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Jesus Christ, election and nature: revising Barth during the ecological crisis

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Abstract

Theologians seeking to respond to the ecological crisis seldom turn to the theology of Karl Barth as a resource. In fact, some suggest that his doctrine of God is too monarchical and leads to unnecessary hierarchies between God and humans, or between humans and the rest of nature. This article counters this trend and begins a dialogue with Barth, especially on the place of non-human nature in his thought. While agreeing with the substance of Barth's theology, it is argued a number of critical additions and revisions are appropriate, especially concerning his doctrine of election. The article first briefly outlines Barth's doctrine of election and then, second, examines various New Testament passages on election and non-human nature. This second section will examine the prologue of John's Gospel, Colossians 1:15–20 and Romans 8:18–23. As key texts in Barth's exposition, it will be noted how he passes over important connections between election and nature found in them. Guided by the green exegesis of Richard Bauckham, it will be argued that nature is not merely the stage for the drama between God and humanity but that it is also an object of God's election and thereby participates in reconciliation and redemption. The third part of the article suggests various points of commensurability, correction and addition to Barth's theology arising from the biblical material examined. This includes points concerning theological epistemology, the atonement, anthropology and the theology of nature. For example, Romans 8 suggests that creation groans in anticipation of redemption. Barth's view of the cross, especially the Son's taking up of human suffering, is extended to suggest that the cross is God's way of identifying with the suffering of nature and its anticipation of redemption, and not just human sin and salvation. The most important revision, however, is to be made to Barth's doctrine of election. It may be summarised as follows: in Jesus Christ, God elects the Christian community and individuals for salvation *within the community of creation*. The article concludes by suggesting areas of dialogue with other types of ecotheology, especially ecofeminist forms.

Keywords: Christology, ecotheology, election, green exegesis, Karl Barth, nature.

In a 1987 article Jürgen Moltmann critically reviews Barth's doctrine of creation within the context of the ecological crisis. Moltmann points out that Barth's doctrine of creation was written during the crisis of the Third Reich and its version of European nihilism. While Barth's context is different, he still supplies us with an important message: 'Over against this eschatological nihilism of modern times, in his doctrine of creation he stressed the reliable YES of the Creator and the wonderful goodness of his creation.'[1] Despite this positive focus, Moltmann suggests that Barth's doctrine of creation may be improved in a number of ways; two points are worth noting. First, non-human nature must be included in the eschatological glorification of all things. Moltmann suggests that creation, covenant and glory are not to be separated, and creation itself will participate in the eschaton. In this way, the church's ethical and political action can be properly grounded in a view of salvation which includes the rest of nature. Second, Moltmann correctly suggests that any revision of Barth must begin with the doctrine of God. He points out that Barth's 'doctrine of the Trinity is the blueprint of his doctrine of creation, which can be recognised everywhere. Anyone who thinks that this or that part of the structure of his doctrine of creation has to be changed must therefore be in a position to change his doctrine of the Trinity.'[2] Moltmann argues that Barth's view of God focuses on the single divine subject, is too monarchical and leads to hierarchical notions unacceptable for a contemporary doctrine of creation. Moltmann suggests a social doctrine of the Trinity which would provide a model for reciprocal relations between God and creation, or humanity and creation.

In this article I want to converse with Barth in a different direction. Rather than supplement Barth with a social trinitarianism I want to provide critical additions to his theology, especially his doctrine of election – which is a part of Barth's doctrine of God. Barth's doctrine of election, like his Reformed predecessors, was focused on human salvation. Famously, he suggested that Jesus Christ is the subject and object of election, the electing God and the elected human. In Jesus Christ, God elects the Christian community and individuals for salvation. One of my critical additions to Barth will simply be this: in Jesus Christ, God elects the Christian community and individuals for salvation *within the community of creation*.[3] With this addition, non-human creation has a place secured in the eternal will and purposes of God, and

[1] 'Creation, Covenant and Glory: A Conversation on Karl Barth's Doctrine of Creation', in *History and the Triune God: Contributions of Trinitarian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1991), p. 142.

[2] Ibid., p. 130.

[3] On the community of creation biblically understood, see Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), esp.

Jesus Christ is viewed as the creator and saviour of humanity and nature. The natural world becomes an object of God's electing will and not merely the place in which human election is received.[4] By including nature in the doctrine of election it receives a different ontological status than Barth's instrumentalist view in which it is the 'external basis' or 'theatre' for the covenant. In other words, both humanity and nature are included in the covenant, for all things hold together in Christ (Col 1:17).

I will proceed, first, by briefly outlining Barth's doctrine of election, noting the absence of nature; second, examining sample New Testament passages which support expanding the notion of election; and third, making suggestions on how these passages are both commensurate with Barth and challenge us to make critical additions to his theology.

