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Karl Barth's Doctrine of Election

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According to Bruce McCormack, the greatest contribution of Karl Barth to the development of Christian theology is his doctrine of election.¹ McCormack's optimistic appraisal of Barth's doctrine of election is not universally shared, however, with a number of interpreters expressing serious concern about Barth's construction of the doctrine. Evangelical concerns focus on three prime issues: the degree to which Barth's presentation of election is Scriptural, the abiding concern that his doctrine leads inexorably to universalism, and the sense that his construal of the divine-human relation evacuates human agency of genuine meaning. This essay is an attempt to read Barth on his own terms, attending not only to his argument, but also to the patterns of his rhetoric and to his idiosyncratic use of terminology, in order to uncover the theological logic that drives his doctrine of election, and thus to assess its validity.

The Election of Grace

That the doctrine of election held a primary place in the architecture of Barth's thought is widely recognised. He considered it 'the sum of the gospel because of all the words that can be said or heard it is the best', believing that 'the election of grace is the whole of the Gospel, the Gospel *in nuce*...the very essence of all good news.'² For Barth, all divine activity issues from and is grounded in this primal decision of the divine election.

1 McCormack, B. L. 2000, 'Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology' in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, J. Webster (ed.), Cambridge: CUP, 92.

2 Barth, K. 1957, *Church Dogmatics Volume II/2: The Doctrine of God* ET: G. W. Bromiley et al. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 3, 13-14. Hereafter references to Barth's *Church Dogmatics* will be indicated with the abbreviation *CD*, followed by the volume and part number and page numbers.

Barth's exposition of the doctrine of election extends to over 500 pages of densely argued propositions, historical and theological analysis, and biblical exegesis, and is as such, one of the most substantial attempts to explicate this doctrine in the history of theology. For Barth, all serious expositions of the doctrine seek to assert one central fact: the freedom of the grace of God. With the Reformed tradition Barth argues that God's sovereignty is not constrained, conditioned or obligated by anything external to himself in the decision of his election. His decision is independent of, and prior to, 'and thus fully over-rules our human volition and achievement.'³

Barth, however, parts company in a decisive way with the Reformed tradition by insisting that the freedom of God in his grace is not to be abstractly conceived as an absolute power of disposal but as the absolute freedom of the gracious God who has definitively revealed himself in Jesus Christ. His correction of the tradition is an attempt to maintain the freedom of God's election as *grace*, as *gospel*. Barth suggests that traditional formulations presented a doctrine in which the bad news overshadows the good, in which the essence of *gospel* is swallowed up in the indeterminate decision of the *decretum absolutum*.⁴

Barth's rejection of this approach to the doctrine is based upon his fundamental epistemological principle, namely, that Jesus Christ is the ground, the centre and the focus of all human speech about God.⁵ Barth argued that God could only be known according to his activity in revelation. Because revelation is God's *self-disclosure*, God is as he has revealed himself in time, supremely in Jesus Christ. Barth does not argue from God's eternal being to his activity in time but from time to eternity, from revelation to ontology. Thus, any talk of an absolute decree as a theological axiom cannot be admitted.⁶ Barth is strident: 'There is no such thing as a *decretum absolutum*. There is no such thing as a will of God apart from the will of Jesus Christ.... He is the Lamb slain, and the Lamb slain from the foundation of the

3 CD II/2: 19, 133.

4 'How can the doctrine of predestination be anything but "dark" and obscure if in its very first tenet, the tenet which determines all the rest, it can speak only of a *decretum absolutum*? ...We abandon this tradition, but we hold fast by John 1:1-2' (CD II/2: 104; see also his comments on CD II/2: 25).

