

RESEARCH ARTICLE

What difference does one's view of God make in understanding sin and salvation? Some suggestions from Karl Barth

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Abstract

This article argues that views of sin and salvation are shaped by one's view of God. Thus, whenever it is thought that God is a metaphor that theologians can change to attain a desired social or psychological result, then the true meaning of sin and salvation are lost. Relying on Karl Barth's view of Jesus as the Judge judged in our place, this article argues against ideas that sin can no longer be understood as self-will, and that salvation must be understood only as our working for a better world. Such views fail to recognise that, since only God can reveal God, the true meaning of sin is and remains most visible today in our attempts to redefine God and salvation in social and psychological rather than strictly theological terms.

Keywords: Christ; God; grace; righteousness; salvation; sin

Over the last thirty years or so it has become customary to argue that both sin and salvation must be redefined in order to speak properly not only of God but of salvation either as 'humanisation' or as piecing together the earth, conceptualised as the body of God, by taking steps to overcome the poisoning of the ecosystem. The problem I shall identify, however, is that for those who conceptualise the world as God's body, salvation is not ascribed to a sovereign act of grace on the part of God in reconciling the world to himself, which took place once for all in Jesus Christ, but to the actions of many supposed 'saviours' preserving the earth from destruction. In other words, when salvation is equated with humanity working for a better world, the Christian concept of salvation by grace through faith is undermined. According to the problematic views I will discuss in this article, sin could no longer be described as self-will because only those with power over others could commit such a sin.¹ This understanding of sin, however, is extremely problematic just because it is not based on the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. That may seem a strange remark. But I believe, among contemporary theologians, Karl Barth was exactly right in claiming that there is, so to speak, an

¹Of course poisoning the ecosystem could be understood as an instance of sin as pride or self-will, since it could be taken to imply a presumed sovereignty on the part of humanity that is inconsistent with God's own sovereignty as Lord and saviour of the world; but this is not the perspective that tends to be adopted by the theologians under consideration here.

unprofitable understanding of sin, which always arises whenever sin is not understood in light of Christ's forgiving grace.

In this article therefore I hope to spell out some views of sin and salvation, which are not based on revelation, and which, I will contend, are therefore problematic for at least two reasons. First, they misunderstand the depth of human sin and the nature of our alienation from God and the brokenness which follows from it. Second, because they base their view of sin on a conception of God that is antithetical to the God revealed in Jesus Christ, they espouse some version of self-justification and thus fail to understand the proper meaning of salvation. I will begin my discussion by citing Ellen Leonard, who, relying on the thought of Sallie McFague, argued that 'It is the task of theology to revision God in the light of contemporary experience, especially the experience of the excluded ones.'² This argument is based on at least two seriously flawed presuppositions: (1) that human experience can or should be the starting point for understanding God, sin and salvation; and (2) that since all knowledge of God is metaphorical, God should be understood not from revelation in its identity with Jesus Christ, but rather from those experiences that matter most to us, such as motherhood, love and friendship. Hence, God would be understood not just as Father, Son and Holy Spirit but as mother, lover and friend.

I say this understanding of God is faulty because the Christian God was and is the eternal Father, Son and Holy Spirit, whose name is confessed on the basis of God's revelation as disclosed not only in the Old Testament to Moses, but in the New Testament by Jesus himself with the saying that no one comes to the Father except through him (John 14:6). In contrast to this biblically based confession, Leonard's view of God is a projection of peoples' own experiences, and to that extent has nothing to do with who God is in himself. It amounts to the construction of an idol that results in the idea that we must do what only God can and does do for us, since God alone is the one who enables true human freedom precisely by freeing us from the kind of self-reliance that is basic to sin. As Barth once said, we must expect 'everything from *Jesus Christ* and from *Jesus Christ everything*; that He is unceasingly recognized as the way, the truth, and the life (Jn. 14.6)', because any idea of God constructed in abstraction from faith in him is in fact the creation of an idol.³ Serious implications follow. Knowing God in Jesus Christ means that he himself discloses to us the real nature of sin, because he himself took our sinful nature to himself in the incarnation precisely to overcome our sin by forgiving it. But the essence of sin as self-will is in reality only overcome in him and thus can only be truly recognised by faith in him as the Judge judged in our place.

The point of this article then is that theologians such as Leonard, Sallie McFague, Gordon Kaufman and others who adhere to their method (which has similarities to that of Paul Tillich) all think of sin in ways that undermine its seriousness. This leads them to change the meaning of salvation, so that salvation, for them, is no longer an act of God's forgiving grace recognisable only in Christ, but the human attempt to

²Ellen Leonard, 'Experience as a Source for Theology', *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 43 (1988), p. 56.

³Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 13 vols. (hereafter *CD*), ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–74), II/1, p. 320. Importantly, Barth insisted that 'We cannot say anything higher or better of the "inwardness of God" than that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and therefore that He is love in Himself without and before loving us, and without being forced to love us. And we can say this only in the light of the "outwardness" of God to us, the occurrence of His revelation' (*CD* I/2, p. 377).

create a more peaceful and better world. The end result of this misunderstanding is a version of self-justification that may sound appealing, but is theologically as well as practically unhelpful for human flourishing. This is the case because the very assumption that we are saved by creating a better world places us at enmity with the grace of God actualised in Jesus Christ, since it means that we fail to rely on him alone as the one who liberates us from sin as self-will, which takes the form of pride, sloth and falsehood as we shall see. Such action finally is a form of self-justification, which flies in the face of the confession that we are saved only by grace through faith. What I will illustrate in this article is that every attempt to redefine who God is in order to attain a desired social, ecological or political result illustrates that such self-reliance is just another manifestation of human sin either as pride or as sloth or falsehood – and as such is much more dangerous than is normally supposed by its advocates.

Barth on sin

It is no accident that Karl Barth understood sin not only as pride, sloth and falsehood, but maintained that we could only know the true meaning of sin as that has been disclosed to us in Jesus Christ himself since he is in fact the one who takes our sin to himself in the incarnation to overcome it. He is, as Barth said, the Judge judged in our place exactly because he himself is God acting for us as the incarnate Word. So Barth argued that Jesus Christ himself in his true humanity and true deity could only be known ‘in the particular way in which He gives Himself to be known’.⁴ Consequently,

What human nature is as His, and also what ‘flesh’ is as the human ‘un-nature’ which He has assumed – both human nature and this perversion in which He has made it His own can be learned only with and from Him, just as it is only with and from Him, and not from a general concept of deity, that we can learn who and what God is, and therefore His divine nature.⁵

These are loaded assertions and Barth’s entire theology is here on display.⁶ For Barth, ‘Our sin is no longer our own. It is His sin, the sin of Jesus Christ. God – He Himself as the obedient Son of the Father – has made it His own. And in that way He has judged it and judged us as those who committed it.’⁷ It is, however, only in Jesus himself that we can see the true meaning of evil as our opposition to God. We are those ‘in whose place Jesus Christ came to convert us to Himself. A confession of faith which . . . was not ready to be a confession of sin would not be a confession of faith.’⁸ Consequently, in Christ

We are summoned to accept our life on this presupposition, as those who are liberated, whose sin is cancelled and forgiven in Him: in the genuine confidence that

⁴Barth, *CD IV/2*, p. 26.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Barth carefully avoided any docetic view of Jesus’s sinlessness, insisting that ‘If anything is in bitter earnest it is the fact that God Himself in His eternal purity and holiness has in the sinless man Jesus taken up our evil case in such a way that He willed to make it, and has in fact made it, His own’ (*CD IV/1*, p. 237). Jesus’s sinlessness therefore consisted in the fact that ‘He did not refuse to be delivered up and therefore to take the place of us sinners’ (*ibid.*).

⁷Barth, *CD IV/1*, p. 238.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 241.

our being in sin (as our own) belongs to God and not to us, that the responsibility which we owe Him in this matter has been borne by Him. We do not believe in Jesus Christ if this is not our fully assured confidence.⁹

Barth always insisted that we could only know God through God himself precisely because God was the hidden God. In other words, since creation is other than God, nothing in creation has the power to disclose him. This is why Barth argued that it 'is because the fellowship between God and us is established and continues by God's grace that God is hidden from us. All our efforts to apprehend Him by ourselves shipwreck on this.'¹⁰ Barth claimed that we resemble what we can apprehend, and this applies to our knowledge of the world in which we live. But he argued, 'we do not resemble God'. To this, one might object by arguing that we were created in God's image. And Barth would respond that the 'fact that we are created in the likeness of God means that God has determined us to bear witness to His existence in our existence'. However, that does not mean 'that we possess and discover an attribute within ourselves on the basis of which we are on a level with God'. That was indeed the sin of Adam who 'missed his true determination and fell into sin'. It is precisely because 'we do not find in ourselves anything which resembles God' that 'we cannot apprehend Him of ourselves'.¹¹

Barth maintained that we are in an original unity with what we can apprehend; but we are in no such unity with God, because God is the creator and we are creatures. For that reason (as well as because we are sinners who are at enmity with God in ourselves since the fall), we simply cannot 'conceive God of ourselves'; however, Barth also argued that we are 'made like God by His grace in Jesus Christ' so that we do 'become one with God by His grace in Jesus Christ' – but only by that grace.¹² To recognise the fact that of ourselves we cannot speak rightly either of God as the eternal Father, Son and Holy Spirit or of ourselves as forgiven sinners in Christ, is to recognise God's hiddenness such that: 'The beginning of our knowledge of God – of this God – is not a beginning which we can make with Him. It can be only the beginning which He has made with us' in Jesus Christ.¹³ Thus, Barth asserted that 'No one has ever said, or can say, of himself, in virtue of the dynamic of his words, what God is; God is inexpressible, *ineffabilis*'.¹⁴

Here we reach the heart of the matter. We simply cannot know the Christian God apart from the grace of God in its identity with Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word. That is why knowledge of God can only take place in faith. Hence, 'the insight that God is hidden from us is the infallible indication of the fact that it is by God Himself – namely, by His revelation – that we are led to the knowledge of Him, that we and our knowledge do not stand outside and afar off but in the very presence of God Himself'.¹⁵ What this finally meant for Barth is that 'God is known by God, and only by God; because even as an action undertaken and performed by [us], knowledge of God is objectively and subjectively both instituted by God Himself and led to its

⁹Ibid., p. 242.

