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The Certainty of Our Future Hope in Karl Barth’s Theology

Dr. Jacqui A. Stewart

Honorary Research Fellow, Department of Theology
University of Exeter, UK; Honorary Lecturer, Department of
Theology and Religious Studies, University of Leeds, UK ¹

Introduction.....	1
A. Humans in Dynamic Relationship with God	4
B. Summoned to Hope.....	6
C. Jesus Is Our Hope	7
D. Hope Is Not Futurism	10
E. The “Now” and “Not Yet”	12
Conclusion: Certainty, Rationality and Hope.....	13

Introduction

It is not uncommon to find accounts of theology in which hope, eschatology and the 'last things' of judgement, heaven and hell are considered to be more or less synonymous. In the light of Karl Barth's theology, this must be seen as an unacceptable conflation of different things. For Barth, hope is the consequence of the reconciliation brought about by God through the justification and sanctification of humanity, and hope is not hope **for** things but **in** Jesus Christ.²

¹ See www.leeds.ac.uk and www.exeter.ac.uk; J.A.Stewart@leeds.ac.uk.

² When reading Barth's accounts of these issues, it is helpful to have in mind that his theology redefines every concept and statement about God in terms of Jesus [Footnote continued on next page ...]

Because of this, Christian hope acquires significance in the context of community, the body of Christ in whom Christians hope, and it has ethical implications, as being in a relationship of hope and trust transforms the life of the Christian. It also stands out more clearly as distinct from human expectations of temporal change and human anticipation of objectified desires.

In this paper I will review some of the most relevant sections of Barth's mature writings. This is, of course, an enormous subject, and for practical purposes I will focus particularly on the last quarter of Barth's monumental *Church Dogmatics*, which is devoted to the doctrine of reconciliation.³ The first three quarters may be regarded in some sense as a prolegomenon to it. Volume One, *The Doctrine Of The Word*, is an account of the possibility of knowing God; Volume Two, *The Doctrine Of God*, is an account of some of what may be known of God; Volume Three, *The Doctrine Of Creation*, is an account of God's foundational activity in relation to humanity. Irrupting into this is the tragic fact of human sin and rejection of God. So the story of God and humanity is completed by Barth with Volume Four, *The Doctrine Of Reconciliation*, and his understanding of Christian hope is most explicitly elaborated here. He begins his survey of reconciliation with a lapidary summary.

The subject-matter, origin and content of the message received and proclaimed by the Christian community is at its heart the free act of the faithfulness of God in which He takes the lost cause of man, who has denied Him as Creator and in so doing ruined himself as creature, and makes it His own in Jesus Christ, carrying it through to its goal and in that way maintaining and manifesting His own glory in the world (*CD IV.1, 3*).

Here Barth gives the core of the Christian message, which is that humanity has indeed certain hope in God, because nothing could be more certain and reliable than the faithfulness of God; indeed, God in

Christ, and that everything is viewed from a least two directions in his dialectical approach. George Hunsinger provides some useful clues for deciphering Barth; see G. Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of his Theology* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols in 13 pts.(hereafter *CD* referred to in text), trans. G.W. Bromiley, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1967).

Jesus Christ is the source and guarantor of the possibility of both faithfulness and certainty.

At the outset, it can be seen that this assertion preserves the priority of God's reconciling activity in respect of human responses to it. Humanity is not saved because people have faith in a particular formula, or are baptised into a particular community, or follow particular practices. Barth observes that "If we tried to start with faith and hope and love, we would still have to go back to that free and higher other in which they have their basis" (*CD IV/I*, 4). Humanity is saved by the activity of God in Jesus Christ, which is always primary and pre-eminent. Barth refuses the slide into idolatry which offers itself so seductively to adherents of the Christian tradition by inverting the relationship between divine and human activity.

The central location of this divine action of reconciliation in the Christian message is reinforced by Barth's image of the doctrines of creation and the last things as being the circumference of that message; a complete view of the circumference can only be seen from the centre (*CD IV/I*, 3-5), so that the whole of Christian teaching must be seen in the light of this centre - the "covenant fulfilled in the work of atonement" (*CD IV/I*, 4). Logically, the promise of God "goes beyond, or rather it precedes his will and work as Creator" (*CD IV/I*, 9). Salvation and fulfilment is the ultimate reason for creation. It is "freely determined in eternity by God himself before there was any created being" (*CD IV/I*, 10). It may be noted that there has been criticism of the way Barth locates reconciliation in ground of the being of God, but it is not part of this paper's remit to consider these issues here.⁴ We may conclude however that Barth's very dynamic

⁴ For example, Colin Gunton is one who is unhappy with the universalist implications of Barth's view of salvation. See C. Gunton, 'Salvation', *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed J. Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) pp143-158. Gunton argues that in Barth, "the commitment to human salvation is in some way written into the heart of God in a way that commitment to creation is not, the created order as a whole is given a rather instrumental place in the works of God, as but the outer basis of the covenant" *op cit* 156 . But to limit God's commitment in the way Gunton wants would be to engage in exactly the kind of subjecting theology to the influence of human constructs, that Barth so opposes. For a different view, see T. Greggs, 'Pessimistic Universalism: Rethinking the Wider Hope with Bonhoeffer and Barth' *Modern Theology* 26:4 (2010) 495-510.

account of the theology of reconciliation and salvation is essential to his radical revisioning of the relation between humanity and God.

