



**Declan Kelly, *The Defeat of Satan: Karl Barth's Three-Agent Account of Salvation*, Explorations in Reformed Theology 3 (London: T&T Clark, 2022), pp. ix + 162, ISBN 978-0567698810. £28.99**

In recent years, there has been a growing sensibility in the fields of New Testament and theological studies for the apocalyptic elements within Christianity. Karl Barth's early theology, notably his *Römerbrief* (second edition, 1922), is often regarded as a pioneering exercise in Pauline apocalyptic. However, whether the mature form of Barth's theology in his monumental *Church Dogmatics* (*CD*) should be listed within this apocalyptic stream remains disputed. Barth scholars such as Bruce McCormack and Shannon Nicole Smythe contend that Barth's soteriology is fundamentally forensic, a two-agent-event between God and sinners. By contrast, Declan Kelly, the author of *The Defeat of Satan: Karl Barth's Three-Agent Account of Salvation*, takes a different stance.

In this work, Kelly argues that 'in the wake of his pivotal doctrine of election in *CD* II/2, Barth pursues a doctrine of salvation that offers sustained and nuanced attention to God's saving event in Christ as a three-agent event' (p. 7). Satan, synonymous with nothingness (*das Nichtige*), comes into view in Barth's *Church Dogmatics* from II/2 onwards, serving as a third agent alongside God and humans. Kelly notices that the notion of this third agent is often underplayed in contemporary Barth scholarship. Hence his aim is to trace the presence of this third agent throughout Barth's doctrine of election, creation and reconciliation, which he locates mainly in *CD* II/2, III/3 and IV/1 (especially §59.2–3).

Kelly begins Chapter 1 by giving examples of 'theology without Satan' and argues that Barth's theology should not be classified within this category. He then critiques the prevailing scholarly opinion that views Barth's soteriology as primarily forensic, highlighting how this perspective overlooks the military metaphors, the cosmological force of *das Nichtige*, and the soteriological significance of the resurrection within Barth's theology. According to Kelly, Barth's theology is fundamentally rooted in a 'cosmological apocalyptic' framework rather than a 'forensic apocalyptic' one, and the presence of the third agent (i.e. Satan/ nothingness) in Barth's theology actually aligns with a more Protestant understanding of soteriology.

In Chapter 2, Kelly discusses Barth's explanation of the origin of Satan/nothingness and outlines the scholarly criticism towards Barth's account of nothingness. He elucidates that Barth moves from a two-agent



to a three-agent conception of election in *CD* II/2. Election involves judgement, so when God elects, he also rejects. Satan is the object of this rejection and exists only in the power of God's negation, which is his *opus alienum* (alien work, i.e. divine wrath). Barth's account of nothingness and *opus alienum* has faced criticisms from several scholars. In view of these critiques, Kelly attempts to think beyond Barth by formulating the dialectic relationship between *opus proprium* and *opus alienum* eschatologically rather than teleologically. This approach offers new insight to the interplay between the cross and resurrection.

Kelly proceeds to examine *CD* IV/1 §59.2 in Chapter 3, addressing Barth's choice to present the death of Christ within a forensic framework instead of a military perspective. He points out that there are two concepts of judgement in §59.2: judgement as deliverance and judgement unto destruction. While current Barth scholars focus mainly on the latter, Kelly asserts that the former signifies a cosmological description of the God-human relationship, which precedes the forensic aspect. In §59.2, the image of the divine Judge presents a military view of salvation, depicting Christ as the one who rescues the cosmos from the oppressing power of sin. The judgement unto destruction should be examined in light of this positive form. This world is handed over to the lordship of Satan temporally and Christ has come into this world where the cosmological struggle between the power of God and the power of Satan exists. The temptation in the wilderness serves as a manifestation of this apocalyptic warfare and Christ's resistance of the temptation reflects his decision for the cross.

Chapter 4 is the highlight of this book. In this chapter, Kelly discusses Barth's *theologia crucis*, addressing Barth's notion of God's 'covenant with death' specifically. He first examines how Barth associates the darkness of Jesus's death with the expression 'the face of the deep' in Genesis 1:2, arguing that the most terrifying form of divine judgement, characterised by the absence of Word, finds its realisation in Christ's death on the cross. He then examines the concepts of forgiveness and substitution in §59.2–3 and proposes that Barth's account of atonement is not 'not so much a legal transaction—the punishment of one instead of the many—but an apocalyptic ending of the many in this One human, an apocalyptic ending that involves the "third agent".' (p. 94). While Satan and this fallen world seek to preserve themselves by sending Christ to death, God, on the other hand, employs Christ's passion as a means of 'helping the patient by killing him'. In other words, God actualises the



positive form of judgement on this world by the negative form of judgement executed upon Christ, who has taken our place. Satan, albeit unwillingly, becomes the servant of the hidden God to execute this negative form of divine judgement (p. 103). God has aligned himself with Satan and utilises this as his *opus alienum*. This is the meaning of God's 'covenant with death'.

