

# Karl Barth's "modern" and "unbiblical" universalism according to Willie Jonker: Valid critique? Or the way forward in a pluralistic society?<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This paper asks the question whether Willie Jonker's critique of Karl Barth's universalism, which is claimed to be found throughout Barth's theology, is valid. It is argued that Jonker is to a large extent quite correct in his judgment that Barth's universalism is in part due to his modern paradigm, and is not always Biblically founded. However, it is also argued that Barth's universalism is not identical to a modern tolerance, and is not completely unbiblical. It is rather a particular universalism that tries to keep both the universal and the particular aspects of God's revelation in tension. In a pluralistic country and world, this particular universalism of Barth opens an opportunity to think in a theologically responsible way about unity within diversity.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Living in a pluralistic, post-apartheid South Africa, and in a world where the tension between the "Christian West" and the "Muslim Middle East" is escalating, it must be said that the church today will stand and fall with its brotherhood and solidarity with Muslims, Hindu's, Buddhists, atheists, etc. Just as Paul was called *from* the Jews *for* the Jews, we are called *from* the gentiles *for* the gentiles. Barth has shown how this is possible, by emphasising that the church's faith does not separate us from unbelievers, but actually unites us with them. As Christians, Barth says, we believe: "The God who is over all is also – and indeed primarily – the God of those who are absent and aloof in unbelief" (Barth 1957:205). And although the unbelief of the gentiles should cause us pain and suffering, just as the unbelief of Israel caused Paul pain and suffering, we should, like Paul, rejoice in the faithfulness of God, which is infinitely stronger than the unfaithfulness of humanity (Barth 1957:214).

Even though God says No to unbelief, God's No is in complete a-symmetry to God's Yes, even more, God's No is in service of God's Yes. Psalm 30 says that God's anger endures but for a moment, but God's favour endures a lifetime, just as Isaiah 54 says that God has forsaken us for a moment, but that God bestows mercy on us with everlasting kindness (Barth 1957:224). In Barth's sermons in the prison in Basel near the end of his life, Barth repeatedly made use of Jesus Christ's

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cry of dereliction on the cross, as *the moment* wherein God said No to humanity, so that God can for all eternity say Yes to humanity. In this way Barth proclaimed the good news to these believing and unbelieving prisoners, that they can never think that God's back is turned towards them, even though it might seem so, because God has already turned God's back on Christ, so that God's face is now turned towards them (Barth 1979:177,189-192,214).

In an increasingly anti-Semitic context, in the years after the Nazi Party was elected in Germany, Barth was bold enough to write that if the church becomes anti-Semitic, or even only *a-Semitic*, the church will lose the object of its faith, Jesus Christ, in whom Jews and gentiles are united. If the church does not believe in God's yes to the whole world in Christ, its faith is without content, it no longer has anything to say to the world and it thus ceases to be the church (Barth 1957:234). And thus, although the entire world does not yet believe in the Yes that God has spoken to humanity in Jesus Christ, we cannot believe that this unbelief of humanity will outlast the faithfulness of God. Therefore Barth can make the universal statement: "Regarded christologically and eschatologically the Church is always both *all* Israel ... and *all* the Gentile world, those who have already become believers and those who are yet to become so" (Barth 1957:280). The sole purpose of the church on earth is to give witness to the Yes that God has spoken to the entire world, so that those who do not yet believe in it will come to believe in it (Barth 1957:281).

## 2. BARTH'S "MODERN" UNIVERSALISM

Jonker and his colleagues started to read Barth when he had already reached the mature position of the *Church Dogmatics* and rejoiced over this modern European theologian, who so unashamedly proclaimed the gospel of the Bible, in a very refreshing, yet seemingly "unmodern" way. For Jonker and his peers, this almost seemed like the first sign of European theology "returning" to evangelical orthodoxy, which they still held dear in South Africa. For once, South African theology was not merely following European theology in a liberal direction, but European theology seemed to be moving back to the conservative position that South African theologians held. And yet, Jonker says, from the very beginning South African theologians had their misgivings whether Barth was truly as "unmodern" as he seemed on the surface, and whether his theology was truly a neo-orthodox theology. With growing unease, Jonker over time became convinced that "despite Barth's opposition against the spirit of the Enlightenment and his rejection of modernism in his theology, he himself was a thoroughly modern man and that his theology in fact bore witness to that fact" (Jonker 1988:30-33).

