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David W. Congdon

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Apokatastasis and apostolicity: a response to Oliver Crisp on the question of Barth's universalism

David W. Congdon

InterVarsity Press, 430 Plaza Drive, Westmont, Illinois 60559-1234, USA

dcongdon@ivpress.com

Abstract

Oliver Crisp argues that Karl Barth is incoherent on the question of universal salvation. Making use of a modal distinction between contingent and necessary universalism, Crisp claims that Barth's theology leads to the view that all people *must* be saved, yet Barth denies this conclusion. Most defences of Barth reject the view that his theology logically requires the salvation of all people; they try to defend him by appealing, as Barth himself seems to do at times, to divine freedom. This article argues that, even though his theology does lead necessarily to the conclusion of universal salvation, it is still coherent for him to deny universalism on his own methodological grounds, since the necessity and the denial operate at different levels. Barth has other commitments in his theology than mere logical consistency. To support this claim, I argue that the necessity which belongs to God's reconciling work in Christ coincides with a double contingency: (a) the 'objective' contingency of Christ's particular history and (b) the 'subjective' contingency with which this reconciliation confronts particular human beings and calls them to participate in the apostolic mission of Jesus. In each case, necessity coincides paradoxically with a kind of contingency, such that, within Barth's theology, we can speak of what Kevin Hector calls 'contingent necessity' or what Eberhard Jüngel calls 'eschatological necessity'. Most debates over universalism focus on the objective side. There the question is whether the necessity of Christ's universally effective work compromises divine freedom. But Barth's concern on this point is whether the necessity is 'transcendent' or 'immanent', that is, whether it is determined by God or the creature, and since God can indeed will the salvation of all, this poses no problem in principle for affirming universal salvation. Barth's central concern has to do with the issue of 'subjective' necessity. Barth denies that theology is ever a matter of describing what is objectively or generally the case regarding God and the world. On the contrary, he situates theology within the existential determination and subjective participation of the one called to bear witness to Jesus Christ. For this reason, he rejects all worldviews, including universalism. The rejection of universalism is the affirmation of apostolicity.

Keywords: divine freedom, historicity, mission, participation, universal salvation, worldview.

Oliver Crisp has advanced the claim in two essays that Karl Barth is logically inconsistent with respect to universalism.¹ Barth's doctrine of election, according to Crisp, makes the salvation of all people a logical necessity, and yet Barth denies that he is a universalist. The problem is most succinctly and memorably captured by a statement attributed to him by Eberhard Jüngel: 'I do not teach it [universalism], but I also do not not teach it [ich lehre sie nicht, aber auch nicht nicht]'.² It seems as if Barth is simply confused about his own position, or else he is being deliberately misleading.

Crisp gives would-be defenders of Barth's consistency two options: 'either affirm that election in Christ is conditional in some way . . . [or] affirm with Barth that election in Christ [is] a completed matter', and if the latter, 'some sense has to be made of Barth's assertion that he is not committed

¹ Oliver D. Crisp, 'On Barth's Denial of Universalism', *Themelios* 29/1 (2003), pp. 18–29; and Oliver D. Crisp, "'I Do Teach it, But I Also Do Not Teach It': The Universalism of Karl Barth", in Gregory MacDonald (ed.), *'All Shall Be Well': Explorations in Universalism and Christian Theology from Origen to Moltmann* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), pp. 305–24. The 2003 essay was reprinted in Oliver D. Crisp, 'On Karl Barth's Denial of Universalism', in *Retrieving Doctrine: Essays in Reformed Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), pp. 116–30. For related articles on Barth, see Oliver D. Crisp, 'The Letter and the Spirit of Barth's Doctrine of Election: A Response to Michael O'Neil', *Evangelical Quarterly* 79/1 (2007), pp. 53–67; Oliver D. Crisp, 'Barth and Jonathan Edwards on Reprobation (and Hell)', in David Gibson and Daniel Strange (eds), *Engaging with Barth: Contemporary Evangelical Critiques* (New York: T & T Clark, 2008), pp. 300–22. For related articles on universalism, see Oliver D. Crisp, 'Augustinian Universalism', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 53/3 (2003), pp. 127–45; Oliver D. Crisp, 'Is Universalism a Problem for Particularists?', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63/1 (2010), pp. 1–23.

² Eberhard Jüngel, *Barth-Studien* (Zurich and Cologne: Benziger Verlag, 1982), p. 51. Trans. Garrett E. Paul, as Eberhard Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), p. 44. In his 2003 essay in *Themelios*, Crisp misquotes the statement as: 'I do not teach it (universalism), but I also do not teach it' (Crisp, 'On Barth's Denial of Universalism', p. 18). It would seem that this is just a typographical error on Crisp's part, but then we find it repeated in his 2011 essay – this time with a comment in the footnotes. In the main text of the essay, he quotes it as, 'I do teach it, but I also do not teach it'. Notice that this exchanges a double negative for a positive, which drastically alters the tenor of the original statement and loses the relation to Barth's *Römerbrief*, where revelation is understood as the negation of the negation. The odd part about Crisp's new essay is the footnote that follows this citation. He writes: 'In fact the text says "I do not teach it, but I also do not teach it" – but it is clear from the context that this is a misprint. The phrase only makes sense if the first clause affirms Barth *does* teach it' (Crisp, 'Universalism of Karl Barth', p. 310, n10). This is erroneous on two counts. First, the misprint is Crisp's, since both the original German (which Crisp never cites) and the English translation both have the double negation in the second clause. Second, Crisp entirely misses the significance of the double negation.

