

# The Letter and the Spirit of Barth's doctrine of election: a response to Michael O'Neil

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The story is indeed a little difficult to believe. Still you might try.

– E. Nesbit, *The Phoenix and The Carpet*

The question of whether or not Karl Barth's doctrine of election in *Church Dogmatics* II/2 yields a version of universalism is a much-debated issue in modern theology. Some theologians claim Barth's view does not require universalism; others declare that Barth's doctrine entails it. Elsewhere, I argued that the internal logic of Barth's doctrine of election leads inexorably to one of two possible outcomes: universalism or incoherence.<sup>1</sup> However, in a recent article in this journal, Michael O'Neil reiterates the alternative view, that Karl Barth's doctrine of election and atonement do not yield a version of universalism.<sup>2</sup> Through a careful reading of *Church Dogmatics* II/2 O'Neil's essay demonstrates that Barth's doctrine of election is more nuanced than it is often given credit for – by Barth's defenders as well as his detractors.<sup>3</sup> In particular, he shows that Barth's doctrine retains a place for the distinction between those who are 'in Christ', who have appropriated the benefits of their derivative election in Christ, and those who are not and have not. He argues that, on this basis, Barth's doctrine of election does not guarantee the eternal salvation of all humanity. So it is not universalistic. This is a helpful contribution to the literature on Barth's doctrine of election. Nevertheless, O'Neil has not shown that the internal logic of Barth's doctrine is both coherent and non-universalistic. My earlier essay on Barth did not include a discussion of the distinction within Barth's doctrine that O'Neil highlights. This essay is an attempt to remedy that omission. I shall argue that, rather than clearing Barth of the accusation that his doctrine entails universalism, O'Neil's reading of *CD* II/2 shows that, *if we take Barth at his word*, his

1 See O. Crisp, 'On Barth's Denial of Universalism', *Themelios* 29/1 (2003), 18–29.

2 M. O'Neil, 'Karl Barth's Doctrine of Election', *Evangelical Quarterly* 76 (2004), 311–326. At one point O'Neil comments, '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' (323).

3 All references to Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* are taken from the English translation (eds.) G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957–1969), cited as *CD*, followed by volume number in Roman numerals, forward slash, part-volume number in Arabic numerals, comma, and pagination, e.g. *CD* II/2, 100.

doctrine is either universalistic or deeply confused. My earlier account of Barth's doctrine was an attempt to do just this. And my view of the letter of Barth's doctrine has not changed in light of reading O'Neil's essay. However, I now see, through reading O'Neil, that there is another way of thinking about Barth's doctrine, that ignores the *letter* of what he says in *CD II/2* (which is so deeply problematic) and attempts instead to reconstruct a doctrine of election in the *spirit* of Barth's account. If we try to see what Barth might have been aiming at, ignoring the actual wording of his doctrine in *CD II/2* and thinking instead about the conceptual structure that lies behind it, we might be able to tell a consistent, and theologically interesting story about election. In the final section of this essay I set out one such retelling according to the spirit, rather than according to the letter, of Barth's account that does seem to be internally coherent and is not (necessarily) universalistic.

### Barth's doctrine of election outlined

To begin with, let us consider the contours of Barth's doctrine of election. For reasons of space, I shall restrict myself to a sketch of Barth's view on this matter.<sup>4</sup> Having said that, in order to show that the outline I give does indeed reflect the contours of Barth's position (and it is the shape of Barth's doctrine of election that is in question in O'Neil's essay) I shall cite Barth more frequently than one might normally expect in an essay of this sort.

Contrary to the received view of Reformed Orthodoxy God does not, according to Barth, decree to elect some of humanity and reject others. For Barth, there must be no decree lying behind a putative covenant of redemption, by which the Father ordains – by a sheer act of will – the election of some of humanity and reprobation of the remainder that is then brought into effect by the Son in his work of redemption. Barth is utterly opposed to this deliverance of the Reformed tradition, sometimes called the *decretum absolutum* (absolute decree), which he thinks is the underlying flaw in Calvin's doctrine of election:

How can we have assurance in respect of our own election except by the Word of God? And how can even the Word of God give us assurance on this point if this Word, if this Jesus Christ, is not really the electing God, not the election itself, not our election, but 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

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4 Barth's doctrine of election is widely known (even if, according to O'Neil, it is known in a somewhat corrupted form). Readers wishing to consult more detailed literature on Barth's doctrine of election might begin with Bruce McCormack's stimulating essay, '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, 1992).