5 See, for example, Barth's assertions on pages 4, 54 and 99.

6 See Gunton, C. E. 1974, 'Karl Barth's Doctrine of Election as Part of His Doctrine of God', *Journal of Theological Studies* Vol. XXV No. 2, October 1974, 387. See also Hunsinger, G. 1991, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology*, Oxford: OUP, 32-35, 51.

world. For this reason, the *crucified* Jesus is the "image of the invisible God."⁷

Barth also rejects the *decretum absolutum* because of the darkness it casts over the doctrine of election.⁸ He notes that the Reformers spoke of Christ as the light or the mirror of election, seeing in him the first of the elect according to his human nature, and as the elected means by which human salvation would be accomplished. This understanding of the election had a pastoral function: that is, believers are to cleave to Jesus Christ as their hope of eternal life. It is not possible to penetrate beyond him to the eternal and terrible decree that lies at the foundation of all reality in the depths of God's inscrutability, the absolute decree that divides humanity into both elect and reprobate. Barth insists that this formulation of the doctrine in fact robs the believer of assurance by obscuring the source of election:

(H)ow can even the Word of God give us assurance on this point if Jesus Christ is...only an elected means whereby the electing God – electing elsewhere and in some other way – executes that which He has decreed concerning those whom He has – elsewhere and in some other way – elected. The fact that Calvin in particular not only did not answer but did not even perceive this question is the decisive objection which we have to bring against his whole doctrine of predestination. The electing God of Calvin is a *Deus nudus absconditus*.... All the dubious features of Calvin's doctrine result from the basic failing that in the last analysis he separates God and Jesus Christ.⁹

For Barth, this is exactly what theology must not do, for in so doing it capitulates to, and becomes a natural theology, grounded in speculations that seek to understand the nature of reality and of God himself in a manner separate from Jesus Christ.¹⁰

The Election of Jesus Christ

What, then, is the material content of Barth's doctrine? Simply put, Barth's doctrine of election consists 'in the assertion that the divine predestination is the election of Jesus Christ.'¹¹ This simple phrase, however, is at once a statement of divine ontology and an epistemological claim. First, it signifies that before election has a human ref-

7 CD II/2: 115, 123 (Barth's emphasis).

8 CD II/2: 146.

9 CD II/2: 110-111.

10 CD II/2: 158.

11 CD II/2: 103.

erent it refers to God's eternal and unconditional act of self-determination, in which he ordained himself to be God-for-humanity in the person and under the name of Jesus Christ. Election is firstly and primarily about God. In his eternal existence as the triune God, before the existence of any reality other than his own being, God determined that 'the goal and meaning of all His dealings with the as-yet non-existent universe should be the fact that in His Son He would be gracious towards man, uniting Himself with him.'¹² McCormack comments, 'Election is an *eternal* decision and as such resists our attempts to temporalize it; i.e., to think of it in such a way that a 'before' and an 'after' are introduced into the being of God in pre-temporal eternity. If election is an eternal decision, then it has never not taken place.'¹³

It is in this way that Barth's theology finds its ontic ground. Neither the incarnation nor the crucifixion represent or effect a change in the divine being because God had already and eternally determined himself to be God in this relationship of oneness with humanity in and through the person of the Son, and to be God *only* in this form and this relation. In the primal decision, which, from a human perspective, occurred in pre-temporal eternity but which for God is an eternally present willing, God wills to be God-for-humanity and God-with-humanity and not to be God apart from this relation which has been eternally established and grounded in the divine-human relationship as it occurs in the person of Jesus Christ.¹⁴ In the eternal decision of election God assigned to himself the being he would have throughout eternity.¹⁵

The material content of Barth's doctrine is further disclosed in this same phrase: 'the divine predestination is the election of Jesus Christ.' In this assertion Barth intends that the genitive be understood as both subjective and objective: that is, Jesus Christ is both the Subject and the Object of election, both Elector and Elected, the electing God and the elected person. These two activities are not to be seen as equivalent, however. It is as the Son of the Father, and in unity with both the Father and the Spirit as the one triune God, that Jesus Christ is electing God,¹⁶ while as the elect person, he alone of

12 *CD II/2*: 101. See also *CD II/2*: 157, 161-162.

13 McCormack, 'Grace and Being', 101.

14 See Barth's response to the question, 'Does the incarnation make a change in the Trinity?' in Godsey, J. D. 1963, *Karl Barth's Table Talk (Scottish Journal of Theology Occasional Papers No. 10)*, Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 49.