to universalism, without thereby falling into inconsistency'.³ This article affirms the latter option. I propose to explain why it is fully consistent for Barth to reject universalism even though his theology is indeed logically universalistic. The problem with Crisp's approach is not that the logic is faulty in this particular instance, but rather that his understanding of theological speech diverges in a sharp way from Barth. If theology were simply a matter of reporting objective facts about God and humanity, then Barth would indeed be logically incoherent. He instead understands the event of election in Jesus Christ to be inseparable from one's existential participation in it as an apostolic witness. Theology cannot speak of the former in the absence of the latter. For this reason, Barth's theology can (and does) necessarily involve universal salvation without permitting an abstract doctrine or theory of universalism.

Crisp on Barth's denial of universalism

Crisp claims that 'if one reads CD II/2 with attention to what Barth actually writes about election . . . one will end up with a doctrine that is either a form of necessary universalism . . . or incoherent. . . . He either did not allow the implications of his doctrine of election to fully work through into the rest of his theology, or he rhetorically overstated his doctrine of election.'⁴ In order to assess the justification for these claims, we first need to understand what Crisp means by 'universalism' and, specifically, 'necessary universalism'. According to Crisp, universalism 'connotes any species of Christian doctrine concerning the scope of human salvation that yields the conclusion that all human beings will be saved'.⁵ He then adds a modal qualification to this definition. He differentiates between a contingent universalism which claims 'all human beings will be saved' and a necessary universalism which claims 'all human beings must be saved'. The former allows for 'possible worlds in which some human beings are not saved', since 'it is not the case that God had to save all human beings'.⁶ Crisp rightly recognises that both forms of universalism are compatible with the doctrine of God's aseity. Contrary to what many theologians – including, ostensibly, Barth – have said, the claim that universalism is a necessary truth does not conflict with divine freedom. It might be the case that 'God is essentially such that . . . he must bring about the salvation of all humanity'.⁷

³ Crisp, 'Universalism of Karl Barth', p. 320.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 307–8.

Keeping these distinctions in mind, we can turn now to the logical problem that Crisp claims to expose in Barth. I will restate the argument from his 2003 essay, though I condense some propositions and elide other less controversial steps in the argument. The syllogism then goes something like this:

1. Christ is the elect one and the reprobate one (i.e., election and reprobation directly pertain only to Christ);⁸
2. all human agents are elect only in the derivative sense of having a saving relation to Christ;
3. the saving relation to Christ is constituted by Christ's work of atonement;
4. Christ's death is sufficient and efficient to atone for the sin of all human agents; therefore,
5. all human agents are necessarily (and derivatively) elect in Christ, the elect one, by virtue of his universally efficient atonement.⁹

By and large, this argument correctly reproduces at least some of Barth's theological convictions, and I will not challenge Crisp's logic directly. Two things are worth noting. First, Barth's doctrine of election is not an abstract *decretum absolutum* willed by God. It is a conceptual explication of what occurred in the reconciling history of Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection. Election is a historical event. Insofar as Barth understands it as a decision in pretemporal eternity, it is a decision made by God strictly in *anticipation* of the event that took place at Golgotha. In other words, what God elects in eternity is precisely this history. Second, what occurred in this history, according to Barth, is not merely the *possibility* of reconciliation but its *actuality*. There is no act, divine or human, needed to consummate the redemptive work accomplished already in Christ – neither an ecclesial act of sacramental mediation nor an individual act of faithful acknowledgement.

Crisp is right to see a necessity at work in Barth's theology.¹⁰ Barth's denial of universalism does not mean he retracts his clearly stated conviction that

⁸ For the purposes of this article, this statement by Barth will be accepted as axiomatic. Its justification depends on considerations both exegetical (e.g. John 1) and theological (e.g. the doctrine of revelation) which cannot be elaborated here.

⁹ See Crisp, 'On Barth's Denial of Universalism', pp. 21–4.

¹⁰ Though I agree with Crisp on this point, one has at least to take into account the substantial literature on Barth's theology which would seem to belie such a claim. Crisp contrasts the 'necessary universalism' he finds in Barth with a 'contingent universalism' that says all people will be saved in the eschatological future, but this leaves out of account Barth's understanding of the threefold *parousia*. Barth's theology precludes any bifurcation between what must be and what will be on the grounds that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. As the subject and object of election, Jesus Christ determines what must be the case on the basis of God's eternal decision. But what

‘the concern [of the godless] can not be to suffer the execution [Ausführung] of this threat, to suffer the eternal damnation which corresponds to their godlessness’, for this is ‘the very goal which is unreachable by the godless, because it has already been taken away by the eternally decreed offering of the Son of God to suffer in place of the godless, and can not any longer be their goal’.¹¹ After the death and resurrection of Jesus, the threat of rejection and condemnation is an empty threat. This much is quite true. But Crisp identifies the wrong kind of necessity. To clarify Barth’s position, we are aided by a statement that Jüngel makes with respect to the question of necessity in the field of christology, but which is also relevant to our topic.¹² He says that ‘this “must” [Muß] is more than the must of a modal necessity [Notwendigkeit]’. It is not ‘some earthly necessity’ that we see in the life-history of Jesus, but rather it is the ‘eschatological must (δεῖ)’.¹³

