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On Barth's Denial of Universalism

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It is notorious among theologians that Karl Barth defends doctrines of election and atonement that *appear* to lead to universalism, but that Barth steadfastly maintained did not lead to universalism. As Jüngel records it, Barth emphatically claimed, 'I do not teach it (universalism), but I also do not teach it'.[1] There have been many who are willing to defend Barth in this matter. For instance, John Colwell claims that:

> [I]f some of Barth's critics refuse to take this divine freedom seriously with respect (especially) to Barth's doctrine of election and consequently suspect him of implicit universalism then that is their problem rather than his and probably says more about them than it says about him.[2]

Similar views can be found among other barthians both present and past. Thus, for example, Joseph Bettis says that 'for Barth, one can reject both Arminianism and double predestination without having to accept universalism'.[3]

There , however, have also been those voices raised in opposition to this view. For instance, Hans Urs von Balthasar says:

> It is clear from Barth's presentation of the doctrine of election that universal salvation is not only possible but inevitable. The only definitive reality is grace, and any condemnatory judgement has to be merely provisional.[4]

1 Eberhard Jüngel, *Karl Barth, A Theological Legacy*, (trans.) Garrett E. Paul (Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1986), 44–45. Compare also *Church Dogmatics* IV/III, 477–78.

2 John Colwell, 'The Contemporaneity of the Divine Decision: Reflections on Barth's Denial of Universalism' in Nigel Cameron (ed.) *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992), 160.

3 Joseph D. Bettis, 'Is Karl Barth a Universalist?', in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 20 (1967): 423. Compare George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 132.

4 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, (trans.) John Drury (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 163.

Similarly, G.C. Berkouwer observes that:

> In original universalism, the issue is a universal offer because Christ died for all, and election remains in the background for the moment. But with Barth, Christ's death touches precisely upon the election of all, which election has become manifest in Christ's death. The universality of the message is no longer at odds with the fact of election, for it is based on the universality of election.[5]

Even Geoffrey Bromiley, one of the translators of Barth's *Church Dogmatics* into English, and a theologian sympathetic to Barth's account of election, nevertheless closes his own overview of Barth's doctrine of election with these words: 'The ambivalence at this decisive point – will all be saved or not, and if not, why not? – by no means outweighs the solid merits of Barth's presentation.'[6]

So what is the logic of Barth's position? Does his view yield a version of universalism or not? In this essay, I will attempt to show that Barth's doctrines of election and atonement do indeed yield a version of universalism, despite the protestations of both Barth and his defenders to the contrary.

Barth's doctrine of atonement and election

The argument depends upon a number of theological terms pertaining to universalism which it might be helpful to explain at the outset. First, I take it that the term 'universalism' refers to a family of similar views which share in common the notion that all humanity will be saved by God. None will be finally damned to hell. In the current literature these different versions of universalism have been categorised into two groups: necessary and contingent universalism. Necessary universalism is the view that it is not just true, but *necessarily* true that all humanity will end up in heaven. By contrast contingent universalism states that, although a human being *could* be consigned to hell, as a matter of contingent fact no-one *will* end up there.[7]

Second, I will use the terms 'elect' and 'reprobate' to refer to two groups of humanity. The former term denotes that group which God decrees to save; the latter, that group which God decrees to damn.

With these clarifications in mind, let us turn to Barth himself. I take it that Barth's denial of universalism depends upon his doctrines of election and atonement in particular. In the argument that follows, I will show that Barth's denial of universalism is either disingenuous (he was a universalist), or just plain muddled (his position is not coherent). There is a third option: that Barth did not see the logical implications of his position. However, this seems unlikely, so I will ignore it. Either result means Barth's

5 G.C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, (trans.) Hugo Bekker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 229.
6 Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 97.
7 See Jonathan Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 74, for these distinctions.

