

# Condemnation and universal salvation: Karl Barth's 'reverent agnosticism' revisited

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## Abstract

The question of Karl Barth's attitude towards universalism has been a topic of debate since his own day. By examining a twofold two-way determination of the actuality of world-history *in Christo* that Barth construes in the actualistic hamartiology of CD IV/3, §70, I will contend that he does not describe the prospect of the final condemnation of humankind as an empty threat, even though the whole of his theological witness to Christ clearly testifies to universal salvation. This dialectical aspect of Barth's actualistic hamartiology leads to an attitude towards the *apokatastasis* that George Hunsinger aptly describes as 'reverent agnosticism'.

**Keywords:** actualism, apokatastasis, Karl Barth, hamartiology, reverent agnosticism, universalism

## Introduction

The question of Karl Barth's attitude towards universal salvation has been a topic of debate in the secondary literature since his own day. His explicit rejection of the *apokatastasis* is well documented, but the precise nature of this rejection is still a subject of controversy. From the Göttingen phase of his career he made it clear '[t]hat election and not rejection is the goal of the ways of God is the most that we can and must say ... The idea of apocatastasis, of the elimination of rejection, cannot derive from knowledge of this God.'<sup>1</sup> Although his christocentric revision of the doctrine of election from *Gottes Gnadenwahl* (1936) to the *Church Dogmatics* (henceforth CD) II/2 (1942) seems to firmly indicate the final salvation of all humankind, he remains unambiguous at this stage of his career in his firm rejection of the *apokatastasis*.<sup>2</sup> However, he does not offer a full-fledged

<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, vol. 1, ed. Hannelotte Reiffen, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 475.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* [henceforth CD], 13 vols., ed. T. F. Torrance and G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–75), II/2, pp. 417, 476–7. Hereafter I will refer to the original text in German only when ambiguities arise in the English trans.

formulation of his position on universal salvation until the final section of his three-part hamartiology in the doctrine of reconciliation in CD IV/1–3, namely, ‘The Condemnation (*Verdamnis*) of Man’ under §70, ‘The Falsehood and Condemnation of Man’.<sup>3</sup>

This article examines Barth’s rejection of the *apokatastasis* in light of some surprising features of his actualistic ontology in §70 that are unanticipated in earlier paragraphs and largely unnoticed in the secondary literature. In this final paragraph of his christological-soteriological hamartiology he sets forth a twofold two-way determination of the actuality of human world-history (*Weltgeschichte*): (1) a determination *from above* by the victory of Christ (or better put, Christ as victor) from and to all eternity, countered by a determination *from below* by the sin of all other human beings; and (2) a determination by the *perfect tense* of God’s reality in Christ accomplished *zum Vornherein*, along with a determination by the *future tense* of God’s final condemnation of sinful humankind to which the present actuality of human falsehood points.

The first two-way determination is unsurprising; it is suggested even in Barth’s exegesis of Romans 11:32 in *Gottes Gnadenwahl*, where the notion of God as being-in-act is still latent.<sup>4</sup> In §60 and §65, the first two hamartiology paragraphs in CD IV, this two-way determination rises to prominence, and Barth is emphatic as always that the *Weltgeschichte* of Adamic sin can never trump the grace of God in the very divine and very human *Geschichte* of Jesus Christ.

What is surprising about §70 is the second two-way determination: Barth states that the condemnation of humankind, unlike fallenness and misery, is not a result of sinful human activity or inactivity, but is itself God’s act to which the present actuality of human falsehood points. This aspect of his actualistic ontology calls into question whether he thinks of divine condemnation as ultimately an empty threat.

If sin really is an ontological impossibility for humankind – if it really is *das Nichtige* – does this not imply that the consequences of sin are only illusionarily actual in the here-and-now, and that they are thus eschatologically inconsequential? If the fall and misery of humankind as consequences of human pride and sloth are only world-historical conditions that will pass away at the end of time because of Christ’s *a priori* triumph over nothingness, does this not mean that the threat of divine condemnation as a result of human falsehood is also a sword that will never fall on the human race? If that were the case, divine condemnation would really be just

<sup>3</sup> See Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* [henceforth KD], IV/3 (Zurich: TVZ, 1980), p. 531.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth, *Gottes Gnadenwahl* (Munich: Kaiser, 1936), p. 27.

another form of nothingness to which the sinner may look upon with a Mozartean laugh, and God's sword of final condemnation would be merely an empty threat. However, Barth makes it clear that divine condemnation, unlike human fallenness and misery, is God's act rather than a form of nothingness.

