

AN EVALUATION OF SOME ASPECTS OF KARL BARTH'S DOCTRINE OF ELECTION

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Introduction

WITHOUT A DOUBT, Karl Barth's doctrine of election represents a significant departure from that of Reformed confessional theology. His distinct vocabulary, typified by various *Christocentrism*s, makes his theological claims somewhat difficult to isolate and interpret. In particular, Barth's repeated references to Christ Jesus as both the Electing God, the Subject of election, and as the Object of election (the Elector and the Elected) have met with significant opposition, currently and in the past, from Reformed and non-Reformed theologians alike. Nonetheless, Barth's perspective on divine election deserves fair attention and careful interpretation. Not only is the matter of election substantially important, but Karl Barth himself, as a capable and prestigious scholar, warrants both great respect and a charitable analysis of his work. The fact that much of the Evangelical left has, in more recent times, become increasingly fascinated with Barth's theology also provides the impetus for understanding the man and his message, both on its own terms and in contrast to historic confessional orthodoxy.

Within the last century, a large number of scholars have sought to interpret Barth and offer critical responses to his work. Particular antagonism has surfaced in response to Barth's view on divine election. Notable theologians such as Cornelius Van Til and G. C. Berkouwer, in an attempt to synthesize and interpret Barth, have launched major projects in assessment of Barth. Van Til's books were almost exclusively negative in their valuation of Barth's work, while Berkouwer's work has been much more sober and measured in its criticisms. Our purpose is to determine whether these authors, among others, have fairly represented Barth on the doctrine of election in their respective works. Have they read him carefully, sifted through his heavily nuanced terminology sufficiently, and synthesized Barth's teachings in a way that properly characterizes and encapsulates his doctrine of divine election? Our purpose is to answer these important questions by allowing Barth to speak for himself (as much as is possible within the limits of this essay) in order that we may ascertain both where Barth transgresses the boundaries of orthodoxy and where he challenges orthodox Christians to think in a more orthodox manner.

Assessing Barth's Conception of God's Being

Bruce L. McCormack believes that Barth's teaching on election comprises a "corrective to classical teaching" as well as "the corrective to Calvin's teach-

ing.”¹ An important aspect of this “corrective” of the classic Augustinian, and later Calvinistic, doctrine of election is, in McCormack’s view, Barth’s sincere attempt to make Jesus Christ as the Incarnate Logos “the eternal, ontic ground of election.” As such, Christ is both the “object” and “the Subject” of election.² The nature of God’s dealings with the world is always and in every way Christological. Thus, God cannot conceive of the election of humans as something separate from the existence of the God-man, Jesus Christ.

According to McCormick, Barth always begins with the Incarnate Jesus Christ as the electing God and the elected human, and it is only from this starting point that one can advance to ascertain the eternal ontological state of the triune God. In a similar vein, Cornelius Van Til interprets Barth to mean, “We must not speak about God as he is in himself apart from and prior to Christ. Accordingly, we must not speak of a decree of such a God as the source of man’s election.”³ In Barth’s mind, Calvin’s doctrine of double predestination inserted an element of mystery into the doctrine of election, which only prompted undue and harmful speculation on the part of Christians. “If we establish our doctrine of election upon the counsel of God in himself prior to Christ, then we involve ourselves in meaningless mystery, since our very idea of God, as the triune God, must be stated in terms of the revelation that we have in Jesus Christ.”⁴ Van Til construes Barth’s words to say that we may only distinguish between God’s essence and works in order to say that his works are that of grace in Jesus Christ. Therefore, our affirmation of the doctrine of the Trinity is nothing more than confessing Christ as Lord, for he is above all else the electing God and the elect man from all eternity.

Orthodox theologians have long regarded Christ as “elect” of God. That is to say, Christ is from all eternity the begotten Son of God foreordained to be the Mediator between God and man and, according to God’s eternal decree, to accomplish redemption for the elect. However, Barth would regard such a construal of election to be a truncated Christology. The Calvinist view, from his perspective, seems to regard Christ only as Mediator, that is, only a manifestation of God’s love and gracious favor through whom redemption is accomplished and applied. Calvinists look beyond the incarnate Word to a more fundamental “other”—a deeper, hidden and mysterious Word of God (the eternal decree of reprobation and election). To conceive of a hidden and mysterious other word, existing above, beyond and behind the work of Jesus Christ, is unacceptable to Barth. It is to de-personalize and de-concretize the gospel, making it some abstract, disembodied, amorphous and apathetic doctrine. In fact, if McCormack understands Barth correctly, to speak of election in this way is completely to do away with the eternal nature of the Son. For, to say that “Jesus Christ” is the Subject of election is to say “that there is no *Logos asarkos* (Word without the flesh) in the absolute sense of a mode of existence in the Second Person of the Trinity which is independent of the determination for incarnation, no ‘eternal Son’ if this Son is seen in abstraction

1. Bruce L. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 183-184.

2. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, 184.

3. Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1962), 34.

4. Van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism*, 34.

from the gracious election in which God determined and determines never to be God apart from the human race."⁵

This raises further questions regarding the relationship between election and the Holy Trinity. George Hunsinger, in a fairly recent journal article entitled, "Election and the Trinity: Twenty Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth," offers several helpful points of critique pertaining to McCormack's, and consequently Van Til's, reading of Barth. Hunsinger admits that Barth's reflections on the topic of election and Trinity are as unique as they are complex. Barth scholars have debated the issue hotly, some contending that Karl Barth always believed that the tri-unity of the Godhead necessarily existed prior to the divine decree of election, while conversely, others assert that Barth's language betrays the idea that God's pre-temporal decision to elect actually brought about the Trinity.⁶ Hunsinger introduces his essay with several pertinent questions revealing the crucial importance of this issue for the whole of theology. "Can a God who needs the world in order to be God really be the Lord, at least as attested by Holy Scripture? Is the Trinity free to be the living God with or without the world?" This matter also raises Christological questions. "In what sense, if any, does the Incarnation presuppose the Son's eternal priority? Does the Son exist only 'for us,' or does he enjoy a more basic existence in the Trinity?"⁷

A brief examination of Hunsinger's more relevant theses will help us determine whether the above analyses of Barth's theology are accurate interpretations or unfair caricatures. First, we consider McCormack's reading of Barth's reference to Jesus Christ as the "Subject of election." He insists that Barth's language describing the relation between election and Jesus Christ's divine-human unity fails to account even for the distinction between the *Logos incarnandus* (the Logos "to be incarnate") and the *Logos incarnates* (the Logos "incarnate"). For Reformed theologians, this distinction "was one between the *Logos* as he appears in the eternal plan, or *consilium*, of God (predestination) and the *Logos* as he appears in the actual execution of this plan in time."⁸ Thus, they affirmed Christ's appearance in the eternal *consilium* of God only as the *object* of election. Barth's attempt to make Christ the *Subject* of election is unsustainable, according to McCormack, since he must

... deny to the *Logos* a mode or state of being above and prior to the eternal decision to be incarnate in time. He must, to employ the traditional terminology, say that there is no *Logos* in and for himself in distinction from God's act of turning towards the world and humanity in predestination; the *Logos* is *incarnandus* in and for himself, in eternity. For that move alone would make it clear that it is 'Jesus Christ' who is the Subject of election and not an indeterminate (or 'absolute') *Logos asarkos*.⁹

Hunsinger responds to McCormack's criticism on this point in a rather helpful manner. In several explanatory points he defends the import of Barth's terminology, much of which has been so widely misunderstood. He

5. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, 191.

6. Hunsinger, George. "Election and the Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth," in *Modern Theology* 24/2 (2008): 179-198. McCormack's reading of Barth also offers serious correctives to Van Til's analysis of Barth's theology. See his "Afterword: Reflections on Van Til's Critique of Barth," in *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism*, eds. Bruce L. McCormack and Clifford B. Anderson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 366-380.

7. Hunsinger, "Election and the Trinity," 179.

8. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, 185.

9. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, 186.

maintains, "When Barth states that Jesus Christ is 'the subject of election' he is not speaking without qualification (*simpliciter*) but only in a certain respect (*secundum quid*)." ¹⁰ By way of illustration, Hunsinger offers the familiar phrase, "The Queen was born in 1819." No one interprets this saying without a certain measure of qualification. The Queen, as such, was not born in 1819, but rather the infant Victoria who would eventually take the throne, was born that year. Victoria "became what she was ordained to be," such that we could say in retrospect, "The Queen was born in 1819." This helpful example corresponds in some way to Barth's view of the *incarnandus* position of the eternal Son. For Barth, while there is a numerical sameness between the eternal Son and the incarnate Son, there does remain a difference concerning their modes of existence. In the strictest sense, only the Son *incarnatus* (essentially in the flesh) is equal with Jesus Christ, the God-man. Consequently, "the eternal Son, by definition, is the second person of the Holy Trinity, generated eternally by the Father, and he would be such whether the world had been created or not. He is necessarily the eternal Son; he is only contingently *incarnandus*."¹¹ Barth essentially means to affirm that the second person of the Trinity is from all eternity *incarnandus*, but in virtue of God's free and eternal decree to make him so.