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*. (CD II/2, 111)

He is also opposed to the consequence of this *decretum absolutum*, seen in the bifurcation of election in Reformed theology. God does not elect some number of human beings for salvation; he elects Christ. Or, as Barth has it, 'in its simplest and most comprehensive form the dogma of predestination consists, then, in the assertion that the divine predestination is the election of Jesus Christ.' (CD II/2, 103.) Christ is the Elect One. He is also the Reprobate One, the judge judged in our place, and the one who takes upon himself our sin – the sin of humanity *in toto* – and is reprobated for us.

In this one man Jesus, God puts at the head and in the place of all other men the One who has the same power as Himself.... The rejection which all men incurred, the wrath of God under which all men lie, the death which all men must die, God in His love for men transfers from all eternity to Him in whom He loves and elects them, and whom He elects at their head and in their place.... Indeed, the very obedience which was exacted of Him and attained by Him was His willingness to take upon Himself the divine rejection of all others and to suffer that which they ought to have suffered.... He, the Elect, is appointed to check and defeat Satan on behalf of all those that are elected "in Him," on behalf of the descendants and confederates of Adam now beloved of God. (CD II/2, 123)

Moreover,

That the elected man Jesus had to suffer and die means no more and no less than that in becoming man God makes himself responsible for man who became His enemy, and that He takes upon Himself all the consequences of man's action – his rejection and death. (CD II/2, 124)

This is underlined in Barth's discussion of supra- and infralapsarianism.<sup>5</sup> As is well known, Barth opts for a supralapsarian view of the divine decrees. But he resists the traditional assimilation of supralapsarianism to a *decretum absolutum*

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5 Supra- and infralapsarianism are the two major views in Protestant Orthodoxy, concerning the logical ordering of the divine decrees. According to Barth (CD II/2, 142) supralapsarianism has to do with God ordaining the salvation of some and damnation of others prior to (usually understood in the tradition to mean conceptually or logically prior to, not temporally prior to) his decision to create the world or redeem it – hence the '*supra*-' which refers to the fact that the *decretum absolutum* takes place 'prior to' or 'before' the decree to the fall. By contrast, infralapsarianism, according to Barth, begins with the decree to create and preserve humanity despite the fall. Only subsequent to this decree does God ordain the election of some and reprobation of others, hence '*infra lapsum* (after the fall) (CD II/2, 143f.). I have dealt with supra- and infralapsarianism in more detail as it occurs in the work of another great theologian in *Jonathan Edwards and the Metaphysics of Sin* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), ch. 1

coupled with a doctrine of double predestination. Instead, he weds his doctrine of Christ, the Elect and Reprobate One, to supralapsarianism. This results in God decreeing the salvation of humanity in and through Christ, the Elect human being:

This foreordination of elected man is God's eternal election of grace, the content of all the blessings which from all eternity and before the work of creation was ever begun God intended and determined in Himself for man, for humanity, for each individual, and for all creation.

So sure is Barth of this that he says a little later in the same passage

[i]t remains to the individual only to grasp the promise which is given in the one Elect, and to seek and find his salvation, not as a private end, but as a participation in the victory and blessedness of this other, the Elect of God. (*CD II/2*, 142)<sup>6</sup>

Thus, Barth ingeniously inverts the traditional Reformed doctrine of the double decree: God's double decree does not fork at the point of election, designating eternal life for some and eternal damnation for others. Rather, damnation and election are focused on the person of Christ alone. Human beings are, on Barth's way of thinking (although, not in Barth's language) only *derivatively* elect. We might say that human beings as a whole are elect because of Christ the Elect One, and no human being is Reprobate because Christ is the only Reprobate One. Or, perhaps better, Christ stands in our place as the Reprobate One so that we do not have to be reprobated. What needs to be emphasised here is that Barth states that *all humanity* is derivatively elect in Christ. No human being is outside the scope of this divine act:

This, then, is the message with which the elect community (as the circumference of the elect man, Jesus of Nazareth) has to approach every man – the promise, that he, too, is an elect man. It is fully aware of his perverted choice. It is fully aware of his godlessness.... It is fully aware, too, of the eternal condemnation of the man who is isolated over against God, which is unflinchingly exhibited by the godlessness of every such man.... It knows of the wrath and judgment and punishment of God in which the rejection of the man isolated over and against God takes its course.... It knows that God, by the decree He made in the beginning of all His works and ways, has taken upon Himself the rejection merited by the man isolated in relation

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6 Later in his discussion of the one Elect, Barth even goes as far as to say, '[t]he exchange which took place on Golgotha, when God chose as His throne the malefactor's cross, when the Son of God bore what the son of man ought to have borne, took place once and for all in fulfilment of God's eternal will, and it can never be reversed. There is no condemnation – literally none – for those that are in Christ Jesus' (*CD II/2*, 167). And of course, as Barth has already laboured to show us, this means there can be no condemnation for any human being because all human beings are somehow derivatively elect in Christ, the Elect One.

