



The old question of Barth's universalism:

An examination with reference to Tom Greggs and T. F. Torrance

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Some champions of universalism cite Barth as a great theologian who justifies or supports the belief that all humans, created by a loving God, will in the end be saved. While this interpretation of Barth has been disputed, the controversy raises questions which must be addressed. Recently Tom Greggs attempted to move us through the impasse of contradictory claims about the extent of Barth's universalism. Greggs argued that Barth did not reject universalism completely but only problematic elements associated with it, chiefly those elements associated with the theory of *apokatastasis*.¹ In rejecting universalism under this guise, however, Barth is not rejecting the friendliness of Jesus Christ towards all humanity.² In response to Greggs' argument, this paper argues that Barth stopped short of a full commitment to universalism, that he recognized and honoured a boundary that precluded his adoption of universalism in the structure and content of his theology. The rejection of faulty 'elements' in universalism does not exhaust the proper caution Barth exercised. In fact, Barth's theology does not *require* universalism at any point, and we will attempt to show, with reference to T. F. Torrance, why this is so.



Engaging in dialogue with Tom Greggs

Greggs rightfully notes that Barth took some opportunities to reject universalism. For example, in *Church Dogmatics* II.2 he speaks of God enlarging the circle of the elect to include people who have lived outside God's community:

It is the concern of God that there should be these frontier-crossings. [...] It is His concern what is to be the final extent of the circle. If we are to respect the freedom of divine grace, we cannot venture the statement that it must and will finally be coincident with the world of man as such (as in the doctrine of the so-called *apokatastasis*). No such right or necessity can legitimately be deduced. Just as the gracious God does not need to elect or call any single man, so He does not need to elect or call all mankind.³

Yet Barth also argues the opposite, that we cannot exclude the possibility that all may be saved in the end, because of God's true freedom to do it:

But, again, in grateful recognition of the grace of the divine freedom we cannot venture the opposite statement that there cannot and will not be this final opening up and enlargement of the circle of election and calling.⁴

We cannot limit 'the loving-kindness of God.' In either extreme we would be imposing a 'historical metaphysic' which cannot be legitimately done, for nothing can impinge on the free decision of God.⁵ The two choices are not primarily between 'limited atonement' and 'universalism' as a pre-determined arrangement, rather they are between the two coming eschatological results which are possible: either some will remain outside the circle of salvation or all will be included in it. These two possible results do not have to be linked to old doctrines of limited atonement or universalism.

This passage shows that Barth's theology of election is open-ended. Whatever the end will reveal, it will be consistent with God's holiness, love and freedom. But from our finite vantage point, it remains an open question how many will be saved. The salvation of all humanity is not ruled out, but neither is it affirmed.

Other portions of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, however, prompt Greggs to say 'the tenor of Barth's soteriology clearly points in a universalist direction'.⁶ Greggs lists aphorisms that point in the

direction of universal salvation to support his claim. These are part of the record, but they are usually inconclusive. Often the full review of his remarks show that Barth never lost the balance between the two eschatological possibilities.

For example, 'The dogma is that Hell exists, not that people are in it'.⁷ This cannot stand alone, because Barth refused to declare whether hell is empty or occupied. He affirmed the victory of Christ over hell, which gives Christ the authority to make that determination. However, Barth did not teach it was impossible for an individual to be eternally lost. He held that terrifying prospect together with the belief that Christ has the freedom to set prisoners free from hell, yet without presumption about the final outcome.⁸

T. F. Torrance said a universalist argument may 'point to the *possibility* that all might be saved in as much as God loves all to the utmost, but it does not and cannot carry as a corollary the *impossibility* of being eternally lost. The fallacy of every universalist argument lies not in proving the love of God to be universal and omnipotent but in laying down the impossibility of ultimate damnation.'⁹ Judged by this standard, Barth avoided the 'universalist fallacy': he did not teach it is impossible for a human to be damned. Here is a significant wedge between Barth and prominent varieties of universalism.