In addition, when Barth says that Jesus Christ "*elects*" to be "*incarnandus*," he does so only in that he is numerically equivalent to the eternal Son. To be sure, in the most immediate and proper sense, it is only the eternal Son who decides freely to become the *incarnandus* in obedience to the will of God. "Nevertheless, because the eternal Son is not only eternal but also *incarnandus*, and because the Son *incarnandus* is numerically identical with the Son *incarnatus*, it is not illegitimate to say that in a certain respect (*secundum quid*) it is the Son *incarnatus*, or Jesus Christ, who is the subject of this decision" (Hunsinger 183). To interpret what Barth means by calling Christ the *Subject* of election, without the necessary and intended qualifications (*simpliciter*), is to represent Barth in an unfair manner. McCormack and others who share his understanding of Barth tend to fall into this error.

We have already noted McCormack's assertion that, in order for Barth to say Jesus Christ is the *Subject* of election, he must conclude "that there is no *Logos asarkos* (Word without the flesh) in the absolute sense of a mode of existence in the Second Person of the Trinity..." (McCormack). But again, this assertion does not reflect as careful a reading of Barth as we would like. When Barth writes concerning the *Logos asarkos*, he again writes in a certain respect and with certain qualifications (*secundum quid*). He does not abandon the idea of the *Logos asarkos* in the absolute sense; rather he affirms its principle. Hunsinger is helpful here:

What [Barth] rejects is the idea that, as a matter of contingent fact, we might still have access to a *logos asarkos* above and beyond the *logos ensarkos*. Pre-temporal election, which strictly speaking begins with the *logos asarkos* and ends with the *logos ensarkos*, or more precisely, which presupposes the *logos asarkos* in union with Jesus as the subject and object of election, makes any human access to the *logos asarkos* of no practical or theoretical consequence.¹²

10. Hunsinger, "Election and the Trinity," 182.

11. Hunsinger, "Election and the Trinity," 183.

12. Hunsinger, "Election and the Trinity," 188.

What is clear, from reading Barth's own words, is that he certainly did affirm the *logos asarkos* (contra McCormack) in order to clarify that the essential triune relationship in the Godhead cannot be simply identified with God's relationship with and for the created world.¹³ Barth says, "The content of the doctrine of the Trinity ... is not that God in his relation to the human being is Creator, Mediator and Redeemer, but that God in himself is eternally God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit ... God himself cannot be dissolved into his work and activity [for us]."¹⁴

Van Til interprets Barth to say, "What [God] is in himself is not different from what he is in his works. In his works he is himself revealed for what he is."¹⁵ Since the beginning of all the ways and works of God is Christ, Van Til concludes that Barth sustains no real distinction between God and Jesus Christ. "For all practical purposes God is his revelation to man. This means that God is his revelation in Christ.... In this way God is identical with Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ is identical with God."¹⁶ Van Til goes even further with this line of interpretation. He believes Barth to be teaching, "God wants to be *nothing in himself* that he is not also in his relation to man in Christ. God's goodness to man [works] is the *only thing* that we can find in his eternal being. God's love toward man *constitutes his being* in time and in eternity. From eternity God exits not only within but also beyond himself."¹⁷ However, the following statements from Barth himself reveal that Van Til's interpretation is somewhat mistaken:

From all eternity God is within himself the living God. The fact that God is means that from all eternity God is active in his inner relationships as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that he wills himself and knows himself, that he loves, that he makes use of his sovereign freedom, and in doing so maintains and demonstrates himself.¹⁸

God neither becomes nor retains his person only in virtue of his relation to the world and his works, as Van Til interprets Barth to write. God is from all eternity the living triune God in himself, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Again Barth:

God does not, therefore, become the living God when he works or decides to work *ad extra*—in his being *ad extra* he is, of course, the living God in a different way....¹⁹

It is not because God decides to elect that the Holy Trinity comes into being. Rather, "In this pre-temporal act of self-determination God becomes what he is as the Trinity in a different way. The tri-personal God becomes also for us what he is already in himself."²⁰ Election, then, is for Barth ontologically subsequent to the existence of the Holy Trinity. The Trinity constitutes election, not vice versa. "It is eternally necessary (true by definition)

13. Hunsinger, "Election and the Trinity," 189.

14. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols., trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936-1969), I/2, 878-879.