to Him; and on the basis of this decree of His the only truly rejected man is His own Son; that God's rejection has taken its course and been fulfilled and reached its goal, with all that that involves, against this One, so that it can no longer fall on other men or be their concern. The concern of other men is still the sin and guilt of their godlessness – and it is serious and severe enough. Their concern is still the suffering of the existence which they have prepared for themselves by their godlessness (in the shadow of that which the One has suffered for them) – and it is bitter enough to have to suffer this existence. Their concern is still to be aware of the threat of their rejection. But it cannot now be their concern to suffer the execution of this threat, to suffer the eternal damnation which their godlessness deserves. Their desire and their undertaking are pointless in so far as their only end can be to make them rejected. And this is the very goal which the godless cannot reach, because it has already been taken away by the eternally decreed offering of the Son of God to suffer in place of the godless, and cannot any longer be their goal. (CD II/2, 318f.)

Nor, as this passage shows, is it truly possible for a human being to be reprobate, since Christ has atoned for our sin by becoming the Reprobate One in our place. And this act of Christ is not merely a means by which God makes *possible* our inclusion in election. It is an act that ensures that the derivative election of all human beings via the work of the Elect One, Christ, has already been realised. All humanity is already elect in Christ, the Elect One. This election is not merely a potential election, but an actual one – that is, one God has already brought about on the basis of Barth's stated supralapsarianism.<sup>7</sup> God's *decretum absolutum* is not to elect some and reject others. It is to (derivatively) elect all humanity 'in' the one Elect, Christ. But the election of Christ is certain – God has decreed it from before the foundation of the world, on Barth's way of thinking. And all of humanity is derivatively elect in Christ, so no human being is non(derivatively)-elect.<sup>8</sup> This means that any attempt to live as if this election were not already achieved in and through the work of Christ is an 'impossible possibility'. It makes

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7 This is not to suggest that Barth's adherence to supralapsarianism *commits* him to his particular doctrine of election, or *vice versa*. My point is just that this is how things stand on Barth's account. Nor, I should add, am I implying that infralapsarianism would yield a merely 'potential' election. The question of the potentiality or actuality of election is distinct from the question of whether or not God ordains that his decrees are organised in a supra- or infralapsarian fashion.

8 This is conceded even by theologians who want to speak of some sort of 'space' in which, on Barth's reckoning, God allows his creatures freedom to respond to this election. So, for instance, Colin Gunton says, '[t]hat *God has destined all for reconciliation with himself* need not preclude the eschatological space – that is to say, the time and freedom – for the way in which this predestiny works itself out.' In 'Karl Barth's doctrine of election as part of his doctrine of God' reprinted as chapter 6 of *Theology Through The Theologians* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 101, emphasis added.

no sense. (In this regard, recall *CD II/2*, 318f., where Barth says, that damnation 'is the very goal which the godless cannot reach, because it has already been taken away by the eternally decreed offering of the Son of God to suffer in the place of the godless, and cannot any longer be their goal'.<sup>9</sup>) Moreover, and importantly for the matter in hand, for Barth, Christ's work is appropriated now not by repentance and salvation (the traditional Reformation model of conversion), but by an agent's coming to realise that he or she is already saved *now*, by the prior act of God in Christ *then*, at the cross. In this regard, Barth comments, '[t]his, then, is the message with which the elect community (as the circumference of the elect man, Jesus of Nazareth) has to approach every man – the promise, that he, too, is an elect man.' (*CD II/2*, 318) Note the unconditional nature of Barth's formula here. As George Hunsinger points out, 'in Barth's understanding, God has already freely included us [in salvation]'. Hence, 'it falls to us henceforth freely to receive our inclusion as the gift it is proclaimed to be.'<sup>10</sup>