15 McCormack, 'Grace and Being', 100.

16 *CD II/2*: 105, 110.

the triune God is determined for an ontological union with humanity. Barth makes this move in order to assert that the electing God is not an unknown quantity, but the very God we encounter in Jesus Christ, and that we can go no further back with regard to the mystery of election.¹⁷ As the Subject of this decree, Jesus Christ 'was at the beginning of all things, at the beginning of God's dealings with the reality which is distinct from Himself.'¹⁸ Barth substantiates his assertion with an exegesis of John 1:1-2 in which he argues that the *Logos* 'is unmistakably substituted for Jesus. His is the place which the predicates attributed to the *Logos* are meant at once to mark off, to clear and to reserve. It is He, Jesus, who is in the beginning with God.'¹⁹ Because this is so, it is possible to have complete confidence that God will never prove to be anything other than the God of electing grace, for it is *this* Jesus, who, 'for us and for our salvation' suffered and died, who is also the electing God.

As elect person, Jesus Christ is not simply one of the elect, nor only the means of the election of all other elect persons, but he is himself *the* elect of God *in* whom all humanity are likewise elected. Thus Barth asserts that

as elected man He does not stand alongside the rest of the elect, but before and above them as the One who is originally and properly the Elect. From the very beginning (from eternity itself), there are no other elect together with or apart from Him, but, as Eph. 1:4 tells us, only 'in' Him...' 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.²⁰

Jesus Christ, as electing God, elects all humanity in his own humanity and his own election, so that his election carries with it the election of all others. God chose Jesus Christ, and in so doing chose also all humanity and determined that he would be gracious to it. In Jesus Christ the elect person is seen 'the destiny of human nature, its exaltation to fellowship with God.'²¹

The basis of the election of Jesus Christ as the elect person lies in

17 Bromiley, G. W. 1979, *Introduction to the theology of Karl Barth*, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 87.

18 *CD* II/2: 102.

19 *CD* II/2: 96. John Thompson notes that Barth's position has been criticised as exegetically untenable. He cites several scholars' exegesis of John 1:1-2 before concluding, 'Barth's is a possible exegesis and not a merely fanciful or speculative one. It must, however, be conceded that it is an unusual, minority one... (but nonetheless) a perfectly arguable and tenable one' (see Thompson, J. 1976, 'The Humanity of God in the Theology of Karl Barth', *Scottish Journal of Theology* Vol. 29, 249-269 (264-266)).

20 *CD* II/2: 116-117.

21 *CD* II/2: 118.

his primal obedience as the Son of God in which he willed to be obedient to the determination willed for him by the Father, that is, the suffering and death of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. His election as the elect person occurred in the event of this obedience, so that 'the obedience which He renders as the Son of God is, as genuine obedience, His own decision and electing...the fact that He is elected corresponds as closely as possible to His own electing.'²² According to Barth, therefore, the Son affirmed the determination willed for him by the Father, choosing his being chosen by the Father.²³

Finally, and in accord with the Reformed tradition Barth posits a double predestination, albeit one which has been radically reconfigured. As noted, he rejects the absolute decree which divides humanity into those elect and those rejected, and insists, rather that in the primal decree God elected himself for rejection, and in Jesus Christ bore that rejection in time, so that humanity could be elect in him.²⁴ Thus Barth is adamant:

Man is not rejected. In God's eternal purpose it is God Himself who is rejected in His Son...He is rejected in order that we might not be rejected. Predestination means that from all eternity God has determined upon man's acquittal at His own cost.... We shall never find...the decreed rejection of ourselves or of any other men. This is not because we did not deserve rejection, but because God did not will it, because God willed the rejection of His Son in our stead.²⁵

Circles of Election

Thus, Jesus Christ is the proper and primary focus of election. However, in this election he is not alone, but is with a people whom he represents as king and head.²⁶ Because of the manner in which Barth has developed his understanding of Jesus as the elect person in whom all humanity are also elect, and as the one who has taken all rejection upon himself, it is expected that the people represented by him would include the entire race. This, however, is not the case.²⁷

Barth finds the traditional focus of the doctrine on the ordering of the individual's relation with God to be problematic²⁸ and thus seeks

22 *CD II/2*: 105.

23 Thompson, 'The Humanity of God', 253.

24 *CD II/2*: 162-165.

25 *CD II/2*: 167-168; see also *CD II/2*: 123.

26 *CD II/2*: 8.