Barth on divine election

Inspired by the 1936 Calvin congress in Geneva,[5] Barth argues that the traditional Reformed view of election, which suggests God pre-temporally elects some to salvation and others to damnation, needs to be fundamentally revised. Not because it is improper to speak of God's predestination or sovereign grace, or that mercy and justice have no place in election, but because 'the doctrine of election must not begin in *abstracto* either with the concept of an electing God or with that of elected man. It must begin

pp. 64ff. The concept of the community of creation has the advantage of highlighting the reciprocal relation and interdependence between humanity and the rest of nature. As Willis Jenkins demonstrates, both secular and religious environmentalism has tended towards focusing on the value of nature in and of itself, human agency in relation to nature, or how human personhood is ecologically dependent: *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (New York: OUP, 2008), pp. 31–111. All of these approaches have strengths and weaknesses and the idea of the community of creation could be developed in dialogue with these tendencies.

[4] While this article focuses on the doctrine of election, the status of non-human nature, especially in relation to ecological concerns, deserves to be examined in Barth's doctrines of creation and reconciliation as well. See e.g. Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace*, pp. 153 ff. This paper differs from Jenkins in that I am seeking to ground the positive findings in Barth's doctrines of creation and reconciliation more securely in a revised doctrine of election, which precedes both for Barth.

[5] For Barth's own account of the congress see *CD* II/2, pp. 188–92. Bruce McCormack correctly argues that the revised doctrine of election would decisively shape the rest of his theology: *Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (New York: OUP, 1995), pp. 453–63. We begin to see the effects of this christocentric turn even in *CD* II/1 when Barth defines God's being as *actus purus et particularis*. God's being is defined as act and event because God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ is event and act. But antecedent to this revelation, God's triune being is living, active and willing in itself (II/1, pp. 257–72; see McCormack, *Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, pp. 61–3 as well).

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concretely with the acknowledgement of Jesus Christ as both the electing God and elected man' (*CD* II/2, p. 76). In fact, Jesus Christ 'is the election of God before which and without which and beside which God cannot make any other choices' (II/2, p. 94, see pp. 99–103 as well).

He is the electing God insofar as in eternity the Father elects the Son, the Son is obedient, and the Holy Spirit is the bond which ensures this election. In this way, the divine Son is the subject of election (II/2, pp. 101–4, see pp. 99–103 as well). But Jesus Christ is also the object of election as the purpose of the eternal election is to become this man for human salvation (II/2, p. 116). What is more, the movement of God towards the creature which forms the content of election is 'an overflowing of His glory. It can consist only in a revelation and communication of the good which God has and also is in Himself' (II/2, p. 168). This overflowing glory arises from the triune life, for all 'God's willing is primarily a determination of the love of the Father and the Son in the fellowship of the Holy Ghost' (II/2, p. 169). What follows is the justification, salvation from death, exaltation and blessedness of eternal life for humanity. This destiny for humanity corresponds to the divine glory communicated in Jesus Christ (II/2, p. 173).

Nevertheless, while the positive content of election is the salvation of humanity, there is also a negative side. Because of human sin, which falls under God's permissive will, the election of Christ includes the suffering of the cross, which is the judgement of God on human sin (II/2, pp. 120–7 and 161–74). In this way, Jesus Christ takes on double election: he is the elected man who bears the rejection in order that there is only grace available for humanity. Double predestination, traditionally held, reflected the mercy and justice of God; it was God's Yes and No to humanity. Barth maintains this, but it is a reference to God's electing humanity to be a covenant partner and partaker of the divine glory while God the incarnate Son receives the rejection which humanity deserves on the cross (II/2, pp. 161–75).

Election is made effective in humanity as God encounters them first in the community and then as individuals. The community mediates Christ's electing to individuals (II/2, pp. 195–6), who are determined to hear, have faith, and witness to the work accomplished in Christ (II/2, p. 197). Currently this hearing has two forms. Israel represents the divine judgement because it hears but does not believe (II/2, pp. 206–10, 234–7), while the church represents the divine mercy because it hears and believes (II/2, pp. 210–13, 237–40). Following this, the election of the individual is found in the encounter of Jesus Christ and individuals in the church (II/2, p. 310). Whereas each human is already included in God's election in Jesus Christ, in the community this is recognised and received as a real 'event' and 'decision' (II/2, p. 321). While some are called and receive their election in faith,

others, the non-elect, have not (II/2, pp. 345–6). The division between the elect and non-elect, however, is not absolute as the scope of those who receive their election is always growing.