But clearly this can only be the case if the agent concerned is in some sense *already* saved by the work of Christ. If I have a large debt with my tailor which, unbeknown to me, my friend paid off when he was measured for a new suit a year ago, I am free of debt from that moment onwards, whether I know I am free of it, or not. And when my friend tells me he has paid my debt I come to realise, so to speak, that I am debt-free now because of the prior action of my friend a year ago. But for the whole year between my friend paying the debt and my coming to know the debt was paid, I no longer had a debt with my tailor, even though I was unaware of that fact. It would make little sense to say I need only realise that I am now debt-free because of the prior beneficent act of my friend, if that act was only a matter of his offering to pay my debt if I were to *ask* him to do so. But it would make perfect sense to say this if he had in actual fact already paid my debt a year ago, *unbeknown* to me at that time. In a similar way, Barth's understanding of election must mean that Christ has paid my debt not just potentially – offering to free me from my debt if I am willing – but actually, or really: I am free of debt because of what Christ has already done on my behalf. For Barth, then, the election of Jesus Christ has this immediate effect: it means that when God creates human beings, they are already, as it were, objects of his divine grace because of his election of Christ, and derivative election of the whole of humanity 'in' Christ.<sup>11</sup> Given Barth's view, all that remains to be changed regarding my

9 Geoffrey Bromiley comments on this, 'The gospel declares that *the individual is already elected in Jesus Christ, who bore his merited rejection.*' *The Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1979), 95, emphasis added.

10 George Hunsinger, *How To Read Karl Barth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 130f.

11 This, I should say, is my extrapolation from what Barth says, not what Barth actually says, although I am not alone in making this point. (See, for instance, Colin Gunton, 'Karl Barth's doctrine of election as part of his doctrine of God' in *Theology through the Theologians*, 91-93 and 101.) Of course, this does raise an important question for the consistency of Barth's supralapsarianism. If logically prior to the creation Christ

relationship to God in the present is an *epistemic* matter (a matter of what I know and understand my relationship to God in Christ to be), not an *ontological* one (not a matter of whether I am amongst the (derivatively) elect or not, which has already been decided through the decision of Christ to become the Elect One).

In my earlier article I argued that this position leads to universalism (or, alternatively, incoherence) whether Barth thinks human beings have what we might call a 'strong' free will, that is, a libertarian free will, or a 'weak' free will, that is, a compatibilist free will. According to libertarianism, a person is said to be free with respect to a particular action if that person is able to refrain from choosing that course of action and his or her free act is not caused or otherwise necessitated by an antecedent act (either temporally or logically antecedent) either of the moral agent themselves, or of some outside cause or agency. And, to the extent that that person is free to do a particular action, he or she is morally responsible for the choice made. According to compatibilism, human beings are free with respect to a particular action to the extent that they are not hindered from choosing what they want to do, or prevented from choosing what they want to do. Such actions, unlike libertarian free acts, are caused either by prior choices of the moral agent (not necessarily temporally prior choices and perhaps including several different causal factors that give rise to the choice made), or the moral agent in concert with some other causal factor or agency, such as God.<sup>12</sup> And, to the extent that that person is free to do a particular action, he or she is morally responsible for the choice made. (Compatibilists also argue that a moral agent could be morally responsible for acts he or she commits even if they have no alternative option open to them. But we need not enter into this here, although it is an important difference from libertarian accounts of freedom.<sup>13</sup>) If human moral freedom consists in some version of compatibilism, then, applied to Barth's views, human beings are all elect in Christ, and will all be saved. Indeed, this is *inevitable*, given the prior free act of election in Christ, the Elect One. However, if human moral freedom reflects a version of libertarianism, then, applied to Barth's doctrine of election, human beings are all elect as a matter of fact, and it seems that human beings must be able to 'opt out' of their elec-

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is the Elect and Reprobate One, how can he be Elect or Reprobate without reference to some object of Election or Reprobation? For no object of election or reprobation can be in view at the 'moment' when God ordains Christ's election, according to the ordering of the decrees set forth in supralapsarianism, because the decree to create is conceptually 'after' or consequent to the decree to elect Christ. Sadly, the resolution of this problem will have to await another essay.

12 In fact, matters are much more complicated than this thumbnail sketch allows. But, for present purposes, these very rough and ready characterisations will suffice. For a good sample of the contemporary discussion, see Gary Watson (ed.), *Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

13 I am referring to Harry Frankfurt's famous Principle of Alternate Possibilities, which has been much discussed in recent analytic philosophy. See his essays in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

tion. Human beings cannot be said to 'opt in' to salvation through repentance and regeneration, as, say, classical Arminianism maintains, because, according to Barth, all humanity is already derivatively elect 'in' Christ. According to classical Arminianism, this can only obtain where election is conditional upon the human agent concerned choosing to be saved. In other words, it can obtain only where the election concerned is universal in *scope* but not *effectiveness*. So, according to this Arminian libertarian way of thinking about election, all human beings may be saved because Christ has made salvation available for them, via his atoning work. But it might be the case that some human beings ultimately reject this offer of salvation and turn away from Christ, bringing damnation upon themselves in the process. But this cannot be Barth's view because he includes all humanity in the election of Christ. Nevertheless, Barth's view does, at times, sound similar to the classical Arminian position with respect to the application, rather than the scope, of election, although for different reasons. For instance, Barth says,

