

On patience: thinking with and beyond Karl Barth

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In memoriam, Ronald F. Thiemann (1946–2012). Requiescat in pace.

Abstract

This article has three goals: (1) to provide a careful analysis of Barth's treatment of divine patience in *Church Dogmatics* II/1; (2) to show how Barth's thinking about divine patience helps to illumine his account of human being and human activity in later portions of the *Church Dogmatics*; and (3) to offer a series of constructive suggestions which connect Barth's theology with liberationist visions of human existence.

With respect to *Church Dogmatics* II/1, I argue that Barth breaks with a number of earlier thinkers and focuses attention on God's exercise of patience, treating it as a key dimension of God's creative and providential work. This exercise of patience means, specifically, that God accords creatures their own integrity and a capacity for free action, tempers God's punishment of sin and, in Christ, fulfils but does not temporally close the covenant. My analysis of divine patience in II/1 then serves as an interpretative key for reading later volumes of the *Dogmatics*. It sets in vivid relief Barth's belief that Christ's fulfilment of the covenant, achieved through Christ's life, suffering, death and resurrection, is the condition of possibility for humans being able to act with genuine integrity and consequence in the created realm. I propose, too, that Barth develops his thinking about patience by emphasising the 'pressure' of the patient God's empowering command – a command which is a constant summons, directed towards each and every human being, to live freely into God's future through acts of gratitude, obedience and responsibility, and to play some part in bringing creation to its glorious end. Finally, I explore the convergence between certain aspects of the *Church Dogmatics* and anti-essentialist construals of the self in contemporary theology. I aim to identify points of connection between Barth and thinkers like Marcella Althaus-Reid, and I voice support for a style of scholarship which elides the distinction between 'systematic' and 'liberationist' modes of inquiry.

Keywords: Barth, ethics, liberation, patience, providence, theological anthropology.

This article engages a relatively understudied part of Barth's dogmatic lexicon: the word 'patience'.¹ My initial focus is a section of *Church Dogmatics* II/1,

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, 31 vols (London: T&T Clark, 2009). Subsequent citations are set in the body of my text; page numbers

§30, which identifies patience as a divine perfection which is particularly illustrative of God's love. The interpretation I offer admits of easy summary. Barth's relatively brief treatment of patience must not be viewed casually – say, as one more dialectical flourish, or a charmingly scholastic elaboration of a description of God as the 'one who loves in freedom'. On the contrary: patience is a term which connects, in striking fashion, Barth's exposition of God's being with an account of the human action that God awaits. It is an occasion for Barth to advance a christologically ordered account of providence, embedded within which is the idea that God 'opens' history in ways which grant us the time and space needed to live into, and purposefully to inhabit, the covenant of grace.

With this analysis in hand, I then suggest that Barth's treatment of patience sheds intriguing light on later portions of the *Dogmatics*. My principal claim is that the remarks of §30 can function as an interpretative key which helps readers to access subtle aspects of Barth's 'moral ontology'.² Barth's treatment of patience underscores, particularly, how human correspondence (*Entsprechung*) to God's gracious advance happens in the context of a covenant objectively fulfilled but not temporally finished. While God waits for us, God's patience is exercised in such ways that human life is suffused with a provocative demand. Each of us is pressed to meet the coming Christ, to orient and order the 'now' of our lives to his in-breaking futurity. By heeding this demand, we make good on God's patience; by ignoring it, we exhibit an ingratitude and disobedience which redounds to eternity and impedes the coming of the Kingdom. The concept of patience, in short, helps to highlight a dimension of Barth's thought which has suffered neglect: the fact that there really is 'work' left for us to do, the objective fact of reconciliation notwithstanding.

In conclusion, I experiment with the idea that patience might play a valuable role in constructive theological reflection. My argument, which stretches beyond anything Barth envisaged, is that this reading of patience dovetails with the suggestion that human beings live as 'beings in becoming', resistant to perniciously restrictive construals of identity and welcoming of various kinds of individual and communal transformation. The goal here, to some extent, is to offer an account of the *imago dei* in terms analogous to

refer to the standard English translation and the German original. The notation 'rev.' indicates a revised translation, for which I am responsible. For the German, I use 'The Digital Karl Barth Library', published by Alexander Street Press, available at <https://solomon.dkbl.alexanderstreet.com>.

² John Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), p. 1 and *passim*.

Eberhard Jüngel's famous claim that, for Barth, 'God's being is in becoming'.³ But, I want also to commend a conversation between Barth and liberationist thinkers – especially those who dwell on, and often celebrate, the open-ended possibilities of human life.

Patience in *Church Dogmatics* II/1

It is useful to begin by recalling some influential patristic treatises, written by a trio of North African authors – Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine – that Barth consulted when crafting his own remarks.⁴ Creatively combining biblical cues and Stoic ruminations, these treatises articulated meanings of patience manifested in much contemporary discourse: patience as the capacity to respond to adversity with equanimity and integrity; patience as a determination to continue doing what's needful in difficult circumstances; patience as a disposition which helps one to wait, and perhaps suffer, in purposeful and sometimes transformative ways.⁵ Patience, in other words, understood as a human quality, exhibited by those who persevere amidst difficult circumstances. However, these patristic expositions must not be read simply as instances of ethical or pastoral counsel. A profound theological point is always presupposed: human exercises of patience and, a fortiori, human activity as such, have as their condition of possibility God's exercise of patience. That is to say, God's equanimity, steadfastness and perseverance, articulated decisively in the person of Jesus Christ, despite the ongoing fact of sin, establishes the basis upon which human patience is imaginable and sets the standard against which a diverse array of human practices must be

³ Eberhard Jüngel, *God's Being is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. John Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001).

⁴ See here Tertullian, *Of Patience* (202 CE), trans. S. Thelwall, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3: *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, pp. 707–17; Cyprian, *Treatise IX. On the Advantage of Patience* (256 CE), trans. Ernest Wallis, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5: *Hippolytus, Cyprian, Caius, Novatian*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, pp. 484–91; and *On Patience* (417/18 CE), trans. H. Browne, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3: 1st series, *Augustin [sic]: On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises*, pp. 527–36. These volumes were originally published by the Christian Literature Publishing Co. in 1886; I have used the reprint edition, issued in Peabody, MA, and published by Hendrickson in 1994. Barth's recourse to these patristic treatises, incidentally, has notable precedent; see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II.136 (vol. 3 of *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benzinger Bros., 1948; reprint: Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1981), pp. 1743–7).

⁵ While the language used here is my own, it has been shaped by two instructive essays. The first is David Baily Harned's *Patience: How we Wait upon the World* (Boston, MA: Cowley, 1997); the second is the minor classic by W. H. Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2006).

judged. Who can ‘be either wise or patient’, Cyprian asks, ‘who has neither known the wisdom nor the patience of God’?⁶ It is only because of ‘the patience of our Lord as well as our Father’ and because Christ’s ‘actions . . . are characterized by patience’, that we can ‘endure and persevere . . . that we may fulfil that which we have begun to be, and may receive that which we believe and hope for’.⁷ Polemical concerns make Augustine’s treatise a somewhat frustrating read, but it too frames human patience in terms of a divine precedent, with God being ‘patient without aught of passion’.⁸ So it is that ‘the patience of the godly is from above, coming down from the Father of lights’: an unmerited ‘gift of God’.⁹

Calvin’s affection for Cyprian and Augustine perhaps prompted him to take up this line of reasoning. Certainly patience, cast as a commendable human disposition, is lauded in the *Institutes*: it counts among the *beneficii Christi* which might ‘enrich poor and needy men’ – that is, Christians who undergo the sometimes painful process of sanctification, and who suffer a providential ordering of events which often proves hard to stomach.¹⁰ Less discernible in the *Institutes*, but evident at key points in commentaries on the Hebrew Bible, is Calvin’s identification of the condition of possibility for human patience. The contention, continuous with the perspectives sketched by Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine but inflected to serve Calvin’s distinctive concerns, is delicately but firmly made: it is only because God endures our sinfulness, opting not to punish according to exacting standards of justice and preferring to relate to us mercifully, that those undergoing sanctification can persevere.¹¹ Amandus Polanus, one of Calvin’s most astute followers (and one of Barth’s most significant scholastic forebears), puts it well: the ‘*Patentia*

⁶ Cyprian, ‘On the Advantage of Patience’, §2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, §§3 and 13.

