is for us, we must never distort it into a god itself, and thus worship only the god, hope. It is the God *of* Hope that the Christian serves and worships; He it is who gives us the gift of hope so that we need not apotheosize any human longing or activity into an hypostatized idol of false promise or illusion. The God of hope moves the Christian; he is not moved by his own power. '... Christian existence is existence in movement. Hope takes place in the act of taking the next step. Hope is action, and as such it is genuine hope' (CD IV. 3/2, 939). This genuine hope is grounded and stimulated by 'the God of hope' (Romans 15:13), for '... the limit set to Christian existence can be removed only with the coming of Jesus Christ Himself to complete His revelation' (CD IV. 3/2, 904).

The only point is that God Himself, the 'God of hope' (Rom. 15:13), in the glory still to be manifested, is not an abstraction but bears the features of a specific human countenance well known to the one who hopes, namely, the countenance of the One who has come already in the event which fulfils the hope of Israel, and who will Himself come again in that future event in full revelation of His salvation and glory (CD IV. 3/2, 909).

4. Criticism and Conclusion

4.1. Thinking Like God or Thinking in Hope?

One of the characteristic criticisms of Barth has been that his thought is at least implicitly universalistic; many such readers of Barth too easily mistranslate his great confidence and hope into his alleged presumption to think like God, and to declare that all men are saved. Certainly, in his discussion of hope, Barth states that the resurrection of Christ is for all men. In his *The Resurrection of the Dead*, he states the universality of the resurrection:

'In Adam all die' is the account of every human life ruled off; 'in Christ shall all be made alive.'... Observe the 'all', obvious from the

start, the later following 'who belong to Christ (Christ's) to be understood, not as exclusive, but as representative. The resurrection, like death, concerns all.¹⁸

From this starting point, Barth proceeds, sometimes by direct statement, sometimes by implication, to his hope for a universalism. Cornelius Van Til states that Barth in his concept of the election of all men in Christ makes a 'titanic effort to think like God', and is therefore 'fantastically unscriptural'.¹⁹ Yet, it is clear that Barth did not intend to think like God presumptuously, but merely to 'think God's thoughts after Him'. In an earlier volume of the *Church Dogmatics* he wrote;

. . . it is not legitimate to make the limitless many of the elect in Jesus Christ the totality of all men. . . . It is always the concern of God to decide what is the world and the human totality for which the man Jesus Christ is elected, and which is itself elected in and with Him. It is enough for us to know and remember that at all events it is the omnipotent loving-kindness of God which continually decides this. . . . We cannot consider their number as closed, for we can never find any reason for such a limitation in Jesus Christ. As the reality and revelation of the omnipotent loving-kindness of God, He is not dead, but lives and reigns to all eternity. This event in and for the world, and therefore its movement and direction at any given moment, its dimension and the number of those whom the event affects at any moment, are all matters of His sovereign control. . . . For the very same reason, however, we cannot equate their number with the totality of all men. . . . Those who believe in Him, however, are not all men, nor mankind as such in its totality. They are always distinct from this totality. They live in the world as elected ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου (Jn. 15:10). . . . Nowhere does the New Testament say that the world is saved, nor can we say that it is without doing violence to the New Testament. We can say only that the election of Jesus Christ has taken place on behalf of the world, i.e., in order that there may be this event in and to the world through Him (CD II.2, 422-23).

In his focus on Jesus Christ as the elector and the elected, as the judge judged in our place, Barth has freed discussions of predestination from preoccupation with a hidden, horrible decree from a God lurking behind, and not completely revealed in, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the Elect One in whom humanity is elect; whoever is elect is in Christ and whoever is in Christ is elect. It is God who determines this, and our hope is securely based on this electing God, who is the origin, preserver, and fulfiller of the hope of all mankind.

¹⁸ Barth, *The Resurrection* . . . , 166.

¹⁹ *Christianity And Barthianism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1962), 164.