[i]f he [the believer] believes in Him [Christ], he knows and grasps his own righteousness as one which is alien to him, as the righteousness of this other, who is justified man in his place, for him. He will miss his own righteousness, he will fall from it, if he thinks he can and should know and grasp and realise it in his own acts and achievements, or in his faith and the result of it. He will be jeopardising, indeed he will already have lost, the forgiveness of his sins, his life as a child of God, his hope of eternal life, if he ever thinks he can and should seek and find these things anywhere but at the place where as the act and work of God they are real as the forgiveness of his sins, as his divine sonship, as his hope, anywhere but in the one Jesus Christ. (*CD IV/1*, 631.)

But clearly, this has to be understood in the context of Barth's claim that derivative election is accomplished in Christ, the Elect One. So no one can *begin* their life outside the number of the derivatively elect, although some may 'opt out' of this group of humanity (into the number of the non-elect?) by rejecting the work of Christ. The problem is this does not seem to make sense when taken together with what he says about the impossibility of opting out of election elsewhere in the *Church Dogmatics*, because election has already been accomplished through the person and work of Christ. Recall, for example, the passage cited earlier:

it cannot now be their concern [viz. the concern of 'other men' as Barth puts it, presumably, those who do not profess Christian faith] to suffer the execution of this threat [of damnation], to suffer the eternal damnation which their godlessness deserves. Their desire and their undertaking are pointless in so far as their only end can be to make them rejected. And this is the goal that the godless cannot reach, because it has already been taken away by the eternally decreed offering of the Son of God to suffer in place of the godless, and cannot any longer be their goal. (*CD II/2*, 319.)

So, those wishing to defend Barth's claim that he is not a universalist must do



one of two things: either affirm that election in Christ is conditional in some way, contrary to what Barth says in a number of important passages in *CD II/2* where he deals with election, but in keeping with some things Barth says elsewhere in *CD II/2* and later in *CD IV*. Alternatively, they may affirm with Barth that election in Christ a completed matter, not a merely something which, it is hoped, may finally apply to all of humanity. But then some sense has to be made of Barth's assertion that he is not committed to universalism, without thereby falling into inconsistency. But defenders of Barth cannot affirm both these sorts of passages in his *CD* on pain of contradiction.<sup>14</sup>

Why, then, does O'Neil think that Barth's position on election avoids universalism and makes sense of the doctrine of election?

### O'Neil's thesis

Essentially, O'Neil's thesis is a fleshing out of the conditional reading of Barth's doctrine of election just mentioned. He makes much of passages in *CD II/2* where Barth does appear to equivocate on the matter of election, even claiming, contrary to what we have seen Barth say in other passages in *CD II/2*, that election is conditional upon the individual human being deciding to remain 'within' the number of those derivatively elect in Christ, rather than 'opting out' of this number, and effectively reprobating him or herself – the impossible possibility adverted to earlier. So, O'Neil says,

[b]ecause 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.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, O'Neil points to the overlapping circles of election that Barth makes use of particularly in § 34 of *CD II/2*, which has to do with the election of the community (Israel and the Church) as that body of people called to the particular task of witnessing to the Elect One, and thereby bringing those outside the community to a knowledge of Christ. It is at this point that O'Neil's reading of Barth depends upon a 'conditional' reading of Barth's doctrine of election. O'Neil maintains that Barth is distinguishing two (overlapping) circles of derivative election. There are those who are part of the community gathered around

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14 This is not to deny that someone could affirm a conditional or contingent universalism, whereby it is hoped that all will eventually be saved, although some might not finally be saved. My point is just that Barth cannot say both that election is a closed matter (all have been saved through the election and atonement of Christ and therefore all will inevitably be saved) and that election is still an open matter (some people may not be finally saved, for all we know, despite their being derivatively elect because of Christ). And yet this is just what Barth does say in different passages in *CD II/2*!