For me, and some of my peers, our relationship with Barth could perhaps be described as exactly the opposite. At first we were appalled by the seemingly untroubled, unambiguous, uncritical, pre-modern, arrogant, positive position that Barth held in his *Church Dogmatics*. Over time, and when reading more of his earlier works, such as *The Epistle to the Romans*, we came to understand that when Barth stated the positive message of the gospel, it was not a mere repetition of orthodox doctrines, but truly a new understanding of these old truths. Whereas Jonker and his colleagues appealed to the positive aspect of Barth's message, we perhaps appealed more to the negative side of his theology. Whereas Jonker appreciated the Yes of Barth's theology, we appreciate the No that makes the yes possible, *even more*. Because we are also modern people, who are at the same time disillusioned about the limitations and errors of modernity, we are excited about Barth's critique of modernity from within modernity, and not as concerned about the underlying modern paradigm in Barth's theology as Jonker is. We are perhaps more concerned when people read the *Church Dogmatics* and nod their heads in affirmation, without fully comprehending the ground clearing that Barth had to do before he could reach such a positive position. What makes Barth such an exciting theologian, is the fact that he can give new meaning

to the old doctrines of orthodoxy, in such a way that it truly addresses modern humanity. Thus I thoroughly agree with Jonker when he says that Barth did not ignore modern humanity, but rather addressed modern humanity as a modern theologian who was critical of modernity (Jonker 1988:33-34). Whereas this is a source of concern for Jonker, it is a source of joy for us. Of course Barth himself never appreciated the term “neo-orthodox” that was attached to him for some time, and could even, in his typical radicalising and tongue-in-cheek way, describe himself as more liberal than most liberal theologians. By this he meant that he remained more “open” and more “free” than they did to listen to revelation, because whereas liberal theologians were only willing to listen to modern theology, he was also willing to listen to orthodox theology (Barth 1977:33-36).

Jonker agrees with Rendtorff, who has shown how Barth accommodated the modern mindset with the use of certain key concepts, such as freedom and autonomy. According to Rendtorff, Barth did not merely oppose the Enlightenment, but tried to radicalise it by rethinking the whole Christian message in the light of the core principles of the Enlightenment, namely freedom and autonomy. Instead of reaffirming and justifying the freedom and autonomy of modern humanity by means of the gospel, Barth affirmed the freedom and autonomy of God, which serves as modern humanity’s ultimate critique. By rethinking the whole gospel through his modern lens of Christ centrism and universalism, Barth made doctrines that were formerly unacceptable to the modern mind, like the doctrine of election, of sin and of the church, acceptable. Jonker affirms Rendtorff’s suspicion that Barth’s Christ centrism was not merely an innocent and naïve desire to emphasise the centrality of Christ, but a modern way to develop an antimetaphysical concept of God. Jonker feels that there is an element of truth in Rendtorff’s assertion that Barth arrived at the type of Christianity that the Enlightenment originally intended, i.e., “a Christianity that is no longer bound to the church as an institution; a Christianity that can be thoroughly optimistic about the triumph of what is good over what is bad; a Christianity that can positively dedicate itself to the world and its problems of humanisation” (Jonker 1988:37).

With regards to committing oneself to the world and its problems of humanisation, it must also be said that there is an undeniable relationship between Barth’s socialism and his theology, although it is commonly agreed, also by Jonker, that Marquardt rather overstated this point. Barth was never shy to reveal his political support of the modern principles of social democracy, and even saw it as his Christian duty to do so publicly. Because Barth was not someone different in his theology than in his political life, these modern principles can also be seen in his theology, as in his use of the concepts of freedom, autonomy and active change. Jonker shows that the same goes for Barth’s emphasis of the bodily resurrection of Christ, which is not a pre-modern, conservative clinging to a core belief of the orthodoxy, but rather a razor sharp critique of the type of modernity that puts so much emphasis on the inner life of the individual, that the material and physical well-being of humanity as a whole can easily be overlooked. Thus Barth does not remove this stumbling block for modernity from the Christian faith, but rather uses it to emphasise another important modern principle, namely the immanent, worldly character of salvation. Jonker agrees with Schellong, who pointed to Barth’s immanent and universal interpretation of the church, which is completely strange to the reformation, but which incorporates the modern concern with the earthly well-being of humanity. Thus, Jonker says, “the church is not in Barth’s thought the body of those who are eternally saved as was the case with the Reformation, but is only a provisional representation of the whole humanity which is reconciled to God” (Jonker 1988:38).