⁸ Augustine, ‘On Patience’, §1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, §§14, 22, 24 and 25.

¹⁰ The remark about ‘poor and needy men’ occurs at the beginning of book III of the *Institutes*; sustained comments on patience are offered in III.7 and III.8. See here John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006). Also instructive are claims in an early French edition of the *Institutes*. In differentiating philosophical (i.e. Stoic) and Christian views of patience, Calvin argues that only the latter appreciates the gracious workings of providence. The former, unhappily, bespeaks thankless resignation to fate. See *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1541 French Edition*, trans. Elsie Anne McKee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), esp. p. 701.

¹¹ Three examples are Calvin’s remarks on Gen 6:3, Ps 78:38 and Isa 30:18. See Calvin’s *Commentaries*, 22 vols (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847–50; repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005). Note that Calvin uses a cluster of terms to make his point: ‘patience’, ‘longsuffering’ and ‘forbearance’ have proximate meanings.

Dei' is God's 'most benign will, by which He so controls His anger, that He either bears sinning creatures long and puts off punishment . . . or He does not pour forth all His anger in one moment upon them, lest they should be reduced to naught'.¹² Those who disregard and violate God's sovereign rule do not immediately suffer the penalty that they deserve; they have an opportunity to play some role in the 'theater of God's glory'.¹³ And the elect, whom God favours especially, are given stretches of graced time and space in which they might follow the direction of the Spirit who unites them to the person of Christ and assures them of the Father's kindness and care. In both cases, the word patience underscores a characteristic of God's wise governance of history: mercy towards sinners, exercised in such a way that human activity has integrity, distinction and consequence.

These remarks, I hurry to add, are not preparatory to the underwhelming claim that Barth rehearses the best insights of the 'tradition'. Certainly there is continuity. Like his patristic predecessors, Barth conceives patience in terms of God's providential concern to support human freedom, the exercise of which can and should involve practices of patience. Like Calvin, Barth's theocentric orientation connects with ventures of great exegetical subtlety, and a keen sense that God's patience is a gracious act which human beings in no sense deserve. However, to a degree not found in the earlier authors, Barth shows scant interest in promoting patience as a desirable human disposition, conceived in light of a divine analogate. He envisages it in strictly theological terms, and elaborates its meaning in a decidedly original manner. Patience, conceived as a defining aspect of God's providential governance of history, is underwritten by Christ's perfect enactment of the mission that the Father petitions him to undertake. And it is because of Christ's obedience, implicit throughout his life and enacted, terribly, in his suffering and death, that God is well pleased to open time and space for human action, expectant of human decisions to discern, embrace and purposefully respond to God's direction. On this reckoning, one can do rather more than dispatch, once again, the (annoyingly persistent) worry that Barth's emphasis on divine sovereignty has a crudely deterministic doctrine of providence as a necessary corollary. The truth is more interesting. Barth supposes that the patient God of Jesus Christ establishes a context in which human beings participate in a truly

¹² Amandus Polanus a Polansdorf, *Syntagma Theologiae Christianae*, II.24 and 25. Quoted in Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. G.T. Thomson (London: Allen & Unwin, 1950), p. 96. See also Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms, Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), pp. 180 and 219.

¹³ See here, of course, Susan Schreiner, *In the Theater of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in John Calvin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995).

covenantal relationship. What God waits for is the moment at which human beings reward God's patience, making good on the justified and sanctified existences that God, in Christ, has elected us to have.

It is useful to elaborate this claim gradually, beginning with some reflections on Barth's treatment of God's perfections and then offering a more nuanced analysis.

As indicated, Barth's reflections on patience – in German, *Geduld* – are found towards the end of *Church Dogmatics* II/1. Already in this part-volume, Barth has identified the conditions by which God makes Godself known, connecting claims about God's 'encroachment' upon human beings' cognitive processes with an account of the *unio cum Christo* as the means by which we are drawn into the sphere of God's self-knowing. Barth has also provided a striking statement about God's being. It is not enough for a theologian to assert the fact of God's existence. That alone, in fact, could scuttle theological discourse before it has a chance to launch, engendering little more than a 'devout silence' or 'rapturous mumbling' (II/1, p. 336 rev./378). Nor does it suffice to supply a formal account of the trinitarian life – say, by way of an analysis of divine processions and missions. The theologian stands under a more challenging and far-reaching obligation: advancing statements about God's identity which summarise, in interesting and conceptually precise ways, the broad arc of the biblical witness to God's action. So it is, then, that in §28 Barth identifies God as 'the one who loves in freedom'. God loves, because God 'seeks and creates fellowship between Himself and us' (II/1, p. 273/307). God's covenant with Israel anticipates God's relationship with humankind as such; the incarnation of the Word declares God's love to be so intense, so extreme, that God will do whatever proves necessary to bring God's children into right relationship with God. "'God is",' Barth memorably writes, 'means "God loves." Whatever else we may have to understand and acknowledge in relation to the divine being, it will always have to be a definition of this being . . . as the One who loves' (II/1, p. 283/318). Without doubt, the theologian must never forget that God relates to us freely. God's decision to be *pro nobis* has God's sovereign good-pleasure as its presupposition. But even this point serves to underscore God's love. Remarks about divine freedom are tied to a vivid sense of how God uses that freedom: in service of God's love for humankind.

The all-important nuances of Barth's doctrine of God emerge when §28 is read as a programmatic statement which is gradually substantiated by expositions of God's perfections in §§29, 30 and 31.¹⁴ Paragraphs 30 and

¹⁴ I am here skirting the difficult question of how this account of God's perfections might be complicated by Barth's later doctrine of election. To address it briefly: since Barth's

31, in particular, show Barth giving texture to his identity-description of God in coherent, complex and appropriate ways: coherent, in that the meanings of love and freedom are connected and elaborated through a clutch of auxiliary concepts; complex, because these auxiliary concepts relate to one another in an intricate but orderly manner; appropriate, since every statement that Barth tenders aims to bear witness to God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ.¹⁵ Barth's decision to develop his doctrine of God with reference to divine 'perfections', as opposed to 'attributes', signals a further nuance. Whereas Calvin (and some of his followers) thought in terms of an 'accommodated' knowledge of God qua creator and redeemer, with the consequence that talk about God's immanent life was fringed by a potentially troublesome degree of obscurity, Barth supposes that God's self-revelation supports a more robust and more expansive knowledge of God as such.¹⁶ How so? Simply,

treatment of God's *Gnadenwahl* does, to my mind, involve a revision of certain earlier claims, remarks about God's unconditioned aseity in II/1 sometimes sit awkwardly with remarks about God's self-determination in II/2 and beyond. Yet I also believe that Barth is on the way to his doctrine of election in II/1. As such, the tensions between Barth's doctrine of God in *Church Dogmatics* II/1 and the more consistent 'post-metaphysical' position of II/2 are not acute. Bruce McCormack seems to share this judgement; see his exceptional essay, 'The Actuality of God: Karl Barth in Conversation with Open Theism', in Bruce McCormack (ed.), *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), pp. 185–242.