One further question may arise at this point. According to Barth's doctrine of election in CD II/2 and the 1936 *Gottes Gnadenwahl*, the sword of God's condemnation of sinful humankind has already fallen upon Christ, who is the only reprobate, in order for all human beings to be elected in and with Christ. If the sword has already fallen vicariously upon God's paschal lamb, does this not mean that it will never fall again upon the human race? Note, however, that in §70 Barth treats divine condemnation in its eschatological aspects, rather than the aspect of what Christ the electing God and elected human being already accomplished from all eternity. These are two aspects of the same inseparable reality, but there is also an abiding distinction between them.

With an examination of the new features of Barth's actualistic ontology in §70, I will contend that the prospect of the final condemnation of humankind is not at all an empty threat, even though the whole of Barth's theological witness to Jesus Christ clearly testifies to the final salvation of all. This dialectical aspect of Barth's actualistic ontology in §70 leads to an attitude towards the *apokatastasis* that George Hunsinger aptly describes as 'reverent agnosticism'.<sup>5</sup>

### Current state of the debate over Barth's position on universalism

As early as 1956, G. C. Berkouwer observed that 'the question of the universality of the triumph of grace confronts us squarely with Barth's doctrine of election'.<sup>6</sup> Berkouwer's opinion is that Barth only pays lip service to 'the "open situation" in his doctrine of election ... , however great the emphasis he placed upon it'.<sup>7</sup>

Aside from Barth's own rejoinder to Berkouwer in CD IV/3,<sup>8</sup> those who sympathised with the Swiss theologian's christocentric soteriology came to

<sup>5</sup> George Hunsinger, 'Hellfire and Damnation: Four Ancient and Modern Views', in *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 226–49. Originally publ. in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51 (1998), pp. 406–34.

<sup>6</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Harry Boer (London: Paternoster, 1956), p. 262.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 296.

<sup>8</sup> CD IV/3, pp. 173–81.

his defence against the charge of universalism as early as his own days.<sup>9</sup> Despite their efforts, many contemporary evangelical critics still follow Berkouwer in interpreting Barth's rejection of the *apokatastasis* as inconsistent with his christocentric doctrine of election. Oliver Crisp, for instance, comments that Barth's openness to the possibility of a final reprobation of those who 'choose to reject Christ ... flatly contradicts other things Barth says about the inexorable nature of our derivative election in Christ'.<sup>10</sup>

Bruce McCormack's exposition of Barth's position on universalism offers an important corrective to this common misreading. McCormack rightly states that Barth is not a universalist in the sense that 'at the end of the day, Barth's position ... is [that] universal salvation is something for which we ought to hope and pray, but it is not something we can teach'.<sup>11</sup> However, McCormack's corrective is not thorough enough in debunking the misinterpretation of Barth as a universalist. His understanding is that Barth's rejection of the *apokatastasis* is a matter of theological method rather than material content.<sup>12</sup> He is of the opinion that everything in Barth's christology and actualistic ontology points to the final reconciliation of all things to God, even though 'until Christ comes in glory, even the very best Christology (the doctrine of election which finds its root in it) can only be a witness to the reality that Christ is. It cannot provide an exhaustively true account of that reality.'<sup>13</sup> It should be noted, however, that McCormack's piece is intended for dialogue with American evangelicalism, and it covers a wide range of materials, including historical survey and biblical exegesis. It is not intended as a thoroughgoing and focused analysis of Barth's position on universal salvation.

One of the most in-depth treatments of Barth's view on universalism has come from Tom Greggs in his 2009 monograph and his 2007 article on this subject.<sup>14</sup> Especially valuable about Greggs' contribution to the debate is his analysis of the Swiss theologian's charitable response to Berkouwer in CD

<sup>9</sup> E.g. J. D. Bettis, 'Is Karl Barth a Universalist?', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 20 (1967), pp. 423–36.