For Jonker, Barth’s universalism is maybe the clearest indication of his modern mindset. As is often the case with theology, this underlying motive of Barth comes to its climax in the doctrine of election, since this doctrine brings any theology back to its true roots. By replacing the eternal decree of God as the centre of the doctrine of election, as it was in Reformed theology, with Christ

as the centre of the doctrine of election, Barth was once again not merely emphasising the centrality of Christ, but indeed opening the possibility for a modern, universal understanding of this former unacceptable doctrine for modern humanity. Jonker says that this modern, universal interpretation of the doctrine of election was already present in the first edition of his *Römerbrief*, and formed the corner stone of Barth's theology. It affected all of his theology, namely his understanding of salvation, church, preaching and the sacraments. Throughout Barth's theology, the distinction between church and world is ambiguous and unclear, since the church, for Barth, can never be more than a sign of the salvation of the whole world, and must therefore always be completely directed towards the world. The church is understood fully in terms of the *missio Dei*, and the only message that it has to bring to the world is the triumphant grace of God, and certainly not that there will be weeping and a gnashing of teeth in hell for all of those who do not believe the message of the Bible. Jonker finds it troublesome that there is as little place for the Biblical concepts of eternal damnation in the theology of Karl Barth, as there is place for it in the modern mind (Jonker 1988:38-39; 1989:150).

All of the above, although a serious concern for Jonker and his peers, is music to the ears of me and my peers. But that doesn't mean we should not view it critically. We should honestly ask ourselves whether Jonker's critique is a valid critique. Jonker himself was not of the opinion that Barth should be criticised for being a modern theologian, since it is in fact a theologian's duty to speak relevantly to his historical and cultural age. Jonker was rather concerned whether Barth succeeded in remaining faithful to the Biblical message, and whether he did not reduce the message of the Bible in his attempt to interpret it from within a modern paradigm. Barth succeeded in allowing the Bible to once again criticise the spirit of the modern era, but Jonker feels that with regards to his Christological concentration and his universalism, Barth's modern mindset did not allow the Biblical evidence to come to its right. Although Barth said that the theologian cannot stand over against the Bible and criticise its message, Jonker feels that this is indeed what Barth has done with regards to his universalistic views (Jonker 1988:39-40).

### 3. BARTH'S "UNBIBLICAL" UNIVERSALISM

Jonker claims that Barth, no less than other modern theologians, reduced the message of the Bible to suite his modern paradigm. Whereas liberal theology reduced the Bible by always reading it through the lens of humanity's religion or experience, Barth reduced the Bible by always reading it through the lens of God's revelation in Christ. The revelation in Christ, for Barth, contains the full revelation of God, i.e., the triumphant grace of God, and Scripture is not allowed to say anything more or less or different than this gospel (Jonker 1988:36).

Barth's insistence to interpret the doctrine of election completely from within the revelation of God in Christ, goes in direct opposition to the orthodox understanding of this doctrine, which proceeds from the eternal decree of God. In the latter, the doctrine of election forms part of God's provision, it is linked with God's sovereignty, and it implies that God's eternal decision has predestined a given number of people to be elected and to be rejected. For Barth this was unacceptable, because it spoke about the election in a speculative way, around the revelation in Christ. In this way the doctrine of election receded into a *decretum absolutum*, instead of speaking

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2 Jonker shows that Barth's theology was influenced in a fundamental way by the two Blumhardt brothers, who proclaimed the all conquering power of God's grace with the exclamation: "*Jesus ist Sieger!*" In the famous book of 1954, *De triomf der genade in de theologie van Karl Barth*, Berkouwer indicated that the triumph of God's grace in Jesus Christ is *the* typifying aspect of Barth's theology.

about God's *Gnadenwahl* for humanity. Barth sees this as a different form of natural theology that does not derive its knowledge of God from God's Self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Like the orthodoxy, Barth deals with the doctrine of election in the doctrine of God, but for Barth, this God is none other than the God which has turned to humanity in grace through the incarnation in Jesus Christ. Thus Barth's doctrine of election is supralapsarian, but this eternal decision that we find within the doctrine of God is completely one with, and cannot be distinguished from God's salvation in Christ, since Christ is the electing God and elected humanity. There is no separate election that precedes the work of Christ, just as Christ is also no reaction to the sin of humanity. In Christ, God has in all eternity said yes to humanity and No to sin. Christ is God's-will-in-action, i.e., God turning towards humanity, taking up humanity in God-self, and thus reconciling all of humanity with God-self (Jonker 1989:121-123).

In general, Barth's Christological approach has found ecumenical acceptance in the theological world, although always with some reservations<sup>3</sup> (Jonker 1989:123-126). Jonker acknowledges Barth for bringing back the doctrine of election to the attention and discussion of modern theologians in an era when people seemed disinterested in this orthodox doctrine. He is also grateful for Barth's attempt to keep this doctrine out of the sphere of unnecessary scholastic speculation and within the sphere of doxology, i.e., the praise and gratitude of the community of faith for God's free grace (Jonker 1989:126-127). Jonker however disagrees with Barth that Christ is the ground of the election, and would rather say that God's love is the ground of the election and Christ is the corner stone and the head of the elected (Jonker 1989:129-130). Jonker prefers to stick with the way the Bible speaks about God and Christ, and therefore is happy to say that Christ, and in Christ the church, is the object of election. Jonker is adamant that the Bible is not Christ centric with regards to the election, but rather Trinitarian. Thus it is the Father that elects *in* the Son *through* the Spirit. In this way it is also possible to give a larger accent to the continuous effectuating of the election in history through the work of the Holy Spirit. God's gracious election of the church not only *happened* in Christ but also continuously *happens* through the powerful work of the Holy Spirit<sup>4</sup> (Jonker 1989:130).