27 See *CD II/2*: 51.

28 *CD II/2*: 306.

to address this by positing a 'mediate and mediating' election of the community, between the election of Jesus Christ and that of the individual.²⁹ Barth employs the image of the circle to present this understanding of election. Those called and gathered around Jesus Christ, the one community in the two-fold form of Israel and the Church, constitute an 'inner' circle of the election which has taken place in and with the election of Jesus Christ. Beyond this there exists a wider circle which includes the rest of humanity, and which is labeled by Barth as 'the outer circle of the election which has taken place (and takes place) in Jesus Christ.'³⁰ For Barth, then, all the election that takes place in Jesus Christ is 'mediated, conditioned and bounded by the election of the community.'³¹

Barth's move is pregnant with significance. When Barth speaks, therefore, of the elect individual he asserts that they are elect only in and with the community, 'elect through its mediacy and elect to its membership...an election to participation in the ministry of the community.'³² This inner circle is a circle of proclamation and faith, and those outside of it live lives that are 'lost', bearing the rejection of those who are apart from Jesus Christ.³³

Election means faith. And since those who believe are the Church, election means to be in the Church. We have here a closed circle which cannot be penetrated. There is no election to anything else or to any other situation. There is no election of an individual man on the basis of which he is not led by the Word into faith, and therefore into the fellowship of believers, and therefore into the Church.... Election and the Church are coinciding circles.³⁴

Yet this circle is not so closed or predetermined that it cannot expand, for an enlargement of the circle of election occurs as the Church faithfully pursues its calling of witness and proclamation in the world. Barth argues that 'the election of each individual involves, and his calling completes, an opening up and enlargement of the (in itself) closed circle.... The existence of each elect means a hidden but

29 *CD II/2*: 195-196.

30 *CD II/2*: 196-197. Note Barth's parenthetical comment in this sentence. This indicates that Barth considers election an event which occurs in time, as well as in pre-temporal eternity. It is crucial to recognise that for Barth, election has two 'moments' and that those in the outer circle are in one sense elect, and in another, yet to be elected, or better, to have their election actualised and made a concrete reality.

31 *CD II/2*: 196-197.

32 *CD II/2*: 410.

33 *CD II/2*: 415.

34 *CD II/2*: 427-428.

real crossing of frontiers, to the gain of the Kingdom of God.³⁵ The Church, therefore, must not regard the world as rejected for they are those to whom God has graciously turned in the election of Jesus Christ. The elect are called to proclaim the message of the triumphant grace of God, and to summon the world to faith in him. At every point on the frontier between the inner circle of the community and the outer one of the rest of humanity the gospel is to be proclaimed.³⁶

A final reference to the circles of election is very instructive. Barth avers that the final extent and enlargement of the circle can only be God's concern, as well as the how and the when of specific frontier crossings. He refuses, on the basis of the freedom of grace, to venture that the circle of election will finally encompass the whole of humanity; he refuses likewise, on the same grounds, to rule out the possibility.³⁷

The End of Election

How, then, does Barth conceive the telos of election? Because Barth has not always been read carefully, a great deal of misunderstanding has occurred at this point. Emil Brunner, for example, as an early critic of Barth, contended that he developed 'the most thoroughgoing doctrine of universalism that has ever been formulated.'³⁸ He understood Barth to remove the possibility of divine judgement on the ungodly since all are elect in Jesus Christ, the only Rejected of God. 'In so doing Karl Barth is in opposition, not only to the whole ecclesiastical tradition, but – and this alone is the main objection to it – to the clear teaching of the New Testament.... Barth (has arrived at) a fundamental perversion of the Christian message of Salvation.'³⁹ Evangelicals have, understandably, expressed similar concerns.⁴⁰

35 *CD II/2*: 417. See also *CD II/2*: 419.

36 *CD II/2*: 195. See also *CD II/2*: 266.

37 *CD II/2*: 417-418. See also Barth's extensive excursus on Judas (*CD II/2*: 458-506). A final 'circle' reference occurs on page 503.

38 Brunner, E. 1949, *The Christian Doctrine of God: Dogmatics Vol. 1*, ET: O. Wyon, London: Lutterworth, 314.

39 Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 348-349.