<sup>10</sup> Oliver Crisp, 'Karl Barth and Jonathan Edwards on Reprobation (and Hell)', in D. Gibson and D. Strange (eds), *Engaging with Barth* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), p. 319.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce McCormack, 'So That He May Be Merciful to All: Karl Barth and the Problem of Universalism', in B. McCormack and C. Anderson (eds), *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), p. 248.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 247–8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>14</sup> Tom Greggs, *Barth, Origen, and Universal Salvation: Restoring Particularity* (Oxford: OUP, 2009); '“Jesus is Victor”: Passing the Impasse of Barth on Universalism', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60 (2007), pp. 196–212.

IV/3. Greggs pinpoints Berkouwer's misinterpretation as having stemmed from the misreading of an abstract theology of the triumph of grace in Barth's writings, and clarifies that Barth's theological witness should instead be described in terms of the particularistic proclamation, 'Jesus is Victor'.<sup>15</sup> Greggs aptly draws out intricate implications from this extremely pregnant proclamation, and his presentation of the universalistic aspects of Barth's theological witness to Jesus Christ is for the most part hardly disputable.

However, while agreeing that 'in Barth's rejection of Berkouwer's analysis of his work ... no limitation on the extent of salvation is ever made', I will challenge Greggs' contention that there is nothing agnostic about Barth's attitude towards the final reconciliation of all creatures to God.<sup>16</sup> Greggs asserts that 'Barth's rejection of the category of "universal salvation" is a rejection of any approach to theology in which a principle replaces Christ as a person.'<sup>17</sup> That is, he is of the opinion that Barth only rejects the theological method underlying the *apokatastasis*, but not the universality of salvation in Christ *per se*. Thus, he dismisses the description 'reverent agnosticism' with regard to Barth's view on the extent of salvation: 'There is certainly no agnosticism in Barth's approach to the question of universal salvation.'<sup>18</sup>

Note that I am not opposing Greggs's reading of the universality of salvation in Barth's theological witness. Rather, my contention is that Greggs has neglected the dialectical nature of Barth's view on this subject. On one hand, Barth repeatedly indicates that Christ is *zum Vornherein* victor over nothingness, and the final salvation of all humankind has been determined from all eternity in Jesus Christ who is at once electing God and elected human. On the other hand, as we shall see anon, Barth is perspicuous that the final condemnation of humankind is not an empty threat.

A striking feature of Greggs' analyses of Barth's position on the question of universal salvation is that they pay far too little attention to the theologian's hamartiology. Greggs' interpretation of Barth relies heavily on the christocentric doctrine of election in CD II/2, and when he references CD IV/3, he almost completely ignores the hamartiology paragraph (§70), citing it sporadically only in passing.<sup>19</sup>

The fact, however, is that Barth's rejection of the *apokatastasis* in CD IV/3 is formulated in the context of his actualistic hamartiology. Without

<sup>15</sup> Greggs, 'Jesus is Victor', p. 204.

<sup>16</sup> Greggs, *Barth, Origen, and Universal Salvation*, p. 30. Greggs cites CD IV/3, pp. 173–80.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* Cf. George Hunsinger, 'Hellfire and Damnation'.

<sup>19</sup> E.g. Greggs, 'Jesus is Victor', p. 208.

detailed consideration of how he develops the section on the condemnation of humankind, it is impossible to understand the full significance of his rejection of the *apokatastasis*.

More specifically, Greggs' interpretation of Barth's position on universal salvation has neglected a highly dialectical aspect of his actualistic ontology in the hamartiology of CD IV/1–3, namely, the proposal that the reality of humankind and the world is determined both from above (Christ) and from below (sinners). Though the determination from below cannot possibly trump that from above, in the final section of §70 Barth tells us that the reality of humankind and the world is determined from two directions by the perfect and future tenses of God's act, and so the prospect of God's condemnation of humankind is not an empty threat.