In this ground-breaking reinterpretation of election, however, there is little place for non-human creation – the rest of the heavens and the earth besides humanity. When creation is mentioned in the doctrine of election it is described as the 'sphere' (II/2, p. 11) or 'theatre' of grace (II/2, pp. 172–3). This view of nature is consistent with what Barth says in the doctrine of creation proper.[6] In this description nature is not an object of God's electing in Jesus Christ. What this means, Paul Santmire suggests, is that Barth 'depicts the scene of eternity, . . . the ontological principle of everything, as essentially a *landless* event'.[7] For Barth, creation is 'a kind of stage to allow the eternally founded drama between God and humanity to run its course. So, whereas humanity has a dual status – it is elected in eternity and it is also created "as such", in order to fulfill its eternal determination – the whole world of nature, outside of humanity, has a single status only. It has no eternal determination. Its reality is purely instrumental.'[8] This is an insightful way of putting the problem, that non-human nature only has a single status in Barth's theology. But if nature is to have a place in reconciliation and final consummation it must have a dual status; it must become an object of God's electing in Jesus Christ.

Election and nature in the New Testament: sample passages

Various New Testament passages suggest the inclusion of nature in the election and work of Jesus Christ: the prologue of John's Gospel, the hymn or poem of Colossians 1 and the groaning of creation in Romans 8.[9] I choose these both because Barth is concerned with their exegesis and because they describe the relation of Jesus Christ, election and creation we are inquiring about. While I think Barth is correct to turn to such passages in support of his view of election, in our context we clearly need to say more than he does. Moreover, given Barth's insistence on covenant as the internal basis of and preceding creation it may be argued that it is more appropriate to begin a doctrine of creation with these texts rather than Genesis 1 and 2.

[6] He develops the metaphor of nature as *theatrum gloriae Dei* in *CD* III/1, pp. 44–9.

[7] *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 151.

[8] Ibid., p. 152.

[9] My exegesis of these passages in indebted to Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*. For helpful discussions of the Bible and ecology, besides Bauckham, see Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: CUP, 2009) and Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2014).

First, however, it is important to note how Barth approaches election in his exegesis. He does not always turn to passages which deal explicitly with election, whether of the community or individuals. Rather, his concern is to establish that Jesus Christ is both the object and subject of election. That is, before any decision to create or redeem or glorify, God chooses to become the man Jesus. There are at least two groups of passages which ground Barth's argument.[10] The first group of texts focuses on Jesus Christ as active subject before creation, in pre-temporal eternity.[11] These texts suggest to Barth that there is no strong distinction between the Son as *logos asarkos* and the incarnate word, Jesus is the active agent. Of course, this does not mean there is no place for the pre-existence of the divine Son without the human Jesus, but that becoming human is first in God's will. The second cluster of texts focuses on Jesus as the one who elects his disciples.[12] These passages of Jesus choosing disciples are viewed as an act of divine sovereignty. The discussion below draws from passages from the first cluster.

One of the ways in which the following passages evince Barth's view of election is with the prepositions used to describe Christ's work. Prepositions such as 'in' (*en*), 'through' (*dia*) and 'for' or 'to' (*eis*) are used to describe how Jesus Christ is the active agent in creation and reconciliation. For example, in reflecting on the 'in Him' of Ephesians 1:4 Barth argues that the term 'does not simply mean with Him, together with Him, in His company. Nor does it mean only through Him, by means of that which He as elected man can be and do for them. "In Him" means in His person, in His will, in His own divine choice, in the basic decision of God which He fulfills over against every man. What singles Him out from the rest of the elect ... is the fact that as elected man He is also the electing God, electing them in His own humanity' (II/2, pp. 116–17).

John's prologue (John 1:1–18)

The prologue of John's Gospel provides important biblical support for Barth's doctrine of election (II/2, pp. 95–9). The first three verses identify the divine Word or Logos with God and as God, while verse 14 identifies the Word: 'And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.'[13] Barth wants

[10] As noted by van Driel , *Incarnation Anyway: Arguments for Supralapsarian Christology* (New York: OUP, 2008), pp. 67–72.

[11] These include Eph 1:4, 1:11, and 3:11; Rom 8:29ff.; and Col 1:15; John 1:3ff., Heb 1:2ff.; 1 Peter 1:20; and Rev 13:8.

[12] These include John 13:18, 15:16 and 15:19.

[13] Unless otherwise noted, I am using the NRSV translation.

to emphasise that the divine Word who was God before creation is Jesus of Nazareth. To support this, Barth provides a novel interpretation of verse 2, usually translated as 'He was in the beginning with God'. He suggests that this verse points to verses 14–15 where Jesus Christ is identified as the Word.