Greggs is correct in saying that 'Barth's rejection of universalism or *apokatastasis* does not involve a limitation of God's ultimate salvific work'.¹⁰ The above passage on election from *Church Dogmatics* II.2 indicates just this point. No limitation may be placed on God, no 'historical metaphysic' that requires anything of God is permissible. Thus Greggs is right to say that in Barth's thought God is free to save everyone, but he needs to add that in Barth's thought God is not bound to do so.

Greggs argues that what Barth actually rejected when he rejected universalism were 'problematic elements' associated with it. By implication, these elements could be removed without nullifying the belief that all may or will be saved in the end. He argues that 'in rejecting universalism, Barth is not rejecting the final victory of Christ, but rejecting a particular (and wrong) understanding of the *means* by which this is achieved.' Once these negative elements are removed, Barth still allows for the ultimate salvation of all, because

the ultimate 'victory is Jesus Christ's.'¹¹

Yet it is difficult to know whether these are, in fact, equivalent concepts. Different scenarios arise which could accommodate or describe the ultimate victory: (1) some remain under judgment and *recognize* the lordship of Christ without loving it; (2) some are graciously allowed to go into an eternal sleep and are annihilated, with nothing rebellious remaining, or (3) through the aeons the Holy Spirit works healing grace into all hearts and minds, wooing until the last reticent rebel comes home. Each of these has been proposed, not necessarily by Barth, but by theologians committed to meshing their theologies with the witness of the biblical canon. Without favouring one over the other, it seems fair to ask whether we have a clear understanding of what is meant by the vital referent 'victory of Jesus Christ'? Without greater clarity about the content of this phrase, it is impossible to judge the suitability of identifying universal salvation with it.

We cannot say in advance exactly what the full revelation of the victory of Christ will entail, any more than we can visually imagine the new heavens and new earth. Therefore there is no basis on which we can claim to know that all who reject the love of God in time will come to welcome that same love in eternity.

Finally, we concede too much if we allow Greggs to say that in 'rejecting universalism or *apokatastasis*' Barth is only rejecting a faulty method of reasoning. This is tantamount to saying that Barth rejects the *argument* for the conclusion, but not the *conclusion* itself. But this is clearly at issue and may be a case of Greggs begging the question. How does he know Barth is not rejecting the universalist conclusion? Greggs says that when Barth spoke of rejecting universalism he really meant only to reject a faulty chain of reasoning called *apokatastasis*. But the reverse may more likely be the case: when Barth spoke of rejecting *apokatastasis* he meant he was rejecting universalism. As we will see below, Barth spoke of *apokatastasis* as a way of emphasizing that he did not affirm or teach that 'all will be saved', thus he (consciously) used the words 'universalism' and '*apokatastasis*' interchangeably. He did not speak negatively of only one form of universalism or one argument for it, but rather he spoke negatively of any conclusion declaring 'all will be saved'.



Reclaiming and incorporating an important reminder from Thomas F. Torrance

Barth's position on the impropriety of imposing any necessity on God was both consistent with and reflective of an underlying presupposition to which he was thoroughly committed. T. F. Torrance pointed out that Barth refused to operate with logico-causal connections in his thinking about God and humanity and God and the created universe. It is unfortunate that Torrance's insight is one to which insufficient attention has been paid.

Torrance faulted the Latin tradition for introducing logico-causal, or logically necessary relations, between God and humanity into our understanding of election, a problem which does not trouble the Greek tradition.¹² In other theological contexts this error always, in his view, led to disastrous distortions that ought to have been avoided. Torrance argued that both 'universalism' and 'limited atonement' are actually twin heresies because they both stem from the same underlying problem: the error of operating with logico-causal connections in our thinking about God's interaction with humanity. He illustrated this as follows:

If you think with logical-causal connections then if Christ died for all men all men have to be saved. And if you say Stalin and Hitler went to hell, then you say He didn't die for all men [...]. But both those mistakes, the limited atonement or the universalism, have a fundamental problem behind them: they substitute for the Holy Ghost logical-causal connections. That is the real error.¹³