¹⁵ One can also say that these paragraphs are characterised by 'rhetorical actualism': a dialectical style of writing which sets diverse terms in vital relationship, so as to help readers understand God less as an oversized 'being', more as a vital – and utterly objective – event.

¹⁶ I use the term 'fringed' purposefully, since I find Paul Helm's arguments about Calvin's theological epistemology somewhat persuasive. So Helm: 'Through God's gracious disclosure of himself we can know his nature – what God is toward us, and, because we know that what God says and does accords with his immutable essence, we can know that what he says and does is utterly reliable.' See *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), p. 13, emphases added. A somewhat similar position, which situates Calvin in broader historical perspective, is adopted by Louis Berkhof in *Systematic Theology*, new edn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996); see pp. 43–6. The crucial question, however, is whether Calvin's distinctive construal of 'a substantive "epistemic gap" between God and ourselves' (*ibid.*, p. 31) undermines the connection between 'nature' and 'essence' that Helm posits. I would say so. The reason is that Calvin's handling of 'accommodation' sometimes serves to undermine plainly cognitive statements about God's eternal identity. It is not quite clear how the 'lisper' of the nurse tells sinful 'infants' about the nurse him or herself; we cannot easily claim that the nurse's 'accommodated' speech comports with the identity that he or she has when 'out of uniform' (see here, of course, *Institutes*, I.xiii.1). Or, to put it a bit more sharply: while sidelining medieval accounts of analogical discourse about God, Calvin does not offer a functional equivalent to the (modern) claim that divine revelation means

because God does not hold back when God gives Godself to be known.¹⁷ Our cognitive capacities are seized in a thoroughgoing way, ‘objectively’ in Jesus Christ and ‘subjectively’ by the Holy Spirit; these capacities are then aligned with and rendered participant in the truthfulness of God’s self-revelation. And this means that knowledge of God is neither qualified nor compromised by some manner of ‘quantitative limitation’ (II/1, p. 52/56). The ‘secondary objectivity’ of revelation, while differentiable from God’s knowledge of Godself, is controlled and defined by the ‘primary objectivity’ of God’s own self-knowing; and inherent to this ‘secondary objectivity’ is the liberation of human ‘views’ and ‘concepts’ to participate, with a significant degree of adequacy, in the divine reality itself. As such, granted the corrigibility of every theological statement and the manifest failure of theological discourse to do justice to the divine reality, the Christian’s faithful apprehension of God’s ultimate identity – a *triune* identity, orientated wholly towards the salvation of humankind through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – has, in principle, a surety surpassing anything allowed by Calvin.

Barth’s exposition of God’s perfections can be read as an expansive, and highly detailed, application of this ambitious theological epistemology. None of God’s perfections stand apart from the being and event that God is; each, in its own way, is illustrative of the being and event that God is. It is not only that talk of God as patient, wise and omnipotent is not comparable, for example, to my wearing mismatched socks, being sleep-deprived and feeling a bit nervous – these being fairly incidental aspects of my current condition. It is also the case that a theologian can do more than suppose that attributes qua perfections are only legitimately ‘predicated of the Divine Being in Scripture, or are visibly exercised by Him in His works of creation, providence, and redemption’.¹⁸ Since revelation means *self-revelation*, the perfections that a theologian associates with God’s economic activity feed directly into a description of God’s immanent being. Indeed, in the final analysis, one must

self-revelation. The relationship between statements about God’s economic activity and statements about God *in se* therefore remains somewhat ambiguous.

¹⁷ So Bruce McCormack, writing of Barth’s account of Jesus Christ: ‘However partial and incomplete our reception of revelation may be, revelation is not partial on the side of God’s act. God reveals himself by appearing in person, as the Subject of a human life in history. Nothing of God is left behind in this personal act’. See *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), p. 171. The essay from which this quotation is taken, ‘The Limits of the Knowledge of God: Theses on the Theological Epistemology of Karl Barth’ (pp. 167–80) is a penetrating analysis of §27, from which I have learned much.

¹⁸ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 52.

state that God just is God's perfections – multiple perfections which, in and of themselves, may particularly emphasise God's 'freedom' (§31) or God's 'love' (§30), yet which are themselves always constitutive of the 'manifold simplicity of the divine nature'.¹⁹ Or as Barth puts it: 'the divine being as the One who loves in freedom is the divine being in the multiplicity, individuality and diversity of these perfections. He does not possess this wealth. He Himself is this wealth' (II/1, p. 331/372). This wealth 'overflows' as God creates, sustains and protects God's fellowship with humankind. And it is a wealth which affords human beings the opportunity to know truly who God is.

Barth's account of patience has three layers of meaning. The first emphasises the graciousness of God's providential ruling. This ruling certainly entails all-encompassing sovereignty: absolutely nothing occurs, save for God's creative and sustaining action. Yet this action may not be conceived without due regard for the integrity and agency of creatures ontologically distinct from God. Within the context of God's sovereign governance, God grants many creatures – human beings particularly – a relative degree of agential power, thereby according those creatures the opportunity to respond to God's direction in free, grateful obedience. A dense but important passage captures the point nicely:

We define God's patience as his will, lying in his essence and constituting his divine being and action, to allow to another – for the sake of God's own grace and mercy and in the affirmation of God's holiness and justice – space and time for its own existence, thus conceding to this existence a reality side by side with God's own, and fulfilling his will towards this other in such a way that he does not suspend and destroy (*aufhebt und zerstört*) it as this other but rather accompanies and sustains it and allows it to do as it wishes. (II/1, pp. 409–10 rev./461)

There's a fascinating hint here about God's trinitarian life as patient, which Barth later develops with reference to 'nearness' and 'distance' in the divine life – the idea being that God is patient with Godself, as each divine 'person' grants time and space for and to the others; the idea being that God's own life, as a matter of active relating, involves some kind of 'letting-be', such that each of God's *Seinsweise* allows for and sustains the distinctiveness of the others.²⁰ Barth's principal concern at this juncture, however, is the way in

¹⁹ Robert B. Price, *Letters of the Divine Word: The Perfections of God in Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), p. 3.

²⁰ See here esp. CD II/1, pp. 461–90 and 608–40. I borrow the language of 'letting-be' from John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 2nd edn (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977). Macquarrie's phraseology turns up in more recent work, too.

which God relates to human beings. God does not begrudge us existence distinct from God. We're not passing fantasies, conjured up by a febrile divine imagination; we have a genuinely 'independent life' (II/1, p. 411/463). Further, God does not control history despotically, treating human beings as disposable pieces on a cosmic chessboard. On the contrary: God grants us the time and space needed to respond positively, freely and obediently to God's rule. God's will is certainly 'great, strong, relentless, victorious' – Barth hits the high notes of his Reformed heritage without fail. Yet those high notes do not exhaust his perspective, for God's will is also 'gracious [and] merciful . . . it waits and lets human beings do as they wish' (II/1, pp. 410–11/462). Thus it is that God *loves*. There is no attempt to strong-arm us into the covenant; there is no sense in which God's action is analogous to that of a puppeteer, whose control over her puppets is both absolute and thoroughgoing. Instead, God waits for us to recognise what God is doing and to respond accordingly, 'opening' history to such a degree that a human being's enacted decisions are genuinely consequential. The creature really can, in some sense, 'do as it wishes'. Patience, then, helps Barth to describe how the loving God waits and what this God waits for: the moment at which human beings make free decisions to renounce sinful patterns of conduct and to participate, collectively and individually, lovingly and gratefully, in the covenant of grace. This 'letting-be' has nothing to do with disregard, much less disengagement; it has everything to do with God's solicitation of our free, joyful obedience.