Verse 2 begins with *outos en*, most often translated 'He was'. Most see this as a reference to the preceding verse on the divine word. Barth notes, however, that the *outos en* only occurs again in verse 15, when John the Baptist is quoted: 'This was he (*outos en*) of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me"'. So rather than *outos en* referring to the Logos of verse 1, it is looking forward to Jesus Christ mentioned in verse 15. The eternal Word of God, then, is not to be abstracted from the incarnate Word. As Barth summarises, 'in this person we are called upon to recognize the beginning of the Word and decree and election of God, the conclusive and absolute authority in respect of the aim and origin of all things' (II/2, p. 99). Barth draws the strongest possible connection between the divine Word and Jesus. Bruce McCormack helpfully uses the term *incarnandus*, 'to become incarnate', to describe Barth's view of the eternal Son who becomes incarnate. The divine Word before anything else is the Word who will become human.[14]

Whether or not Barth is correct in his interpretation of verses 2 and 15, and he might be, he seems to pass over the important point that the divine Son who is *incarnandus* is the creator. Verses 3–4 state: 'All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.' 'There is no doubt', Barth writes, 'that in Jn. 1:3 (and 1:10) a cosmogenic function is ascribed to the Logos. But there is also no doubt that the Evangelist did not adopt the concept for the sake of this interpretation of it' (II/2, p. 97). It is true of course that John wishes to emphasise the Word or Logos as incarnate, but we cannot ignore the Word as creator, as Barth seems to do. We can see the importance of the divine Word as creator if we view Genesis 1 as the background of the prologue. As Richard Bauckham notes: 'John is not replacing Genesis 1, but he is offering his readers or hearers a way of reading the Genesis account in the light of his Gospel's story of Jesus.'[15] The phrase 'In the beginning' (*en arche*), which is repeated twice, would undoubtedly bring to mind Genesis 1 for the ancient reader. The phrase 'all things' (*panta*) is used in Jewish literature to refer to everything God has created, and the

[14] McCormack , 'Grace and Being', in John Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), pp. 94–5.

[15] Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, p. 162.

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reference to life, light and darkness are certainly echoing Genesis. And of course, in Genesis 1 God creates by speaking, while here John suggests it is the divine Logos or Word which creates. Given this, we cannot pass over Jesus Christ as the creator as Barth does, since creation occurs 'through him' and 'in Him'. If John's prologue supports the notion that Jesus Christ is the subject of election, it also clearly suggests he is the subject of creation as well.

Colossians hymn or poem (1:15–20)

Nevertheless, John's prologue does not go as far as to suggest that non-human creation participates in salvation. While John connects the divine Word's work in creation and reconciliation, the Colossians hymn brings nature more directly into the reconciling work of Christ. In Barth's doctrine of election, the Colossians hymn receives treatment after the discussion of John 1. Again, Barth's point is to establish the basis of election in God's revelation in Jesus Christ, rather than in *loci* abstracted from this. For example, Barth is concerned with Christ being 'before all things' in verse 17 in order to establish the christological basis of election. But the hymn says more than Barth gives it in *CD* II/2.

It appears that Barth realises this in his later theology. In a small-print section in *CD* IV/3 Barth mentions the Colossians hymn briefly, along with other references. In this context, he is describing the relation of Jesus Christ to the Christian community as expressed in the two-fold *Existenzform* of Jesus Christ. The church is defined as the earthly historical *Existenzform* of Jesus Christ which corresponds to his heavenly historical *Existenzform* (IV/1, p. 661). Barth speculates, however, whether it may be appropriate to express a three-fold *Existenzform* of Christ. Besides the Ascended Lord and the church, there is Christ *Pantocrator* – the king and ruler of all things. Barth rhetorically asks: 'Does he not already exist and act and achieve and work as the *Pantocrator*, as the κεφαλὴ ὑπερ πάντα, as the One who alone has first and final power in the cosmos? Concealed though He may be in the cosmos and not yet recognized by it as by His community, does He not already exist in it with supreme reality, with no less reality than He does at the right hand of God the Father or in His community?' (IV/3.2, p. 756). So Barth hints that he may have missed something. He ends the small-print section with regret, as 'we raise but cannot answer here this stimulating question' (ibid.).

Barth is correct. It is necessary to speak of Jesus Christ as ruler of all things according to this passage. The Colossians hymn does include the suggestion that Christ's reconciliation and redemption extends beyond the

church and individual Christians to all of creation. The hymn is divided into two strophes.[16]

The first strophe deals with the creation of all things in Christ (vv. 15–17), while the second deals with the reconciliation of all things in Christ (vv. 18–20). The hymn begins with 'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation' (v. 15). The subject of the whole hymn is Jesus Christ, for only as incarnate can Jesus be the image of the invisible God. As in other passages, this text seems to support Barth's view of Jesus Christ as the agent of election and not merely the recipient. For example, it is stated that Jesus Christ is both 'the firstborn of all creation' (v. 15) and 'the firstborn from the dead' (v. 18). The first description is probably a reference to Christ's pre-existence and his role as creator, while the second is a reference to his own resurrection and his headship over the new creation.[17] In both sections Christ's relation to all things is described with three basic prepositions: 'in' (*en*), 'through' (*dia*) and 'for/to' (*eis*). This supports Barth's view that Jesus Christ is the agent in the full economy of God's works. Similar to John, the first strophe states that 'in him all things in heaven and earth were created'. But this is given more emphasis and detail: 'things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers'. There is no mistaking here the scope of Christ's work; it refers to anything and everything in creation, including political authorities of various sorts. It continues, 'all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together' (vv. 16b–17).

