

BITH – 489 - Barth  
 W. Travis McMaken  
 March 4, 2004

### **Final Exam: Essay #1**

*“In what way does Barth’s claim that “Jesus Christ is the sum of the Gospel” represent a complete renovation of the doctrine of election, and why does Barth focus so directly upon the concrete particularity of Jesus Christ?”*

Barth’s doctrine of election represents a paradigm shift in that, rather than following in the method of the traditional Reformed doctrine of election, he founds his construction upon the concrete person and work of Jesus Christ. Barth places Jesus Christ at the center of election, and he understands election to be the center of the Gospel. These are the fundamental moves that drive his formulation of the doctrine of election.

The traditional Reformed doctrine of election has generally been founded upon data from experience or a concept of God’s omnipotent will, the former being more characteristic of Calvin and the latter of Reformed Protestant Scholasticism. In the former, one starts with an observation that there are some individuals who seem to be saved while others are not. The latter is the systemization of an explanation for the former, since if God is understood as omnipotently sovereign, then he determined before eternity that some humans would perish and that some would be saved. This divine determination is the *decretum absolutum*, and is shrouded in unknowable mystery. Human beings are predestined either to eternal grace or eternal wrath by the decision of God before the world began. Thus, as per this construction, it is the first and last word concerning humanity in relationship to God. It is a word of hope for the elect, but a terrifying word of condemnation for those who are not, and it seems that it is only the arbitrary will of a possibly capricious and tyrannical God who determines this. Those who seek to know God are faced solely with this arbitrary *decretum absolutum*, a knowledge that must either extinguish faith or fan the flames of legalistic righteousness, for it leads only to “an unknown

God and an unknown man.”<sup>1</sup> In this construction, the divine ‘No’ of condemnation drowns out the ‘Yes’ of divine grace.

Barth does not follow this formulation. Rather, he seriously critiques it, pointing out that it takes as its starting point some facet of human knowledge as foundational, a vague notion based on experience and an ontotheological idea of God, instead of building upon the self-revelation that God has given in Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup> In this, Barth shows that he is not interested in speaking about abstractions, but rather about the particularity of God and Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup> Jesus Christ is the elected man, and yet he is also the electing God. As such he stands at the center of the doctrine of election. The key move here is Barth’s replacement of God’s supposed *decretum absolutum* in relation to the eternal condition of individual human beings in general with a personal and revealing *decretum absolutum* of the election by God of himself, shown in a particular man, Jesus Christ. Thus identified, the *decretum absolutum* presents the questioner with Jesus Christ as the revelation of the now knowable God.<sup>4</sup> Jesus Christ is the first and last word concerning humanity in relationship to God. Indeed, the presence of this answer does not extinguish questioning, but inspires its. For here is seen God’s unlimited goodness to all humanity in making himself known as the one who has given himself in Christ for all humankind. What is more, this God gives himself to humankind for the purpose of taking upon himself the consequences of man’s rejection of God.<sup>5</sup> Here is the divine ‘No,’ but it is enacted, in Christ, upon the divine itself. In Christ, the divine ‘No’ is not the lot that God has elected for man. Rather, grace and freedom, the overwhelming divine ‘Yes,’ is elected in Christ for men. Barth

---

<sup>1</sup> CD II/2, cf. p. 159-160

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, cf. pp. 52-53

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, cf. pp. 55-58

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 160

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, cf. p. 164

understands this and works to base his doctrine of election upon this foundation of the concrete and particular Jesus Christ. In this way, his formulation is a distinct paradigm shift.

In focusing on the particularity of Jesus Christ, Barth is able to recognize the staggering grace proclaimed by the Gospel. It truly is “good news,” not only for the few, but available for all. However, this comes about not because of some pre-existent, eternal determination of a generality, but in the particularity of a person, fully human as he is fully divine, within created history. God does not act abstractly at the beginning of a schema of causality, but he takes up the created order and intimately connects it to himself.<sup>6</sup> He elected and continues to elect in time, within the realm of human potentiality. This is a continual cooperation between creature and Creator, epitomized in Jesus Christ, which lends an extraordinary dignity to humanity and the created order. In the election of Christ, God has determined himself to with and for humanity, not in a way that imprisons God, but freely because he has elected that it to be so. The true mystery of election is why God would determine that he would be intimately connected with his creation, and yet this mystery is not overwhelming, for in Jesus Christ this determination is made certain.<sup>7</sup> It is the eternal demonstrated in history and with a definite form. Rather than leading to revolting terror or complacent peace because it is unknowable, this mystery brings us back to the beginning, to Christ, “the subject about which we know and about which we can therefore ask.”<sup>8</sup> In light of all this cause for joy, it may be recognized that election is indeed the sum of Gospel and that Jesus Christ is the center and sum of election.

By focusing on the concrete particularity of Jesus Christ, Barth is able to recognize that the doctrine of election is the center and sum of the Gospel. It is so because it is in the concrete particularity of Jesus Christ that the “good news” for humanity is found, namely, that God is *for*

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, cf. p. 186

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, cf. p. 160-161

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 160

humankind.<sup>9</sup> God has, of his own free grace, bound himself up together with humanity in the person and work of Christ. Furthermore, in this God takes upon himself the consequences for humanity's rejection of him to that the divine-human relationship may be reestablished.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, this formulation frees us from a seemingly capricious God, setting in its place the God of Scripture, who has determined himself in this way in Jesus Christ. This is Barth's doctrine of election, the epitome of the Gospel.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, cf. pp. 94-95

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, cf. p. 94

<sup>11</sup> Word count for the body of the text: 1,034.