For Barth, God does not elect and reject in the same way. Election and rejection are not parallel parts of God's eternal decision, but God rejects all of humanity in Christ in order to elect all of humanity in Christ. Thus God's election triumphs over God's rejection, so that all people are rejected within themselves but elected in Christ (Jonker 1989:133). Because this new interpretation of the doctrine of double predestination in reality does away with the possibility of any rejection of certain individuals, it has been severely criticised by many theologians. For Barth the rejection has already taken effect in Christ and all are now called to believe in God's election of humanity. Thus faith and unbelief are not seen as the result of God's election or rejection, as it has traditionally been seen in the doctrine of election<sup>5</sup>. According to Barth it would be wrong to say that those who believe are elected and those who do not believe are rejected. It is in any case

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3 Jonker asserts that not only Barthian theologians, such as Miskotte, Van Niftrik, Walter Kreck, Hasselaar and H.J. Krause, but also many theologians that were critical of Barth's doctrine of election, such as Heinrich Vogel, Otto Weber, Eduard Buess, Wolhart Pannenberg and Klaus Schwarzwaller, accepted Barth's Christological focus in this doctrine to a large extent. Jonker refers specifically to G.C. Berkouwer's *De verkiezing Gods* in 1955, and O. Weber's *Grundlagen der Dogmatik II* in 1962, as the two works that discussed Barth's doctrine of election thoroughly. Both were very appreciative of Barth's accent on the comfort and joy of the doctrine of election, but both had distinct differences with Barth.

4 Jonker agrees to a large extent with Graafland's trinitarian approach to the doctrine of election, as Graafland explains it in his work published in 1987, *Van Calvijn tot Barth*.

5 Jonker refers here to the work of Haitjema of 1948, *Dogmatiek als apologie*.

not the intention of the doctrine of election to explain why some believe and others don't, but to proclaim the good news of God's free grace. Barth says that both those who believe and those who do not yet believe, are rejected and elected in Christ. Jonker, however, says that there are no Biblical grounds for speaking of Christ as the rejected of God. Although he has appreciation for Barth's attempt to emphasise the a-symmetry between election and rejection, Jonker is concerned that this denies the very real threat of falling outside the grace of God in Christ through unbelief (Jonker 1989:134-136).

Barth denies that he proclaims a doctrine of *apokatástasis*. He asserts, however, that he does not wish to take the end of history out of God's hands, but would like to hope that it is still possible for God to save those who do not yet believe. In the open context of preaching, Barth would like to proclaim God's salvation to all people, in the hope that all of humanity will be saved. Barth does not give himself the right to say that all people will definitely be saved, since this would deny the freedom of God's grace. Unbelief is, for Barth, an impossible possibility, yet it is still, in these in between times that we are living in, a reality. In the Holy Spirit, that which is already Christologically true, must still be made a living reality. Jonker objects however, that, firstly, although Barth denies the *apokatástasis*, his theology cannot do otherwise but steer towards it. Secondly, Jonker objects that because of Barth's overpowering objective understanding of election, the subjective acceptance of salvation through faith does not come to its right<sup>6</sup> (Jonker 1989:150-151).

Jonker is convinced that, although Barth denies the fact that his theology supports a doctrine of unconditional salvation for all of humanity, the thrust of his theology still remains universalistic, and has contributed to the common universal climate that we find in the world today<sup>7</sup>. Brunner predicted that Barth's universalism will find widespread approval in the modern mind, since it is in harmony with the spirit of the Enlightenment<sup>8</sup>. Because the orthodox interpretations of the doctrine of election, i.e., either a synergism between God's election and the individual's faith, or God's predestination of the elected and the rejected, was unacceptable to Barth's modern understanding of the free grace of God, he invented a third interpretation, i.e., a universal election. Thus, God's predestination is interpreted so universal, that a synergism between God's election and the individual's faith becomes unnecessary, and that there is no differentiation between the elected and the rejected. In this way the subjective acceptance of salvation through faith is weakened by Barth. Barth emphasised the triumph of Christ's universal reign over the world, which confuses the difference between the church and the world. The good news of salvation in Christ is not directed at the church, or those who believe, but at the world as a whole, even those who do not yet believe, since salvation does not depend on the individual's faith, but is sure and certain in Christ (Jonker 1989:156-157). In the view of many theologians, this causes God's grace to become cheap and faith to become unnecessary. To escape this danger, Berkouwer and Weber pleaded for a kerugmatic universalism, in which salvation is proclaimed to the entire world, but must still be received in faith by the individual. The Bible speaks in universal terms about salvation and gives the church the command to preach the good news to the entire world, but still the Bible also teaches us to appeal to all to come to faith and to say a small yes of faith to the big Yes that

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6 Jonker relies on the work of Berkouwer of 1954, *De triomf der genade in de theologie van Karl Barth*.