For our purposes, I take it that this distinction between ‘earthly necessity’ and ‘eschatological necessity’ is a way of identifying the unique nature of God’s saving action in Christ. We can specify this uniqueness as the paradoxical unity of necessity and contingency. In his contribution to the

Christ was and is cannot be separated from what he will be. The multitemporal nature of the Christ-event establishes an eschatological limit on our God-talk. It is precisely on this christological basis that both George Hunsinger and Bruce McCormack defend Barth’s denial of universalism. See George Hunsinger, ‘Hellfire and Damnation: Four Ancient and Modern Views (1998)’, in *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 226–49; Bruce L. McCormack, ‘So that He May Be Merciful to All: Karl Barth and the Problem of Universalism’, in Bruce L. McCormack and Clifford B. Anderson (eds), *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), pp. 227–49. To use Crisp’s terminology, Barth on this reading would be a ‘contingent universalist’, in the sense that all will be saved in the third and final form of the *parousia*. The lack of engagement with major Barth scholars on this point constitutes a lacuna in Crisp’s argument. That being said, I would defend the claim that Barth is a necessary universalist on the grounds that the future is not undetermined for Barth, nor is the eschatological consummation a matter about which we can only be agnostic or silent. Barth is very clear that ‘in all these forms it is one event. Nothing different takes place in any of them.’ See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956–75), IV/3.1, p. 293 (hereafter CD). Cf. Karl Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, 4 vols (Zollikon-Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag AG, 1932–70), IV/3.1, p. 338. Pages from the KD will follow the pages cited from the CD. Unless otherwise noted, all italics are restored from the original German.

¹¹ CD II/2, pp. 319/350–1. Barth goes on to say that the threat of rejection is rendered ‘powerless [außer Kraft]’ and ‘impotent [unkräftig]’ (CD II/2, pp. 321/353).

¹² Jüngel is attempting to address the way in which Jesus ‘must’ be the object of faith in the same way as God the Father in light of the resurrection.

¹³ Eberhard Jüngel, ‘Das Wunder des Glaubens’, in *Beziehungreich: Perspektiven des Glaubens* (Stuttgart: Radius, 2002), p. 146.

debate over trinity and election, Kevin Hector makes the claim that ‘there is a sense in which humanity is contingently necessary to God’.¹⁴ The concept of ‘contingent necessity’ has purchase outside of that particular debate. In fact, it is a key aspect of Barth’s thinking throughout the *Church Dogmatics*, especially in the fourth volume. I will argue here that the divinely necessary event of the world’s reconciliation includes a double contingency: the contingency of Christ’s history as the actualisation of salvation and the contingency of each person’s own history as the apostolic witness to this salvation. Modal logic is incapable of adequately understanding the paradoxical and historical character of Barth’s account of salvation. I will address the contingency of Christ briefly before turning in more detail to the contingency of Christian witness.

Divine freedom and transcendent necessity

The mature dogmatic theology of Barth in CD II/2 and following is a minefield for the analytic theologian. I am tempted to say, a rather *Hegelian* minefield, but it is not merely Hegel’s influence that makes its presence felt. One sees traces – and sometimes much more than traces – of many different continental thinkers, including *inter alia* Kierkegaard, Heidegger and, of course, Rudolf Bultmann. All that is simply to say, when it comes to parsing Barth’s later theology of reconciliation, the analytic thinker is wading into highly unfriendly waters. Any attempt to corral Barth’s thought into tidy logical categories is bound to be a fruitless exercise. That is nowhere more the case than with the topic of universal salvation, which forms a point of intersection for his doctrinal reflections on Christ and election.

We begin by observing that Barth’s doctrine of election understands God’s decision to be contingent not only in the sense of being a particular act of God, but also because it has a determinate historical location. Election is identifiable with the historical event of Jesus Christ, an event that is ‘concrete, limited in time and space, singular and unique. It is . . . a “contingent fact of history”, to use the phrase of Lessing’.¹⁵ At the same time, this contingent decision is also necessary. God can only will what God in fact does. One cannot understand Barth’s doctrine of divine freedom without attending to what he calls ‘the inner necessity of the freedom of God’. God does not have ‘a sovereign *liberum arbitrium*’ which makes it possible for God to will things arbitrarily, as if God’s decision is a choice of one option among many. He

¹⁴ Kevin W. Hector, ‘God’s Triunity and Self-Determination: A Conversation with Karl Barth, Bruce McCormack and Paul Molnar’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7/3 (2005), p. 247. Emphasis added.

¹⁵ CD IV/2, pp. 696/788.

goes on to say that ‘we do not have to do with one of the throws in a game of chance which takes place in the divine being, but with the foundation-rock of a divine decision’.¹⁶ Barth wants to exclude from theology the notion that the will of God is a libertarian free will such that God is wholly undetermined and capable of choosing any possibility. He argues instead that God is wholly self-determined. God necessarily is what God has done. The actuality of God’s decision in Christ determines what is possible for God. All other contingent possibilities are eternally excluded as unreal possibilities which are, in fact, impossible.