Here I am partly in agreement with David Congdon in my reserved reception of Greggs' view. In his outstandingly well-balanced 2014 article on Barth's denial of universalism, Congdon concurs with Greggs that 'it is the replacement of the person of Jesus Christ with a principle, rather than any limitation of the salvific work of God, that Barth dismisses in rejecting *apokatastasis*'.<sup>20</sup> For that matter, I, too, have no objection to Greggs' thesis regarding Barth's *methodological* rejection of universalism. However, I am with Congdon on his point that Greggs' view is limited 'to the question of salvation (in a person, not a principle)', and 'it does not go far enough'.<sup>21</sup>

Congdon's article is in fact a response to Crisp's allegation that Barth's rejection of universalism is inconsistent with the Swiss dogmatician's own theology. Congdon aptly points out that most debates over Barth's take on universalism focus too narrowly on the objective necessity of the reconciliation of all things to God, failing to recognise that Barth 'situates theology within the *existential determination* and *subjective participation* of the one called to bear witness to Jesus Christ'.<sup>22</sup> It is precisely 'for this reason', argues Congdon, that Barth 'rejects all worldviews, including universalism'.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> David Congdon, 'Apokatastasis and Apostolicity: A Response to Oliver Crisp on the Question of Barth's Universalism', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 67 (2014), p. 472. See Greggs, 'Jesus is Victor', p. 199.

<sup>21</sup> Congdon, 'Apokatastasis and Apostolicity', p. 472.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 464; emphases added.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* Here Congdon may appear to some to be reading too much Bultmannian reasoning into Barth. The Swiss theologian's rejection of 'worldviews' is far more complicated than the way Congdon presents it in his article. One of Barth's early refutations of the concept of a 'Christian worldview' is found in *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, where he comments that '[t]he notion of a "worldview" [*Weltanschauung*] expresses itself quite clearly: the human being intuits the world from particular viewpoints, perhaps ultimately and supremely from religious, Christian viewpoints. Yet, the

Despite its thoroughness and sophistication, however, Congdon's article falls short of recognising that in CD §70, Barth is emphatic that condemnation is not an empty threat. Congdon in fact agrees with Crisp that 'after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the threat of rejection and condemnation is an empty threat'.<sup>24</sup>

I will take my cue from Congdon's argument that 'it is not enough to say that Jesus is victor if we do not also say that the event of his victory is one in which we are called to participate as a faithful witness', and that 'theology as *Nachdenken* corresponds to this event only insofar as it speaks from and for this existential determination'.<sup>25</sup> I will demonstrate that in CD §70 Barth situates his hamartiology subjectively within the existential actuality of Jesus Christ in the here-and-now to recognise a twofold two-way determination of the final actuality of Adamic history. In light of this actualistic hamartiology, I will show that Hunsinger is right that the description of Barth as a universalist is 'still a common misconception', and Barth's position should properly be described as 'reverent agnosticism' instead.<sup>26</sup>

### Barth on the condemnation of humankind: two clarifications

A possible confusion that needs to be clarified from the outset is the misunderstanding that according to Barth, 'the condemnation of man' is a result of 'the falsehood of man' in the same way that the fall and

human being intuits what he intuits, and the world remains what it is.' Here Barth is offering a (neo-)Kantian critique of the concept of a Christian worldview: as McCormack points out, Barth's famous 1915 dictum, 'the world remains world, but God is God', would always continue to express his 'attempt to overcome Kant by means of Kant'. More specifically, Barth is rejecting the notion of a Christian worldview or world-intuition against the background of German Protestant theology in the nineteenth century, in which the term *Anschauung* carries specific meanings in German idealism's appropriation of the Kantian term *intellektuelle Anschauung*, as well as Schleiermacher's understanding of the intuition of the universe. For Barth, the concept of a Christian *Weltanschauung* is inevitably metaphysical and natural-theological. A worldview as such is an attempt to understand the world apart from Jesus Christ (see CD IV/3.1, p. 257). Thus understood, Congdon's discussion of Barth's rejection of worldviews may not seem to have reached sufficient depth. To Congdon's credit, however, despite the Bultmannian overtones of his terminology, he is right about Barth, if we understand him to be saying that Barth rejects universalism as a natural-theological worldview, and insists that theology needs to find its starting-point in the concrete, particular, and actual event of Jesus Christ. See *Unterricht in der Christliche Religion*, vol. 2 (Zurich: TVZ, 1985), p. 217 (trans. mine). Also see Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 1995), p. 466.