¹⁰Barth, *CD II/1*, p. 188.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., p. 189.

¹³Ibid., p. 190.

¹⁴Ibid. Importantly, Barth continues: 'He is not *invisibilis* and *ineffabilis* in the same way as the infinite, the absolute, the indeterminate, the spirit in the world, can also be described as invisible and inexpressible.'

¹⁵Ibid., p. 192.

end by Him; because God the Father and the Son by the Holy Spirit is its primary and proper subject and object.¹⁶

Before proceeding further let me just add here that there is a parallel between what Barth said about knowledge of God and our relationship to the righteousness of God which he spoke of early in his career. In our pride and then in our despair, we discover that the God we think we can know on our own is merely a reflection of our own unrighteous construction. We sense the need for God's righteousness, which is indeed our deepest need, but we do not allow God's own righteousness to enter our lives because we think we can achieve this ourselves. This is 'the really tragic, the most fundamental, error of mankind'.¹⁷ As sinners we rely on our moral ideals, the state and our religious righteousness to overcome our own unrighteousness, finally asking whether God himself is righteous in view of 'all that is now happening in the world'.¹⁸ With this question it becomes evident that, relying on ourselves, we are in fact 'looking for a righteousness without God ... we are looking, in truth, for a god without God and against God'.¹⁹ That is what leads from pride to despair. It is that self-reliant search for God that is hopeless because what is known is in fact an idol, as a creation of our unrighteous self-will, and not the living God.²⁰

What then is the sin that has in fact been overcome in the reconciling acts of God's revelation in Christ? In sum it is our self-will, understood as our refusal to live by grace and by faith. It is our failure to acknowledge God as he is: God *for us* in his Word and Spirit. For Barth, then, the only thing we really need to know of persons who think they can live independently of Jesus Christ is that they are the ones who 'brought Jesus Christ to the cross and that in this same cross [their] sins are forgiven'.²¹ From this, Barth insisted that everything said about our relationship to God, including the fact that, as sinners, God justified and sanctified us in Christ, can only be said from the vantage of our new being in Christ himself. What we see in Christ, however, is the fact that Christ himself 'has suffered the being of man at enmity with grace in terms not merely of what came on Him from without, from man's side, in the place of God, but also – and this is more – in terms of what came on Him from within, from God's side, in the place of man'.²² He has, Barth said, 'borne the far greater burden, the righteous wrath of God against those who are enemies of His grace, the wrath which must fall on us'; we are disclosed as the enemies of God's grace because it is we 'who are accused and convicted by the crucifying of Jesus Christ'.²³ Human beings do the very thing that

¹⁶Ibid., p. 204.

¹⁷Karl Barth, 'The Righteousness of God', in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978), pp. 14–15.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 22.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Barth, *CD* II/1, p. 162.

²²Ibid., p. 152. Sin, Barth held, means that 'Always and everywhere [one] is guilty of responding to the grace of God, not with a corresponding thankfulness, but in one or many forms of his wretched pride' (*CD* IV/1, p. 489). There is 'no reason or cause for any such act' (ibid.). But in committing it we disrupt the order of creation and place ourselves at enmity with God and ourselves as determined by God for fellowship with him. Importantly, Barth also insisted that 'grace would not be grace, the serious and effective address of God to man, the effective establishment of fellowship with him, if God did not oppose man's opposition to Himself ... if He ignored the miserable pride of man, if the man of sin had nothing to fear from him' (ibid., referring to Heb 12:29).

²³Ibid.

cannot be forgiven by 'despising' forgiveness itself! But Barth maintained that because Jesus is the Son of God who became flesh, while we are the ones who deserved death, even eternal death, Christ himself endured the very judgment that was 'passed upon us. He has borne the punishment which was rightly ours.'²⁴

This means also that 'our very enmity against grace ceases at the moment at which it is perfectly revealed, when the accusation against it becomes inevitable and crushing because it has risen to the point of hating and wanting to destroy God Himself. The enmity in which we stand against grace 'is expiated and abandoned before God by God Himself, before the Father by His only begotten Son, but by the incarnate Son of God and therefore in our place.' Our enmity is destroyed in Christ's own living by grace in our place. That indeed is the 'victory of grace over human enmity against grace'.²⁵ Here we see the true nature of human sin; it is real enmity against God himself in his graciousness.²⁶ It is here that we as sinners respond to grace and forgiveness 'by responding to the fulness of the divine forgiveness with [our] own religious and moral activity and therefore with the capital sentence which condemns [us]'.²⁷ We are revealed as those who do not 'love in return' but as those who hate 'the One who has loved [us] from eternity – there (miracle of miracles) the truth is revealed by which all transgression of the law, all enmity of man against grace, is revealed and destroyed as falsehood'. The victory of grace then is identical with the fact that, in the incarnation, God himself 'suffered the enmity of man in its most fearful promise and fulfilment'.²⁸ It is the crucified Christ who rose from the dead who is the new man who obeyed God in our place, who lived by grace for us. This truth is not something that can be discovered in us and our religious experiences but only in Christ himself as he claims us for fellowship with himself.²⁹