At the same time, Barth is keen to avoid the opposite error. The necessity that Barth posits is a necessity within *divine freedom* – that is, a necessity within the singularity of the divine decision. This does not mean that God could have acted otherwise, as if there were other real possibilities. What it means, by contrast, is that the necessity of a certain occurrence taking place is not immanent to (or grounded in) the occurrence itself. Recall Barth’s discussion of the *analogia fidei* in CD II/1. In his dispute with the Lutheran dogmatician Johannes Andreas Quenstedt, Barth strictly differentiates between an *analogia attributionis extrinsecae* – in which the analogy between the creature and God ‘is proper to the creature only externally in the existence and form of its relationship . . . to God’ – and an *analogia attributionis intrinsecae* which makes the analogous properties internal to both God and the creature.¹⁷ Barth’s point with the *analogia fidei* is that the analogy which comes to exist between human knowledge and divine self-knowledge is one which God alone makes possible. It is always an extrinsic relation. Nothing native to human speech itself can make analogous God-talk possible. If such an analogy occurs, it can only be due to a contingent act of divine grace. It is in this sense that Barth rejects necessity in other areas of his theology. Even where he speaks of the contingent act of grace as necessary – since God precludes all other possibilities from the start – it does not become the ‘bad necessity’ that he elsewhere rejects as mechanical in nature. He thus opposes speaking of God’s merciful treatment of sinners like ‘a mechanism which functions, as it were, independently of his free ruling and disposing’, because this would involve a ‘necessity immanent to its occurrence’.¹⁸ The claim is not that God might treat sinners unmercifully but only that, when and where God acts mercifully, it is solely an act of divine grace and not an act conditioned by anything in the sinner. That God treats humanity mercifully is necessary because God has sovereignly determined Godself to be a merciful God. It is,

¹⁶ CD IV/1, pp. 195/213.

¹⁷ CD II/1, pp. 238/268–9.

¹⁸ CD IV/1, pp. 221/242.

we might say, a *transcendent* necessity, rather than an immanent necessity.¹⁹ The terms ‘immanent necessity’ and ‘transcendent necessity’ correspond to Jüngel’s ‘earthly necessity’ and ‘eschatological necessity’.

The distinction between a transcendent-extrinsic necessity and an immanent-intrinsic necessity helps to make sense of Barth’s well-known statement against universalism, namely that God ‘does not owe us eternal patience’.²⁰ His rejection of *apokatastasis* is an attack on the notion of an immanently necessary universalism, i.e. the notion that God owes us salvation. He rejects the view that there is something about humanity which could constrain God’s decision. We might call this ‘immanent (or bad) universalism’ as opposed to a ‘transcendent (or good) universalism’. Barth’s consistent reference to Origen supports this observation. In his conversation with members of Princeton Theological Seminary in 1962, for example, Barth begins his response to the question of universal salvation by defining the idea in terms of Origen’s soteriology: ‘[By] 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 if we proclaim, well, we are all saved, we all will end in a pleasant way, then we take away God’s freedom to do it.’²¹ The problem with (Origen’s) universalism is that it ‘take[s] away God’s freedom’; it is an external determination regarding what God is able to do. This does not, however, preclude God from freely actualising the salvation of all people in the history of Jesus Christ. Universalism in this sense would be a contingent necessity rooted in God’s free and eternal self-determination.

Divine self-revelation and existential participation

Thus far we have seen that Barth is not at all opposed to speaking of necessity with respect to God throughout his mature dogmatic theology. But this necessity occurs in a contingent historical event and is inseparable from this contingency. It is the necessity not of immanent logic but of transcendent, eschatological action.

¹⁹ Barth makes the same argument regarding the resurrection and human faith. Both are free and yet both are necessary. See CD IV/1, pp. 309/340 (resurrection) and pp. 620/693 (faith).

²⁰ CD IV/3.2, pp. 477/550.

²¹ Karl Barth, *Gespräche 1959–1962*, ed. Eberhard Busch, Gesamtausgabe 4/1 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1995), p. 503. Barth makes the same statement in his conversation with the World Student Christian Federation from earlier that same year: ‘What do we mean by *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 theory first propounded by Origen and then by many others’ (ibid., p. 431).

We turn now to the subjective, human corollary of Barth's account of necessity and contingency in the Christ-event. If the relation between transcendent and immanent necessity concerns the ontological basis for universal salvation (namely that the reconciled *being* of humanity is established by God's act in Christ), then the concern here is with the epistemological relation of human beings to this christological event. With regard to the former, Barth recognises that contingent particularity is internal to the event of salvation itself; with regard to the latter, we will see that Barth recognises that a certain particularity is internal to a theologically responsible thinking and speaking about salvation. Transcendent or eschatological necessity is operative in both cases: in the former, it means that *God determines Godself* for this particular historical person from Nazareth; in the latter, it means that *God discloses Godself* to those particular historical persons who live as faithful witnesses of the crucified Nazarene. The problem with universalism is not that it infringes upon divine freedom – since, as we have seen, there is a good Barthian way of avoiding that problem – but rather that it presupposes a mistaken notion of theological speech.