<sup>24</sup> Congdon, 'Apokatastasis and Apostolicity', p. 468.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 480.

<sup>26</sup> Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace*, p. 12.

misery of humankind are respective consequences of human pride and sloth (see CD IV/1–2, §60 and §70). If that were so, condemnation would have been a form of nothingness that is ontologically impossible, and Barth's doctrine of reconciliation would have been rightly described as undialectically universalistic.

However, in contrast to human fallenness and misery, 'the threat entailed by and indeed enclosed in the falsehood of man must be described ... by an incomparably sharper word', namely, 'his condemnation'.<sup>27</sup> Barth explains in simple terms: 'To be condemned is to be judged (*Verurteiltsein*), i.e., to be judged (*verurteilt*) by God.'<sup>28</sup> In other words, whereas fallenness and misery are actual conditions of nothingness that sinners brought upon themselves with their own wilful actions and inactions, the condemnation of humankind is an act of God, and as such it is not a form of *das Nichtige* (see CD III/3, §50). Therefore, divine condemnation cannot be logically ruled out by Christ's eternal triumph over nothingness in any simple way. If the sword of divine condemnation is to finally fall, it would still be God's triumph over nothingness in final historical actuality.

The second misunderstanding that must be clarified is the misconception held by some conservative critics of Barth that since human falsehood is merely a noetic distortion of the true ontological status of humankind, it cannot give rise to anything ultimately real or actual. This is a serious misinterpretation of Barth's actualistic hamartiology.

According to Barth, the falsehood that sinners noetically construct actually gives rise to a new and absurd reality that opposes Christ and the ontological status of humankind in Christ. 'Man is ... forced to live with this distorted image which he has set up by his falsehood and which corresponds to it. As he sees things, so they are, not in themselves, but for him.'<sup>29</sup> In other words, the things within the falsehood that the sinner noetically sets up and perceives actually *are*, albeit not ontically ('not in themselves'). Therefore, the sinner 'must have and experienced them, and so they must have their effect on him. The distorted image has such reality and power in relation to the one who stirs it up by his falsehood.'<sup>30</sup>

Thus understood, what some have called Barth's christological-soteriological objectivism does not imply that the sin of falsehood is unreal and powerless, or that divine punishment is an empty threat. Sure enough,

<sup>27</sup> CD IV/3, p. 462; emphasis added.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 469; emphases added. The German reads, 'Wie er die Dinge sieht, so sind sie.' KD IV/3, p. 540.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.; emphasis added.



even in the sin of falsehood the sinner ‘is still the man whom God created good and who is reconciled to God’ – sin is an ontological impossibility for God’s good creature.<sup>31</sup> Throughout the hamartiology paragraphs, Barth repeatedly contends that humankind ‘has not lost – even in part – the good nature which was created by God, to acquire instead another and evil nature’.<sup>32</sup>

Despite this, however, the sinner who ‘exists in a *subjective reality* alien to and contradicting his *objective reality* (*Wirklichkeit*)’ – even though ‘he has not slipped out of the grasp of the divine power and mercy’ – is ‘obviously a human being punished by God (*von Gott gestrafter Mensch*)’.<sup>33</sup> Here we must bear in mind that Barth, in Congdon’s words, ‘understands the event of election in Jesus Christ to be inseparable from one’s existential participation in it as an apostolic witness’.<sup>34</sup> We cannot speak of the final actuality of humankind by abstractly invoking the doctrine of election – not even the christocentric version that Barth developed in 1936–42. As Hunsinger puts it in his critical review of Greggs’ *Barth, Origen, and Universal Salvation*, ‘for Barth election is the external basis of the cross while the cross is the internal basis of election. Without reference to the cross, the logic of Barth’s doctrine of election can scarcely be understood’.<sup>35</sup>

For Barth, Christ is not only ‘the mirror of election’,<sup>36</sup> but also ‘the mirror of sin’.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, to speak of the final actuality of the history of Adam’s sinful race, we must appeal to the concrete history of Jesus Christ as the history of God’s dealings with sinful *Weltgeschichte*. From our concrete historical situation in light of the history of Christ, we learn that we are under God’s punishment, and this punishment is the anticipation and even, in one sense, the prolepsis, of the condemnation that is to come.