Chapter 5 discusses the place of resurrection in Barth's three-agent account of salvation. Kelly contends that the broad trend of Barth's *theologia resurrectionis* cannot resolve certain tensions in the role of third agent in the death of Christ, hence he aims to 'explore a second pattern of [Barth's] thought [on resurrection] that is also evident at points in *Church Dogmatics*' (p. 113). As the cross is God's *opus alienum* through Satan, a cross without resurrection leads to the conclusion that God has made a lasting alliance with Satan and renders God unjustified. Hence the resurrection should not be regarded as simply a declaration of victory achieved on the cross. Instead, Kelly explores the cosmological dimension of Barth's decisive claim that 'the resurrection is the justification of God Himself' (*CD IV/1*, p. 309). In this second strand of *theologia resurrectionis*, resurrection is regarded as solely *opus proprium*, without any component of satanic activity. He argues that the cross and resurrection should be considered in an eschatological sequence, where the *opus alienum* is ultimately overcome by the *opus proprium*. Kelly proposes that the resurrection is the 'second Yes' of God, which is a non-dialectic Yes without a corresponding re-rejection. This expression avoids falling into the risk of 'eternalising' nothingness.

In the final chapter, Kelly summarises the main argument of the book and suggests that it is unnecessary to adopt Bultmann's approach of demythologising the apocalyptic language found in the New Testament. Instead, the author argues that the idiom of apocalyptic is uniquely adequate to discern the realities of our present age. He further proposes that we should allow this apocalyptic language to challenge and demythologise our human-centric common sense, which tends to view ourselves as the sole agents shaping history.

Overall, Kelly's argument is persuasive, effectively portraying the three-agent traits of Barth's soteriology in this work. The author extensively quotes primary texts, encouraging readers to consult *Church Dogmatics* for verification and further examination. Additionally, the book demonstrates clear and concise internal logic. It begins by discussing the origin of Satan,



then moves on to Satan's influence on the world and Christ, eventually delving into the tension between *opus proprium* and *opus alienum*. These observations by Kelly resonate with CD §50, where Barth provides a detailed discussion of *das Nichtige*, the third agent in the drama. Barth writes, 'The true nothingness is that which brought Jesus Christ to the cross, and that which He defeated there' (CD III/3, p. 305). Nothingness/Satan, as the antithesis of divine election, is the agent that led Jesus Christ to the cross, but God has defeated it simultaneously through Christ's crucifixion. Kelly's work effectively outlines the 'story' behind this profound theological statement of Barth. However, it should be emphasised that Kelly does not intend to dismiss the forensic imagery of Barth's soteriology. Rather, his purpose is to illustrate that these forensic elements and the corresponding model of the atonement 'ultimately serves the articulation of the defeat of God's enemies that happens in the cross and resurrection of Christ' (p. 18), which is 'cosmological' in nature.

On the other hand, there are two recommendations for those interested in further developing the apocalyptic trajectory that Kelly has identified in Barth's work. Firstly, the presence of 'third agent' in *The Christian Life (TCL)*, the unpublished transcript of CD §74–78, is not discussed in this book. As Kelly argues, the defeat of Satan/nothingness 'comes to its most mature expression in his doctrine of reconciliation' (p. 12). Therefore, it would be worthwhile to examine the concept of 'lordless powers' in *TCL*. These powers represent an entity that differs from Satan/nothingness in that they are still creatures of God, yet they align themselves with Satan/nothingness by enslaving human life and activity. Secondly, Kelly suggests that there are two strands of *theologia resurrectionis* in Barth's thought. Are these two strands reconcilable? If not, does it reveal inconsistencies in Barth's *theologia resurrectionis*? This calls for future exploration by Barth scholars. In conclusion, *The Defeat of Satan* is a valuable work for Barth scholars and readers interested in engaging with Barth, apocalyptic theology, or both.

**Tin Tsz Fung**

Tin Tsz Fung is a seminarian at China Graduate School of Theology and is known by the pseudonym ideasfung (思路). He is the author of *Theology Matters? Change Seeking Understanding* (2023).

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