4.2. Penultimate Priests?

In his conception of the Christian who lives in hope and who in this function, acts as a representative for all humanity before God, is not Barth closer to a sacerdotal priestly conception than he would wish to be? Barth states, 'The Christian now can only wake up for others, for the sleeping Church and the world around' (CD IV. 3/2, 933). What, precisely, is the function of the church and the Christian as representative? Is it efficacious in any sense for the unbeliever? 'Provisionally the Church and the world hope in him as their representative' (CD IV. 3/2, 933). Did the apostolic community ever act as a representative for the world around it? It would seem that they did not, unless one would wish to describe evangelical preaching and the call to repent and to enter the *ecclesia* as representative. Certainly Barth rejects all sacerdotalism. But is the Christian as representative merely a way of Barth's imagining a universalism through the incarnate body of Christ extended into the church, and therefore suffering and witnessing to Christ in some obscure representative manner?

4.3. Parousia and the Crucifixion

Barth's conception of the threefold *parousia* is certainly scriptural. *Parousia* does mean 'effective presence' or 'presence in authority'; and in *Church Dogmatics* IV. 3/1, he describes the *parousia* as resurrection, pentecost, and the last day (CD IV. 3/1, 292ff.). However, does the *parousia* begin only with the resurrection? Was not the gospel of the last day, the concept of 'at hand', announced by Jesus in his mighty deeds of healing and in his powerful preaching as recorded in the synoptics? Or does Barth include all of Jesus' ministry under the concept of resurrection, in which case Christ's resurrection becomes the benediction of the Father and the eschatological validation of the Son's entire ministry as the effectual commencement of the ushering in of the kingdom? Even if Barth's view does include the cross under the resurrection, certainly he has omitted from the Christian life in hope a central concern and example—that of the cross. Where are we told in the New Testament that either the life of Christ or the Christian life is participation in the resurrection hope, but not in the crucifixion? Barth emphasize that the reality of the hope of the future existence with God rests in participation in the 'already' of the resurrection. Is it not true that the Christian life is one of crucifixion and self-denial in the penultimate? If we do not emphasize the preaching, healing, and death of Jesus Christ

when we discuss Christian hope, is not triumphalism, or an unwarranted *theologia gloriae*, always a demonic possibility?

4.4. Conclusion: The Christian Arrow of Hope

Despite the criticisms we have suggested, it is the conclusion of this study that Barth's theology of hope so firmly anchors our prospective hope for the future in a retrospective faith in the Christ who has already come, that it avoids the excesses and reductionisms of other contemporary eschatologies, Christian or not.

First of all, Barth's strong Christocentrism prevents the Christian faith from being subsumed under alien metaphysical-cosmological or socio-political categories by which the faith is reduced to a kind of religious cosmology or political construct. For example, Fr. Teilhard de Chardin's theory of cosmic evolution is, according to Barth, only incidentally Christic, or Christian.

His hominization of the universe is more evolutionary than it is Christological; Barth declares;

As concerns T. de C. I let myself be oriented first by the book *Le milieu divin*. Now it seems at first quite harmless when you write that what you find so exciting in him is not the theological material but the anthropological and palaeontological. Why should we not learn from a man who knows so much about these things? But then (even according to your own presentation) he moves on at once from his scientific observations to the unfolding visions of a cosmos that is rising up from darkness to light; to the concept of a gigantic development in whose context Christ too plays an important role at certain places—but in such a way that he too must accept being evaluated and understood in terms of the context. This is precisely what Gnosis in every age has done with Christianity—always with the intention of bringing in what is distant from it and finally elucidating it.²⁰

After having written this to his daughter-in-law, Marie-Claire Barth, August 17, 1963, he then writes the next day to Prof. Georges Casalis the following:

... it seems unmistakable to me that in T. de C. we have a classic case of Gnosis, in the context of which the gospel cannot possibly survive. The reality that is supposedly manifest there, and that we are supposed to believe, is the deity of evolution—naturally decked out with the name of Jesus Christ, as always happened and still happens in Gnostic systems.²¹

²⁰ Karl Barth: . . . , 116.

²¹ Karl Barth: . . . , 120.

He concludes that Teilhard's *Le milieu divin* is a 'giant gnostic snake'.²²

Politically, Barth's theology of hope prevents us from the idolatry of worshipping political principles or movements of whatever orientation, and keeps us focused squarely on Jesus Christ.