15. Van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism*, 36.

16. Cornelius Van Til, *Barth's Christology* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1962), 11-12.

17. Van Til, *Barth's Christology*, 13 (emphasis mine).

18. Barth, *CD*, II/2, 175.

19. Barth, *CD*, II/2, 175.

20. Hunsinger, "Election and the Trinity," 188.

that God is the Holy Trinity, whereas the act of election is contingent (not necessary to the definition of God's being).²¹

This being the case, we also cannot accept Van Til's caricature of Barth's teaching on Christ as "Act." Van Til believes Barth to be teaching that "Christ's person is identical with his work as redeemer.... As we cannot speak of God in himself apart from Christ, so we cannot speak of the divine nature of Christ apart from the human nature of Christ.... To think truly, that is concretely, about Christ is to think of him as the Act, or work of saving man unto God."²² Again, Van Til insists on reading Barth *simpliciter*, failing to account for his intended qualifications. In doing so, Barth is characterized as teaching no distinction whatsoever between the person or essential nature of Christ and his work as redeemer—his "Act."

Barth clearly made the distinction between Christ's being and act, however. He never says that God's being is comprised by God's act. What he did wish to affirm was that God's being and actions (particularly in the act of election) are inseparable. Hunsinger reads Barth to be saying that "act and being for God are each ontologically basic. Act for Barth is no more prior to or constitutive of God's being than the reverse. Barth does not teach, and nowhere states, that act is a consequence of being (*operari sequitur esse*), or that being is a consequence of act (*esse sequitur operari*). They are equally and primordially basic."²³

Van Til also fails to account for Barth's terminological distinction between an act and a work. By "work," Barth refers to God's contingent relationship to the world. For example, the creation is a work of God in Barth's system. By the word "Act," however, Barth is speaking both of God's relation to the world as well as to God's being or essence in eternity—his aseity. "God's being is in act—God is the living God—as Father, Son and Holy Spirit to all eternity."²⁴ Barth:

The whole being and life of God is an activity, both in eternity and in worldly time, both in himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and in his relation to the human being and all creation.²⁵

Barth aspires to affirm the active aseity of God by referring to Christ as "Act." He alone is pure act! "...God as God is in himself the living God... His eternal being of and by himself has not to be understood as a being which is inactive because of its pure deity, but as a being which is supremely active in a positing of itself which is eternally new...."²⁶ Therefore, it is not Christ's "act" which determines his person or essential nature. Rather, "the triune life of God ... is the basis of his whole will and action also *ad extra*.... It is the basis of his *decretum opus ad extra* ... of the election of the human being to covenant with himself; of the determination of the Son to become human, and therefore to fulfill the covenant."²⁷

In summary, Barth affirms that God is necessarily triune, but only by way of contingency is he the God of election. He is "a se," existing in and for himself from all eternity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is not in virtue of

21. Hunsinger, "Election and the Trinity," 181.

22. Van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism*, 13-14.

23. Hunsinger, "Election and the Trinity," 180.

24. Hunsinger, "Election and the Trinity," 180.

25. Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 7.

26. Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 561.

27. Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 345.

God's pre-temporal act of election that he is the self-sufficient triune God. Election is not an act of "self-origination," as certain theologians interpret Barth to say. Rather, it is an act of "trinitarian self-determination." Hunsinger provides a helpful summary of Barth's perspective concerning the relation of election and the Holy Trinity:

The God who would be the Holy Trinity whether the world was created or not is the same God who determines his triune being before the world in his primordial decision of election. For Barth, the logical and ontological priority of the eternal Son in the act of election is presupposed, rather than contradicted, by his (contingent) unity with the man Jesus. But because of that unity, it can indeed be said (*secundum quid* not *simpliciter*) that Jesus Christ is himself the electing God.²⁸