The second strophe turns to the work of Christ in reconciliation (vv. 18–20). Christ is the 'head of the body, the church' and he leads us into salvation 'as the firstborn from the dead' (v. 18), a reference to the eschaton. There is also a reference to the 'fullness of God' dwelling in him (v. 19), an allusion to Christ's divinity. But this passage goes beyond John's prologue as it includes the 'all things' (*panta*) in the work of reconciliation. The resurrection of Christ occurs so that 'he might come to have first place in everything' (v. 18b); or, 'through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven' (v. 20). Here repeating 'all things' indicates the reach

[16] The following is dependent on Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, pp. 151–61.

[17] But we cannot draw too sharp a distinction between the pre-existent and incarnate Christ, for 'the pre-existent Christ was already destined to be the one who would make God visibly present in his world by entering creaturely existence as Jesus. . . . Therefore the hymn is not an invitation to think of a cosmic Christ who is "bigger that Jesus" but to recognize the universal significance precisely of Jesus Christ, the man in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell' (Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, p. 153). Such a reading of this hymn may fulfil Barth's desire to root election, and all of God's works, in Christ and to ensure an understanding of the logos *asarkos* as *incarnandus*.

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of Christ's reconciling work; it includes the heavens and earth, things visible and invisible and political powers. Clearly, the peace made through the cross is totally comprehensive. As Richard Bauckham states: 'Because Christ is the creator of all things, the destiny of all things is bound up with his. Because all things were made "for him", he will ensure that they reach that goal. This means that the Gospel story – the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus – is focal and decisive for all creation.'[18]

While this hymn supports Barth's view that Jesus Christ is both the subject and object of election, it also suggests that all things are or will be reconciled in Christ. And if this is the case, then they are an object of his electing as well. If the creation and reconciliation of all things are 'in', 'through' and 'for' Jesus Christ, then surely all of nature is an object of election. There is, then, a third element of Christ's form of existence, Christ as *Pantocrator*.

The groaning of creation (Romans 8:18–23)

Exegesis of Romans figures prominently in Barth's discussion of election. In fact, Romans 9–11 undergirds Barth's discussion of the election of the community; in its forms of Israel and the church. After each major exposition a fine-print section provides exegesis of these chapters.[19] However, there is no significant mention of Romans 8:18–23 in Barth's exposition.[20] While this passage does not explicitly mention election, it is a part of a discussion in which believers, whom we may presume are elect, are instructed on living in the Spirit and working out their salvation. In fact, in the verses which follow we find discussions of foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification and glorification (8:29–30), and chapters 9–11 certainly deal with election in discussing Israel and the church. So it may be argued that Paul does seem to suggest that creation accompanies the election and salvation of the sons and daughter of God.

In the verses preceding the passage, Paul is describing for his readers the difference between life in the Spirit and life in the flesh. As those led by the Spirit they are adopted as children of God and are heirs of future salvation, and so 'we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him' (8:17). But Paul includes the parallel suffering and future glory of nature:

> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but

[18] *Bible and Ecology*, p. 155.

[19] *CD* II/2, pp. 202–5, 213–33, 240–59, and 267–305.

[20] There is only mention in passing of the groaning of creation when Barth discusses the rejection of the individual (II/2, p. 494).

> by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (vv. 20–3)

First, it should be noted how this passage describes the present state of creation: it was 'subjected to futility', it is in 'bondage to decay' and 'groaning in labour pains'. For Paul, despite the fact that creation can reflect God's 'eternal power and divine nature' (Rom 1:20), there is also an element of suffering and chaos. When he mentions that creation was subjected to this state most commentators suggest that he is referring to the curse of Adam in Genesis 3:17: 'cursed is the ground because of you'. In Genesis there is a connection between human sin and the suffering of creation.[21]

But following this, second, if there is an intimate connection between human sin and the bondage and suffering of creation, there is also hope for creation: 'hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (v. 21) as Paul puts it. Creation will be liberated in the eschaton along with the final salvation of humanity. If there is a connection between human suffering, in its various forms, and the suffering of the non-human creation, there is a connection between their salvation. Paul suggests that they are both included in the one work of God in Christ Jesus.

We can assume, third, that underlying this suffering and glorification of humanity is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There is hope in the midst of human suffering because Jesus' crucifixion and death was followed by his resurrection. But how far can we extend this? If Jesus Christ suffers because of our suffering, and rises for our resurrection, could it not also be said that he suffers and dies for the suffering, death and decay of nature and rises for its glorification? If God's work in Jesus Christ is one, if all that we call reconciliation and redemption are 'in Christ', then Jesus Christ died and rose again for the healing and glorification of nature as well.