7 This has been shown in Von Balthasar's book in 1976, *Karl Barth. Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie*, and in Schwarzwäller's book in 1970, *Das Gotteslob der angefochtenen Gemeinde. Dogmatische Grundlegung der Prädestinationslehre*.

8 Jonker shows that Brunner, in his *Dogmatik I* of 1946, agreed with Barth's Christological approach to the doctrine of election, but criticized Barth for the way in which he does so.

God has spoken to them<sup>9</sup>. Therefore Berkouwer and Weber do not approve of either universalism or particularism, but would like to hold fast to both the sovereignty of God *and* the responsibility of humanity. The initiative of salvation always remains in the grace of God, but still the individual must receive that salvation in obedience to God's Word and Spirit (Jonker, 1989:159-161).

Jonker agrees with Berkouwer and Weber<sup>10</sup> in as much as they pointed out that Barth's universal interpretation of election is an unbiblical objectifying of salvation that does not leave any space for the subjective acceptance of salvation through faith. Jonker approves of Barth's attempt to accentuate the abundance of God's love and grace and goodness, and not to limit God's election with our theology. Like Bavinck, Barth's effort to reinterpret the doctrine of election as a happy doctrine of good news to the world and comfort to the church, must be appreciated<sup>11</sup>. Jonker is mindful of Barth's warning, that the church would be a sorry bunch of people if their biggest concern was that God's grace must not apply to the entire world and that the hell must be filled with millions of condemned people. Jonker, however, does not want to overstep the boundaries of Scripture, and therefore cannot go along with Barth when he emphasises the triumph of God's grace to such an extent that the subjective reception of salvation through faith is weakened. Even in John 3:16, where we hear the good news of God's love for the entire world, salvation is still undeniably linked with faith in Christ. Jonker is concerned that the universal spirit of our modern era will tempt us to stray from what the Bible teaches us. The Bible does not weaken the necessity of faith and the very real danger of unbelief when it speaks of the abundant love of God. Jonker does not reject a universal election in order to limit God's grace, but out of reverence for Scripture. Because the concept of eternal damnation in hell does not accord with our modern mindset, is not a justification to ignore the Biblical evidence of this dark side of the gospel (Jonker 1989:163-164).

This does not mean, Jonker says, that God wills for some people to be rejected. This is a logical conclusion, not a Biblical one. Just like God did not will sin into the world, God also did not will for some to reject Christ. This, however, does not imply a synergistic election wherein it is our decision to elect or reject the salvation in Christ. The grace of God is still irresistible. But although God's grace is irresistible and sufficient for the entire world, the impossible is still possible, namely that some persist in their sin and unbelief and thus remain outside Christ. For those who believe, the election, reconciliation and subjective receiving of salvation through faith, is part of the one work of salvation of the Father, Son and Spirit (Jonker 1989:165-166). Jonker warns against making logical conclusions about election and rejection (Jonker 1989:169) and instead of choosing for a logically coherent doctrine of election, he holds fast to the Bible's insistence that those who are elected are so because of God's grace and those who are rejected are so because of their own sin and unbelief.

It is difficult to disagree with Jonker, because of his faithful following of Scripture. The biggest points of protest can perhaps be that his claim that the grace of God is irresistible is not completely convincing in the light of the urgent call that God's grace must be accepted through faith, and that his doctrine of election is individualistic, which is a modern preoccupation. But in both cases Jonker can defend his position with Biblical evidence. The Bible is filled with urgent calls to come to

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9 Jonker shows that although Graafland, in *Van Calvijn tot Barth* of 1987, criticizes Berkouwer's kerugmatic universalism, since only the elected are given the gift of the Spirit with which they can claim the promises of God, he still sees the election as a cause for preaching and calling all people to faith, as Berkouwer does.

10 Jonker uses Berkouwer's *De verkiezing Gods* (1955) and O. Weber's *Grundlagen der Dogmatik II* (1962).

11 Jonker refers to Bavinck's *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek II*, of 1908.

faith, although it also says that faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit. And although the Bible is not individualistic in a modern sense, it is filled with accounts of the election of particular individuals.