Assessing Barth's Implicit Universalism

Another distinct, yet interrelated, charge is laid upon Barth's election paradigm by a host of confessional Reformed theologians. The charge is that of *universalism*. Barth frequently writes about the freedom and universality of grace stemming from Christ as the elect man. This language would seem to indicate that Christ, from all eternity, bore the wrath of God for all persons and secures redemption for all people once for all. Van Til is supremely committed to understanding Barth's election doctrine as universalistic in nature. He believes Barth taught "because Jesus Christ is wholly God and wholly man in *Geschichte*, God accomplishes the turning about of all men to himself. Jesus Christ is both the reconciling God and the reconciling man. As such he was born, died and rose again for all men. *In Christ all men are objectively justified, sanctified and called.*"²⁹

Here Van Til presents a quite limited or truncated summary treatment of Barth. Actually, Barth offers a far more detailed description of what he means by the objective justification, sanctification, and calling of mankind. Although Reformed theologians such as Van Til seem eager to label Barth a universalist, Barth himself flatly denies that his views are that of universalism proper. Instead, as we will presently discover, his concern is to avoid undue and harmful speculation concerning the free will of God in election. He prompts humility, neither attempting nor daring to affirm or deny absolutely the possible eschatological widening of the scope of divine grace to include the entire human race.

In his *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth explains what he means when he speaks of the whole event of atonement, justification, sanctification and calling as that which is completed in Jesus Christ for the conversion of the world. He says that when we speak of justification, sanctification, etc., we are already beginning to explain and interpret the objective relevance of Christ's act. Van Til interprets this as strict universalism. However, once again we see Barth writing *secundum quid*, rather than *simpliciter*. Barth takes care to distinguish between the objective relevance of Christ's redemptive activity and its subjective apprehension and acceptance in the world by the elect. Only in the believer, says Barth, does the appropriation of the grace of Jesus Christ occur. The elect believer alone has a subjective apprehension of what has been done concerning the world in the historic event of Christ's atonement.

28. Hunsinger, "Election and the Trinity," 191.

29. Van Til, *Barth's Christology*, 17 (emphasis mine).

Consequently, Barth affirms wholeheartedly that the power to accomplish salvation rests in Christ alone and by the work of the Holy Spirit, not of human beings.

Admittedly, Barth's language here is somewhat vague and misleading, but is Barth really teaching the actual, efficacious reconciliation of all persons everywhere, as Van Til and others contend? Clearly, Barth would deny such an idea. However, he does intend to attribute significant weight to biblical passages such as John 3:16 and Acts 16:31. Scripture says, "God so loved the world." For Barth, this love is Christ's supremely sufficient and utterly powerful redemptive act, and this act was performed with nothing less than his world in mind. The world is Christ's object of election. Hence, the call to "believe in the Lord Jesus Christ ... and you will be saved" goes out to the entire human creation. The gospel call is universal in nature and is designed so that all persons everywhere should hear, repent, believe and be saved. However, only the enlivening work of the Holy Spirit, to appropriate Christ's saving grace in the elect and cause them to recognize their reception of it, actually makes Jesus' saving work a subjective reality for the believer. Hence, Barth concludes this discussion in his *Church Dogmatics* saying, "The doctrine of justification, sanctification and calling must obviously be followed by a discussion of this particular form of grace [i.e. subjective, apprehended, and appropriated grace]."³⁰ It is difficult, in light of Barth's own words, to agree with Van Til's interpretation, which has Barth affirming unqualifiedly that "no one can finally deny his election in Jesus Christ."³¹

The thrust of Barth's argument concerns the possible openness of God's electing grace and a rejection of any dogmatic statements confirming the absolute elimination of any person from experiencing the redemptive benefits of Jesus Christ. Still, Barth maintains that there is a real transition point from wrath to grace in the lives of the elect. There are real "frontier-crossings," as he puts it, as a person moves from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of grace—the kingdom of God. So it is not Barth's project to deny that there can be any certainty regarding eternal matters or one's eternal destination. There is real transformation occurring in the lives of God's elect people, wrought by Jesus Christ. It is God's sincere desire that there should be these frontier-crossings.³²

However, it is Barth's project to keep in the eternal mind of God alone the how and when and for whom of such frontier-crossings. God decides when this takes place. In the final analysis, it is God's concern what the scope of the circle is. In other words, Barth contends that our affirmation of the freedom of God's divine will to elect anyone or no one at all keeps us from two polar extremes—universalism on the one hand and what he terms "historical metaphysics" on the other. In order to respect the freedom of divine grace, we can neither deduce that the entire world of man as such comprises the extent of God's saving election (*apokatastasis*—"universalism"), nor can we assert that we are capable of ascertaining the limited scope of God's electing lovingkindness based solely upon what we witness in concrete day-to-day life. Our gracious God is not obligated to elect or call any man, says Barth, so we certainly cannot borrow the universalist model and claim the complete

30. Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 147-148.