²⁴Ibid. See *CD IV/1*, pp. 490–3 for how Barth thought this through. Because we have 'transgressed' the grace of God, 'the grace of God has become judgment' (*CD IV/1*, p. 490). And we have no control over God's grace. In fact, any attempt to control it 'to look beyond the form of it which judges him, to see it and have it again in its proper form, is simply a repetition of the sin of pride' (ibid.). Barth claimed, 'It is the sinister aspect of all religious history that in it men are caught in the act of committing again the very sin from which they are trying to free themselves' (ibid.). Even as sinners, however, we remain God's good creatures with a 'determination for God' since we 'cannot step out of the covenant which God has made with [us]' (ibid., p. 493). The seriousness of sin then concerns the fact that 'even in good things and as a good man he is godless, that in his proper nature he has fallen victim to nothingness in his pride, that as the elect covenant-partner of God he is threatened with the divine rejection' (ibid.). Importantly, however, this means that 'The consuming love which revealed itself in His resurrection as the meaning and goal of the divine wrath [opposition to sin] which He bore for us was and is the love in which God willed to seek us and to find us, to carry us and to embrace us' (ibid., p. 556).

²⁵Ibid. This is why Barth rejected the idea of 'an ontological godlessness of fallen man, of a sinfulness which has become the substance of man, of fallen man as the image of the devil' (*CD IV/1*, p. 481). Such a view suggests that God does not just suffer death for us but that God himself has 'fallen a prey to it. But he has not fallen a prey to it. In taking it to Himself, in suffering it with and for us men in the person of His Son, He has conquered and destroyed it' (ibid.).

²⁶This also takes the form of slothful creatures who will not accept the fact that God is really present with us here and now in the man Jesus Christ who rose from the dead and encounters us now in his Holy Spirit. God's presence and action in the man Jesus here and now 'refer absolutely and exclusively and totally and directly to [us], and make on [us] an absolute, exclusive, total and direct demand' (*CD IV/2*, p. 406). We will discuss this further below.

²⁷Barth, *CD II/1*, p. 153.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹That is why Barth insisted that 'the one who may become and be a man liberated in this way, by the free grace addressed to him in the person of another, is obviously completely enslaved when regarded in

Sin and knowledge of God

Let me briefly contrast this understanding of sin, salvation, grace and knowledge of God with what has become an all-too-prevalent viewpoint in some recent theology. I begin with a series of assertions from Ellen Leonard's claim that it is 'the task of theology to revision God in the light of contemporary experience, especially the experience of the excluded ones'.³⁰ With the declaration that 'all language about God is metaphorical', she turns to the thinking of Sallie McFague and proposes that 'the world be imaged as God's body'. From this she argues that, 'In place of triumphalist, monarchical, patriarchal models for God, she [McFague] develops the models of God as mother, lover and friend of the world', asserting that these images are part of our tradition, although they are less prominent than the images of Father, Lord and king.³¹

Immediately, we have a major problem. First, the task of theology is not to 'revision God in the light of contemporary experience'. That very idea embodies the essence of sin as self-will by reversing the roles of Creator and creature. Once it is thought that experience rather than God himself in his revelation is a source for theology, then in that very assumption, Jesus Christ is marginalised and it is assumed that, as Sallie McFague once put it, we must turn to those experiences, such as motherhood, love and friendship as those that matter most to us to understand God, Christ, sin and salvation.³² That is a disastrous assumption, because only God can disclose God to

and for himself and his own person. He is not in a position to see his own imprisonment ... and therefore to understand his situation as finally harmful' (*CD IV/2*, p. 402). The only way forward cannot be found by us but only in the 'free grace which also judges [us], which disqualifies [us] in the light of this grace, and therefore in the knowledge of the Son of Man in whom it comes to us in this twofold form' (*ibid.*). That is what is offensive to us in revelation. Because we are offended by revelation in its identity with this man, 'religion as the action of sinful man which will inevitably involve flagrant continuations and confirmations and repetitions of his unfaithfulness and therefore sheer self-contradictions, with the continual rise and influence of the alternatives of doubt and scepticism and atheism; religion as a matter on which men separate and fight more perhaps than any other. The religious relationship of man to God which is the inevitable consequence of his sin is a degenerate form of the covenant-relationship, the relationship between the Creator and the creature ... Man may escape faith and obedience, but he cannot escape – and this is what reveals the judgment under which he stands – this their surrogate' (*CD IV/1*, p. 483).