Torrance argued that Barth refused to operate with logico-causal connections in all his theological thinking. Thus we should be cautious about calling Barth a universalist because of his affirmation that Christ was elected to redeem all humanity, and therefore all humans find their election in Christ. Election is not deterministic in Barth's theology. The relation of the world to God rests on 'the free contingent activity' of God's grace, and is not logically necessary. The nature of the relation of God to humanity and creation is always a

relation of grace and freedom on God's part, and our contingency and dependence must be acknowledged. No effort to build a logical bridge to God in our theologizing is acceptable.¹⁴

Torrance thought the charge of universalism made against Barth generally happened because of the tendency 'of construing the efficacy of the atonement in terms of a logico-causal relation between the death of Christ and the forgiveness of our sins. Here these critics appear to substitute an operation of causal grace in the cross in place of the ineffable activity of God the Holy Spirit so wonderfully revealed in Jesus' birth of the Virgin Mary and his bodily resurrection from the dead.' When we substitute the unique activity of God for 'activity of another kind which we can construe, in terms of necessary relations' we come 'rather near to sinning against the Holy Spirit.' Thus he warns against the rationalistic ways of constructing the saving life and acts of Jesus Christ as are found in 'the twin errors of limited atonement and universalism.'¹⁵

Torrance emphasized that Barth did not operate with this kind of error. Thus, in addition to Barth's doctrine of election, we cannot understand the heart of Barth's thinking about redemption and the 'victory of Jesus' unless we keep this truth in mind. Because Barth affirms Christ is the Reconciler does not mean, in a deterministic sense, that in his thought every individual *must* be reconciled in the end. Whether reading in *Church Dogmatics* volumes II or IV, we cannot legitimately introduce determinism where Barth never welcomed it and where, as an element in his understanding, it did not exist.



Examining Barth's statements in his later years

On various occasions Karl Barth made responses to questions concerning universalism. Eberhard Busch, for example, reports Barth's 1959 statement about an earlier disagreement with Richard Imberg, pietist and universalist. Barth said, 'I once said to him: "I don't believe in universalism, but I do believe in Jesus Christ, the reconciler of all."¹⁶ In this short sentence the clear emphasis is on the reconciling work of Christ, coupled with a rejection of universalism. Yet without seeing the transcript or hearing the full recording to which Busch had access, we may wonder whether Barth added clarifying

remarks. It is difficult to build too much on this short comment. Does Barth *hope* that Christ will reconcile all or *expect* Christ will reconcile all?

At a convention in Strasbourg in 1961, Barth gave this answer to a question about *apokatastasis*:

It is the theory that finally and ultimately all men, and possibly the devil too, will be saved, whether they wish it or not. [...] It is a very agreeable theory – it is very pleasant to imagine that everything turns out right in the end. I have never upheld this theory, and never shall. On the other hand I should certainly not uphold the converse: I should not say that the end will be as we see it portrayed in the early paintings – some people in heaven and the rest in hell.¹⁷

Barth's rejection of 'all will be saved' does not move him into accepting that many or most will be damned. Here Barth juxtaposes a position he rejects with its extreme opposite, also a position he rejects, in order to present an alternative.

He continued,

But what we *can* do is realize that complete reconciliation and salvation are prepared for all men in Jesus Christ, that all men will one day have to appear before Jesus Christ as their judge, and the judge will be free to pass judgment. We should not presuppose that the judge will put these people – these awful people – on one side, and on the other the good who will then march white-clad into heaven, while the yawning mouth of hell swallows up the others. We cannot say that because we know that he has overcome hell, but he has the liberty to decide to whom he will give the benefit of this victory over hell. Neither can we say, according to the *apokatastasis* theory, that all will be saved. We shouldn't try to solve this problem of the future automatically.¹⁸

This illustrates Barth's refusal to proclaim the future decision God will make. It also illustrates that Barth used *apokatastasis* as a

label for ‘universalism,’ as something that represents any doctrinal position that declares ‘all will be saved.’ To say that when Barth rejects *apokatastasis* he is only rejecting a faulty form of universalism appears dubious. Barth rejected affirming the conclusion that all will be saved.