15 O'Neil, 'Karl Barth's Doctrine of Election', 316.

Christ (the Church; Israel), and there are those who are outside this community, some of whom belong to the Church/Israel, although they may not be aware of this. But there are those who are not part of this Church/Israel community, whose election is not secure and who may, finally, be lost. It is this group of individuals that Barth makes reference to when he speaks of the impossible possibility of finally rejecting Christ and 'opting out' of their potential election in Christ. So, O'Neil states,

[t]his inner circle [the Church/Israel] 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.... 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 [between the outer and inner circles of derivative election]. 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.<sup>16</sup>

It is certainly true that Barth makes this distinction between two overlapping circles of derivative election in *CD II/2*, and even that he speaks at times of a sort of conditionality about the election of those in the 'outer' circle:

The election of each individual involves, and his calling completes, an opening up and enlargement of the (in itself) closed circle of the election of Jesus Christ and His community in relation to the world.... The existence of each elect means a hidden but real crossing of frontiers, to the gain of the kingdom of God as the kingdom of grace. It is the concern of God that there should be these frontier-crossings. It is also His concern how and when they should take place. Again, it is His concern what should be the end of these frontier-crossings, which are many (in relation to the unworthiness of all men), or few (in relation to the great numbers of mankind). It is His concern what is to be the final extent of the circle. If we are to respect the freedom of divine grace, we cannot venture the statement that it must and will finally be coincident with the world of man as such (as in the doctrine of the so-called *apokatastasis*). Not such right or necessity can be legitimately deduced. Just as the gracious God does not need to elect or call any single man, so He does not need to elect or call all mankind. (*CD II/2*, 417)

But what are we to make of all this? O'Neil suggests that it shows Barth is not a universalist, for the following reasons. First, Barth explicitly rejects any claim to universalism. Second, Barth speaks in a number of places of the need to actualise and make concrete, one's election. Third, Barth speaks of eternal rejection as a real, not imaginary threat for some. Fourth, the context of Barth's universalistic statements is the witness of the believing community, which cannot

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16 O'Neil, 'Karl Barth's Doctrine of Election', 317f.

exclude anyone, and involves the proclamation of the Gospel to all of humanity indiscriminately.

Given what we have seen of Barth's views, it seems to me that O'Neil may well be right. Barth clearly did not think his own position was a species of universalism,<sup>17</sup> and he certainly speaks of the need to appropriate one's election (although quite what this means, given what he also says elsewhere about a supralapsarian derivative election of all humanity in the Elect One, Christ, which is apparently a completed event, is difficult to make sense of). It is also the case, as we have seen, that Barth speaks of the impossible possibility of rejecting one's own derivative election in Christ. And, finally, he does at times speak as though there are those outside the Church, who may remain outside the Church despite the proclamation of the Gospel to them.

However, what this means, if we are to take Barth *at his word*, is that his position is incoherent. Consider what we have seen of Barth's position thus far. In order to see things as clearly as possible, let us put the skeleton of Barth's position in numbered sentences:

- (1) God's election is supralapsarian, and is the election (and rejection) of one person: Christ. (Denial of the *decretum absolutum* of traditional Reformed theology.)
- (2) All human beings are derivatively elect in and through this one person, Christ, who is the Elect (and Reprobate) One. Somehow all humanity is derivatively included in the election of Christ by God before the creation of the world.
- (3) Even those outside the Church who attempt to live without God in denial of their elect status are unable to thwart the divine purposes and remain elect. None are rejected.<sup>18</sup>
- (4) The work of the 'elect community', that is, the Church, is to bring those in the outer circle of derivative election into a knowledge of the fact that they are *already* members of the inner circle of derivative election. That is, they are already (derivatively) elect, although they do not know this.

But at this point the confusion regarding human freedom arises, depending on whether Barth defends a libertarian (strong) view of creaturely freedom, or a compatibilist (weaker) view. What he says about supralapsarianism coupled with his view of Christ's election, and the scope of the incorporation of all humanity in this saving event, points in the direction of compatibilism: election is a matter that God has determined in and through the election of Christ. But then, passages that O'Neil focuses on, which sound much more conditional about the

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17 'Even though theological consistency might seem to lead our thoughts and utterances most clearly in this direction [the direction of universalism], we must not arrogate to ourselves that which can be given and received only as a free gift' (CD IV/3, 477).

18 Even O'Neil concurs with this last point: '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' (O'Neil, 'Karl Barth's Doctrine of Election', 325).

nature of human incorporation into the election of Christ, do not make much sense. Alternatively, Barth is a libertarian of sorts, and the conditional-sounding passages make much more sense, but at the expense of those places where he speaks in robust language about the fact that the election of humanity is not something even those who appear to reject this election can aim at, because the rejection of these human beings has already been dealt with by Christ. The third possibility, that Barth simply did not see the inconsistency of his own position, is, I take it, not a live option.<sup>19</sup> So the problem boils down to this: is Barth serious about his re-casting of the doctrine of election in terms of a supralapsarian decree to elect Christ and ensure the election all human beings through this event, or not? If he is, then he is a universalist, whether he wants to accept this, or not. The logic of his doctrine of election drives in this direction. And, to quote Schopenhauer's dictum, an argument is not like a cab. You cannot pay off an argument when you have gone as far as you want to. But, of course, Barth says things to the contrary, which O'Neil has picked up on (and he is not the first to do so). Such things seem to suggest Barth is not serious about his commitment to the apparent inexorableness of his doctrine of election – there must be some quarter granted to human freedom, even if this seems so bizarre that Barth speaks of it as an 'impossible possibility'.