#### 4. BARTH'S PARTICULAR UNIVERSALISM

As a (post-)modern theologian living in South Africa today, I do not wish to be unfaithful to the Bible – Barth's effort to take the Bible seriously within his day and age is in part what makes him so fascinating – but it is precisely the universalism of Barth, which makes Jonker so uncomfortable, that I find particularly appealing<sup>12</sup>. In trying to find a way forward for the church in such a pluralistic context as South Africa and the globalising world today, Barth's universalism opens possibilities that seem very promising. Especially since Barth did not support the uncritical tolerance that is so common in the universalistic spirit of the modern era.

Barth was very critical of tolerance. He conceded that tolerance is a virtue without which it is impossible to live an ethical life, but he added that the Christian life must go much further than tolerance. To recognise the one body of Christ, does not destroy the particularity of every individual, but actually accentuates the unique gifts given in grace to every person. Thus we are reminded not only of the otherness of every individual, but most of all of the otherness of Christ, and by this true fellowship is created, not by blending all into one, but by creating unity within diversity. Christ is "the great intolerance," the *krisis* of every individual that creates true individuality in fellowship with the body of Christ (Barth 1933:443-445). Because Barth's universalism is not an uncritical universalism, but a universalism inseparably linked with the particular revelation of God's grace in Jesus Christ, it is a responsible universalism that does not merely accept the universalism of the modern era, but that gives Biblical content to it.

For Barth, the biggest mistake that the church can make is to misunderstand the doctrine of election as something which is a No, or beyond a Yes and a No, or perhaps even a Yes and a No. The doctrine of election – according to the Bible – is the gospel of Jesus Christ, and therefore it is an altogether Yes! The doctrine of election is the gospel *in nuce*; it is the essence of all good news; it is the revelation that God is a God who freely chooses to love (Barth 1957:13-14). The balanced and academic way with which theologians speak about the double predestination, i.e., the election of some and the rejection of others, gives the doctrine of election cold neutrality which is too scientific for Barth. A doctrine of election that is simultaneously Yes and No, is not *euangelion*, but *dusangelion*, because it does not understand that the divine No serves the divine Yes. God only says No *in order* to say Yes. God does not say Yes and No (Barth 1957:18). Barth does not want to leave any room to lessen the sovereign, free grace of God. So even where humanity receives God's grace, even where humanity apprehends God's grace through active faith, the election still remains *God's* initiative, *God's* will and *God's* work. Grace cannot be called forth, or claimed, or deserved, or asserted, just as it cannot be constrained, or limited, or revoked, or resisted by humanity (Barth 1957:19). Thus, even faith is a gift given by grace, and not a condition for grace.

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12 Other theologians in South Africa today might not necessarily agree with me. D.S.G. Oosthuysen has written, like Jonker, in his doctoral dissertation at the University of Stellenbosch in 1991, titled *Die Leer van die Dubbele Predestinasie by Johannes Calvin en Karl Barth*, that Barth exceeds the boundaries of Scripture in his doctrine of election. Oosthuysen finds it strange that Barth has taken over the double predestination, although in a very different way, from Calvin. According to Oosthuysen, Scripture does not speak about any double predestination. The Bible neither claims that some people are doomed from all eternity (Calvin), nor that all people are saved from all eternity (Barth). Faith remains the way whereby salvation in Christ, spoken to us by the Word and the Spirit, must be claimed and owned by humanity.

The goal of God's free grace is nothing less than that we can freely hear and obey God's Word, and thus God's grace does not depend on faith, but indeed creates faith and obedience (Barth 1957:21,30).

Barth warns us that we must not forget for one moment that it is *God* who decides and elects. If we question the grace of God's election, we therefore question the grace of God's very being and character (Barth 1957:21). That is why Barth moved the doctrine of election back into the doctrine of God. Although Barth actually does the same as Arminius, namely to move away from describing certain individuals as elected or rejected, and rather to describe Christ as the elected of God, Barth takes Arminius' move a step further, and describes Christ as elected humanity *and* the electing God. In this way, Barth guards against the danger of Arminius' doctrine of election, where it is not longer God who elects humanity, but individuals who have the decision to elect Christ or to reject Christ. In Barth's doctrine of election it is always God who elects, and never humanity, and this election of God is always a revelation of God's very being, which is grace (Barth 1957:76;79). Barth concedes that in the Bible the election of God is always closely connected to the elected people, i.e., Israel in the Old Testament and the church in the New Testament, but for Barth, when the Bible speaks about election, it is saying much more about God than it is saying about the elected people (Barth 1957:83). Barth sees the doctrine of election as a primary, central doctrine, that forms part of the doctrine of God, because in the doctrine of election we come to understand *Who* this God is that creates, reconciles and redeems humanity. From the very start we should know that theology is not speculation about some hidden God, but witness to the God who has graciously elected to be the God of humanity; to be humanity's Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer (Barth 1957:87-89).