In May 1962 Karl Barth met with students at Princeton Theological Seminary, where he answered a variety of questions, including one about universalism and the extent of salvation:¹⁹

Student: Dr. Barth, I wonder if you can tell us what your thoughts are on universal salvation? Who or what is included in salvation?

Barth: If you have read something of my books you will have found out that I have never taught universal salvation. And that cannot be done. Under “universal salvation” I understand what Origen has told people: in the end all will be good, all will be saved, even the devil is coming home and so on. That’s too easy. And we are not allowed to say such a thing because salvation is an act and a decision of God’s free grace.

And if we proclaim, ‘Well, we are all saved, we all will end in a blessed way’ then we take away God’s freedom to do it. We can only believe, we can only hope, we can only pray for: that not only we, but also others, may be saved, you see, and all others. And now I should say it is necessary that you think so. We cannot avoid, if we understand Jesus Christ and his work, then to look for – yes to look for universal salvation – not to proclaim it, but to look for [it], and to deal with every man in the light of the fact that Christ has died also for him.

If I believe that I myself have a saviour in him, then I cannot avoid to think on other people as if they had no saviour. In so far, I look upon the salvation of all without proclaiming all shall and will be saved, because it’s always God’s free grace, and for all others. It is God’s grace when I will be saved, not to speak of the whole humanity. Do you understand?²⁰

Given the timing (1962) and the clear intent of the question, it is not

a strained interpretation to say that the question comprehends and encompasses the entire corpus of Barth's work. In fact, for all its shortness and simplicity, the question was so comprehensive in scope that it went beyond an interpretation of Barth's publications to explore his most current opinion or conclusion, whether expressed previously in writing or not. Nothing limits the range of discussion merely to a form of the doctrine of *apokatastasis*, nor are his conclusions restricted to his reasoning about universalism as opposed, say, to Christ's reconciling work or the extent of Christ's victory. The question jumps beyond the method or processes of Barth's reasoning to address his conclusions about the eschatological end. It can easily apply to both/and: to the question of whether universalism is valid, as well as the range and extent of Christ's victory over all opposition. Given Barth's lifelong contemplation of interrelated doctrinal questions and the full range of possible ramifications, the answer was as comprehensive as the question was in intent: 'Who or what will be saved?'

Firstly, in his answer Barth rejects universalism. There is no escaping the clarion statement, 'I have never taught it.' We can look at all the theological nuances and ramifications that come to mind in Barth's massive corpus, and yet, in all fairness, we have to deal with Barth's answer, stated clearly and publicly as he gave it at Princeton. Barth did not think that anything he had written introduced universalism under any guise, neither as something inherent in or as a logical consequence of his theological ideas. If this analysis of his statement is correct, we can go on to question whether he used the phrase 'Jesus is victor' elsewhere as a coded way to affirm the ultimate salvation of all humanity.

There was a boundary condition which he could not remove, no matter how strong his desire for universal salvation, no matter how great his hope for it, so that in the end he could not teach it as a sure thing. He would not encroach upon God's ultimate freedom in judgment and grace. And for that same reason he could not say universalism was impossible. He could only say he didn't know. But to hope or say universalism is possible is not the same as teaching it as certainty or dogma.

When questions on Barth's meaning in any part of his magnum opus cannot easily be resolved in our interpretative attempts, we

cannot legitimately eliminate from consideration Barth's clearly-stated self-interpretation of his own theology. His answer at Princeton harmonizes with the other statements we have quoted, so it does not stand alone. By his own admission Barth was not a universalist. He neither proclaimed it nor defended it as an acceptable theological position. Above all, God's freedom must be maintained and honoured in this area of speculative theologizing.



What about Barth's desire for universal salvation? Is this a ground for fault-finding?