### The dialectical nature of Barth’s actualistic hamartiology

Of course, this punishment of which Barth speaks here is only the temporary divine permission for the sinner to exist ‘in an untrue and falsified situation’

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> CD IV/1, p. 492.

<sup>33</sup> CD IV/3, p. 469; emphases and trans. mine. Here Barth is employing the verb *strafen* as a dialectical wordplay in the Hegelian grammar of the negation of a negation. The German word he uses for ‘falsehood’ is *die Lüge*. While *strafen* on its own means ‘to punish’, the idiom *Lügen strafen* means ‘to belie’. See KD IV/3, p. 540.

<sup>34</sup> Congdon, ‘Apokatastasis and Apostolicity’, p. 466.

<sup>35</sup> George Hunsinger, review of Barth, *Origen, and Universalism: Restoring Particularity* by Tom Greggs, *Modern Theology* 28 (2012), p. 357.

<sup>36</sup> CD II/2, p. 471.

<sup>37</sup> CD IV/1, p. 397.

as 'a bewitched man in a bewitched world'.<sup>38</sup> This punishment is not yet 'the worst thing' – the sinner is 'only moving towards this [worst thing] in this situation and bewitchment'.<sup>39</sup> The 'worst thing', according to Barth, is 'to be sentenced (*verurteilt*), condemned (*verdamm*t) and lost' at the end of world-history.<sup>40</sup> Sure enough, final divine condemnation has not yet actually happened, 'but it is bad enough to be moving towards this'.<sup>41</sup>

So, is it possible that the sword of divine condemnation will finally and actually fall upon some or perhaps all human beings at the end of fallen time? Surprisingly, Barth's answer in CD IV/3 is at once a Yes and a No, and between the Yes and the No we must not assume any theological certainty.

One feature of Barth's actualistic ontology in §70 is that the actualistic correspondences work in two directions: to God's gracious act of election and reconciliation in Christ there must finally correspond perfectly actual faith and obedience in all humankind, but to the human rejection of the divine pardon there must also correspond the sword of divine condemnation. Of course, from the viewpoint of what Christ has already accomplished objectively, that sword has already fallen vicariously on him, but from the viewpoint of actualistic hamartiology and eschatology, that sword which is to fall upon all humankind has not yet fallen. By virtue of the vicarious reprobation and judgement that Christ suffered for all other human beings, that threat of divine condemnation should only carry 'present significance and actuality'.<sup>42</sup>

However, we should never claim theological certainty about the final pardon of all humankind, for it is a 'brute fact' (*es ist nur eben brutal faktisch so*) that 'in refusing the Word of truth' the sinner 'refuses his pardon',<sup>43</sup> and 'it is God's affair whether or when He will take seriously and put into effect this insane desire'.<sup>44</sup> The fact is that in the attempt to change truth into untruth the sinner gives rise to a 'new actuality' that corresponds to human falsehood and contradicts the truth – Jesus Christ – that determines all reality.

There are thus two competing actualities determined by two vectors. The reality of humankind and the world is ultimately determined 'from above (*von oben*)' by the 'powerful and superior reality of God and man' in Jesus

<sup>38</sup> CD IV/3, p. 469.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 465.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 463.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 465–6.