³⁰Leonard, 'Experience as a Source for Theology', p. 56. It is important to realise here that Barth is not excluding experience from the task of theology since knowing itself is a human experience. What he is excluding is the idea that experience is a 'source' for theology because while there is no knowledge of God without experience of God, when we do know God in faith, we immediately know that the source of that knowledge was and is the God who revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ and through his Holy Spirit. Those who make experience a source of theology then methodologically set aside the fact that God can only be known by God, that is, by grace through faith. That ultimately means that Barth has applied the doctrine of justification to our knowledge of God such that true knowledge of God can never be traced back to us but only to God himself.

³¹*Ibid.*

³²McFague herself asks: 'What prevents models of God, such as mother, lover, and friend from being arbitrary?' and concludes that they are not so 'because along with the father model, they are the deepest and most important expressions of love known to us, rather than because they are necessarily descriptive of the nature of God' (*Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1987), p. 192). Do these loves describe God 'as God is' she asks? She responds by referring to a personal power on the side of life and its fulfilment, asserting that to say anything more than this we necessarily turn 'to the "loves" we know (unless one is a Barthian and believes that God defines love ...). That is to say, I do not know whether God (the inner being of God) can be described by the models of mother, lover and friend; but the only kind of love I know anything about and that matters most to me is the love of these basic relationships, so I have to use these loves to speak of divine love' (*ibid.*, emphasis mine). In

us in our experiences of faith, which, if it is Christian faith, is inextricably tied to Jesus himself in his uniqueness as God become man for us and for our salvation. What happened in her thinking is revealing. Consider her renaming God as mother. No one can be a mother without children. But God was always the Father of his Son Jesus Christ without the world and before the world was created. God could have remained God without us but chose not to. Still, the image of God as mother led McFague and those who follow her to claim that God needs creation when in reality a God who needs creation is not the Christian God at all.³³ About a God who needs creation we could just as well say, with Alfred North Whitehead, that ‘it is as true to say that God creates the World, as to say the World creates God’.³⁴ It isn’t of course, but once one embraces the pantheistic image of the world as God’s body, with the attendant difficulty in clearly distinguishing God from the world, one inevitably confuses and reverses the roles of Creator and creature.

There are further consequences to this. In thinking about God as lover of the world rather than as the one who loves in freedom as the eternal Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Leonard argues that, ‘The experience of sin is different for those who are powerless than it is for those with power.’³⁵ Hence, ‘The traditional emphasis on sin as pride and rebellion against God does not fit the experience of those whose sense of self has been devalued by the dominant culture and who consequently lack a sense of self.’ Having changed the name for God based on human experience, she proceeds to advance the idea that sin for such people cannot be understood as pride and rebellion against God. From that she reckoned that ‘Sin for such persons [who lack a sense of self] is the passive acceptance of their situation while salvation involves transformation from being victims to becoming responsible subjects.’³⁶ On both counts she has missed the meaning of sin and of salvation by redefining them in psychological and social rather than theological terms. If I lack a sense of self, that is a psychological problem

her own words McFague demonstrates that her speech about God is nothing more than speech from and about ourselves which she then projects into God instead of thinking from a centre in God which she believes we can never know. Unfortunately, her concepts of mother and lover leave her with what she labels a pantheist view of the God/world relation which inevitably devolves into pantheism when she claims that the world as God’s body ‘is not something alien to or other than God but is from the “womb” of God, formed through “gestation”’ (ibid., p. 110) and then argues that ‘God will therefore need the world, want the world, not simply as a dependent inferior ... but as offspring, beloved and companion’ (ibid., pp. 112–13). Clearly, if the world is not other than God, then we have a confusion of God and the world. If the world is formed through gestation, then creation cannot be a free act of God’s will creating something outwith himself. And with the image of God the lover she is led to a strongly subordinationist view of Jesus Christ as paradigmatic of God the lover but not uniquely salvific, as we shall see.

³³For McFague, ‘unless we understand God as needing us, we will lack the will to take responsibility for the world’ (*Models of God*, p. 134). Hence, ‘God as lover finds himself needing the help of those very ones among the beloved – of us human beings ... we are needed so that the lover may be reunited with his beloved ... God needs us to help save the world’ (ibid., p. 135). Among contemporary theologians Colin E. Gunton understood well that ‘if God *must* create there is a loss of freedom both for God and for the created world, because its being is then bound up with his so closely as to call into question its distinctive reality’ (*Theology through the Theologians: Selected Essays 1972–1995* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), p. 127. Indeed, ‘the subjection of God to some kind of external necessity’ subverts the Christian gospel (ibid., p. 72). It subverts the fact that salvation is a sovereign act of grace in Jesus Christ for us.

³⁴Alfred North Whitehead, ‘God and the World’, in Ewert H. Cousins (ed.), *Process Theology: Basic Writings by the Key Thinkers of a Major Modern Movement* (New York: Newman Press, 1971), p. 93.