With the second layer of meaning – God's merciful withholding of judgement – we move closer to previous thinkers. Tertullian, for instance, describes patience as God's willingness to 'bear with [the] luxury, avarice, iniquity, [and] malignity' of various 'ungrateful nations'.²¹ Calvin writes of God's longsuffering and forbearance, indicating that God 'exercises moderation in inflicting punishment, because he is inclined to mercy'.²² And Louis Berkhof, rather melodramatically, identifies God's 'longsuffering' and 'slowness to anger' as 'that aspect of the goodness or love of God in virtue of which He bears with the froward and evil in spite of their

See for instance, Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 2002), esp. p. 239, and Colin Gunton, *The Christian Faith: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), esp. pp. 1–56. Gunton offers particularly instructive remarks about patience which are themselves indebted to Barth.

²¹ Tertullian, *De Pat.* §2.

²² John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, trans. Rev William Pringle, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847–50; repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), p. 367 (on Isa 30:18).

long continued disobedience'.²³ Barth continues the trend: he lauds God's merciful restraint, extended despite our acute hostility to grace. In a powerful excursus he references Genesis 4, which recounts the crime of fratricide, yet signals still more vividly that God does not punish murder with a deathly penalty; he also discusses Genesis 6–9, which tells of a punishing flood that discloses, albeit in a manner initially hard to perceive, God's determination to persist with the human project.²⁴ 'Does not the grace and mercy of God depend', Barth asks, 'upon the fact that there is also a patience of God, that He grants space to the sinful creature, thus giving Himself space further to speak and act with it?' (II/1, p. 413/465). Only an affirmative answer can be given. And remarkably so! It would not be unreasonable for humans to suffer the consequences of wrongdoing, either by dint of God consigning us to oblivion on account of our wickedness or, perhaps worse, leaving us to our own devices.²⁵ Yet there is no exacting application of (retributive) justice. God's patience is such that God responds to sinfulness with more time, more space and more opportunities for human beings to participate in the covenant of grace. Our sin doesn't even occasion a divine cautiousness – say, a restriction of freedom, subtly imposed to limit the damage that we might inflict on ourselves and on others, or a deft shift in providential strategy, designed to bring about a more opportune configuration of human affairs. Romans 5:20 is apposite: 'where sin increased, grace abounded all the more'. God's patience is nothing other than the unstinting disbursement of mercy and grace. While it affords us opportunities for repentance, conversion and sanctification, it does not involve God 'changing the rules of the game'; God persists with God's original creative design. This does not mean, of course, that God is permissive; much less that God disregards sin. It is rather that talk about divine patience provides Barth with a way to describe how God exercises mercy across the length and breadth of history. One might even say that God's patience is such that history has length and breadth, and has

²³ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 72. The great Herman Bavinck, unfortunately, is rather less expansive; see the passing remarks in *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2: *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt and John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), pp. 213–14.

²⁴ CD II/1, p. 411–16.

²⁵ So, notoriously, albeit in a sermon which does not adequately represent his theology, Jonathan Edwards: 'natural men [sic] are held in the hand of God over the pit of hell; they have deserved the fiery pit, and are already sentenced to it . . . they have no refuge, nothing to take hold of, all that preserves them every moment is the mere arbitrary will, and uncovenanted unobliged forbearance of an incensed God'. The sermon, of course, is 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God'; see John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout and Kenneth P. Minkema (eds), *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 94.

it in such a way that all human beings, saints and sinners alike, have the opportunity to respond to God's gracious direction.²⁶

Patience's third layer of meaning connects the former two, while anticipating a claim which pervades *Church Dogmatics* III: a fulfilled covenant, underwritten, defined and overarched by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, constitutes the 'internal' basis of creation and supports discrete exercises of creaturely freedom.²⁷ In terms of §30, this means that the most basic meaning of God's patience is nothing other than the concrete history of Jesus Christ. Through and in Christ, God secures the integrity of the created order; through and in Christ, we are assured of God's patience in the past, present and future.

On one level, God is patient with the continuing fact of human sin because God has decisively condemned, judged and overcome it on the cross. In view of Christ's suffering and death, God does not vacillate between condemnation and grace, between impatience with sin and a desire to extend a disappointing species 'one more chance'. No: God is wholly patient, because the full force of God's rejection of sin has always-already been articulated – because, by way of the cross, God has always-already expressed a holy and just 'impatience' with wrongdoing. 'That which we all deserved', Barth writes, 'has been suffered in our place and in Israel's place by the only righteous One, who achieved a perfect penitence . . . by not refusing to take upon Himself the genuine wrath and judgment of God' (II/1, p. 420/472). Precisely because Christ has borne the weight of our hostility to God, God now endures our continuing unrighteousness. This 'past' event secures God's forbearance of sin in the here-and-now (and, in fact, in every here-and-now that we can conceive). To risk a string of colloquialisms: God's patience with us does not wear thin because, on the cross, God's patience has already run out, once and for all – and has done so in a way which assures us that God's patience is truly ongoing, truly provisionary of the time and space necessary for us to live into, and purposefully to inhabit, the covenant of grace.

On another level, Christ's free obedience is such that God now waits for us to do something other than sin. And God does not wait naively, plaintively hopeful that Christ's example might, in and of itself, stimulate imitative practices on the part of those who stand in awe of him. When Christ offers his whole being to God, living and dying in perfect accord with the

²⁶ Implicit here is the idea that all human beings are *de iure* participants in the covenant of grace, even granted that a select number are *de facto* participants. For more on the *de iure/de facto* distinction, applied to the *Dogmatics*, see Adam Neder, *Participation in Christ: An Entry in Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

²⁷ See esp. CD III/1, §41.3.

will of the Father, he undertakes a representative act which has ontological consequence. He does not merely 'stand in' for humankind, before God; he transforms humankind's standing, before God, being the 'true human' who (re)defines, against sin, what it means to be human. In response, the Father looks kindly upon those who are 'in Christ' – that is, ultimately, everyone – giving us the time and space needed to conduct ourselves in a manner which recalls Christ's free obedience. Thus it is that God's 'self-restraint in regard to the many is justified by the fact that in the midst of the many, in the person of the One whom He Himself has appointed Head of these many . . . that which He awaits has taken place and is fulfilled, the obedience which He demands from His creature has been rendered' (II/1, p. 419/472). The Pauline juxtaposition of 'one' and 'many' is of crucial moment: it signals that the particular exercise of patience on Christ's part – a human exercise of patience, even as it is enabled and superintended by the presence of God in Christ – suffices to 'satisfy' God, to secure God's willingness to let God's creatures be, to wait for them to catch up with God's project of covenantal relating. Or as Barth puts it: 'God can be patient because He is patient in His Word . . . He keeps time and space for us who have forfeited our existence in His sight and are unable to justify ourselves' (II/1, p. 421/473, emphases in original). It is for this reason, once again, that God *rightly* waits for something other than sinfulness. God anticipates our inhabitation of and participation in a covenant of grace because the 'pioneer of [our] salvation' (Heb 2:10) has determined human nature in such a way that we can actually carry out the tasks accorded us, and can do so as good and faithful servants.²⁸ God has 'opened' history in the sense that the fulfilment of the covenant, effected by Jesus Christ, will somehow be followed up by worthy human activity: our making good on the sacrifice of Christ's person; our honouring his

²⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar makes a similar point: 'He [Christ] lies between these two *status*, in a situation where all his energies are exhausted as he bears the brunt of all powers hostile to God. His fate surpasses all human tragedy; it is the super-tragedy of ultimate "God-forsakenness", in which he descends to the hell of those who have lost both God and every personal name (that is, the personal consciousness that comes from possessing a mission); and, for that very reason, he experiences a "superexaltation" and is given "the Name that is above every name" (Phil 2:9). In this way, in this collapse and rebirth, he maintains his identity; and so, as the matrix of all possible dramas, he embodies the absolute drama in his own person, in his personal mission. Here it becomes clear that this person, in order to preserve his identity, must be Trinitarian: in order to be himself, he needs the Father and the Spirit. On the other hand, he makes room within himself, that is, an acting area for dramas of theological movement, involving other, created persons.' See *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 3: *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1992), p. 162.

work with grateful obedience, inside and outside the Christian community; our living into the resurrection, such that the Kingdom might become an always-more concrete reality.