31. Van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism*, 28-29. For additional perspective on Barth's universalistic tendencies, see the essays by Bruce L. McCormack and Suzanne MacDonald in *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism*, 227-249; 250-268.

32. See Barth, *CD*, IV/3, 173-180.

election or calling of all mankind in the unqualified sense. Barth is equally passionate to say that God's election and calling do not generate any historical metaphysics, which would, in Barth's estimation, trigger improper attempts to speculate about the final outcome of the makeup and number of the elect based on human perception. Avoiding these two polar opposite views, Barth simply means to affirm that, "in grateful recognition of the grace of the divine freedom we cannot venture [the statement] that there cannot and will not be this final opening up and enlargement of the circle of election and calling."³³ To venture a conjecture regarding who will obtain the electing grace of God and experience the so-called triumph of grace is improper. One should avoid speaking of grace as some abstract concept apart from the historically personal subject/object, Jesus Christ, in whom God's lovingkindness is principally revealed. Barth:

Neither as the election of Jesus Christ, the election of His community, nor the election of the individual do we know the divine election of grace as anything other than a decision of His loving-kindness. We would be developing an opposing historical metaphysics if we were to try to attribute any limits—and therefore an end of these frontier-crossings—to the loving-kindness of God. We avoid both these statements, for they are both abstract and therefore cannot be any part of the message of Christ, but only formal conclusions without any actual substance.³⁴

Barth, in his *Church Dogmatics*, proceeds to describe more vividly the nature of these ongoing frontier-crossings which, while they are not always fully perceived, are nonetheless real and determinative. We should have genuine and significant hope, says Barth, that there exist in this world the concealed people of God, and such that the elect are greater than what was previously visible. This being the case, Christians ought to have the confidence to hope for further repetitions of these frontier crossings. This is motivation for gospel preaching and evangelism, seeing that the Christian's hope rests upon the eternal free will of God. Believers, then, are called (elect) of God so they might be those who extend that call to others in the world, thus recognizing the possible (and likely) opening up or widening of the circle of election by the power and grace of God alone (Barth is clearly not a Pelagian). "It belongs to God Himself to determine and to know what it means that God was reconciling the world unto Himself (2 Cor. 5). The concern of the elect is always the 'ministry of reconciliation,' and no other. This is the determination under which he has to live."³⁵

In summary, though unregenerate man lives in active rebellion against God, constantly attempting to turn God's truth into an "untruth," Barth wonders whether human falsehood can overpower God's truth in the end. This possible "total victory" of the Victor, Jesus Christ, should motivate us to pray for God to change all people's hearts, rather than make imprudent conjectures regarding the eternal destiny of certain men. Concerning such historical metaphysics, Barth believes there is no good reason why we should not be completely open to the idea that God will, in the final analysis, expand the circle of redemption to include the entire world.³⁶

33. Barth, *CD*, II/2, 417-419.

34. Barth, *CD*, II/2, 417-419.

35. Barth, *CD*, II/2, 417-419.

36. IV/3, 477-478.

We have observed that Barth's doctrine of election is frequently misunderstood due to his repeated words and phrases communicating that all mankind is elect and reprobate in Christ Jesus. His language seemingly renders all persons objectively saved, though some have yet to recognize their elect state. Such a construction of election appears to deny, or at least play down, the *historical transition from wrath to grace*. Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, expresses these sentiments:

[Barth] avoids all talk about those things that would provide for a real ongoing history between man and God in the sphere of the temporal and the relative. Thus we cannot help but feel that nothing really happens in his theology of history, because everything has already taken place in eternity.... [I]f it is true that in the eternity of Jesus Christ sin is already the past, how can sin and unbelief ever become the present in time? Are they not illusory phantasms without any reality at all? And if this be true, does not the cross of Christ (in which sin and sinner are rejected) become God's monologue with himself?³⁷