40 See, for example, Berkouwer, G. C. 1956, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth: An Introduction and Critical Appraisal*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 116; Brown, C. 1967, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message*, London: Tyndale, 130-133; Mueller, D. L. 1972, *Karl Barth*, Waco: Word, 152; Grenz, S. J. & Olson, R. E. 1992, *Twentieth Century Theology: God & the World in a Transitional Age*, Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 75; Bromiley, *Introduction*, 97-98, and, Demarest, B. 1997, *The Cross and Salvation*, Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 112.

Several significant factors must be considered to adequately address this concern. First, of course, Barth repeatedly rejects *apokatastasis* as a doctrinal position which can be maintained by the church, although not as a hope that the church might hold and for which it might pray.⁴¹ Second, sufficient weight must be given to the numerous instances where Barth insists that election must be actualised, made concrete and received,⁴² and that the proclamation of the Church must be met with genuine faith, decision and obedience.⁴³ Third, Barth warns of the real threat of eternal rejection awaiting those who fail to obey their election.⁴⁴ Finally, and perhaps decisively, many authors lift Barth's universalistic statements from the context in which they are grounded: that is, the witness and proclamation of the believing community to the world at large.⁴⁵ Barth insists that the content of the proclamation is the objectivity of Christ's atonement, with specific application being pressed upon the individual hearer, thus encountering them with the divine claim upon their lives and calling for a positive response from them in the light of the message proclaimed.⁴⁶ John Colwell correctly recognises that Barth's intent in these passages was not 'to speculate concerning the ultimate destiny of each individual but rather to emphasize and define the inclusive nature of the church's witness to each individual.'⁴⁷ On the grounds of the election of grace in Jesus Christ none are to be considered rejected and the summons to faith is to be issued in undiluted strength.

T. F. Torrance suggests that behind the charge of universalism lies a presuppositional 'notion of external logico-causal connections.' He argues that an Aristotelian metaphysic that functions to supplant the ineffable activity of the Holy Spirit in the application of saving grace was imported into post-Reformation theology through Lutheran and Calvinist scholasticism, and was advanced as the Newtonian worldview came to ascendancy in western intellectual culture. If Barth is

41 On this point see *CD II/2*: 417-419, 484-487, 496-497, and especially *CD IV/3i*: 477-478. See also Bettis, J. D. 1967, 'Is Karl Barth a Universalist?', *Scottish Journal of Theology* Vol. 20 No. 4, 427.

42 See, for example, *CD II/2*: 177, 322 and 323-324.

43 See, for example, *CD II/2*: 236, 320-322.

44 See, for example, *CD IV/3i*: 477.

45 See Barth's thesis at the head of his discussion of the election of the individual (*CD II/2*: 306).

46 For example, see *CD II/2*: 322, 324, 423.

47 Colwell, J. 1992, 'The Contemporaneity of the Divine Decision: Reflections on Barth's Denial of "Universalism"', in N. M. de S. Cameron (Ed.), *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, Carlisle: Paternoster, 147.

read through such a paradigm, says Torrance, it is almost inevitable that his carefully nuanced construction will be misread and misrepresented. If one understands election as an efficient cause of eternal salvation, and reads in Barth that in Jesus Christ all are elected and none rejected, it certainly seems that Barth is proclaiming a universalist doctrine.⁴⁸

How, then, does *Barth* conceive the telos of election? Barth variously describes the telos of election as an election to blessedness, eternal life as God's covenant partner, and vocation.⁴⁹ He further speaks of the telos of election in different ways according to whether he is referring to the election of Jesus Christ, the community or the individual. In addition, since election refers first to God vis-à-vis humanity, its telos must also be considered firstly in this direction.