Christ, but 'from below (*von unten*) it is also continually determined by the falsehood of man in a sinister but very palpable manner'.<sup>45</sup>

Of course, the second determination can never trump the first. 'In its reality' the world of Adam's race

is the world which is created good by God and reconciled to Him in Jesus Christ. And in his [the sinner's] own reality he is the man created good by God and justified before and sanctified for Him in Jesus Christ. This is true. And in the true human situation the aspect under which his reality will represent itself to man will necessarily correspond to this truth.<sup>46</sup>

Just as Barth is always emphatic that sin is an ontological impossibility, he stresses that the true reality of humankind and the world created by God 'has not really changed, or been replaced by another reality'.<sup>47</sup> Barth is careful not to describe falsehood as a second god that has any power to compete with Christ who is the true God: 'the falsehood of man has no power to alter or even set aside the reality of God and man in Jesus Christ'.<sup>48</sup>

However, human falsehood does have 'the power ... , to the extent that it is given or left to it by God in His wrath, to be man's punishment as well as his sin by causing the aspect under which this [false] reality represents itself in man to contradict rather than to correspond to the truth which man himself is seeking to transform into untruth'.<sup>49</sup>

The question is not whether the reality of the human situation will finally correspond to human falsehood to the extent that God's condemnation actually occurs (again, sin is not a second god that could in any way compete with Christ the true God). That is, the question is not whether the secondary and false actualistic correspondence of the present reality to human falsehood from below could ever compete with the all-determinative and definitive correspondence of historical actuality to the *Geschichte* of Jesus Christ from above.

That secondary and false actualistic correspondence has no power over Christ. The question, therefore, is not about that false correspondence, but about God's permission of the contradiction: to what extent will God permit the present situation of sinful human actuality to contradict rather than to correspond to God's truth? Will God permit it to the extent that the sinner,

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 477.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 468.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

in rejecting the pardon given to her *zum Vornherein*, actually loses that pardon? That is, will the sword of divine condemnation actually fall?

This is a question that Barth treats with genuinely reverent agnosticism. God's condemnation of humankind 'is not yet pronounced', and 'there is still only the threat and menace of it ... , but these are real enough'.<sup>50</sup> The 'sword has not yet fallen', but 'by reason of his [the sinner's] falsehood his situation is determined by the prospect and expectation of condemnation'.<sup>51</sup>

Once again, divine condemnation is not *das Nichtige*. It is God's act, though this act has not yet taken place. However, the quotation above indicates that this prospective act of God does in some proleptic way determine our present situation.

This is the truly surprising feature of Barth's actualistic ontology in §70: our present reality is determined not only by the perfect tense of salvation, that is, of what Christ has objectively accomplished *a priori*, but also by a future tense of God's act of which we presently have no certainty. 'This future [of divine condemnation] determines (*bestimmt*), characterises, burdens and obscures already the present in which he [the human being] is not yet damned and lost but only moving to his condemnation and perdition.'<sup>52</sup> The fact that we are *really* moving in that direction means that the threat of divine condemnation is *real* and not empty.

### Barth's actualistic hamartiology: dialectical reverent agnosticism

The twofold two-way determinations (from above and from below; by the perfect and future tenses) in the actualistic ontology of §70 give rise to two answers to the question whether the sword of divine condemnation will finally fall.

'First, if this not the case [that the threat will finally be executed], it can only be a matter of the *unexpected* work of grace and its revelation on which we cannot count but for which we can only hope as an undeserved and inconceivable overflowing of the significance, operation and outreach of the reality of God and man in Jesus Christ.'<sup>53</sup> In other words, the determination of the final actuality of Adamic history by the future threat of condemnation means that the doctrine of 'an *apokatastasis* or universal reconciliation as the goal and end of all things' is a 'postulate' that we cannot make 'even though we appeal to the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ'.<sup>54</sup> That is, *pace* Greggs, even with

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 465.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 466. KD IV/3, p. 536.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 477.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

a right theological method of christological particularism, Barth would not maintain any certainty about the final reconciliation of all things to God, 'even though theological consistency might seem to lead our thoughts and utterances most clearly in this direction'.<sup>55</sup>

'Secondly, there is no good reason why we should forbid ourselves, or be forbidden, openness to the possibility that in the reality of God and man in Jesus Christ there is contained much more than we might expect and therefore the supremely unexpected withdrawal of that final threat.'<sup>56</sup> As Barth sees it, with good reason we should be open to the possibility of universal salvation.<sup>57</sup> 'If for a moment we accept the unfalsified truth of the reality which even now so forcefully limits the perverted human situation, does it not point plainly in the direction of the work of a truly eternal divine patience and deliverance and therefore of an *apokatastasis* or universal reconciliation?'<sup>58</sup>