Barth's interpretation of the doctrine of election is at once completely universal and completely particular. Jesus Christ is the electing God and elected humanity. What this means is that God has chosen God-self to be the fulfilment of the covenant between God and humanity. In Jesus Christ God has freely determined God-self for sinful humanity and sinful humanity for God-self. In Jesus Christ God elected to take the rejection of humanity, due to humanity because of their unfaithfulness to God, upon God-self, and to let humanity participate in God's glory, because of God's faithfulness to them (Barth 1957:94,102-103). Whereas general grace, such as you might find in natural theology, might seem to be more universal than particular grace, it is in fact less universal, when taken to its full conclusion. At first glance, a general revelation of God's grace, for instance in nature, seems very universal, since it is not limited to the revelation in Jesus Christ. But very soon it becomes very particular, since it is only available to those who can grasp it in faith. Those who do not have the gift to see God's general revelation of grace in nature are lost in their ignorance. But this is not the case with God's particular revelation in Jesus Christ. Although this particular revelation seems limited and insufficient at first, it very soon becomes clear that this revelation of God's grace is completely universal and sufficient for the entire world, since in Christ, the whole world has been reconciled to God (Col 1:20). Katherine Sonderegger has observed that for Barth, the particular can never be derived from the general, but the general must always be derived from the particular (Hauerwas 2001, 2002:164). Jüngel has also shown that, for Barth, God elects humanity, not through the general conversion of certain individuals, but through the particular revelation in Jesus Christ. The key distinction in Barth's theology is the fact the electing God is revealed only in Jesus Christ, and therefore the relationship between God and humanity is not based on human decisions, but on God's decision. Jüngel says: "Election is prior to justification and regeneration. And if sanctification already belongs to election, then it is for all people, not just the reborn. It is for Barth a matter of the loving and gracious gift that is always being given in God's disposition toward humankind" (Jüngel 1986:119-120).

Although it might seem to some that Barth's universal doctrine of election denies the reality of faith, it actually takes faith very seriously<sup>13</sup>. Barth is convinced that a universal doctrine of election, wherein all of humanity's unfaithfulness is rejected in Christ, and thus all of humanity is elected by the faithfulness of Christ, is the only interpretation of election which makes faith a possibility. For Barth, it is impossible to believe and to obey the *decretum absolutum*, whereas the election of Jesus Christ necessarily demands and evokes faith and obedience (Barth 1957:161). Barth's doctrine of election does not purport a general universalism that nullifies faith, but a particular universalism, i.e., universal grace in the particular Person of Jesus Christ, which makes faith a possibility, not as one possibility among other possibilities, but as *the* possibility to which all of humanity is called.

God's active election does not deny active faith. To understand how this is possible, one must understand Barth's interpretation of freedom. True freedom is not the freedom to make arbitrary decisions, but to be bound to a self-determined goal. Thus God, in God's freedom has bound God-self to love humanity in freedom, and accordingly, humanity is free only when it corresponds to God's freedom, and is self-determined to freely love God back. In reaction to God's initiative, God's action, God's decision and God's election, all that humanity can do is to pray, to follow and to obey. That is why it is possible for Barth to move from the divine election of God to the command of God within the same volume of the *Church Dogmatics*, because as God freely elects to be the God of humanity, God also claims humanity to freely be the humanity of God (Barth 1957:552). Since Barth has no other view of God than the presently living and acting God, Barth's view of election is also that it is a living act, which incorporates the living action of humanity (Barth 1957:180).

For Barth, and for (post-)modern believers such as myself, it is not possible to believe in a *dasangelion* of election and rejection, but only possible to believe in the *euangelion* of election. There is a No-side, a rejection, in the divine election, but that No, that rejection, has fallen on Jesus Christ at Golgotha, in order to serve the Yes, the election of God. This makes it impossible to believe that we are rejected (Barth 1957:167-168). Although Barth is adamant that the living action of God's election awakens the church's living action of faith, hope and love, he is just as certain that God's living action of election takes place where it is not yet actively recognised in faith. Even for believers, God's election is a reality which has been completely revealed in Jesus Christ, but which is still at times a hidden reality in world history (Barth 1957:185-186).