The telos of the election of Jesus Christ, with specific reference to God, is God's self-determination to be God only in relationship with and for humanity, whom he has united to himself eternally in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. Materially, the self-determination which occurs in this decision of election 'concerns the man Jesus, but teleologically it concerns man in himself and as such created by and fallen away from God. It is to this man, to the plurality of these men, to each and all, that the eternal love of God is turned in Jesus Christ.'⁵⁰ Further, as elected person, Jesus Christ is determined to bear humanity's judgement in order to acquit humanity of its guilt-worthiness, that all may be elected and not rejected. Thus, with a view to humanity considered as a whole, the telos of election is their non-rejection: there is no double decree, no decreed rejection, no 'Book of Life' which is simultaneously a Book of Death. There are none who are excluded by a prior determination of the divine will, but all are embraced in the love and grace of God revealed in Christ supremely at the cross, and which is universal in its scope.⁵¹ Gunton, in a delightful image, suggests,

The reader may be justified in assuming that Barth is not writing without glances over the shoulder...the object of (his) concern is the great Calvin, whose doctrine of the *decretum absolutum* that lies behind what God actually does in Jesus Christ is the very reverse of what Barth wants to say.... For

48 Torrance, T. F. 1990, *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian*, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 237-238.

49 For blessedness as the telos of election see *CD II/2*: 29, 121, 142, 169, 238 and 412. For eternal life see *CD II/2*: 169, 172 and 265. For vocation as the telos of election see, *CD II/2*: 343, 410, 414 and 449.

50 *CD II/2*: 195.

51 *CD II/2*: 16, 167-168, 349 and 453.

Barth, a God who is not gracious from the very first is not the God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ.⁵²

Gunton is surely correct in identifying this issue as the underlying rationale for the development of Barth's doctrine, which also confirms human non-rejection as the telos of election.

Again, it is seen that Barth does not envisage an efficient primal election which will ultimately be achieved regardless of the decisions of human persons in time. In saying that all are not rejected but rather are elect, Barth means that they are elect to the promise of election. All, in and of themselves and as a result of their sins, are rejected. But this rejection is relative, not absolute. As also elect they are ordained to hear the gospel, and with it the promise of their own election, and by believing may become 'rejected men elected'.⁵³

When Barth turns his attention to the election of the community it is evident that he regards its election as one to vocation. As 'mediate and mediating', the community exists for the service and witness of Jesus. As such, the community is elect in order to be "a light of the Gentiles", the hope, the promise, the invitation and the summoning of all people's and at the same time, of course, the question, the demand and the judgment set over the whole of humanity and every individual man."⁵⁴ Should the community cease this mediatorial service it has 'forgotten and forfeited' its election.⁵⁵

Election to vocation is true also of the individual, although this does not exhaust the meaning of the election of the individual who, as elect, is also the object of God's love and heir of eternal blessedness.⁵⁶ Barth insists that election not only distinguishes the person of the elect but also determines the life-content to which those so distinguished are called, a life-content which is nothing other than Jesus Christ.⁵⁷ Barth deplores the privatising of election that occurred in the development of the doctrine in the history of theology. Although the elect person is indeed elected to eternal salvation, this cannot be

52 Gunton, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Election*, 381-382. Compare Reid, J. K. S. 1948, "The Office of Christ in Predestination", *Scottish Journal of Theology* Vol. 1 No. 1, June 1948, 12, '(Calvin's) weakness is at least once betrayed into using (3.22.1): "*gratiam istam Dei praecedat electio*": thus, election precedes grace. If this is true, then one's worst forebodings are fulfilled. The God and Father of Jesus Christ is a God of grace. Who, then, is this God who determines men's election before grace becomes operative?'

53 CD II/2: 506.

54 CD II/2: 53.

55 CD II/2: 196-197.

56 CD II/2: 411-412.

57 CD II/2: 419-423.

allowed to become a doctrinal *cul-de-sac*, the beginning and end of the doctrine, whereby the elect finally 'go to heaven' as distinct from the rejected. He argues that, 'inwardly and inseparably bound up with that which God is for him, is that which he may be for God; with his deliverance, his employment; with his faith in the promise of God, his responsibility for its further proclamation; with his blessedness, his obedience in his service and commission as a witness of the divine election of grace.'⁵⁸

Jesus Christ, therefore, as elect person, is not only the ground and means of election, but also its pattern. It is here that we perceive the true telos of election as it applies to humanity. Election, in this 'second moment' in which the promise of election is heard, believed and received, is an election to authentic human existence as it is determined in Jesus Christ the elect person from all eternity, and as it was demonstrated in the earthly existence of Jesus of Nazareth. The elect are chosen in order to respond in gratitude to the gracious God and to become repetitions and representations of the divine glory, replicating in their own lives that pattern of existence, wholehearted obedience and dependence on God that is exhibited in Jesus Christ.⁵⁹