So, if we take O'Neil's reading seriously, Barth's view does not appear to make complete sense. This is not a case of leaving some aspects of a doctrine shrouded in mystery that we cannot comprehend because God has not revealed it to us. Nor is it a matter of creaturely hubris trying to circumscribe divine freedom, despite what many defenders of Barth have said to the contrary. This is straightforwardly about the internal logic of a given doctrine. Either Barth's doctrine of election (taken on its own terms) is coherent, or it is not. What O'Neil shows, albeit inadvertently, is that on the issue of election Barth expresses himself at different times and different places in his dogmatics in ways that are contradictory. If we are to take Barth at his word (and why not?) his position is, it seems, only non-universalistic if it is incoherent.

### A Barthian story of election

Up to this point, we have simply rehearsed the two ways in which Barth's doctrine has traditionally been read. And, as I have just said, much depends on tak-

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<sup>19</sup> Actually, this is not the only other logically possible option, but I am discounting hard theological determinism (the idea that God determines all events coupled with the denial of creaturely freedom), and the sort of theological libertarianism that would make Barth a Pelagian (human beings are free in the strong sense, and have no original sin. They may freely choose Christ at any time and God does not determine who chooses Christ – the work of Christ is both sufficient for all humanity and potentially efficient, or effective for all, if all choose Christ.) The only other viable option, that Barth meant something that the letter of his account does not make entirely clear, we will return to presently.

ing Barth at his word. However, what if we were to 'see past' the contradictory language in which Barth expresses himself in *CD II/2*, to try to make some coherent sense of what he might be meaning. That is, could we tell a story which takes seriously much of Barth's account, ignoring the *letter* of some of what Barth says, but retaining the *spirit* of much of his stated doctrine? I think we can.<sup>20</sup>

First, let us return to Barth's supralapsarianism and his inversion of the double decree of traditional Calvinism. In the conceptual scheme of the divine decrees (according to Barth), the first divine fiat has to do with the Father electing the Son as the Elect One. As we have seen, all humanity is derivatively elect 'in' the Son. Second, in the course of setting forth his decrees, God ordains that human beings (or, at least, the human beings he will create) all have libertarian freedom. All of humanity is derivatively elect in Christ, so that all humans are born elect, but *remaining in this state is conditional upon each human not finally opting to reject Christ*. This condition – what we might call the default position for this spirit-not-letter version of Barth's doctrine – is deliberately framed in as broad a fashion as possible.<sup>21</sup> Plausibly, only those who at the Last Judgement continue to reject Christ will be cast off, and even then, this condition may be construed so as to allow for some sort of 'second-chance' doctrine post-mortem, in hell. (I say it might be construed this way, not that it has to be construed in this way, or even that Barth would construe it this way.) At the very least, the proviso concerning the finality of a person's rejection of Christ has to be taken seriously on this reckoning. If all human beings are elect, but may freely reject the derivatively elect status bestowed upon them, some may continue to reject Christ forever and be lost. But they may not. And, although there are ways of cashing this out in terms of a contingent universalism, where, it is hoped, all of humanity will eventually be saved (such that universalism is contingent upon the free choices of the individuals who are the objects of salvation), this need not be how this way of thinking about election is cashed out. But it is certainly an eschatologically optimistic vision of election, and fits with what Barth and his defenders have said about the hope, but not the certainty, that all of humanity will eventually be saved.

Thirdly, Barth speaks of Israel and the Church as the (derivatively) elect community, whose mission it is to proclaim the fact that all human beings are already elect 'in' Christ. This is more difficult to unpack. After all, does this just

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20 Of course, this is a hazardous task. The very way in which I have set this out in terms of the 'letter' and 'spirit' of Barth's doctrine will be objectionable to some. But I think that the account this section lays out may be what Barth was aiming at in *CD II/2* and makes sense of the criticisms raised by theologians like O'Neil. If it turns out that this story does not even represent the putative 'spirit' of Barth's account, it may still be a theologically interesting way of thinking about election inspired by Barth's thinking on this matter, that, unlike what Barth says in *CD II/2*, is internally coherent and non-universalistic.