[21] Richard Bauckham, however, suggests an alternative background. He argues that the passage is best understood in light of what he calls the mourning texts of creation found in the Israelite prophets. In the Romans passage he notes that what is usually translated the 'groaning in labour pains' of all creation is actually two verbs: *sustenazein* and *sunodinei*. The first verb literally means 'to groan together' or 'to groan with', and could easily be translated as mourn. See *Bible and Ecology*, pp. 92ff.

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Implications for revising Barth

How may we relate the foregoing discussions to Barth's theology of nature in general and his doctrine of election in particular? What can be affirmed and what needs to be revised? I will proceed with six brief points. The first two will briefly mention two points of commensurability between Barth and these New Testament texts. The next four themes concentrate on additions and revisions to Barth's theology. While these suggestions are not comprehensive I hope they elicit further discussion and reflection on Barth's theology as it pertains to ecological concerns.

First, epistemologically, the New Testament passages examined suggest that knowledge of the creator comes via knowledge of Jesus Christ. In John's prologue it is clear that in reimagining Genesis 1 the writer is suggesting that Christ is the creator, this same Jesus who 'became flesh and lived among us' (John 1:14). Similarly, Jesus Christ is agent of both creation and reconciliation in the two strophes of the Colossians hymn. Therefore, we do not reflect on the cosmos itself to find its ultimate meaning and purpose, we look to Jesus Christ who is revealed as its Lord. We only know of the 'cosmic Christ' or Christ *Pantocrator* if we know the crucified and risen Jesus. This is an insight that Barth persistently follows in his doctrine of creation, especially in his resistance to natural theology.

Second, all of creation is included in eschatological salvation. Again, especially clear in Romans and Colossians, nature is taken up in the final salvation and glorification of humanity in the eschaton. We have established this much. While I have argued that Barth's view of election is not inclusive of nature, there are passages in the *Church Dogmatics*, however, that seem to suggest nature partakes of future salvation.[22] We see creation's participation in redemption in a remarkable, albeit ambiguous, passage in Barth's doctrine of providence in *CD* III/3. Under the category of preserving (*conservatio*), Barth suggests that, although humans and other creatures live and act within a limited time, they 'continue before Him eternally'. Everything that was, is and will be is 'open and present to Him, within its own limits' (III/3, p. 89). In this eternal preservation Barth includes non-human creation. As he states: 'Therefore nothing will escape him: no aspect of the great game of creation' (III/3, p. 90). If Barth is speaking of the final redemption in this

[22] One of Oliver Crisp's concerns with Barth's doctrine of creation is that it lacks a notion of ultimate 'divine self-glorification': 'Karl Barth on Creation', in Sung Wook Chung (ed.), *Karl Barth and Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 94. If this passage is any indication, Barth would have eventually developed a form of self-glorification in relation to all of creation. One might also mention Barth's discussion of the 'lights of creation' in *CD* IV/3, esp. pp. 163–4.

passage, which seems to be the case, then it is inclusive of all of creation.[23] Nevertheless, this is a section of Barth's doctrine of providence and not election or the doctrine of God.

Third, however, Barth needs a more developed view of Christ's agency in creating. While John and Colossians declare Jesus Christ or the divine Word as an agent in creation, this is lacking in Barth's view. While Barth is correct epistemologically to insist that the true meaning of creation and human existence is found in the revelation of God in Christ, he says less about the agency of the Word in creation. As Colin Gunton has suggested, 'Barth does not have so much a conception of the christological mediation of creation as a stress on the analogy between the Son's and the world's distinction from the Father.'[24] But this brings us into the doctrine of creation proper, and so I mention it only in passing as it would need to be developed further.

Fourth, another theme found in these passages is an emphasis on both the cross *and* resurrection of Jesus for inclusive salvation. In his doctrine of election, Barth's focus is predominantly on the cross, as Jesus Christ takes on the wrath of God which sinful humanity deserves. There is much less emphasis on the resurrection, though it is viewed as a manifestation of God's steadfastness and vindication of Jesus' life and death (II/2, p. 126).[25] A more important role for the resurrection and incarnation is found in Colossians: 'he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things'

[23] It is unclear, however, what exactly Barth means by eternal preservation, whether he is including the eschatological consummation or just the preservation of things in God's life prior to the eschaton. While there are indications that this passages includes eschatology (as van Driel reads it, *Incarnation Anyway*, pp. 113–14), some suggest that Barth is here only speaking of the preservation of creatures in the times of creation and reconciliation and not the final resurrection; see e.g. Geoffrey Bromiley *Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 144.

[24] *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 158. Or, as Thomas Torrance asks, 'But why did he not offer an account of creation from a fully overarching trinitarian perspective, as was surely demanded by his doctrine of God? What then becomes of Barth's claim that the doctrine of the Trinity must be allowed to govern all our understanding of God's interaction with us in creation and redemption?' *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), p. 132.