For Barth, authentic human existence is that form of existence which echoes the Yes uttered by the Son to the Father from all eternity, and which echoes the pattern of humanity-for-others exhibited in his incarnate existence. It is this form of existence, this life-content which is the telos of election, both for the elect individual and the elect community, and which is then blessed and crowned with the gift of eternal participation in the divine life of the triune God. Thus Webster characterises Barth's doctrine of election as 'not fate but form...election is to that form of human life which Jesus Christ himself establishes.'⁶⁰

Concluding Reflections

At the beginning of this essay I indicated that Evangelical concerns regarding Barth have often focussed on three primary issues. An example of these concerns is found in a brief critique by D. A. Carson.⁶¹ Carson has provided his critique of Barth within a broader, excellent discussion of the tension between divine sovereignty and

58 *CD II/2*: 414; cf. 343, 345.

59 *CD II/2*: 178-180.

60 Webster, J. 2000, *Barth*, London: Continuum, 91-92.

61 Carson, D. A. 1981, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension*, London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 214-216.

humanity responsibility, and indicates that Barth's doctrine of election is, at least in part, an attempt to resolve this tension. In Carson's estimation Barth's construction is inadequate because a disproportionate emphasis on divine transcendence diminishes human responsibility and tends towards universalism. In the foregoing discussion I have endeavoured to demonstrate that Barth cannot legitimately be accused of universalism, and that his doctrine of election does not guarantee the eternal salvation of all humanity. Further, although a full discussion of Barth's construal of human agency is beyond the scope of this essay, I have also attempted to provide indications that Barth's account does not, in fact, evacuate human agency of genuine meaning: individuals must purposefully choose obedience to their election in Christ.⁶²

What remains, therefore, is the third concern: the question as to whether Barth's doctrine is Scriptural. Carson, for example, writes that

Barth's theological *tour de force* will not withstand close scrutiny. For a start, it is not at all clear that the 'us' of Ephesians 1:4 refers to all men: the epistle is, after all, addressed 'to the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus' (1:1), not to the world at large. Nor does the New Testament conceive of judgment *only* in the way of which Barth writes: there is over and above the judgement which Christ received the judgment of all individuals not in Christ. Moreover, both Paul and John (and other New Testament writers for that matter) speak of *individuals* being elected to salvation. That election is 'in Christ' does not affect its individuality.⁶³

Carson raises three issues. First, he judges that Ephesians 1:4 provides an insufficient foundation for Barth's superstructure. Second, he asserts that Barth's understanding of judgement is inadequate. Third, he insists that election in Christ does not annul the reality that in various places the New Testament speaks of individuals being elect to salvation. This third issue has already been addressed in the discussion above: Barth's conception of election in Christ does not annul individual election, but insists that individual election be understood only as part of his primal election.

Carson's second criticism suggests that Christ has not received all the judgement due to humanity, but there remains a portion of judgement yet to be meted out to all those individuals not in Christ. If Carson means simply that those who refuse to accept the Lordship

62 For an extensive defence of Barth's construal of human agency please refer to Webster, J. 1998, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

63 Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility*, 216.

of Christ will suffer judgement, even though that judgement has already been suffered objectively for them in Christ, then his objection to Barth is warranted, though not fatal: Barth's hope that the circle of election might expand to encompass all humanity is certainly more optimistic than what Scripture warrants. If Carson means, however, that the atonement of Christ is limited only to the elect, or is divinely intended to be effectual only for the elect, his objection is surely unwarranted in light of clear New Testament testimony, and indeed forms an integral part of the *decretum absolutum* that Barth has vehemently rejected.

With regard to Scripture, while a full examination of Barth's method is not possible here several observations are pertinent. First, Barth's entire dogmatic project was explicitly and self-consciously an endeavour to explicate the texts of Scripture. He claimed that 'if I understand what I am trying to do in the *Church Dogmatics*, it is to listen to what Scripture is saying and tell you what I hear.'⁶⁴ The degree to which Barth was successful, of course, is another matter, a question of method and exegetical results.