Some may attempt to make the case that Barth was an unconscious universalist, which would shift the discussion in another direction. Perhaps other philosophers and theologians can make their own case for universalism. Such efforts are, however, outside our discussion.²¹

Barth may actually have *desired* the salvation of every human being. Yet desire for the salvation of all humans does not discredit him or provide grounds for disavowal. The desire to see God's forgiveness include all people is never forbidden in the biblical canon. In fact, our desire for the salvation of our neighbour may be harmonized with God's desire for the salvation of all.²² Christians may hope that God's 'mercy triumphs over judgment.'²³ The affirmation of the goodness of such hope has been echoed by other theologians, including Hans Urs von Balthasar²⁴ and Richard John Neuhaus. As Neuhaus points out in his discussion of the Lord's Prayer, forgiving others their trespasses is consistent with the desire that all be forgiven.²⁵

Charles Moule explored the message of hope in the New Testament. He held in tension human freedom to reject God and God's infinitely patient love, without eliminating either factor. God's claim on our allegiance is stringent: 'The more loving Love is seen to be, the deeper is the horror of rejecting it, even for an instant.' Yet Moule also affirms the tenacity of God's love as portrayed in the book of Hosea: 'The prophet finds he cannot give up his wicked wife, try as he will. Can we believe the love of God in Jesus to be less tenacious? I cannot believe that such love does not pursue us even in hell. If *we* cannot rest without knowing that our loved ones are right with God, is it conceivable that *God* can be content to let them go?'

But Moule adds, ‘if you agree in this, it does not in the slightest degree reduce the claims of God’s love and the intense urgency of a decision [...] “If we decide for universalism,” wrote Dr. John Baillie, “it must be for a form of it which does nothing to decrease the urgency of immediate repentance and which makes no promise to the procrastinating sinner.”’²⁶ The stern biblical warnings of judgment cannot be neglected.

Torrance concurs. He stood with Barth in affirming that in the death of Jesus Christ ‘God has enacted a justification of the ungodly.’ Yet he also spoke of the appalling possibility of choosing to contradict God, a possibility which is allowed by God and is an unfathomable mystery. Do not the New Testament writers speak of a judgment that would separate the children of light from the children of darkness? Is this not to be feared? Torrance argued that modern preaching is weak because it lacks the eschatological urgency of the New Testament: ‘It is the infinite urgency of the situation that life and death hang in the balances and that it is possible to choose death as well as life. No doctrine that cuts the nerve of that urgency in the Gospel can be a doctrine of love, but only an abiding menace to the Gospel and to mankind.’²⁷



Conclusion

Across the years there was movement in Barth’s thought and he candidly acknowledged areas where he had changed his mind, but on this controversial point he does not indicate there was any change. Near the end of his life, with a vast amount of his theology published, he stated that he was not a universalist and never had been. In his theological output we may certainly find evidence of a tendency towards universalism, or a desire to affirm hope for the restoration of all things, but such a tendency was always moderated and held in check by his ultimate reverence for God. Barth neither wanted to presume on God’s grace nor compromise God’s freedom. He hoped for universal salvation, but refused to declare it.

Notes

- 1 Literally, ‘restitution to an earlier state’, i.e., the idea of ‘a final restoration of all fallen sinners [...] to the harmony of all created things in God’; Albrecht Oepke, “ἄποκατάστασις” in Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. and trans. G. W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964), 1:389–93. This concept is often linked with the Alexandrian teacher Origen (d. 251–254), whose system included unusual notions of creation, fall, redemption through the Logos, and the final restoration of all things. The final restoration of ‘all things’ included fallen spirits, humans, angels and demons. Origen’s scheme was brilliant but convoluted even to ancient minds. Critics pointed out that the earliest Christian eschatology assigned demons a different end. Without going into the details of Origen’s extensive model of creation and redemption, it should be said that he saw redemption as a long process yet one centring on Jesus, the incarnation of the divine Son/Logos. In Origen’s defence, he did not teach that God overwhelmed creatures and forced them to accept salvation and restoration. He taught that God respects the freedom of humans and angels. Therefore God will not (and cannot) save them against their will. Nonetheless, God is patiently working to educate and guide all creatures back to the glory originally intended for them.
- 2 Tom Greggs, “‘Jesus is Victor’: Passing the Impasse of Barth on Universalism”, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60 (2007): 196–212 [referred hereafter as *JV*]. Cf. Tom Greggs, *Barth, Origen, and Universal Salvation: Restoring Particularity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) [referred hereafter as *BOUS*], for Greggs’ argument in favor of a universalism which he claims supports the particularity of Christ.
- 3 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–75), II/2, 417.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 418.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 *JV*, 197.