It is well-known that Barth's theology is inimical to universal axioms and general statements. Throughout his dogmatics, and not only in his rejection of *apokatastasis*, Barth opposes any attempt to turn the self-revelation of God into a systematic principle from which general truths may be derived.²² His understanding of theological speech has its basis in his understanding of the Christ-event itself. The contingent, transcendent necessity discussed above with reference to Christ has significant implications for human speech which would seek faithfully to correspond to this reconciling event. This becomes especially clear in a key passage from the 'Judge judged in our place' (§59):

²² I am in agreement here with the excellent 2007 article by Tom Greggs. He argues, correctly in my opinion, that 'it is the replacement of the person of Jesus Christ with a principle, rather than any limitation of the salvific work of God, that Barth dismisses in rejecting *apokatastasis*'. See Tom Greggs, "'Jesus is Victor": Passing the Impasse of Barth on Universalism', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60/2 (2007), pp. 196–212, here p. 199. Whereas a principle can be generalised as a universal datum, a person is always a concrete particularity: 'Barth rejects universalism, therefore, as he is determined to keep the particularity of the person of Jesus Christ – a particularity which cannot be gained from a principle' (*ibid.*, p. 206). The claim of this article is broader than that of Greggs, however, since he limits his focus to the question of salvation (in a person, not a principle), whereas I claim that the basis for this is Barth's entire understanding of theology (as apostolic speech grounded in an event of participation). I am thus setting forth the conditions in Barth's theology for the possibility of Greggs's article, which is correct as far as it goes – but it does not go far enough.

We cannot deduce [ableiten] it [i.e. God's reconciliation of the world] or count [errechnen] on it from any side. We cannot establish in principle from any side that it must be so, that God had to link the revelation and increase of his glory with the maintaining and carrying through to victory of our cause, that he had to cause it to take place as an event in which salvation is given to us. How can it be *necessary in principle* that he should take to himself . . . the cause which we had so hopelessly lost, turning it in his own person to good, to the best of all? If we can speak of a necessity of any kind here, it can only be the *necessity of the decision* [Beschluss] which God did in fact make and execute, the necessity of the fact that the being of God, the omnipotence of his free love, has this concrete determination and is effective and revealed in this determination and no other, that God wills to magnify and does in fact magnify his own glory in this way and not in any other, and therefore to the inclusion of the redemption and salvation of the world. This fact we have to recognise to be *divinely necessary* [göttlich notwendig] because it derives from and is posited by God.²³

Discussions of Barth's universalism do not usually reference this passage, but it has enormous implications for correctly understanding his position. Notice that he differentiates between being 'necessary in principle' and being 'divinely necessary'. The former is something that people can 'count on'; it is a timeless and universal idea from which we can consistently and permanently deduce other ideas. The latter is not the necessity of a principle but rather the necessity of a contingent divine decision. It is marked by a 'concrete determination', by a divine action in the particular history of Jesus Christ. There is nothing timeless about this occurrence. It is the 'event in which salvation is given to us', and as an event it never becomes a stable given within the world. The divinely necessary event took place in a contingent occurrence and – crucially, for our concerns – it continually meets us here and now in a contingent way. As revelation [Offenbarung], it cannot become something revealed [Offenbarkeit].²⁴

²³ CD IV/1, p. 213/234; emphasis added.

²⁴ This is a common refrain throughout Barth's theology. In his Göttingen dogmatics, Barth says 'das "Deus dixit" ist Offenbarung, nicht Offenbarkeit'. Karl Barth, *Unterricht in der christlichen Religion*, 1, *Prolegomena*, ed. Hannelotte Reiffen, Gesamtausgabe 2 (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1985), p. 70. In the Münster dogmatics, he states: 'The word of God that is only a historical datum [historisches Datum], only an object, only in a book, is not the word of God. Revealedness [Offenbarkeit] is not revelation [Offenbarung]'. Karl Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, ed. Gerhard Sauter, Gesamtausgabe 2 (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1982), vol. 1, p. 469. In *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, Barth criticises Roman Catholicism for understanding 'itself and God's revelation [Offenbarung] in

Theology, according to Barth, does not speak of an idea, substance or object, but rather of a history, that is to say, an event. But this is not just one history or event among others, because it ‘never ceases to be event’.²⁵ Theology is concerned with a *divine* history, the event of God. As such, it is invisible apart from the Holy Spirit’s awakening gift of faith. This divine event is not ‘deducible’, meaning that it is not available for neutral and detached observation and examination, and thus it cannot be expressed in static propositions which purport to have universal validity. For this reason, in CD IV/3, Barth contrasts the prophetic witness of Jesus Christ which demands our active involvement with the sinful human attempt to set up a ‘worldview’ [*Weltanschauung*]. A religious worldview attempts to speak of God ‘from a certain distance’ and to state ‘that which is always and everywhere the same’; it is a doctrine that a person ‘deduces from the many things which one has seen or thinks one has seen’. Barth contrasts this with the word of divine grace which ‘speaks of a unique and highly particular event’.²⁶ This event never becomes an objective datum of the past, since God is not past but always present in our midst. As a history, it has to be narrated; as a divine history, it can only be narrated by one who actively participates in it as an apostolic witness, that is, by one whose own history corresponds to the singular history of Christ. Theology is an integral part of this ongoing historical and contextual narration of the event of Jesus Christ. This means there is no theological statement that has timeless validity as a purely objective truth. To speak of God is simultaneously to speak of oneself in the active service of God.