G. C. Berkouwer is particularly critical of Barth on this point. He takes Barth's language regarding "the impossibility" of sin and concludes, "If sin is ontologically impossible, a transition from wrath to grace in the historical sphere is no longer thinkable."³⁸ According to Berkouwer, Barth absolutely excludes such a transition, making the conception of wrath nothing more than a form of grace. God's gracious initiative, being both universal and eternal, "wholly absorbs the full historical significance of evil."³⁹

Is Berkouwer correct in his understanding of Barth's doctrine of election as simply a divine "yes" to all people, whether or not they repent and believe, presumably rendering God's divine wrath illusionary? Is Barth's doctrine simply a "triumph of grace," as Berkouwer puts it? Barth would respond to such questions with a resounding "nein!" (No)! He would completely reject the abstract idea of "grace" triumphing over unbelief. Barth writes only of the Living Person, Jesus Christ, who himself triumphs over sin and unbelief to rescue human beings from sin and wrath to save them. For Barth, sin can never be abstracted from its Christological sense, because sin is always performed in opposition to Christ Jesus, the righteous one. Jesus Christ, not "grace," must triumph over human unbelief. Therefore, one must believe upon the historical person of Jesus Christ and accept by faith the accomplishment of his historical sacrifice. Berkouwer criticizes Barth for speaking of sin as nothingness, an ontological impossibility, and as contradictory. However, Barth uses such terminology to underline the nonsensical or irrational nature of sin. It has no basis for its being. Sin is absurd in the truest sense of the word. It is the impossible possibility because, while it does exist, deeply rooted in the hearts of men, it can only be understood in light of Christ as Victor over it from the outset. Christ has rendered sin impossible, due to his accomplished sacrificial work. He has truly vanquished sin and death and hell. Hence, for Barth, sin has no rational basis for existence. It has been, in the ultimate sense, subject to nothingness.

37. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 276-277.

38. G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Harry R. Boer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 233.

39. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace*, 253.

As opposition to God, it is that which is simply opposed to His will, and from eternity, in time and to all eternity negated, rejected, condemned and excluded by this will [the self-disclosure of the living person of Jesus Christ—Jesus is Victor!]. Is this to deny its reality? No, for when we see it in this light, in its concrete opposition to the will of God active and revealed in Jesus Christ, and in the counter-opposition to which it is thus exposed, we acknowledge and recognize its reality. [But sin] will always be obscure, unfathomable and baffling that something which is merely opposed to the will of God can have reality.... Yet the nature of the reality of what God has simply denied is shown up in the light of the One who withstands it as Victor.⁴⁰

When Barth uses the term “nothingness” to refer to evil, he does so in a very specific and technical way. He is not, contrary to Berkouwer, suggesting that evil is nothing, that it does not even exist or have concrete reality. Barth speaks elsewhere of sin in a very concrete manner, referring to sin itself as “the preoccupation, the orientation, the determination of man as he has left his place as a creature and broken his covenant with God.” Sin is corruption, which separates man from God, and it is something which bears for the one committing it real consequences that detach him from his covenant Lord.⁴¹ What Barth means is that sin “exists only in the negativity proper to it in its relationship to God and decisively in God’s relationship of repudiation to it. It does not exist as God does, nor as His creatures.... [I]t has no basis for its being ... no right to its existence.”⁴²

Barth’s view does not attempt to compromise or destroy the historical nature of God’s encounter with evil. For Barth, “to say ‘Jesus’ is necessarily to say ‘history,’ His history, the history in which He is what He is and does what He does. In His history we know God, and we also know evil and their relationship the one to the other—but only from this source and in this way.”⁴³ Barth regards Christ’s passion (as recorded in the Gospel accounts) to be a historical time/space event, inseparably linked to a specific man, Jesus Christ, as a unique incident “for which there is no precedent and which cannot be repeated.”⁴⁴ Christ’s sacrifice instigates cosmic reconciliation and is a turning point in human history:

[The Gospels] speak of it as an act of God which is coincident with the free action and suffering of a man, but in such a way that this human action and suffering has to be represented and understood as the action and, therefore, the passion of God Himself, which in its historical singularity not only has a general significance for the men of all times and places, but by which their situation has objectively been decisively changed whether they are aware of it or not....