- 7 Ibid., 198, quoting Eberhard Busch.
- 8 “Theologians Answer Student Questions: Karl Barth”, *The Student World*, vol. LIV, no. 1–2 (1961): 162 f.; also published as Karl Barth, “Fragebeantwortung bei der Konferenz der World Student Christian Federation” in Eberhard Busch, ed., *Gespräche 1959–1962* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1995), 431 f.
- 9 Thomas F. Torrance, “Universalism or Election?”, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 2 (1949): 312.
- 10 *JV*, 199.
- 11 Ibid., 206.
- 12 Thomas F. Torrance, “Karl Barth and the Latin Heresy”, in *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 213–40.
- 13 Mark Koonz, “The Generosity of Thomas Forsyth Torrance: A Memoir with Letters”, *Princeton Theological Review* XIV, no.2 (2008): 14 f.; cf. *The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (ed. and trans. Thomas F. Torrance; London: James Clarke, 1959), xcvi–cxxxvi. On the range of redemption, cf. Thomas F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ* (ed. Robert T. Walker; Milton Keynes: Paternoster; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 181–92. The question of whether Barth provided an adequate doctrine of the Holy Spirit applies here. Greggs’ discussion in *BOUS* deserves analysis.
- 14 Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine and Contingent Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 111 f.
- 15 Torrance, *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian*, 238. Cf. ‘If Karl Barth is still misunderstood or criticised over his approach to the efficacious nature and range of redemption, it must be through mistaken opposition to his faithfulness in thinking out as far as possible the implications of the oneness of the Person and work of Christ, or of the inseparability of incarnation and atonement. [...] of this we can be perfectly certain: the blood of Christ, the incarnate Son of God who is perfectly and inseparably one in being and act with God the Father, means that God will never act toward any one in mercy and judgment at any time or in any other way than he has already acted in the Lord Jesus.’ (239).

- 16 Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (trans. J. Bowden; Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1976), 394; quoted in *JV*, 211.
- 17 “Theologians Answer Student Questions”, 163.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Barth was speaking without an interpreter. The verbatim wording is presented with respect.
- 20 *Karl Barth Meets the Students of Princeton Theological Seminary, 2 May 1962* [audio recording] (Princeton Theological Seminary). Cf. Barth’s answer at the University of Chicago: ‘My thesis can’t imply universalism. On the other side, I see no possibility to exclude it, because God’s grace [...] cannot be thought limited.’ *Evangelical Theology: American Lectures 1962: Questions Answered by Karl Barth* [audio recording] (Eugene: Wipf & Stock/Concise Logic, 2006).
- 21 Thomas Talbot, *The Inescapable Love of God* (Parkland, Fla.: Universal-Publishers, 1999) argues for universalism. Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992) argues against universalism. In Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge, eds., *Universal Salvation?: The Current Debate* (Carlisle: Paternoster; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003) the argument continues.
- 22 1 Timothy 2:3–6.
- 23 James 2:13.
- 24 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope “That All Men Be Saved”?: With a Short Discourse on Hell* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988).
- 25 Richard John Neuhaus, “Will All Be Saved?”, *First Things*, August/September 2001, No. 115, 77–80. “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” Is it possible to forgive someone and, at the same time, hope he goes to hell? I think not. After you have, in this thought experiment, said to absolutely everybody, “I hope you will be saved,” have you not declared your hope that all will be saved?
- 26 C. F. D. Moule, *The Meaning of Hope* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1963), 48; cf. John Baillie, *And the Life Everlasting* (New York: Scribner’s, 1933), 288–94.
- 27 Torrance, “Universalism or Election?”, 318.