Barth objects to what he calls ‘ecclesiastical-theological orthodoxy’ on the grounds that it tries to speak about God in a purely objective or non-participatory way, that is, in the manner of a worldview. After expressing appreciation for orthodoxy’s ‘zeal, watchfulness and loyalty in relation to the content of the Christian witness’, Barth then offers the following correction:

[Orthodoxy] ceases to be good when it is linked with indifference to or a disdain for the incidental but necessary question of the existential

this constantly available relationship between God and humanity, in this revealedness [*Offenbarkeit*]’ (CD I/1, pp. 41/40, rev.). Similarly, in his doctrine of scripture, Barth says that ‘it witnesses to God’s revelation, but that does not mean that God’s revelation [*Offenbarung*] is now before us in any kind of divine revealedness [*Offenbarkeit*]’ (CD I/2, pp. 507/562).

²⁵ CD II/2, pp. 184/202.

²⁶ CD IV/3.1, pp. 255–7/293–6. Cf. Clifford Blake Anderson, ‘Jesus and the “Christian Worldview”’: A Comparative Analysis of Abraham Kuyper and Karl Barth’, *Cultural Encounters* 2/2 (2006), pp. 61–80.

determination of Christians by the content of their witness. However carefully this content is investigated and presented . . . it will harden into a possibly impressive but dead idol, and the joy and ability of the Christian to witness to it would fade away if one tries to ignore the fact that the living God in Jesus Christ, who is indeed the content of Christian witness, necessarily affects and grabs those people who are called to bear witness, engaging them in their whole being, making disposition concerning them, finding reflection in their lives in the form of their personal liberation. We cannot ignore or abstract away this accompanying phenomenon. We cannot ignore, conceal, or only speak quietly about this aspect and significance of vocation. Otherwise even the most conscientious, sincerest, and strictest orthodoxy becomes an idle pursuit. . . . Even the trinitarian God of Nicene dogma, or the Christ of the Chalcedonian definition, if seen and proclaimed in exclusive objectivity and thus with no regard for this accompanying phenomenon, necessarily becomes an idol like all others, with whom one cannot live and to whom one cannot therefore witness. Such an orthodoxy would be something highly menacing [*Versucherisch*] and dangerous.²⁷

The content of the faith – even in the most central creeds and confessions – becomes an ‘idol’ if it is not narrated or articulated in the existential context of the one who encounters this content in the addressing word of God. Theology is not the recitation and repetition of ostensibly objective propositional statements. On the contrary, theology is always and only a contingent, subjective act of personal liberation and faithful witness, a contextual and existential engagement with the event of Jesus Christ which meets us in the present moment. Without this inherently subjective character – in which the understanding of God is always a new self-understanding – theology is an ‘idle pursuit’. The content of Christian theology cannot be abstracted from the missionary vocation in which that content comes to expression again and again within a particular time and place.²⁸

Election for the sake of witness: Barth’s rejection of *apokatastasis*

We are now in a position properly to assess Barth’s opposition to universalism. The distinction between necessity and contingency with which Crisp sets up his analysis of Barth places the conversation on the wrong footing. As we have seen, the necessity of reconciliation is doubly contingent in nature: on the one hand, it is a divinely willed decision concerning a

²⁷ CD IV/3.2, pp. 655/750–1, rev.

²⁸ Put another way, CD IV/1 and IV/2 cannot be properly understood apart from IV/3.

historically contingent occurrence; and, on the other hand, this contingent event always confronts human beings in a contingent way which elicits our existential participation and proclamation. Necessity and contingency are paradoxically identical within Barth's covenant ontology. To emphasise one at the expense of the other is to miss the dialectical complexity of his theology. Crisp's interpretation, by contrast, rests on assumptions that Barth actively opposes under the name of a dead 'orthodoxy'. We will never gain a proper understanding of Barth's position on universalism so long as we are trapped within the straitjacket of modal logic. His theology refuses to be constrained within those limits. For these reasons, even given a thoroughly necessary universalism – one which is, of course, transcendent in nature, and thus also in a paradoxical way contingent – Barth's refusal to teach universalism remains entirely valid. The basis for Barth's denial of universalism is found in the very nature of theological speech about God as missionary witness to the event of Jesus Christ. The problem of *apokatastasis* is therefore inseparable from the question of apostolicity.

It is no accident that the two main rejections of universalism in the *Church Dogmatics* appear in the context of Barth's account of mission, vocation and witness. They do not appear in the sections on christology, but instead in the sections which deal with the human response to and participation in the work of Christ. The oft-cited denial of *apokatastasis* in CD IV/3 appears at the very end of §70.3 on humanity's condemnation, following the description of Jesus Christ as the 'true witness' (§70.1) and preceding the account of humanity's vocation of witness (§71) and the presentation of the church as a community of witness (§72). It is not a coincidence that Barth's previously cited opposition to orthodoxy appears in §71.6 in the context of his account of the individual's personal liberation for vocation. Nor is it accidental that his discussion of Christ as true witness begins by rejecting any association of the truth with 'an idea, principle, or system. . . . [It is not] a structure of correct insights, nor a doctrine, even though this be a correct doctrine of the being of God'.²⁹ Moreover, his repudiation of all talk of worldviews in theology appears in his discussion of Jesus as the ultimate victor in §69. The rejection of universalism must be read within this wider context in CD IV/3 if one is not to misunderstand Barth's real concern.