In other words, on one hand we must not 'count on' the *apokatastasis* 'as if we had a claim to it', but on the other hand 'we are surely *commanded* the more definitely to *hope and pray* for it', though we must 'hope and pray cautiously and yet distinctly that, in spite of everything which may seem quite conclusively to proclaim the opposite, His compassion should not fail'.<sup>59</sup> That is, the twofold two-way actuality of God and sinful humankind in Christ proclaims quite conclusively that the execution of the threat of God's final condemnation is to be expected, but at the same time, the same actuality also proclaims that all reality is conclusively determined by God's grace in Christ from and to all eternity. Therefore, for the final reconciliation of all things to God we must reverently hope and pray, but it is not something we can claim with certainty.

In short, the twofold two-directional actualistic ontology of CD §70 means dialectically that hope in the salvation of all humankind and all of world-history is not empty hope, but the threat of divine condemnation is not empty threat either. For this reason, Barth's hamartiology in CD IV/1–3 does not finally come out as empty words. He never fails to take sin seriously, though he never takes it too seriously either. His attitude towards sin as a form of nothingness is always Mozartean, but his attitude towards divine condemnation is profoundly cautious and reverently agnostic.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., pp. 477–8.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 478.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

This article has focused on the context in which Barth offers a fully developed articulation of his rejection of the *apokatastasis*, namely, his actualistic hamartiology in CD §70. My arguments have been built upon Greggs' insight regarding Barth's methodological rejection of universalism and Congdon's important reminder about the subjective and existential character of Barth's theological witness.

Whereas Greggs, Congdon and most other authors who have engaged in the debate over Barth's position on universalism have generally overlooked the context of his actualistic hamartiology, George Hunsinger is a noteworthy exception. His piece on hellfire and damnation is a rare example that draws the reader's attention to CD §70.<sup>60</sup> He reminds us specifically that

when sin is viewed *concretely* ... , it is clear that human freedom cannot be taken for granted as something that we just have ... With respect to grace and freedom, Barth stands in the Pauline tradition as developed by Augustine ... The main characteristic of this tradition is perhaps that it heightens rather than resolves the conceptual tensions between divine sovereignty and human responsibility.<sup>61</sup>

Barth does not attempt to resolve these tensions by 'distorting the actual encounters and renewed decisions at stake in an ongoing divine/human relationship situated in a *living history*'.<sup>62</sup> The actualistic characteristic of his hamartiology means that universal salvation 'is not something we can calculate by a process of abstract reasoning which forgets that God is still God, and that sinners are still sinners. Not even the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ can be used as the basis for such abstractions' (*pace* Congdon).<sup>63</sup> Although Hunsinger's brief treatment of Barth's attitude toward universalism does not investigate into the details of the actualistic hamartiology of CD §70, he is right in describing this attitude as a 'reverent agnosticism'.

Of course, there should be no question that Barth leaves open the question of universal salvation 'not in a neutral fashion, but with a strong tilt toward universal hope'.<sup>64</sup> As we have seen, theological consistency would certainly lead Barth to the conclusion that all shall be saved in the end. Thus Hunsinger reminds us that, although Barth is 'best understood as standing in the

<sup>60</sup> Hunsinger, 'Hellfire and Damnation', pp. 243–7.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 244.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*; emphasis added.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* Cf. Congdon, 'Apokatastasis and Apostolicity', p. 468.

<sup>64</sup> Hunsinger, 'Hellfire and Damnation', p. 243.

tradition of holy silence', this 'does not annul the need for "holy speech"'.<sup>65</sup> Although the sword of divine condemnation is not an empty threat, the gracious Yes of God in which the No is superseded *a priori* from all eternity in the history of Jesus Christ is the definitive and all-determinative word that the church must proclaim and for which she must fervently hope and pray in the firm and certain knowledge of concrete faith.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 243–5.