BITH – 489 - Barth  
 W. Travis McMaken  
 March 4, 2004

### **Final Exam: Essay #2**

*“How are we to understand Barth’s insistence that in the ‘peculiar secret of the election of the man Jesus’ there lies a ‘steadfastness on both sides’ (cf. II/2, p. 125). In what way does this ‘steadfastness on both sides’ constitute the ‘aim and meaning of the covenant willed by God and the election of this man’ (II/2, p. 125).”*

Barth’s affirms that the secret to understanding the election of Jesus Christ is the “steadfastness on both sides,”<sup>12</sup> which is seen in his death and resurrection, and this provides him with categories to develop a robust understanding of the Christian life. He builds this affirmation around two foci, namely, that the key to understanding the doctrine of election is to recognize Jesus Christ as its eternal point of convergence, and that Chalcedonian orthodoxy is imperative in properly understanding Jesus Christ. Barth argues explicitly for the former throughout his discussion of election, but the latter lies more implicitly under the surface.

The Chalcedonian Definition presents Jesus Christ as a unity in distinction. The Definition states that Jesus Christ is, “known in two natures, without confusion, without conversion, without severance, and without division.” The purpose of this *via negativa* is to set the boundaries for orthodox Christology. Christ is two and yet one at the same time; in every way God and in every way a human person. Barth develops this in his discussion of Jesus Christ as both electing God and elected man.<sup>13</sup> In as much as Jesus is God, he elects himself, and in so much as he is man, he fulfills that election.

Christ’s death and resurrection are the stage for the drama of this “steadfastness on both sides.” The divine-human unity in distinction demonstrated in Jesus Christ stands out in high relief. For here, Jesus as God elects to die for the sake of humanity, and Jesus as man is faithful

---

<sup>12</sup> CD II/2, 125

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, cf. p. 103

to his election to serve as testimony to God's glory. Yet, Christology does not exhaust God, for God is Triune, and in Christ's death and resurrection, we see the work of the Triune God ratifying the actions of Jesus Christ, both as electing God and as elected man. In his obedience unto death, Jesus Christ simultaneously lives out his calling as elected man and, in so doing, demonstrates the sovereignty of his act of electing as God. In his resurrection, God vindicates Jesus and shows him to have been the elected man who has lived out his vocation as such, as well as vindicates himself as electing God by displaying his power in the defeat of death.<sup>14</sup> This is the "steadfastness on both sides," that of God to man and of this man to God, which displays God's glory and provides for the salvation of humanity. It is this display and provision which "constitute the aim and meaning of the covenant willed by God and the election of this man."<sup>15</sup>

Barth uses this idea of "steadfastness on both sides" to construct speech about the Christian life, both individual and corporate. One of the primary thrusts of his work on the doctrine of election is that it is an election of grace. He understands that Jesus Christ is the focus and epitome of God's movement toward and for humanity.<sup>16</sup> God seeks to make humankind his covenant partner. God determined, in Jesus Christ, to be present to humanity and to make himself humanity's companion.<sup>17</sup> This was God's determination in Christ, even before the incarnation was a historical event. It is a determination to be profoundly *for* humankind. This is the covenant of grace. The nature of the partnership that God called man to live within necessarily demands something of that partner, something that Adam, and all those who followed after him, failed to do. That is, to live as one faithful to God's election of humanity in

---

<sup>14</sup> The lack of mention of the Holy Spirit here does not mean that Barth does not give him due attention, for without the agency of the Spirit, Christ would not have been obedient unto death. Further, without the agency of the Spirit, Christ would not have been raised from the dead.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 125

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, cf. p. 7

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, cf. p. 11

his grace. The difficulty here is that it appears as if God demands of humanity do something that it is unable to give, namely, true and perfect partnership. However, Barth understands that the election of Jesus Christ defines all other election. The election of Jesus Christ is at the beginning of all God's acts with what is other than himself.<sup>18</sup> As has already been seen, God and man have, in the very person of Jesus Christ, demonstrated their mutual steadfastness in Christ's death and resurrection. God's true and perfect covenant partner is found in Jesus Christ.<sup>19</sup>

As electing God and elected man, Jesus Christ has acted as a true and perfect covenant partner with God. He has fulfilled the covenant partnership and demonstrated God's election of grace for all humanity. Jesus Christ shows in his election that God has elected himself to be for humanity and humanity to be for him.<sup>20</sup> The goal of the election of Jesus Christ is for all of humanity to recognize that it is elect as well, with and for Christ, to live as God's covenant partner.<sup>21</sup> This is grace indeed, for it is as God's covenant partner that the human person can become a true individual,<sup>22</sup> with and for Christ's community, with and for Christ, and with and for God. Found within this awakening to a life as an individual, in covenant partnership with God as well as with Christ and his community, is the essence of salvation. The human person is called to take up a life of witness to this wonderful salvation, to God's election of himself for man and man for himself in Jesus Christ, and live as one who is, in Christ, God's covenant partner.<sup>23</sup>

This is the power of Barth's understanding of the Christian life: human beings may live a life in partnership with God and witness to his grace. While maintaining the priority of God's

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, cf. p. 102

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, cf. p. 126

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, cf. p. 233

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, cf. pp. 179-180

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, cf. p. 415

action, he is able to construct an account of the human life that is robust and promising. Barth's doctrine of election recognizes God's desire for human lives to flourish in relationship with him. The fulcrum of this understanding, the "peculiar secret" that reveals the "aim and meaning of the covenant willed by God" is the "steadfastness on both sides" demonstrated and enacted in Christ's death and resurrection. Because of this "steadfastness on both sides," humanity is called to the recognition that, in Christ, God has elected himself for humanity and humanity for himself.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Word count for the body of the text: 988.