The most significant rejection of universalism appears in CD II/2 in the section on 'The Determination of the Elect' (§35.3), a subsection within 'The Election of the Individual'. Barth grounds his opposition to *apokatastasis* in light of a broader opposition to all 'metaphysics of history'.³⁰ A metaphysics

²⁹ CD IV/3.1, pp. 375/434.

³⁰ CD II/2, pp. 417–18/462, rev.

of this kind sets external limits or requirements on God's grace. Taken in isolation, these statements about 'the freedom of divine grace' would seem to suggest that Barth's view is reducible to the emphasis on God's freedom to save or not to save certain individuals. This is the predominant interpretation of Barth's denial of universalism; it is the position one finds in Crisp.³¹ Even if divine freedom were the concern, we already addressed that issue in the foregoing discussion of immanent and transcendent necessity. But a quick look at the wider context quickly reveals this to be a misreading. The section in question begins by stating that election 'comes to fulfillment in one's calling [Berufung]', and thus it is 'an election to participation in the service of the community'.³² Election includes not only one's objective being in Christ but also one's subjective agency as a witness and apostle.³³ This does not mean that a person fulfils her election through service, as if election in its objectivity is a mere potentiality. But it does mean that any account of Barth's soteriology which restricts the focus to the objective status of human beings in relation to God is not simply insufficient; it is actually erroneous. This is the crucial failure of Crisp's articles on Barth. There is no mention of mission and witness as the telos of election. One cannot understand Barth's theology without attending to the essential role of human participation within the contingencies of history.

When we look at Barth's refusal to endorse universalism from the perspective of humanity's election-to-witness, we discover a very different reason for his reluctance. The paragraph regarding the 'metaphysics of history' begins by explaining how the apostolic witness of the elect individual takes place as the 'ongoing [Fortgang] of the reconciling work of the living God in the world'.³⁴ The continuation to which he refers here is not the fulfilment or extension of Christ's reconciling work in his death and resurrection, but rather the calling into existence of active witnesses within the world. Barth states that the election of each individual 'resolves' [beschlossen] and the calling

³¹ A very recent example of this line of argument is Mark Koonz, 'The Old Question of Barth's Universalism: An Examination with Reference to Tom Greggs and T. F. Torrance', *Theology in Scotland* 18/2 (2011), pp. 33–46.

³² CD II/2, pp. 410/453–4, rev.

³³ CD II/2, pp. 415/458–9, rev.: 'Each elect individual is as such a messenger of God. This is his service and commission. . . . He is sent. He is an apostle: on the basis of the fact that Jesus Christ was elected to be the apostle of grace and in connection with the apostolate of grace which is the meaning and order of the life of [Christ's] whole community. The determination of the elect is to allow the light which has kindled within himself to shine.' Cf. CD II/2, pp. 418/463: '[The elect individual] is called in order that he himself may be one who calls [ein Rufender] within the world'.

³⁴ CD II/2, pp. 417/461.

of each individual ‘puts into effect’ [vollziehen] the ‘opening and expansion of the closed-in-itself circle of the election of Jesus Christ and his community in relation to the world’.³⁵ In view here is the expansion not of the circle of salvation but of the circle of missionary witness. Barth makes this explicit when he says that ‘the circle of election means the circle of human beings who recognize and confess Jesus Christ within the world’.³⁶ The work of Christ continues in the limited sense that more people come to recognise and confess their true being in him. The individual apostle is not called to save others – that has already been accomplished in Christ – but instead to proclaim this good news to them so that they too might hear God’s call and join in the proclamation. It is this ‘subjective’ sense of election to which Barth refers when he says that ‘it is [God’s] concern what is to be the final extent of the circle’.³⁷

The real problem with *apokatastasis* is that it confuses the objective and subjective aspects of election: it makes the subjective circle of elected witnesses necessarily identical with the objective circle of the elected world. It attempts to speak about each person’s existential participation in the same way that theology speaks about humanity’s ontological determination.³⁸ Put another way, it fails to differentiate between the reconciling work of Jesus

³⁵ *Ibid.*, rev.

³⁶ CD II/2, pp. 419/463. While it is beyond the scope of this article, this reading of Barth is amply confirmed in the 30-page small-print section that concludes §35.3, which is an exegetical survey of the election passages in the New Testament (*ibid.*, pp. 419–49/464–98). The conclusion he draws is that election concerns one’s calling to be an apostolic participant in Jesus’ mission. Barth closes by stating: ‘God elects a person in order to be a witness to Jesus Christ and thus a proclaimer of his own glory’ (*ibid.*, pp. 449/498, rev.).

³⁷ CD II/2, pp. 417/462. Crisp misses this entirely. When he cites this passage as part of his ‘catena’ of quotes noting Barth’s denial of universalism, he quotes it as follows (the brackets are his): ‘It is His concern [i.e., the concern of God] what is to be the final extent of the circle [of salvation]’ (Crisp, ‘Universalism of Karl Barth’, p. 309). The circle of salvation is precisely not what it is. On the contrary, it is the circle of those who are engaged in active missionary witness to their already accomplished salvation in Christ. Think here of Barth’s concentric circles: we have Christ at the centre as always, while the circle of reconciliation or salvation is the largest circle which encompasses everyone. The middle circle (between the centre and the outer circle) is the community of those who are awakened to the truth of their election in Christ. It is this middle circle to which Barth refers here.