³⁵Leonard, ‘Experience as a Source for Theology’, p. 57.

³⁶Ibid.

with social consequences. And if I passively accept my situation, that is a psychological difficulty with social consequences. It is not a sin. And to claim that salvation involves becoming a responsible subject by not allowing myself to be devalued by the dominant culture ends by equating salvation with my moral, psychological and social responsibility to become a 'responsible subject'.

The truth, however, is that the moment we assume that we can redefine who God is instead of acknowledging God as the Father of Jesus Christ who is actively present for us in history through the power of his Holy Spirit, we inevitably miss the true theological nature of sin and the proper theological meaning of salvation. Put simply, sin means self-reliance, self-justification and self-will. Sin means unwillingness to accept God's judgment as it took place in Jesus Christ for the whole of humanity. That action of God which liberates us from the idea that we can or must redefine God, sin and salvation also frees us to realise that sin as self-will is the same for everyone because the very nature of self-will is the human refusal to allow God's very own righteousness to enter our lives by turning our backs on Jesus himself. That is the very essence of self-justification. And it is why Barth insisted that we are offended by the revelation of God in Christ. Of course for Barth sin, as self-will, is not limited to pride but includes sloth and falsehood. Pride, Barth said, is the 'heroic' form of sin which 'not only derives from but is itself his fall', while sloth takes the 'unheroic form' of 'inaction' in relation to God's reconciling grace which meets us in Christ.³⁷ Thus,

sin as man's subservient and obsequious sloth is from the very outset his desire not to be illuminated by the existence and nature of God, not to have to accept Him, to be without God in the world. The slothful man, who is of course identical with the proud, begins where the other leaves off, i.e., by saying in his heart: 'There is no God' ... Sin in the form of sloth crystallises in the rejection of the man Jesus. In relation to Him the rejection of God from which it derives finds virulent and concrete and forceful expression.³⁸

³⁷Barth, *CD IV/2*, p. 403. Barth insisted that sin always has this heroic form while the free grace of God always addresses us in the form of justification. However, since God's reconciling grace is not only justifying, but 'sanctifying and awakening and establishing grace, so sin has not merely the heroic form of pride but also, in complete antithesis yet profound correspondence, the quite unheroic and trivial form of sloth' (*ibid.*).

³⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 405–6. Interestingly, Barth goes on to explain that, since we are confronted by God in Jesus Christ, with God's claim on us in him, our sloth is manifested in our religious attempt to find comfort in a 'congenial higher being' which really 'is the purest and ripest and most appropriate possibility at which' we grasp as those who are slothful (*ibid.*, p. 406). Sin is then depicted by Barth as us rendering God himself 'innocuous ... in the fact that [we] definitely will not accept in relation to [ourselves] the reality and presence and action of God in the existence of the man Jesus ... [We] definitely will not accept them as the reality and presence and action of God which refer absolutely and exclusively and totally and directly to [us]', thus making an absolute claim on us. Significantly, Barth concludes that 'As one who worships a higher being, as a religious or pious man, he is able to resist this' (*ibid.*). That is why he says we are offended by the revelation of God as it meets us in Christ – it is the failure to acknowledge the claim of God in this man that illustrates our sloth. Resisting Jesus, we resist God himself with our belief in the God of our choice. And that happens, Barth says, because we are 'turned in upon [ourselves]' and find satisfaction and comfort in our 'own ego' (*ibid.*, p. 407). Sloth, then, 'expresses much more clearly than pride the positive and aggressive ingratitude which repays good with evil. It consists in the fact, not only that man does not trust God, but ... that he does not love Him, i.e., that he will not know and have Him, that he will not have dealings with Him, as the One who first loved him, from all eternity' (*ibid.*, p. 405). It is a form of unbelief because in ourselves as the sinners we are apart from Christ we refuse to live 'in the distinctive freedom of the man

Pride and sloth connect with falsehood, which Barth maintained is 'the disguise or mask which the man of sin at once assumes when he is confronted by Jesus Christ the true Witness, and which is torn off again in the course of this encounter'.³⁹ Falsehood is 'the untruth of man in relation to the truth of Jesus Christ encountering him'.⁴⁰

Interestingly, Barth explained that, as the knowledge of faith and hope are possible and really occur 'only in relation to Him [Jesus, the true Witness], it is only in the same relation, as tares in the same field as the wheat, that falsehood arises'.⁴¹ Here very clearly one can see the true meaning of sin only in relation to Jesus himself. Jesus Christ, Barth insisted is the true Witness 'inasmuch as His Word is also the Word of God'.⁴² Our falsehood is expressed in our 'attempts to avoid Jesus Christ as the true Witness encountering [us]'.⁴³ Our attempt to evade Christ 'means trying to find another place where the truth can no longer reach or affect [us]'. This might almost be considered an innocent reaction, with our pretending that reconciliation and revelation had not really happened in Jesus himself. However, 'The serious and tenacious evader lurking in us all knows quite well that [we] must face the truth, that untruth can do its work only in face of the truth'.⁴⁴ Falsehood, Barth held, relates to our actions in the Christian era because it refers to our attempts to live the Christian life by replacing Jesus as the truth and substituting our own version of the truth even as we apparently accept the truth. In this way we 'use the truth to silence the truth, or the true Witness, by finding for Him a place, by championing Him, by making Him its Hero, Example and Symbol, yet all the time patronising, interpreting, domesticating, acclimatising, accommodating, and gently but very definitely and significantly correcting Him'.⁴⁵