Barth started to write the second half-volume of the doctrine of God, wherein he discusses the doctrine of election, after 1932, when the Nazi Party were elected to govern over Germany, and he made the final corrections within the Federal guard-room, while he was under Nazi supervision (Barth 1957:ix). In these times of turmoil, it is significant to see how Barth writes about the election of the Jews. In a context where it was extremely dangerous to be sympathetic towards the Jews, Barth writes unambiguously: "We cannot, therefore, call the Jews the 'rejected' and the Church the 'elected' community. The object of election is neither Israel for itself nor the Church for itself, but both together in their unity" (Barth 1957:198). To understand what it means to be part of the elected community of faith, Barth once again returns to Romans<sup>14</sup>, and does yet *another* exegesis of Romans 9 to 11 (so much for Barth's doctrine of election not being Biblical). Barth finds it rather remarkable that Paul's faith in Christ does not separate him from the Jews, who do not believe in Christ, but *unites* him with them. The unbelief of the Jews causes Paul pain and

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13 See the work of Walter Kreck in 1978, *Grundentscheidungen in Karl Barths Dogmatik*, pp. 263-283.

14 See the work of Walter Kreck in 1978, *Grundentscheidungen in Karl Barths Dogmatik*, pp. 244-250.

suffering, but his faith makes it impossible for him to let them go. Whereas we would expect Paul's faith to create distance between him and the unbelieving Jews, it only pulls him closer to them, causing him to reach out to them again and again, and never to stop praying for them. Paul is united with unbelieving Israel, not despite his faith, but precisely because of his faith, because he believes that Israel, while they are rejecting God, is elected by God. Paul's faith unites him so closely with unbelieving Israel, and causes him so much suffering, that he is willing to be *cut off from Christ* and to *forsake his salvation*, in order for the church and Israel to be united! The election of Israel is so dear to him, that he is willing to exchange his personal election, in order for them to recognise their election. In a time when German Christians were supporting extreme hostility towards the Jews by their government, Barth was saying that the church stands and falls with its brotherhood and solidarity to unbelieving Israel (Barth 1957:202).

Barth's universal vision does not take anything away from the particular salvation in Jesus Christ or from the missionary zeal of the church, but in fact accentuates it. It is precisely because we cannot believe in the unbelief and the rejection of humanity, that we proclaim the election of humanity and faith in Jesus Christ with such urgency. Because we can never expect too much from God, we are not allowed to despair about the unbelief of humanity, but must place our hope in the faithfulness of God. Barth says: "We can never believe in unbelief; we can believe only in the future faith of those who at present do not believe" (Barth 1957:295-296). Barth would even go so far as to say that the ground of the election is faith and the ground of rejection is unbelief, but whose faith and whose unbelief? Both belief and unbelief are only established within the reality of God, and thus *pistis* is not primarily the faith of humanity, but primarily the faithfulness of God in Christ (Barth 1933:14,411).

Barth was often asked whether he was ignorant of the fact that many of the students in his classes were not Christians, since he always spoke of the reconciliation in Christ as if everybody listening were believers in Christ. Barth always responded with laughter, because he was very much aware of it, but it made no difference to him. As part of the community of faith who confess their faith with the words: "Lord, I believe: help Thou mine unbelief!," Barth did not wish to point to *his faith* in Christ, or *his theology* of Christ, but in fact to Jesus Christ, who *is* Lord over all of humanity. Thus faith in Christ was for Barth not something which separates Christians from non-Christians, but actually the strongest motive for believing in the unity of all of humanity. Proclaiming Christ is not a matter of giving your own theological opinion of Christ, which creates a distance between you and other people who believe differently from you, but to point to the living Christ as such, who is Lord, Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer of every person (Barth 1949:93-94).

## 5. NOT THE LAST WORD

Willie Jonker is the first to concede that it is difficult to interpret Karl Barth correctly. Just when you think you are moving beyond Barth or away from him, it might be that you are actually moving towards him. Similarly, when you think you are following Barth, you might be moving away from him. Jonker affirmed that since Barth was such a dynamic theologian, who was continually rethinking his position and starting again from the beginning, we would be foolish to think that the last word on the interpretation of Barth has been spoken (Jonker 1988:29-30). For Barth it was important that his students do not become followers of him, but always remain free theologians, who are followers of Christ. Theologians should be willing to always start from the beginning, namely God's election to be in a relationship with humanity, before they speak about humanity's relationship with God (Barth 1960:87).

Barth viewed *all of theology*, and not only the doctrine of election, within the sphere of doxology. He says: “This is why it is imperative to recognise the essence of theology as lying in the liturgical action of adoration, thanksgiving, and petition” (Barth 1960:88). Thus the doctrine of election, and theology as a whole, does not leave any room for speculation about the election of some and the rejection of others, but rather gives us the freedom, as theologians and as Christians, to pray for the salvation of the entire world. Our ultimate freedom is to pray, to pray that not our will, but God’s will be done; to pray that not humanity’s unbelief in God, but God’s faithfulness to humanity will triumph; to hope that in the end God will be the Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer of every human being, as God elected to be from the very beginning (Barth 1960:81).

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