[25] For a fuller exposition of the resurrection in Barth's theology see Dale Dawson, *The Resurrection in Karl Barth* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), who convincingly argues that the resurrection for Barth is the unveiling of Jesus Christ as reconciler and Son of God to believers. The resurrection spans functions in epistemology, christology and anthropology.

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(vv. 18, 20). Here God's reconciliation with all things does not privilege the cross but must include incarnation and resurrection as well; especially since the latter inaugurates the new creation.

But how are we to think of the cross and resurrection in relation to the salvation of nature? It seems that one would have to view the cross as not only a substitution for human sin but also as God's way of identifying with creation's suffering.

If the cross is God's wrath poured out on sinful humanity, as Barth suggests, this could imply that the wrath of God is not for non-human creation, but for humans who are fallen. This would follow the idea that creation in some sense suffers because of human sin but that it is not fallen itself. In this case Jesus' death is not a substitute for nature (whatever that would mean), but nevertheless nature will participate in the glory of his resurrected life. But a complementary way to link cross and resurrection to nature is by relating Jesus-history to the order and disorder within creation. Biblically and otherwise, it is obvious that there is much order and design within creation, yet this is accompanied by chaos, suffering and death. To follow the logic of the Romans passage, the death of Christ is the way in which God identifies with a suffering creation, while the power of the resurrected Christ extends to all of the created order. In this view, overcoming the present suffering of both humanity and creation are a part of the one work of Christ's death and resurrection. His death identifies with the suffering in nature, while the power of his resurrected life will be shared with all creation as it is glorified.[26] From this perspective, the cross is not only a substitute but the way in which God identifies with the chaos, suffering and death in nature.

This expansion, I would argue, is not in opposition to Barth's theology, at least the later christology of *CD* IV. As Bruce McCormack has pointed out, while Barth does not reject immutability he does reject impassibility. Barth grounds this rejection not on a general notion that a loving God must identify with a suffering creation, but rather christologically.[27] For Barth, there is a real humility, obedience and, to use McCormack's phrase,

[26] Barth comes close to such a view in the section 'The Light of Life' in *CD* IV/3. There he affirms that in view of the revelation arising from Christ's resurrection the true source of the lights of creation is identified and that as they shine they glorify God. But Barth's focus there is Ps 19 and not Roms 8, so he does not affirm that creation suffers and is in need of redemption.

[27] Bruce McCormack, 'Divine Impassibility or Simply Divine Constancy? Implications of Karl Barth's Later Christology for Debates over Impassibility', in James Keating and Thomas Joseph White (eds), *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 150–86. See the full article for the relation of this to patristic and Reformation perspectives, including how Barth avoids various heresies.

'receptivity' of the eternal Son who accepts the suffering and death of the cross. It is not as if an eternal and impassible deity suddenly tried something new by becoming incarnate and dying. But rather the suffering and death of Jesus Christ corresponds to the eternal election of the Son, which contains humility, obedience and receptivity in relation to the Father's majesty and command. According to this reading of Barth, God in the particularity of the incarnation takes up suffering into his own life. This, it would appear, complements the reading of Romans suggested above, that God in Christ not only identifies with the suffering of humans but creation as well.

Fifth, another critical addition is to rethink the fundamental connection between humanity and the rest of nature. As is evident in both Colossians and Romans, the creation, reconciliation and redemption of humanity and the rest of the cosmos occurs through the one work of God in Jesus Christ. While to some extent the Bible and the Christian faith are anthropocentric, as the incarnation attests to, humans cannot be abstracted from being embedded within creation; whether as created or redeemed.

One of the implications of this for Barth's theology is that his instrumentalist description of creation as the 'sphere' or 'theatre' for the drama of the covenant (III/3, pp. 44–9) would need to be altered. These descriptions and images contribute to a view that sees creation as outside the scope of Christ's reconciling and redeeming work. We need a better description or metaphor for creation. Richard Bauckham has suggested '*theocentric* community of creation' to describe the relation of humanity to the rest of creation. He states that 'we are fellow-members of the community of God's creation, sharing the same Earth, affected by processes which affect each other, with common interests at least in life and flourishing, with the common end of glorifying the Creator and interdependent in the ways we do exactly that'.[28] Whatever the metaphor or description, however, it is clear that humans are embedded in nature, both in creation and redemption.

Another implication is that Barth's anthropology would need to be broadened. Barth develops his theological anthropology in *CD* III/2 by suggesting humans exist in a four-fold relation: to God, other people, self (soul and body) and time. This anthropology would have to be expanded to include humanity's relation to non-human creation as well, a concept of personhood wherein humanity's dependence and responsibility towards nature are highlighted. A fifth relation, then, incorporating biology and shared space could be added.[29]

[28] *Bible and Ecology*, p. 88.

[29] This connection is often noted in religious environmentalism; see Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace*, pp. 93ff.