Second, and along this line, although Carson correctly judges that Ephesians 1:4 is an insufficient ground for Barth's doctrine, he has mistakenly asserted that the core of Barth's argument rests on this text. Indeed, if one is looking to particular texts for explicit confirmation of the details of Barth's construction, they will be disappointed. Barth does not begin his construction with historico-grammatical exegesis of specific texts, particularly of Ephesians 1:4, which is mentioned only once in the 500-pages of Barth's exposition! Rather, the form of Barth's doctrine derives from a method of realist theological-canonical exegesis in which Barth attempts to understand the entirety of the being and purpose of God on the basis of his revelatory activity in Jesus Christ as witnessed in the Old and New Testaments. For Barth, 'God has expressed himself fully and frankly in Jesus Christ. This means that there is no fear of God having any side to his nature which conflicts with what can be seen in Jesus Christ, nor is there a need to search anywhere else for a key to the character of God and of history.'⁶⁵ Barth's method, then, is to use Scripture to construct an overarching narrative of the eternal purpose of God, and then to interpret individual texts in light of this narrative.

64 See D. F. Ford, 1979, 'Barth's Interpretation of the Bible' in *Karl Barth: Studies of His Theological Method*, S. W. Sykes (Ed.), Oxford: Clarendon, 55-87 (55). See also Watson, F. 'The Bible' in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, J. Webster (Ed.), 57-71 (57).

65 Ford, 'Barth's Interpretation of the Bible', 63.

How adequate is this method? Barth's theological exegesis allows him to interpret the peripheral in light of that which is central, the hidden – in this case, God's eternal election – in light of that which is revealed. By so doing Barth is able to co-ordinate election and atonement, thus declaring the universality of election and overcoming difficulties associated with the concept of limited atonement in Calvinist thought. Nonetheless, while it is true that Barth's method of reading Scripture has yielded profound theological insight, it is also true that it leads him at times to strained interpretations of Scripture – as in his exposition of Judas – in which he draws conclusions beyond the explicit witness of the text as a whole. As might be anticipated, then, Barth's method exhibits both strength and weakness, which indicates that it is possible to appreciate Barth's construction without being committed to following him entirely.

In sum, Karl Barth's doctrine of election constitutes a massive attempt to overcome the problematic *decretum absolutum* and so restore to the doctrine its essential character as *gospel*. His Christological orientation of his doctrine has served to bring a correction to the classical exposition of the Reformed tradition. In place of its doctrine of the double decree, Barth asserts an objective universal reconciliation in the eternal union of God and humanity in Jesus Christ, actualised in the incarnation and atonement, with the result that none are rejected.

It is incorrect, however, to limit Barth's intent to the intellectual correction of an abstruse theological construction, for his formulation also bears significant ecclesial and ethical ramifications. First, Barth's doctrine serves powerfully to encourage a potent proclamation of the gospel, focussing on the gracious initiative of God exemplified in the objective atoning death of Jesus Christ for all humanity. The Church can, indeed must, press the message of the universality of God's love and call without hesitation or reservation: all are chosen and have been claimed *without exception* for God's Kingdom, and are thereby called to yield themselves with unreserved dependence upon God in grateful response for his grace.

Second, Barth's doctrine bears practical fruit in Christian living by forging an inseparable link between Christian confession and Christian life, and so helps counter the widespread vapidness in contemporary Christian commitment. It is not by accident that Barth follows his chapter on 'The Election of God' with another on 'The Command of God' for, as he insists, the two concepts belong together. Barth insists that we are elect to membership in the community and to participation in its ministry, and to the form of life established by Jesus Christ which consists in obedience to Command of God. As we have seen was the case with Christ, that his being elected corre-

sponded 'as closely as possible to His own electing'⁶⁶, so also the confirmation of our own election consists in our choosing to live in obedience to it.

Abstract

This essay provides a close reading of Karl Barth's doctrine of election, attending not only to his argument but also to the patterns of his rhetoric and to his idiosyncratic use of terminology in order to uncover the theological logic that drives his doctrine, and thus to assess its validity. Particular attention is given to the telos of election as Barth conceived it, his theological method, and the enduring criticism that Barth's doctrine leads inexorably to universalism.

66 CD II/2: 105.

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