21 It also sounds rather like one aspect of Karl Rahner's 'Anonymous Christianity' doctrine, as Prof. Tony Lane pointed out to me.

mean explaining to non-Christians that they are already elect and just need to see that this is the case? This seems to sit rather ill with the New Testament emphasis on the necessity of repentance and faith (e.g. Acts 2:38). But let us assume some sense can be made of this commensurate with Scripture. The (derivatively) elect community is the catalyst used by Providence for 'activating' or 'awakening' what we might call the 'sleepers' – those who are unaware of their derivatively elect status 'in' Christ. Those who do not hear the Gospel, like those who reject their election, have an uncertain status on this account, but it may be that they too are saved unless they actively reject God when they encounter him (however it is that they do encounter him), in this life, or, perhaps post-mortem (depending on what one makes of the finality of death in matters of salvation). So, on this view, the Church has a reason to carry out her great commission – the 'awakening' of theological 'sleepers' – and has reason to hope that all will finally be saved, although she cannot be certain that this will be the final outcome of salvation.

It must be said that this way of thinking about Barth's doctrine of election makes sense of much of what he says in various parts of *CD II/2*, and, I think importantly, takes Barth at his word with respect to both his denial of universalism and his eschatological optimism. Yet it is still the case that the actual account we have of Barth's doctrine of election in *CD II/2* presents this reading with a number of serious problems, which have to do with the ambiguity of Barth's language, and the fact that he does seem to say contradictory things about the nature and scope of election in different places in *CD II/2*. The most serious of these problems for this spirit-not-letter account of Barth's doctrine is that at times, Barth speaks in language that, taken at face value, means the derivative election of humanity is an event that is complete and that cannot be rescinded by any human action now – 'in' Christ all humanity is (derivatively) elect and Christ's death and resurrection ensure that all of humanity is saved. So this spirit-not-letter account of Barth's doctrine has to ignore those passages where Barth speaks unequivocally about the fact that all of humanity are elect and can do nothing to place themselves beyond that election 'in' Christ. Nevertheless, I suggest that theologians like O'Neil have something like the spirit-not-letter account of Barth's views in mind when they defend him, which is why O'Neil and others are so adamant that Barth's view is internally coherent and non-universalistic. However, those who have attended to what Barth *actually says* in *CD II/2* could be forgiven for not seeing this, when what Barth writes in that volume of his dogmatics is couched in language which is obscure and at times occludes, or even contradicts what he intends to convey (assuming this story, or something very like it, is what Barth intended to convey).

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been modest: to show that if one reads *CD II/2* with attention to what Barth actually says about election and tries to develop an argument from this, one will end up (*pace* O'Neil) with a doctrine that is incoherent

or universalistic. However, if (with O'Neil?) we look to the spirit of Barth's account – and put to one side the obvious inconsistencies in what he actually says – an account of election can be had which is both internally coherent and not necessarily universalistic. What I am suggesting is that Barth's way of doing theology (at least, in the case of his doctrine of election), is rather like a story told by a brilliant raconteur. It is full of big ideas and bold statements, which, if they are analysed carefully, do not always seem to fit together into one coherent whole. But if we sit back and try to grasp the larger picture the raconteur tells, ignoring the frustrations of the inconsistencies in his telling of it, we will grasp what he intends to convey – and will see that what he intends to communicate to us, unlike the way he expresses it, is perfectly intelligible.

None of this means that what Barth actually says about election is either coherent or non-universalistic. But it does mean that an argument that looks beyond the letter to the spirit of Barth's account, taking seriously the problems this involves, may be able to present a doctrine of election that is consistent, non-universalistic, and theologically interesting.<sup>22</sup> Of course, whether such a doctrine is true or not, is another matter entirely.<sup>23</sup>

### Abstract

This essay is a response to the article by Michael O'Neil, 'Karl Barth's Doctrine of Election', *Evangelical Quarterly* 76: 4 (October, 2004), 311-26. I show, contrary to O'Neil's essay, that Karl Barth's doctrine of election in *Church Dogmatics* II/2 is either incoherent or universalistic. However, if, an attempt is made to 'see past' the *letter* of what Barth says to the *spirit* of his account, a coherent and non-universalistic doctrine of election can be set forth. In the latter section of the essay just such an account is given.

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22 Those disappointed at the non-universalistic tone of this 'spirit-not-letter' Barthian account might consider a different way in which a Barth-inspired doctrine of election could go (along universalistic lines) in Oliver D. Crisp, 'Augustinian Universalism', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 53 (2003), 127-45.

23 Thanks are due to Prof. Paul Helm, Prof. Tony Lane and Rev. Prof. John Webster for reading through and commenting on an earlier draft of this essay.