Barth affirms that Christ’s sacrifice initiated reconciliation of cosmic proportions. Some have yet to know God’s electing grace in their own lives, but it was effected at its moment of historical singularity nonetheless.

It is, of course, necessarily the case that the knowledge of it as the act of God and the knowledge of the change in the world situation brought about by it

40. Barth, *CD*, IV/3, 177.

41. Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 247.

42. Barth, *CD*, IV/3, 178.

43. Barth, *CD*, IV/3, 179.

44. Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 245.

can come about individually only in the decision of faith, in which this act becomes to the individual a word, the word of God accepted in obedience, in which the passion of Jesus Christ is attested as having happened for him, and therefore in very truth for the world.⁴⁵

Barth distinguishes between the cosmic effects of Christ's reconciliatory work in history and the application of God's special electing grace in the hearts of those who believe, i.e., those who are given the gift of faith.

Summary of Conclusions

In summary, despite the mischaracterizations of theologians like Van Til, Berkouwer, and McCormack, Karl Barth explicitly affirms real historical transitions from wrath to grace. He refers to such transitions, at least at certain points in his *Church Dogmatics*, as "frontier-crossings." Furthermore, Barth affirms a genuine hell and real divine wrath against sin, and Jesus Christ suffered said wrath. What Barth does wish to avoid is viewing election, and those who are included in receiving God's electing grace, apart from or beyond the principal human being, Jesus Christ, who is both the Elect and the Reprobate. If we consider God's act of election in any way apart from Jesus Christ and his definitive historical act of redemption, then we fall into the destructive practice of presuming who are elect, and subsequently, also deciding who are not elect and who are, as such, unworthy of the gospel. If we adopt such a view, election becomes a matter of pride and self-aggrandizement rather than a doctrine promoting gratitude, service and sincere evangelistic efforts.

To be sure, Barth's teaching on the doctrine of divine election departs from Reformed orthodoxy in several ways. Referring to Christ as the elect man (the statement itself) is not a distinct teaching *per se*. Reformed theologians have long spoken of Christ as the one appointed to procure eternal life for God's elect people through the sacrifice of his body. From the creation of the world he was appointed to be slain for those whose names are written in the book of life (Rev. 13.8). However, Barth's modified supralapsarianism, as a way to account for all persons being in some way elect in Christ, does not justly account for the teaching of Scripture (Eph. 1:4). People are elected *in Christ*, for they are first viewed (in the logical progression of decrees, humanly speaking) as sinners, as those lapsed and in need of grace—in need of Christ's atoning work. Contra Barth, for us to speak of God's decree is not to exclude or look to a word behind or beyond Christ. Christ is the Word. He is the elector, such that the eternal decree of election is in no way divorced from the person and work of Christ. Neither is the glorification of God's free grace truncated in the orthodox viewpoint.

Clearly, Barth is not a universalist proper. But his theology does not bear the marks of consistency. Many places in the *Church Dogmatics* speak of Christ's saving work along the lines of universalism. Meanwhile, Scripture allows us to say more about the final outcome of the human race than Barth seems willing to admit. Texts like Matthew 25:41-46, John 3:36; 10:15 and Revelation 20:14-15 testify to the fact that God limits the scope of the elect circle willingly, revealing that only some are considered his "sheep." Many, as these passages reveal, will perish in the lake of fire because of their unbelief.

45. Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 245.

While we may agree with Barth that God can certainly open up the scope of election to an extent that surpasses our imaginations, we have no Scriptural reason to speculate that there could be a final opening of election to the entirety of humanity. We believe God's in-scripturated revelation of himself and of his eternal will, which testify to the fact that eternal damnation is a real and everlasting reality for those who do not trust Christ alone for salvation. Hence, Scripture repeatedly contrasts the salvation of believers with the ongoing suffering of God's wrath, apart from Christ.

The Reformed have always recognized that God has the power to save all people. But God's Word gives us no reason to conclude that God, though sufficiently powerful, wills to save all persons. However, we can appreciate Barth's challenge to the church, urging Christians to abstain from thinking that they can, with absolute certainty, determine who is and who is not elect of God. His warning to keep from judging who is and who is not worthy of the gospel is quite pertinent, for believers do wrongly fall into this kind of thinking and acting. We ought to share Barth's commitment to praying for the salvation of all persons, with the hope and confidence that our evangelistic efforts are not in vain inasmuch as God alone determines and effects the salvation of the elect according to his eternally good decree.