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Sixth, the most important addition is that non-human nature needs to be included in the doctrine of election. If Jesus Christ is the electing God, as these passages suggest, then the object of his election is not only the community and individuals but 'all things'. These texts clearly suggest that Jesus Christ reconciles and redeems not only humans but non-human nature as well. So if the creation and redemption of nature occurs 'in', 'through' and 'for' Christ, as it does for humanity, then nature needs to be protologically secured in the doctrine of election; it deserves to have a dual status, a secure ontological place, in God's pre-temporal will. To add to Barth, then, the summary of election should read: in Jesus Christ, God elects the Christian community and individuals for salvation *within the community of creation*. Not only would this be faithful to these New Testament passages, it would also be faithful to Barth's suggestion that creation accompanies reconciliation and the lights of creation shine forth reflecting God's glory, as explicated in *CD* IV/3.

One implication following this critical addition is rethinking Barth's formula for the relation of covenant and creation. Barth argues that the covenant is the internal basis of creation and creation is the external basis of covenant (III/1, pp. 94ff.). This two-fold principle serves a number of positive functions.[30] The problem with the axiom as it now stands, however, is that it does not seem to support the claim that nature is included in reconciliation and redemption. One of the problems of course is terminology. Does creation in this formula refer to the material reality of all that God has created or does it refer to God's act of creation? If it refers to the material reality of all that God has created then creation cannot be external to the covenant if it participates in reconciliation and redemption. If, however, creation refers to the acts of creation (and preservation) then, yes, one can understand the covenant as its presupposition or internal basis. So the danger of Barth's formula as it now stands is that external language can leave one with the impression that non-human nature is outside God's salvific plans. Barth's formula would need to be further clarified or revised.[31]

[30] Epistemologically, for Barth knowledge of the creator does not occur by reflecting on the creature or creation, but through God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Or, ontologically, the axiom suggests that creation and covenant are two distinct though related works. The formula also protects a Christian doctrine of creation from the twofold problem of a godless world and a worldless God. See Eberhard Busch, *The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth's Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 180ff.

[31] If election refers to God's primal and eternal self-determination which shapes all of his temporal and external works *ad extra*, then perhaps Barth's basic goals can be secured by providing a different axiom along the following lines: election is the internal basis of the external works of creation, reconciliation and redemption. In this formula internal

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Conclusion

Contrary to Moltmann's suggestion that an ecologically responsible theology after Barth must replace his doctrine of God, in this article I have argued for critical revisions and additions to his theology, especially the doctrine of election. In dialogue with various New Testament passages it was suggested that an interpretation of humanity's election in Jesus Christ must include non-human nature as well. It is clear from these passages that Jesus Christ as the subject of election includes the rest of the cosmos. I suggested that humanity is elected for fellowship with God *within the community of creation*. This leads to a number of revisions and additions to Barth's theology. This obviously secures nature as not merely the place in which human salvation occurs but also recognises that it not only is created by and glorifies God but also participates in God's salvific work.

While I have suggested a number of internal revisions in Barth theology, in conclusion it might be helpful to note a few areas of dialogue. First, to state it briefly, Barth's own understanding of the rise of modernity, with its godless world and worldless God, would need to be brought into dialogue with the accounts of other political theologies of nature. Following this, second, a key concern of ecotheologians, especially feminist and womanist scholars, is the modern ideology of domination, which includes not only the problem of humanity over nature, but a critique of domination from the perspectives of gender, race and class as well. A possible dialogue could be made between this critique and Barth's doctrine of *Das Nichtige* (*CD* III/3, pp. 289ff.), the third ontological reality beside God and his good creation which God does not elect and will. This doctrine, written to express the negative and destructive possibilities within creation could provide a theological foundation for the critique which many ecotheologians bring against certain modern economic and cultural developments. Conversely, Barth's critique of various forms of pantheism, in which God is thought of as an immanent principle in nature or history, would be an antidote to this tendency as expressed in various forms of contemporary ecotheology.

But why turn to Barth in the first place? Why go through all the trouble of critically reading and revising Barth's theology? Surely there are theological interlocutors better attuned to the theological values needed for a constructive ecotheology. There are various reasons to turn to Barth, not the least of which that he was one of the greatest theologians of the last century. But other than this one of the key issues Barth is dealing with in his theology is European nihilism – as Moltmann pointed out. In his own way, Barth was calling out

refers to God's eternal plans and determination, while external refers to his creating and salvific acts.

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in his context for the Christian church to return to its proper foundation in Jesus Christ and away from the destructive and nefarious forces which would betray God's Yes to humanity and creation. Barth is relevant because, behind the ecological crisis and the human injustices which encircle it, is a continuous refusal to accept the goodness and faithfulness of God the creator and creation as gift and benefit. Looking to Barth as a guide, even if we need to critique or supplement his view, would enable us to see clearly our present crisis in light of God's revelation in Christ – which ultimately proclaims hope.

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