Patience after *Church Dogmatics* II/1

While there are certainly references and allusions in later parts of the *Dogmatics*, Barth does not reprise his earlier remarks in an expansive way. Patience is not a category that Barth leans on, for example, during his explication of election, nor is it given a starring role in his theological anthropology, Christology or ecclesiology. Indeed, it wouldn't be unreasonable for an interpreter to deem the remarks of §30 less a materially significant move, more quirks of an expansive and creative dogmatic imagination. And if an interpreter were reluctant to think in terms of 'quirks'? Well, she might argue that Barth had good reasons not to retain patience as a leading term in his dogmatic vocabulary after *Church Dogmatics* II/1 – say, because an emphasis on divine command in II/2, which was bound up with a range of ethical and political concerns, required that *Geduld* be pushed to the margins; or because Barth developed a doctrine of providence in which talk of God's 'preserving', 'accompanying' and 'ruling' rendered the concept surplus to requirements.

Reading later portions of the *Dogmatics* without regard to the concept of patience would, however, be a wasted opportunity. The rather modest deployment of the term in later paragraphs does not betoken dogmatic irrelevance. On the contrary: it is possible, and I think interpretatively beneficial, to view Barth's earlier remarks as a quiet dynamo, whirring under the surface of the text. Paying attention to this dynamo can prove advantageous, for it alerts readers to aspects of Barth's account of human agency which might otherwise go unnoticed. No doubt, to treat the remarks of §30 as a necessary antecedent for later contentions would constitute an interpretative mis-step: Barth's 'moral ontology' was up and running well in advance of *Church Dogmatics* II/1. My point is different: Barth's earlier comments provide a valuable interpretative leverage, enabling a more nuanced engagement with later paragraphs than might otherwise be possible.

Consider, for instance, the connection that Barth forges between creation and covenant in *Church Dogmatics* III/1: creation being the 'external basis' of the covenant and the covenant being the 'internal basis' of creation. Barth's remarks on patience seem subtly to underwrite this dogmatic pairing. From one angle, couched in the contention that 'creation aims at (*zieht auf*) history' (III/1, p. 59 rev./63), there is the repeated claim that God provided, and continues to provide, time and space to God's creatures. Creation, Barth contends, involves 'the world as a space (*Raum*) for the human who is to be

a participant in this grace . . . And the human as the being who, precisely in this space, is to become thankful for God's grace and should correspond to it' (III/1, p. 67 rev./72). Indeed, to differing degrees, every human 'acquires and has time; the time which God allots and lends . . . from the unsearchable riches of His eternity' (III/1, p. 75/81). And, still more boldly, God 'does not in any sense will to exclude man even from His juridical office, but . . . wills quite definitely that man should participate in it' (III/1, p. 266/303). Each of these assertions meshes with remarks offered in §30. Given that God undertakes, patiently, a 'seeking and creation of fellowship' (II/1, pp. 278/312), the world is so ordered that human beings have the opportunity to discern, realise and to delight in a relationship with God. One can even read the exquisite exposition of Genesis 1:1–2:4a, which anchors Church Dogmatics III/1, as a finely grained account of divine patience in action. It is a slow-moving (but not 'pedestrian'!) exegetical exercise which examines God's patience at the point at which prehistory becomes history proper; an analysis of scripture which demonstrates, in various ways, how God structures the mundane world, such that each creaturely 'other' might 'do as it wishes'.

Yet we need to look at the matter from the perspective of the covenant, too. The reason that God's creation has its distinctive qualities is not merely for the purpose of preparing the world for Jesus Christ – 'preparing' understood in terms analogous to a crew of workers who organise the stage, fix the lights and adjust the scenery before the cast treads the boards.²⁹ Embedded within the declaration that the covenant supplies 'the material presupposition' of creation is a rather more interesting claim – namely that God's creation has the character it has because God's elective will has been perfectly realised in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. On this reckoning, a theologian ought to read the repeated commands of Genesis 1 – 'let there be light' (Gen 1:3); 'let the waters under the sky be gathered' (Gen 1:9); 'let us make humankind in our image' (Gen 1:26); and so on – in view of Christ Jesus, whom 'God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood . . . because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed' (Rom 3:25). Christology is the basis for thinking about the covenant; a fulfilled covenant norms and directs reflection about the more far-reaching locus of creation. Put more ontically: Christ's concrete history, conceived as the sum of a coherent string of actions purposed to fulfil God's covenant, should be understood as the reason why God, qua creator, 'lets be' in such

²⁹ Which is not to say that one cannot so describe creation. Barth himself, after all, writes that creation 'is one long preparation . . . for what God will intend and do with [the creature] in the covenant' (CD III/1, p. 231). My point is simply that, for Barth, more can and should be said.

ways that human beings can act with genuine integrity and consequence. Christ's life, death and resurrection ensure that, while God's patience may wear thin, God's patience will never run out, and that sinners can expect to continue to live in freedom.

Matters become even more interesting when, in *Church Dogmatics* III/2, Barth refines his earlier account of God's 'sustaining' and 'accompanying' of human life to emphasise God's demand that human beings participate in the covenant of grace. The argument, in broad terms, is that the 'now' in which we exist is always being encompassed by, filled with and pressed towards the present and future fact of Christ's mediatorial work. God's patient provision of time and space includes Christ's urgent petition that each and every one of us should act, without delay, in a manner which honours the covenant of grace. God's patience, one must even say, awaits a dis-analogous response. We are not asked to do the impossible: correspond ourselves to the God who has time and space, and who gives time and space to us, by giving God time and space to act in freedom and obedience. Nor, for that matter, are we asked to exercise restraint or to take on the responsibility of incarnating God's patience. Our task is otherwise: to move towards and purposefully to inhabit the Kingdom which is the in-breaking gift of the patient God.

Reflections on the finite period of time 'allotted' to each human being in §47 make this point in an especially vivid way. Having argued that Christ's time 'is the time which [God] took to Himself, thus granting it as a gift to the men of all time' (III/2, p. 455/546) – a move which, once again, identifies the incarnation as the point of departure for thinking about creaturely time – Barth writes about the 'now' of human life as charged with the 'promise of the true and genuine being in time actualized in this One' (III/2, p. 519/626). This is not merely an assertion of the fact of *christus praesens*, embedded within an examination of time in its past, present and future modalities (a midrash, of sorts, on the final chapters of the *Confessions*). Artfully connecting earlier remarks on patience with the claim that Jesus Christ is the 'true human' – itself an implication of Barth's groundbreaking identification of Christ as 'electing God' and the 'elected human' – Barth envisages movement towards and a reintensified participation in the covenant of grace as a possibility inherent in every passing instant, every present moment and every possible future. More than a 'possibility', in fact: Christ insists that we live into the justified and sanctified roles which God assigns to us. A memorable claim in the second edition of *Der Römerbrief* – that, on 'the threshold of my existence there appears, demanding admittance – the new man of the new world, the new man in Christ Jesus, justified and redeemed, alive and good, endowed with attributes that are not mine, have never been

mine, and never will be mine'³⁰ – is framed in terms of a sharp and constant summons: a sovereign personal encounter, with Christ, which obliges each person to discern and to play a role in the future towards which we are being moved.