> Himself when He elected fellowship with man, then we can answer only that He elected our rejection. He made it his own. He bore and suffered it with all its most bitter consequences.[9]

We can express his argument for the atonement of Christ in the following way:

1. Given A1 and A2, Christ's death atones for the sin of all human agents.

By this Barth seems to mean that:

2. Christ's death is sufficient and efficient for all human agents.

That is, Christ's death is not simply *potentially* universal in scope (it could save all humanity); it is *actually* universal in scope (all humanity are saved by it). It might be argued that Barth's position is merely that the atonement is universal in scope, not effectiveness. However, that Barth's position does involve a universally efficient atonement can be seen from passages such as the following:

> There is no-one who does not participate in Him [Christ] in His turning to God. There is no-one who is not ... engaged in this turning. There is no-one who is not raised and exalted with Him to true humanity. 'Jesus Christ lives, and I with Him.'[10]

We shall return to this issue at a later point. For the present, let us assume that Barth does endorse something like 2 above. From here we move to:

3. This work is completed at the cross.
4. This work is appropriated not via the traditional Reformation formula: 'If you repent and believe, you will be saved; if you do not repent and believe, you will not be saved', but by agents coming to realise that, 'this is what God in Jesus Christ has done for your sake. Therefore repent and believe.'[11]

This raises a question. It is this: if the atonement is universally effective, according to Barth, then how does this tie into his doctrine of election? To answer this, let us lay out

9 *CD* II/2, 164.
10 *CD* II/2, 271.
11 See *CD* II/2, 317 ff. The two citations are from George Hunsinger's *How To Read Karl Barth*, 130, my emphases. Hunsinger points out the unconditional nature of the Barthian formula, observing, 'since, in Barth's understanding, God has already freely included us [in salvation], it falls to us henceforth freely to receive our inclusion as the gift it is proclaimed to be'. Ibid., 130–31.

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6. Christ is the Reprobate One. (That is, the set of the reprobate comprises one member, Christ.)

In this way, Barth's doctrine fuses the so-called 'double decree' of Calvinism in the person of Christ, who is both the Elect and Reprobate One. But the way in which this is applied to the set of human agents is asymmetrical.

7. All human agents are elect only in the derivative sense of having a saving relation to the set of the elect and its single member, Christ.

And:

8. The sin of all human agents is atoned for by Christ, the Reprobate One, who is the only member of the set of the reprobate.

Rather than 8, it might be tempting to construe Barth as saying something more like:

8*. All human agents are reprobate only in the derivative sense of having a relation to the set of the reprobate and its single member, Christ.

But this would entail:

9. All human agents are simultaneously members of the sets 'elect-in-Christ' and 'reprobate-in-Christ'.

This *which* is incoherent, for then, all humanity would be derivatively elect and reprobate simultaneously, and, presumably, co-terminously. This would, of course, be absurd. (Compare the idea that someone could simultaneously be both an associate member and non-associate member of a country club.) I suggest that Barth must mean 8 rather than 8*, in order for his argument to make sense. Let us proceed on this assumption. Then, given 8, we have:

9*. All human agents are members of the set 'elect-in-Christ'.

On this understanding of Barth's doctrine of election, the relation between election and reprobation is asymmetrical. Christ takes on the sin of all humanity, becoming the Reprobate One, whose death atones for that sin, and Christ is also the Elect One whose death brings about the (derivative) election of all humanity.

The problem with this is that it seems to entail some form of universalism. But a universalism of what kind? This depends on Barth's understanding of, among other things, free will. And it is not entirely clear whether Barth wishes to endorse a

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This seems the most straightforward way to understand the compatibility of 1–4 and 5–8 and 9*. Barth claims, however that, his views are not universalistic. Instead, he seems to believe something like the following conjunction:

10*. All human agents are elect in Christ, the Elect One, by virtue of his universally efficient atonement and:
11. A human agent may reject Christ, and may, ultimately, not be saved.

This seems fallacious. For, given 1–4 and 5–8 and 9*:

12. If a human agent is a member of the set 'elect-in-Christ', then a human agent will inevitably be numbered among those who are saved.

This, once again, yields a version of universalism. Perhaps another way of looking at Barth might not yield the same problems. Let us try a different tack. Barth has already allowed that:

i Christ's atonement is universal in scope and efficacy (from 1–4).
ii Christ is the Elect One and therefore the sole member of the set 'elect', in whom all human agents are elected (from 5–8 and 9*).
iii Christ is the Elect One whose atonement for the sin of human agents is universal in scope and efficacy, and all human agents are members of the set 'elect-in-Christ'.

The problem is that this appears to mean that all the members of the set 'elect-in-Christ' will be saved, since it is not possible that the Elect One's atonement will not be effective for all members of the set 'elect-in-Christ'.