Barth insisted that we are all sinners in this sense, and that means we can never escape our falsehood. Any attempt to do so by relying on ourselves will always put us in conflict with the truth. But his point is that 'the truth itself, Jesus Christ as the true Witness infallibly differentiates falsehood from the truth'.⁴⁶ As our faith, hope and love are actually grounded in him through the power of the Holy Spirit, we really can live from and in the truth. The offensive thing for all of us, however, as sinners, is that truth is identical only with this man. We find ourselves unable to accept this identity and try to modify the fact that our encounter with Jesus Christ, who is the truth, is really 'an absolutely vital, binding, decisive and even revolutionary affair'.⁴⁷ What then is his truth? It is 'the fact that the reconciliation of the world to God took place when He (2 Cor. 5:21) was made sin by God that we might be the righteousness of God in Him, when he was treated by God as the sin of the world which he found impossible and intolerable, and therefore when He was rejected and destroyed as its Bearer and Representative'. The truth is God's act of justification and sanctification in him. He

Jesus' and thus regard him as 'a stranger and interloper, and his existence as an intolerable demand' (*ibid.*, p. 407).

³⁹Barth, *CD IV/3*, p. 434.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹*Ibid.*

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 418.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 435.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 437.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 439.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 441.

is the one who was 'judged in our place'.⁴⁸ And this is what we try to evade as sinners by reinterpreting who he was and is in his identity with God himself.

Does it seem as though I have spoken too straightforwardly here? Consider the fact that, in light of Sallie McFague's view of God as lover of the world as God's body, she first concludes that Jesus 'is paradigmatic of God the lover but is not unique'.⁴⁹ As she put it, 'Jesus is not ontologically different from other paradigmatic figures either in our tradition or in other religious traditions who manifest ... the love of God for the world'.⁵⁰ She even insisted that she could not say anything about a 'so-called immanent or intrinsic Trinity'.⁵¹ However, unless it is with the immanent Trinity that we have to do in Jesus Christ, then not only do we have no true and certain knowledge of God, but we cannot possibly know the proper meaning of sin or salvation either. McFague's thinking demonstrated the truth of what I have just asserted. She maintained that, from within her perspective of the model of God as lover of the world, 'sin is the turning-away not from a transcendent power but from interdependence with all other beings, including the matrix of being from whom all life comes'.⁵² Consequently, sin cannot be understood as 'pride or unbelief but the refusal of relationship – the refusal to be the beloved of our lover God and the refusal to be lover of all God loves'.⁵³

At a pinch, one could strain and interpret these remarks as an attempt to speak of God's love and the need to love others, except for the fact that, on the one hand, McFague told us that the world is God's body, and on the other hand she then claimed that sin refers to 'a horizontal refusal to be part of the body of God *rather than* a vertical refusal to be inferior to God'.⁵⁴ Therein lies the problem. The truth is that our relationship with God the Creator who, in his Son, humbled himself to take our sin to himself in order to exalt us to relationship with the transcendent God, is not one of parity, as it would be if our relationship with God were merely a horizontal relation to the world. It is precisely here that McFague's inability to acknowledge an immanent Trinity led her to completely miss the meaning of sin and salvation. It is just because she rejected Jesus's ontological uniqueness as the Judge judged in our place that she felt free to equate salvation with our care for the environment. But the fact is that one does not have to even believe in God to care for the environment. And the actual meaning of sin for Christians has always meant active rebellion against the transcendent God who meets us in his Word and Spirit; it is exactly the kind of rebellion that took place historically when Jesus himself was rejected and crucified. That is why T. F. Torrance could so powerfully argue that, as Jesus lived out his mission, he uncovered the evil in the human heart that finally led to his ultimate rejection not only by his own chosen people but by the Romans as well.⁵⁵

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 442.

⁴⁹McFague, *Models*, p. 136.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 224.

⁵²Ibid., p. 139.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 140, emphasis mine.