What is hope, and what does it mean for the Christian who, since Jesus Christ has not yet spoken His universal, generally perceptible and conclusive Word, finds himself in that dwindling and almost hopeless minority as His witness to the rest of the world? (CD IV. 3/2, 917-18).

We must not hypostasize a merely human principle of hope, such as Ernst Bloch's; nor should we substitute the concreteness of current political, social, and economic realities for the specificity and concreteness of Jesus Christ in his threefold *parousia*. It is true that 'there have been many and varied attempts to fix Christian expectation so exclusively on the ultimate denouement that a hopeless view is taken of penultimate developments' (CD IV. 3/2, 936). But, for Barth, it is an impious illusion to reduce the gospel to any particular social or political program; thus, early in his life he championed socialism as a pastor in Safenwil; later, in the name of the One Lord Jesus Christ and as a spearhead of the confessing church, he opposed Nazism with the Barmen Declaration; in addition, he would not join the west in its hostility toward and rejection of communism in the Cold War following World War II. For Barth, Jesus Christ is our life and hope; nevertheless, or rather therefore.

If Jesus Christ is the goal and end of time, then necessarily this time as such with all its contents, though it is not yet the day of redemption, is at least partly determined by the fact that it moves towards this as its end and goal. It is the last time (CD IV. 3/2, 937).

It is because of Jesus Christ that we work in the penultimate world; concerning the Christian, Barth writes:

Just because he hopes for the Last Day, for the eternal year, he hopes for the next day and the new year, from which, whatever they may bring, he can always expect at least new indications of the coming of Jesus Christ (CD IV. 3/2, 938).

The coming of Jesus Christ does not sanction or sanctify our earthly hopes for society, but it also does not condone or provide complacency. Jesus Christ works *through* the human community; therefore he simultaneously prevents our utopian fantasies and

²² Karl Barth: . . . , 117.

our dogged or revolutionary activity from becoming idolatrous by pronouncing plagues on all our households; and he also is the One who reminds us that the cup of cold water given in his name or simply for the sake of the brother or sister is part of the work of the kingdom (Mark 9:41; Matthew 25:40).

Christian hope, then, is abiding in the 'already' of the resurrected Christ and working in the power of the present Holy Spirit; and therefore it is assured of the future kingdom. Our hope has nothing whatever to do with the wishful thinking that Freud attributes to us in *The Future Of An Illusion*: 'No, science is no illusion. But it would be an illusion to suppose that we could get anywhere else what it cannot give us'.²³ The natural man does not understand the steadfast joy and hope of the Christian who lives and works and prays in this hope by which he confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord. Thomas Hardy, the great English novelist and poet, seems to say as much as the natural man can hope to say, in his poem, 'The Oxen':

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.

'Now they are all on their knees,'

An elder said as we sat in a flock

By the embers in hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek mild creatures where

They dwelt in their strawy pen,

Nor did it occur to one of us there

To doubt they were kneeling then.

So fair a fancy few would weave

In these years! Yet, I feel,

If someone said on Christmas Eve,

'Come; see the oxen kneel

'In the lonely barton by yonder coomb

Our childhood used to know,'

I should go with him in the gloom,

Hoping it might be so.²⁴

He hopes in a plangent, poignant, moving, longing way to find something that has already come to us in Jesus Christ. Hardy spent his whole life searching sensitively and persistently for the God who, he thought, had disappeared. The Christian can only be moved by such a struggle; deep and profound as Hardy's hopefulness is, it is not the hope of which Barth and the gospel

²³ *The Future Of An Illusion* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, — 1949), 98.

²⁴ James Gibson (ed.), *The Complete Poems Of Thomas Hardy* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, Inc., 1976), 468.

speak. The hope of the Christian, and therefore of the entire world, is Jesus Christ.

The one *parousia* of the one Jesus Christ in its first and second forms is like an arrow pointing to the third (CD IV. 3/2, 915).

This sovereign, powerful movement of God in our history is our hope—the commencement, continuation, and consummation of God's powerful, effective, authoritative presence for us and in us.