But why is this so? Because, as previously noted, Christ's death is not merely *potentially* effective, according to Barth (as it is for, say, traditional Arminians). It is *actually* effective for all human agents. This understanding of Barth is reflected in the fact that he labours the point that (according to 4), the appropriation by a human agent of the benefits of Christ's death now is a matter of coming to realise that one is already saved, and in the light of that knowledge, turning from sin to salvation. (Recall also, Barth's claim that the attempt to reject God is pointless, since, '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 the place of the godless, and cannot any longer be their goal.'[15])

Therefore, on Barth's model, Christ's atonement is both universal in scope and efficacy, and potentially and actually universally effective. But if Christ's atonement is like

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> 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.[16]

Passages such as this appear to mean that Christ's death applies unconditionally to every human being, such that all human beings are justified (as per 4). Points 10** and 4 together mean that the atonement is still applied to a particular human agent on the condition that it has not been consciously refrained from by that particular human agent.

This, however, will not work as a solution to the universalism dilemma Barth faces, for two reasons. First, it is not clear what this view means. Barth does not mean simply that the atonement is universal in scope (potentially all human agents could be saved), but not necessarily in its effect (actually, not all human agents are saved, because they have libertarian freedom and some choose not be saved). This looks like a traditional Arminian view of the atonement. Instead, he means something more like: the atonement applies unconditionally to all humanity, such that all humanity is justified before God, but, given 4, the atonement is only applied on the condition that it has not been consciously refrained from, or opted out of, by a human agent. The problem here is that this is not a solution to the universalism dilemma that is any more coherent than the alternatives already outlined. For, if this is Barth's position, then a person can be both derivatively elect in Christ, such that their sins are atoned for by Christ, whose death has already justified them before God (as per 4), and, at the same time, be able to opt out of this justification and election in Christ, which appears, *prima facie*, to be contradictory. For how can a person be both justified and (derivatively) elect, and yet be able to reject that status?

There are two strengths to Barth's position here. He could mean, (a) a person might be justified and derivatively elect at one moment, and reject that status the next. Or he could mean, (b) a person can be in a state where they are both justified and rejected simultaneously. But how could a person be both justified and rejected at one and the same time? This seems to be confused, if not incoherent. To illustrate: it would be a strange state of affairs indeed if a subject was ennobled by their king, and given a place of prominence at court, and *at the same time* turned out of the court, and banished from the realm. But this is what (b) amounts to.

Nor does (a) fare any better. The problem with (a) is that it makes for a strange doctrine of election if one can opt out of election, and the status it confers on an individual, at any moment. What is more, this does not seem compatible with Barth's position laid out in 5–8 and 9*.

Secondly, this does not seem to be in agreement with what Barth says elsewhere, about the pointlessness of persisting in rebelling against God, when one's election is

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But what Barth is claiming at this juncture in his argument is something like:

iv Because God is free, the eschatological destiny of all humanity is uncertain.

The problem is that iv simply does not appear to be consistent with i–iii. In fact, it seems to contradict i–iii. One cannot consistently hold both that all humanity have been (derivatively) elected, so that all their sin has been efficaciously atoned for by Christ, *and* that the soteriological status of all humanity is uncertain, any more than one can hold both that all the Conservative candidates fielded have been elected to Parliament, so that they may all return to their offices in the Palace of Westminster, *and* that the future candidacy of all Conservative parliamentary candidates fielded is uncertain. Either their future candidacy is uncertain, or it is not. If they have been returned to Parliament, then their future candidacy simply cannot be uncertain.[20] Similarly, either the question of whether all humanity are (derivatively) elect and efficaciously atoned for by Christ is uncertain, or it is not. If all humanity have been (derivatively) elected and efficaciously atoned for by Christ (as per i–iii), then their soteriological status simply cannot be uncertain (as per iv). This seems fatal to the consistency of Barth's position.[21]

[20] Of course, a parliamentary candidate who has been returned to parliament might withdraw from their position, or may withdraw at some later date. But that is beside the point. My claim here is about the consistency of saying the future candidacy of a particular Conservative MP is *at one and the same time* a settled question (they have been returned to Parliament), and an open question (it is not clear whether this MP has retained their seat or not). Whether that MP, having been re-elected, then withdraws or not, is a separate issue.

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