Two proximate passages make this point beautifully:

We now ask: What does it mean that the human is *always now*? We have seen that all human being, action and experience is either now or else unreal. Even as past and future it can be understood as a totality only in relation to the present, as a past or future *now*. We are always in this transition. Indeed, our own reality depends upon the reality of this transition. And this transition, and therefore the Now in which we are, is real because and insofar as the present of the eternal God as the Creator of time is the secret of our present. What can this transition mean for us, then, but again and again the *offer*, the *summons*, and the *invitation* to be with God now, to be present with God, to carry out this transition with God? 'With God': that is, recognising that God always goes ahead of us and precedes us – not without us, but rather for us, on our behalf. Indeed, God always does this now. This is what gives our present its distinctive weight, but also its distinctive lightness; its distinctive seriousness, but also its distinctive radiance. So God is always ever new and for us; the same in each 'now', with a particular offer and summons, with a particular invitation. And, therefore, in this *particularity*, God's present is the secret of our own. (III/2, p. 531 rev./641)

Every 'now', in its particular relation to the before and after, is an opportunity which comes only once and then, whether acknowledged or not, whether taken up or not, passes and never returns . . . We have to reckon with each moment because God himself has particular moments, *καίροί*, in God's being, speaking, and acting in relation to us: moments which themselves come and go. *Now, now*, is no time for dreaming, whether

³⁰ Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: OUP, 1968), p. 229. The original German bears quotation: 'Diese Beziehung bedeutet, dass ein gerechtfertiger und erlöster, ein guter und lebendiger Mensch, der neue Mensch der neuen Welt in Jesus Christus Einlass fordernd an der Pforte meines Daseins erschienen ist – wobei alle jene Attribute das besagen, was ich nie war, nicht bin und nie sein werde!' (*Der Römerbrief*, 2nd edn (Zürich: TVZ, 2005), p. 230). Barth's claim about attributes that 'will never be mine' reflects, to some degree, the often-extreme eschatology of the 2nd edn of *Romans*. But the phrase is not hyperbole. Barth is simply reminding readers that life 'in Christ' and conformity to Christ will always be a creaturely affair. While Christ is in *nobis*, Christ and Christ's perfection will always be *extra nos*. We can only approximate ourselves to his reality.

about past or future. Now is the time to wake up, to receive or act, to speak or be silent, to say Yes or No . . . Now I must step forward, take up position, be the person who I am. (III/2, pp. 531–2 rev./641–2)

An emphatic affirmation of the force of the present – an instant pregnant with the vital fact of God’s charge to slough off the tired, ‘old’ human; a moment rich with the possibility of giving birth to the ‘new’; a prospect which would seem fantastic, were it not for God’s transformative grace – characterises these passages. While God certainly supplies human beings with the time and space needed to develop and live into the covenant of grace, God’s ‘accompanying’ and ‘sustaining’ of our lives is also a sharp provocation to act. Certainly God grants each of us the opportunity to respond to God in grateful, obedient and responsible freedom; certainly God is constantly allocating us more time and more space. Yet God also presses each of us to take up the task at hand. What ought we not to do? We ought not to keep God waiting; we ought not to try God’s patience. What ought we to do? We ought to recognise the ‘importance of the Now’ (III/2, p. 532/642); we ought to move forwards to meet the coming Christ, for while the covenant is definitively fulfilled, by no means is it finished.

What does it mean to distinguish a ‘fulfilled’ from a ‘finished’ covenant? Answering this question is crucial, lest talk of divine patience as a solicitation of action devolve into the vapid counsel that one ‘live for the moment’ or ‘seize the day’ – slogans more suited to the advertising industry than faithful theological inquiry. Three final comments, then, are needed to round out this analysis.

First, a negative point: God’s continuing patience does not permit us to envisage human life in terms of a series of second chances which, if discounted, might be recovered at a later date. Our time will not last forever; God allots to each a limited period in which to participate in the covenant of grace. These discrete stretches of ‘allotted time’, in and of themselves, certainly attest to God’s gracious care. They mark human beings as creatures who are not divine and who are relieved of the burden of self-salvation. They also prevent an interminable series of sins and an increasing accumulation of guilt. Yet the time allotted to each of us signals, too, that Christian life ought to involve actions which bear positively upon the eventual ‘glorification by the eternal God of [a] natural and lawful this-sided, finite, and mortal being’ (III/2, p. 633/771). ‘Bear positively?’ One does need to be careful here. Barth obviously does not suppose that human ‘works’ contribute to the objective act of salvation. The reconciliation and redemption of every ‘this-sided, finite, and mortal being’ is the business of Christ alone. But inasmuch as every ‘this-sided, finite, and mortal existence’ is caught up

in God's demand that we move towards the Christ who is always coming, everything that we do, in the context of God's covenantal scheme, or fail to do, in the context of God's covenantal scheme, has some effect on the person that God embraces after his or her death. That is to say: while God waits patiently and insistently for us, and while death means our passing into God's care, the use we make of the time we have been granted makes a difference to the human history that God beholds, post-temporally, 'in all its merited shame but also its unmerited glory' (III/3, pp. 633/731). If I repay God's patience, enacting some measure of obedience in correspondence to God's gracious demand, then the history that God eternally beholds might involve something better than 'merited shame'. But if I continue to try God's patience, persistent in my slothful and stupid evasion of God's demand, then the history that God eternally beholds will be marked by nothing other than the monotony of sin, the tedium of my hostility to grace – *even granted that my 'merited shame' will be overwhelmed, lovingly, should God so will it, by the reconciliation and redemption which Christ brings.*

Second, there is determinate content to God's waiting: the coming future which is the person of Jesus Christ. Barth makes this point beautifully in §78 of the posthumous *Christian Life*. 'God's kingdom', he writes, 'is his own . . . coming to meet man, to meet the whole of the reality distinct from himself. The second petition [of the Lord's Prayer] looks toward this special dynamic reality, to the coming of God's kingdom as the coming of God himself, to its breaking forth and breaking through and breaking into the place where those who pray the petition are, to encounter with them and therefore with all creation' (*Chr. Life*, p. 236/404).³¹ And in no sense is the Kingdom an abstract reality. It is itself the person of Christ, for 'He is God acting concretely within human history. He is the One who calls those who know him to obedient willing and doing but who is and remains from all doing' (*Chr. Life*, p. 252/436). The future, one might say, always bears the unsubstitutable name of God's second way of being – Jesus Christ – and cannot be understood aright if one trades in impersonal generalities. And Christ's coming, once again, is itself an imperative of such force that God petitions each disciple to do nothing other than 'look and move forward to

³¹ As with the *Dogmatics*, page numbers are included in the body of the text. The editions used: Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics, IV/4, Lecture Fragments*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (London: T&T Clark, 2004); Karl Barth, *Das christliche Leben: Die Kirchliche Dogmatik, IV/4, Fragmente aus dem Nachlass, Vorlesungen 1959–1961*, ed. Hans-Anton Drewes and Eberhard Jüngel (Zürich: TVZ, 1999).

this Jesus' (Chr. Life, p. 255/441), even as she prays, patiently and expectantly, 'Thy Kingdom come'.