³⁸ We could say that *apokatastasis* collapses the important distinction in Barth between ‘active Christian’ and ‘virtual Christian’, between those who are both ontologically and subjectively ‘in Christ’ and those who are ontologically ‘in Christ’ but ‘only provisionally and subjectively outside him and without him in their ignorance and unbelief’. See CD IV/2, pp. 275/305.

Christ and the awakening work of the Holy Spirit. Everyone is ‘in Christ’, but not everyone knows this truth or will participate in its promulgation. Apokatastasis, as Barth defines it, is the doctrine that every person will become an active witness, and it is this doctrine that sets up a ‘metaphysics of history’ for the basic reason that it runs roughshod over the historical contingencies related to each person’s existential participation in the mission of God.³⁹

In the final analysis, the problem Barth has with universalism is the same problem he has with ecclesiastical orthodoxy (or any other religious worldview). Both attempt to speak ahistorically about God and the world. Orthodoxy sets up dogmas and doctrines which purport to be timeless accounts of God that are permanently valid in themselves. Universalism sets up a timeless picture of the world which entirely overlooks the particularity of each person’s calling to become an apostolic witness. Both forget that the object of theology is an *event* of revelation and reconciliation which is never finished in the past (*Offenbartheit*) but always happening again and again in the present (*Offenbarung*) in a way that encounters us in our particular histories and calls forth our active involvement. Both end up either disregarding the subjective and existential dimension of theology, or they end up collapsing the subjective into a timeless interpretation of what is objectively true. In doing so, however, these ‘objective truths’ become falsehoods and idols, according to Barth, for there is no appropriate description of the God–world relation which focuses exclusively on God’s relation to the world without taking into explicit consideration the diversity and contingency of God’s relation to the world. No matter how faithful and accurate Christian universalism is – and it is accurate a thousand times over compared to any view that leaves salvation for anyone in doubt – it is unfaithful to the extent that it separates the objectivity of salvation from the subjectivity of vocation. In rejecting apokatastasis Barth leaves space open in history for each person to discover anew her or his calling to be an apostolic participant in Christ’s

³⁹ It is this more nuanced understanding of election that Crisp fails to grasp. He says that ‘affirming both that election is a closed matter . . . and that election is still an open matter . . . implies a contradiction. And yet this is just what Barth does say in different passages in CD II/2!’ (Crisp, ‘Universalism of Karl Barth’, p. 320, n. 32). But there is no contradiction, once one sees that election is *ontologically closed* in Christ and yet *existentially open* in us – *closed* in the sense that all creation is ‘enclosed’ in Christ and *open* in that we can only speak about the actuality of election within the context of concrete witness – and both are true simultaneously. More than that, to proclaim one without the other is actually to falsify both. Barth’s theology is dialectical from the ground up: one can only read him properly when one sees these dialectical statements not as a veil of some non-dialectical truth above and behind them, but rather as a witness to the truth itself precisely in their paradoxicality.

mission. The rejection of *apokatastasis* is simultaneously the affirmation of apostolicity.

Conclusion

Oliver Crisp raises a number of important questions in his discussion of universalism in Barth's theology. As an analytic theologian, he correctly discerns the universalistic logic of Barth's soteriological claims. However, it is this same analytic rigour which leads him to miss Barth's understanding of the existential and missionary nature of theological speech. The result is that Crisp can only see incoherence where Barth sees a necessary respect for the concrete historical location of faithful human witness. Barth affirms vocational, pastoral and doxological aims more basic than analytic philosophy's prioritisation of logical consistency and propositional clarity. That is not to say there are not times when Barth simply contradicts himself. But it also means that not every appearance of incoherence is an actual instance. In the case of universalism, he insists that we cannot speak in advance and in the abstract about the historicity of each person's subjective participation in the election of Jesus Christ. It is not enough to say that Jesus is victor if we do not also say that the event of his victory is one in which we are called to participate as a faithful witness. Theology as *Nachdenken* corresponds to this event only insofar as it speaks from and for this existential determination. For that reason, Barth must reject universalism along with every worldview.⁴⁰

The salvation of all people is not an 'immanent necessity' rooted in human existence but a 'transcendent necessity' rooted in the eternal divine decision. It is not 'necessary in principle' but rather 'divinely necessary', and thus contingently necessary. For this very reason, though, it cannot be incorporated into a dogma or worldview which we can discuss from a distance as an objective fact alongside other facts. It can only be the truth of an event which we enter into in the form of a missionary praxis. The basic problem with universalism is not *what* it says about humanity but *how* it says it.⁴¹

⁴⁰ I would suggest, in fact, that Barth's appeals to divine freedom be read consistently in this manner. When Barth refers to God's freedom anywhere in his later dogmatics, it is not to suggest that God could change God's mind or that there are possible worlds in which God could have acted differently. On the contrary, this appeal is best understood as a way of acknowledging the historical contingencies and particularities associated with the concrete encounter between God and specific human beings.

⁴¹ My sincere thanks to Travis McMaken, John Drury and Oliver Crisp for reading an earlier version of this article and providing invaluable comments and recommendations. Any remaining mistakes are, of course, my own.