⁵⁵As Torrance vividly put it: 'Jesus had never lifted a violent finger against any one, and yet he became the centre of a violent disturbance that has shaken the world to its foundations. The incredible thing is this: the meeker and milder Jesus is, the more violent the crowd become in their resentment against him. The more like a lamb he is, the more like ravening wolves they become ... until at last they laid violent hands

Here then is the main point of this article: knowledge of the Christian God can only occur as we, in humility, live as those who are already reconciled with God in Christ – but only in Christ and not in ourselves. This means that we can see and acknowledge the depth of human sin precisely as our unwillingness to accept Jesus as God acting for us within history, and acting thus once and for all as the only saviour of the world because only God can, did and does save us from sin as unbelief, pride, sloth and falsehood. McFague and those who adhere to her thinking unequivocally cannot do that, because they think that since salvation refers to our care for the environment and our relationship with ourselves as ‘responsible subjects’, therefore salvation (‘as the piecing together of the fragmented body of the world in one’s own time and place’) requires ‘many minds, hearts, hands, and feet’ and ‘must be done and done again’.⁵⁶ In that very assumption, however, McFague advances an agenda which places the work of salvation in our hands – the hands of sinners who are utterly incapable of becoming righteous by what we do in relation to the environment or in relation to ourselves and others. The very picture offered in that stance is the picture of creatures still unwilling and unable in themselves to accept God as the Lord who really was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. Rejecting Jesus in his uniqueness means rejecting God – and that indeed is the meaning of sin, not only as pride but as sloth and falsehood as well.

Conclusion

McFague thinks Jesus is a ‘paradigmatic’ manifestation ‘of God as lover’. But considering this love ‘in an ecological, evolutionary context does not allow the work of one individual to be effective for all space and time’.⁵⁷ Consequently, sin is redefined as failure to realise our interdependence with the world as God’s body, and salvation is redefined as ‘the ongoing healing of the divided body of our world which we, with God, work at together’.⁵⁸ It is not something that is accomplished by Jesus doing anything for us – it is rather the work of many saviours attempting to reunify ‘the shattered, divided world’, and, as already noted, it must be ‘done and done again, by many minds, hearts, hands, and feet’.⁵⁹ The overt self-justification on display in these remarks, along with the reduction of salvation to our working for ecological ‘justice’ go hand-in-hand with McFague’s claim that Jesus is ‘paradigmatic of God the lover but is not unique. This means that Jesus is not ontologically different from other paradigmatic figures ... He is special to us as our foundational figure: he is our historical choice as the premier paradigm of God’s love.’⁶⁰

None of this is true. Jesus is ontologically different from all of us because only he is the very Word of God incarnate in history. He is the only human being who ever existed in hypostatic union with the Word from the moment of his conception. As such he is the only saviour of the world. However, he saves us from self-will, and thus from the sins of pride, sloth and falsehood. That was his once-for-all action, at once from the side of God and from the human side, as he lived out his mission in obedience to

upon him and dragged him off to the cross.’ T. F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic 2008), p. 151.

⁵⁶McFague, *Models*, p. 150.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 143.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 150.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 136.

God the Father, which led to the cross and resurrection. In her denial of all this, McFague fails to reckon with the depth of our human inability to diagnose our own fallen condition and denies that the true meaning of salvation can never be understood without a proper view of God as the eternal Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that is, unless our models of God are grounded in the immanent Trinity through encounter with Jesus himself as the incarnate Word.

These problems are not unique to Leonard and McFague. Similar difficulties can be seen in the perspective of Elizabeth Johnson, who thinks conversion should be understood 'not as giving up oneself but as tapping into the power of oneself' with the result that 'in the ontological naming and affirming of ourselves we are engaged in a dynamic reaching out to the mystery of God'.⁶¹ Her understanding of sin and salvation are thus distorted by her giving too much credit to human ability and the consequent assumption that we can rely on ourselves instead of Christ alone and exclusively to know God and to know the meaning of conversion and salvation itself.⁶² In a similarly problematic way, Gordon Kaufman thinks of God as an ecological reality working itself out in the evolutionary process,⁶³ and then claims that St Paul could never have meant that God acted to save the world in one human individual, that is, Jesus of Nazareth.⁶⁴ Thus, for Kaufman, salvation becomes simply our working for a better world instead of God's act of atoning reconciliation accomplished in Christ himself. For Kaufman, Jesus' resurrection referred to 'an event in the *history of meaning*' and 'was not primarily an odd physical event that happened two thousand years ago' in the life of Jesus that gave meaning to Christian faith.⁶⁵

Looking at these reflections on Leonard and McFague as well as Johnson and Kaufman, one can easily see why Barth insisted that there is a definite connection between the way one understands God and the way one subsequently understands sin and salvation.

⁶¹Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 67.

⁶²For more on this see Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology*, 2nd edn (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), pp. 17–44.

⁶³Gordon Kaufman, *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), pp. 43–5.

⁶⁴Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 383. This, because 'in the biological and historico-cultural terms with which we now conceive human existence, no individual person can have this sort of absolute significance and cosmic efficacy for all others, for every individual is an expression of and interdependent with the complex ecological web of life and nature which gives them all birth and sustains them all' (Kaufman, *Theology for a Nuclear Age*, p. 56).

⁶⁵Gordon D. Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 433.

Cite this article: Molnar PD (2022). What difference does one's view of God make in understanding sin and salvation? Some suggestions from Karl Barth. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 75, 55–67. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S003693062100082X>