What 'moving forward to this Jesus' entails brings me to a third point: the patience of God requires nothing less than human beings actively gathering and purposefully building up the church. Barth advances this claim in remarkable fashion in the third section of §62, which considers 'the time of the community'. Posing the question of what precisely Christians should do in the time before 'the dawning of the eternal Sabbath of His second *parousia*' (IV/1, p. 736/822), given the completeness of God's saving work, Barth writes:

God will not allow his last word to be fully spoken or the consummation determined, accomplished, and proclaimed by him to take place in its final form until he has heard a human answer to it, a human Yes; until his grace has found its correspondence in a voice of human thanks from the depths of the world reconciled with him; until here and now, before the dawning of his eternal Sabbath, he has received praise from the midst of his human creature. So great is his grace, so broad is the reach of condescension, so serious is the solidarity in which he has committed himself with us human beings in the person of his Son . . . [that] God wills a body, an earthly and historical form of the existence of this Head . . . In order that this may happen, God still gives the world space, time, and existence; he allows the end-time to dawn and to persist. It is the context (*Stätte*) in which there can be this correspondence. (IV/1, pp. 737–8 rev./824)

Here, I think, one catches sight of one of a claim which might have received fascinating elucidation, had Barth written a doctrine of redemption. What is God waiting for, even as God moves towards us, in Christ, in the mode of Christ's futurity? God awaits the purposeful enactment of Christ's body. God petitions us to make good on God's patience; God is in fact *holding history open*, graciously persisting with the provision of time and space until the moment that, at long last, we enact the communal and individual identities which God asks us to realise.

Now the exact shape of the 'earthly historical form' that God awaits is not, of course, given to us to know – just as we do not know when God's 'last word' will be fully spoken (so Mark 13:32–7). Barth is wonderfully hard to pin down when it comes to concrete details about the form of the Christian community; his actualism is so thoroughgoing that his ecclesiology remains relatively (and, I think, aptly) light on detail. Clearly, though – and John Flett has emphasised this point to great effect – God's missional activity has

a human complement.³² So, when writing about ‘the time of God’s patience and purpose’ in relation to the Parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14–30), Barth insists that it is the ‘business of the [Christian] community to recognize the character of this time, and therefore never to think that it has plenty of time in this time, but to “buy up” this time in relation to those who are “without” (Col 4:5; Eph 5:16)’ (III/2, p. 507/610). Barth is also blunt in saying that the church’s correspondence to Christ is a task with political dimensions which oblige Christians to endorse, and even to incite, *revolt* against social disorder and unrighteousness. The petition ‘Thy Kingdom come’ requires, after all, that we are always ‘going to meet the coming kingdom of God . . . seeing and grasping the possibilities which are provisionally present or which offer themselves not for divine but for human righteousness and order’ (Chr. Life, p. 213/362).³³ It is also fair to say that, for Barth, the political dimensions of Christian discipleship must be angled towards those who endure acute injustice and who hunger – yes, with righteous *impatience* – for a ‘new heaven and a new earth’ (Rev 21:1). Yet it can never be said that our response to Christ’s future is assimilable to a predetermined ecclesiological or political programme. More basic is the fact that our covenantal relationship with God requires a resolute and cheerful uptake of a task, the character of which is keyed to God’s gracious address. God holds history open; the challenge is for us to fill time and space in the right way, and in so doing to afford God the opportunity to finish, to speak God’s ‘last word’.

Patience after Barth

Thus far, I’ve stuck close to the text of the *Dogmatics*. I initially offered a series of claims about a subsection of §30, parsing the meaning of patience in terms of God’s creative and providential largesse, God’s merciful withholding of judgement and the person and work of Jesus Christ. This analysis was then used to shed light on later claims in the *Dogmatics*. I argued, particularly, that Barth understands Christ’s futurity to be the leading edge of the patience God extends towards human beings. And human beings are tasked, right now, purposefully to meet the Kingdom of God which Christ embodies and declares. It is not sufficient for a theologian merely to say that human beings are given time and space to correspond to God. Nor can she rest with the claim that the covenant of grace, which pivots around the concrete fact of Christ as ‘electing God’ and ‘elected human’, invites human beings to act,

³² See John G. Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).

³³ Nigel Biggar writes similarly about this sentence; see *The Hastening that Waits: Karl Barth’s Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), p. 77.

freely and obediently, in correspondence to God. God's patience, articulated in the covenant of grace which Christ fulfils, is a rather more urgent affair. It confronts every one of us as an in-breaking future, provocative of missional and political action. Human life – and, more specifically, Christian life – requires that we seize hold of Christ's coming, lest we be found untrustworthy servants.

Certainly there remain some significant interpretative avenues to be explored. Beyond developing these tentative ideas, one might extend the analysis into Barth's doctrine of providence (so *Church Dogmatics* III/3, §§48 and 49) or consider Barth's fascinating treatment of 'sloth' (so IV/2, §65.2). There is also the question of how the analysis proffered relates to perspectives favoured by scholars who, fairly soon after Barth's own time had drawn to a close, urged that his thinking about divine and creaturely time be subject to a significant eschatological corrective.³⁴ However, forgoing an expansion of claims already offered, I want now to strike a constructive note. Specifically, I want to imagine how the forgoing reflections might provide dogmatic support for an understanding of sanctification which delights in the possibilities of change and transformation that God invites God's people to enact and endure. I aim to stretch Barth in a somewhat experimental manner, imagining what patience might mean for a theology inspired by, but in no way limited to, his insights.

Let's assume that some of what Barth says about human existence, at least on my reckoning, might be summarised as an anthropological modulation of Eberhard Jüngel's description of God as a 'being in becoming'. And let's grant, straightaway, that 'being in becoming' plays out differently for God and human beings. Applied to God, the phrase identifies the eventful character of the divine being, both in terms of God's trinitarian relating and in terms of God's elective movement towards us. Applied to human beings, there is a different register of meaning: at issue here is the fact that human beings

³⁴ The works of Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhard Pannenberg, most obviously, would be interesting to examine on this front. A particularly interesting question is whether Barth promotes a stronger eschatology than Moltmann realises. Does not Barth effectively signal that 'faith, wherever it develops into hope, causes not rest but unrest, not patience, but impatience. It does not calm the unquiet heart, but is itself this unquiet heart in man?' Does not Barth himself plainly avoid supposing that 'the future redemption which is promised in the revelation of Christ [is] only a supplement, only a noetic unveiling of the reconciliation effected in Christ . . . such . . . that it gives promise of the real goal and true intention of that reconciliation, and therefore of its future as really outstanding, not yet attained and not yet realized'? See *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), pp. 21 and 58.

are being shaped, transformed and moved by the Spirit, in light of Christ's elective activity, with a view to Christ's futurity. This anthropological claim has as an intriguing corollary, albeit one that Barth struggled to articulate in a consistent manner: a rejection of the assumption that human life could ever be construed in 'essentialistic' terms – that is, modes of reflection which explicitly or implicitly discourage adventuresome modes of becoming, given that an individual is 'fixed in place' by his or her gender, sex, ethnicity, socio-economic standing, etc. Put a bit differently: if one attends to those aspects of the *Dogmatics* which I have highlighted, a sharp refutation of Calvin's claim that 'each individual' has a 'kind of living assigned to him by the Lord as a sort of sentry post so that he may not heedlessly wander' comes into view.³⁵ Made in the image of the God who liberates us from sin and opens history in such ways that we can move novelly towards the Christ who always comes, neither restrictive versions of 'essentialism' nor pinched understandings of vocation are dogmatically viable. Something rather different is needed since, in light of Christ's futurity, concretised diversely by the activity of Christ's Spirit, human life is always-already being opened up for expansion, development and transformation – even, sometimes, for apparently avant-garde kinds of experimentation. As beings-in-becoming, then, we are asked by God to endure and enact an open-ended project of the self; we are asked to be patient with ourselves, and with others, as grace shapes us, reshapes us and moves us towards a future, the precise character of which cannot be foreknown. We are asked to make ourselves susceptible to and patient of change; we are asked to undergo and endorse transformations which we cannot anticipate in advance. For sure, there is something stable, something permanent, about human being. We are not awash in a sea of possibilities; we are not haplessly caught in the swell of changing circumstances. What remains constant, at the very least, is the simple fact that every one of us is elected for covenantal relationship with God. What defines us, deep down, is the fact that God 'chose us in him before the foundation of the world' and 'destined us in love to be his sons [and daughters] through Jesus Christ' (Eph 1:4 and 1:5). But election is only the beginning of the story, and the same Lord into whose body we are incorporated petitions us to move into the future over which he presides.

³⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.x.6 (p. 724). Calvin is alluding to Cicero, *On Old Age*, 20.73. The 1541 *Institutes* is just as vivid: 'Lest we disturb everything by our madness and wantonness, by distinguishing different estates and ways of living He has ordained for each one what he has to do. In order that no one may lightly go beyond his limits, He has called such ways of living "vocations". Each one in his place ought to think that his estate is for him like a station assigned by God, so that he may not turn around in circles here and there without reflection, the whole course of his life' (pp. 711–12).

Kathryn Tanner and Kristine Culp have recently gestured towards a claim of this kind: Tanner, in talking about the ‘unusual plasticity of human lives, absent of any predetermined specification of nature’ in *Christ the Key*; Culp, in talking about ‘vulnerability’ as ‘the situation in which persons and communities may receive and bear the glory of God’.³⁶ The work of Tanner and Culp, further, intersects with theological insights proffered by a number of gay, lesbian and queer theologians who reflect on the ‘mobility’ of the self – the fact that, to borrow from Gerard Loughlin, a theological iteration of queerness presses us ‘to outwit identity’, especially when identity is predicated on restrictively essentialist assumptions.³⁷ Thus a fascinating passage in the late Marcella Althaus-Reid’s unsettling (and sometimes baffling) text, *The Queer God*, which combines Félix Guattari’s idea of ‘transversality’, the Augustinian motif of the ‘unquiet heart’, contemporary reflections on border-crossing, and frank eroticism:

Redemption has, after all, been made the ultimate prison for the desires of nomadic bodies. Redemption fixes our souls . . . [It] aims to construct the body in quietude, in a steadfast, equilibrated, and unexcitable manner . . . However, nomadic bodies are unequilibrated, excitable, and incorrigible . . . As nomadic Queer theologians, our praxis can travel in open daylight, positioning [us] in regard to new loving and political referents, divine and mundane. Queer Theology does theology with impunity. Borders of thinking are crossed. Borders of prayer are crossed . . . A Queer theological project . . . is a theology of the travelling body which crosses borders between unnameable countries, and it is given away by transversal kisses and re-configurations of desire.³⁸

³⁶ Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), p. 50; and Kristine A. Culp, *Vulnerability and Glory: A Theological Account* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), esp. p. 2. A supplementary (and non-theological) voice that might be added is that of Catherine Malabou. See *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, trans. Lisabeth During (London: Routledge, 2005); *What Shall We Do With Our Brain*, trans. Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); and *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*, trans. Carolyn Shread (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

³⁷ Gerard Loughlin, ‘Introduction’, in Gerard Loughlin (ed.), *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p. 9.

³⁸ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), pp. 49 and 50. ‘Transversality’, for Althaus-Reid, ‘is the flow of ideas and experiences, like a drunk walking in zig-zag patterns, while bringing together odd, dispersed elements, not necessarily in harmony’ (p. 49). The concept is taken from Félix Guattari, *Chaosophy* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1995). A qualification that I would offer: granted that a person may undergo ‘odd, dispersed elements’ which do not harmonise, and granted

Barth would probably have little sympathy for Althaus-Reid's pioneering work, even granted that he showed a willingness to revise his views about gender, sex and sexuality towards the end of his life.³⁹ But there is a possible point of connection which allows us to imagine a constructive theology inspired by Barth and alert to the insights of a new generation of liberation theologians. Patience, as I am framing it, affords one the opportunity to connect Barth's theological anthropology, a Reformed view of sanctification, and queer reflections on the open-ended dynamism of the self. It is a term which, if stretched ambitiously, might even help us to emphasise how the complex, shifting reality of human sexuality could, by the grace of God, bear witness to the eschatological transformations that God graciously effects; how the passion, eccentricity, purposeful turbulence and subversive disregard for that which is deemed 'normal' in personal and social struggles for sexual liberation provide clues to the type of transformation to which all human beings are called. Why not? Why not imagine a theology, funded by Barth and queer thinkers, which conceives of the sanctification of the individual in light of the strange world of human sexuality, which finds anticipations of the Kingdom – 'secular parables of the truth', if you will – among those communities that are constantly 'dying' to the oppressively familiar and 'rising' towards something quite unexpected?⁴⁰ Is this not one aspect of a future towards which theological reflection may be being called – a future which purposefully but quietly ignores the distinction between 'systematic' and 'liberationist' theology in favour of a style of reflection which interweaves the insights of classical thinkers with contemporary voices, especially those long-ignored or marginalised by the mainstream church?

We may not, of course, forget that our lives are grounded in the fact of God's gracious election. Election in fact ensures that the sometimes-messy process of sanctification has as its uncomplicated basis the fact of God's grace. But we also must not forget, to borrow from one of Barth's early works, that each human being 'has really been put on his feet in order to walk'.⁴¹ And this walking requires that we patiently discern, attend to and explore the

that she may walk, and be led, along 'zig-zag patterns', the graciousness of the process of sanctification is such that that person can hope that the turbulence of her life will ultimately make 'sense' in some respect – simply because of her election by God and her enclosure in the body of Christ.

³⁹ See Karl Barth, 'Freedom for Community', in Eugene F. Rogers, Jr. (ed.), *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 114–15.

⁴⁰ For more on such 'parables', which Barth considers in CD IV/3, see George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of his Theology* (New York: OUP, 1991), pp. 234–80.

⁴¹ Karl Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, trans. Darrell Guder and Judith J. Guder (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p. 92.

territory of the strange new world into which we are led; it requires that we be patient with ourselves, and with others, as we undergo the transformative event of sanctification.⁴² And it requires, last but not least, that we not keep God waiting. Living towards and into the resurrection that is our future, we must now hasten towards the Kingdom that is always coming. To give Barth the last word:

If only [Christians] knew what a task and what power are entrusted to them when, as children of God, they are liberated and called with this prayer [i.e. the Lord's Prayer] to hurry to their Father! And if only they knew what a debt they incur to him, themselves, and the whole world that they have to represent with this petition ['Thy Kingdom Come'] if they neglect to do this! And, finally, if only they knew with what profoundest rest and joy they can withstand the inner and outer assaults of the course of the world, with all its impropriety, degradation, monstrousness, and impossibility, looking ahead to its goal and end, when they do not become idle and slothful but persist cheerfully and industriously in the (by no means heroic) action of praying, 'Thy kingdom come!' (Chr. Life, p. 261 rev./452)⁴³

⁴² Not that this is easy: 'patience with others is only second in difficulty to patience with oneself'. So Donald Gray, 'On Patience: Human and Divine', *Cross Currents* (Winter 1975), p. 416.

⁴³ Some of the ideas above were developed for talks offered at Australia Catholic University (Melbourne), Charles Sturt University (Canberra), and United Theological College (Sydney) in summer 2012. I owe thanks to my various hosts and audiences in Australia – especially Anne Hunt, Kevin Hart, James Haire and Benjamin Myers – for their generous hospitality and thoughtful questions. I had the opportunity to recast and reconceive these ideas for the Karl Barth Society of North America at the 2012 American Academy of Religion; the lecture I gave formed the basis for this article. I'm very grateful for the feedback provided by the attendees of Barth Society lecture, particularly to George Hunsinger (Princeton Theological Seminary), who presided over the session, and Kate Sonderegger (Virginia Theological Seminary), who delivered a wonderful lecture on Barth's understanding of the divine attributes. Many thanks, too, to a group of talented graduate students in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia – Gillian Breckenridge, Timothy Hartman, Christina McRorie, Shelli Poe, Matthew Puffer and Reuben Glick Shank – who offered advice when I was preparing the lecture.