A. Humans in Dynamic Relationship with God

For Barth, humans are not passive objects under the hand of God but are but called into relationship with him. Barth has often been accused of reducing human beings to passive objects, spectators of God's activity, without freedom, responsibility or agency. But this is a misreading, as his summary of how God reconciles the world with himself makes clear. God's activity cannot be reduced to a static state; reconciliation is not a condition, but an ongoing event, and it includes all the events and activity of God which call people into being as fully human.⁵ It is not open to human investigation as an object, because humanity is a participant in the activity and history of God. He chooses to be God in relationship with humanity. "He does not allow His history to be His and ours ours, but causes them to take place in a common history" (*CD IV/I*, 7). Consequently, as humans we can only comprehend God's gifts from within this relationship of reconciliation; it is this which makes the general graces of creation and preservation fully comprehensible. "It is only from this standpoint that the general grace of being and the opportunity which it offers can and do become a subject for generous gratitude and a source of serious dedication" (*CD IV/I*, 9).⁶ The invitation to relationship given by the sense of 'God with us' is not an "arbitrary act of the divine omnipotence of grace" (*CD IV/I*, 12); it is not being overridden by an impersonal goodness. Rather it is the most loving personal outreach, where God himself involved himself as God and man in "a real closing of the breach, gulf and abyss" (*CD IV/I*, 12) between God and humans. It is not the restoration of any status quo, but it is a re-creation because it is the coming of that which was promised, the

⁵ *CD IV.1*, 3-6. Note that in Barth, being is always be-ing, an act of a dynamic subject, not a property of a static object. (See the discussion of Actualism in Chapters One and Two of Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*.)

⁶ The recognition that humans live only in the context of this relation with God, whether recognised or not, and that it is between persons, is fundamental to Barth's theology. Revelation and salvation are relational; they are encountered personally by humans as creatures, and the encounter frees humans for relationship and fellowship with God. (See the discussion of Objectivism and Personalism in Chapters One and Two of Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*.)

eschaton. And the problem of sin is the belief of the human "that he can and should find self-fulfilment. He has himself become an *eschaton*" (*CD IV/I*, 10); that is, humans attempt to become their own end and goal, thus perverting their proper destiny.

Rather than this refusal that constitutes sin, Barth is clear that love is foundational to the Christian response to this call to relationship. It is characteristic of the working of love that "the promise which has eternal content is peculiar only to human life in the community as it is determined by it and lived as such. In short it is...love alone that endures" (*CD IV/2*, 825). And Barth then points out that 1 Corinthians 13 is a hymn to love, and there are no similar hymns to faith and hope, because love is the primary activity which enervates both faith and hope, "It bears and believes and hopes and endures" (*CD IV/2*, 835). Indeed, Barth concludes *CD IV/2* with the assertion that "it is love alone that counts and love alone that conquers. This is the reason why it is *the way*" (*CD IV/2*, 840).

Barth addresses the question of human freedom and responsibility when he asks the rhetorical question "Have we not lost all responsibility? Are we not reduced to mere spectators?" (*CD IV/I*, 14). Here he directly faces the problematic position that he has so often been accused of; that of rendering humans as passive objects in the face of a dominating divine omnipotence. Barth is quite clear about his answer; that for humans, salvation is a summons, a call to a kind of life which is now made possible, a life in relation to God in Christ. This is an invitation to a way of being, not a passively accepted change of state. "We ourselves are directly summoned...we are lifted up...we are awakened to our truest being as life and act..." (*CD IV/I*, 14). And this is done because we are offered a relationship with God that would not have been possible if God had not acted in Christ; "This actualisation of His redemptive will by Himself opens up to us the one true possibility of our own being...this one thing does not mean the extinguishing of a humanity, but its establishment" (*CD IV/I*, 14). And the form that this establishment of a new humanity takes is to acknowledge this radical gift from God and to "affirm this, to admit that God is right, to be thankful for it, to accept the promise and command which it contains" (*CD IV/I*, 15). As in other areas of Barth's thinking, the human engagement in relationship with God is marked by a change in behaviour, an "acceptance of command",

which itself is empowered by God's agency as that makes the relationship possible.

B. Summoned to Hope

Hope is what humans are summoned *to*, it is a calling from God into a relationship with Jesus Christ with all the consequences that entails. The Christian does not project himself into the future by expectation or anticipation, which would be an unreliable proceeding depending on his own finite effort, but is called from the future by Jesus Christ as risen, vindicated Lord; "nor is it that in hope the Christian anticipates that which he is not yet and does not yet have; it is rather that, hoping in Jesus Christ, he is anticipated by Him" (*CD IV/3.2*, 916). Hope leads above all to the practical life of witness and service. "Since he in whom [the Christian] hopes is already present as the basis of his hope, he owes Him this active witness" (*CD IV/3.2*, 929). Barth notes three key features of such hope - empowered life, active engagement in community, and enervation by a non- simplistic vision of the Holy Spirit. Hope is not for one's own salvation but for that of the universe. Christian hope is not about securing a kind of salvation limited to the self, ('pie in the sky when you die'), but about the promise to all. And indeed, since hope is in Jesus Christ, it couldn't be otherwise because it is the community of creation subtended in Jesus Christ that is summoned to hope; "The Christian hopes in order to show thereby that there is good cause and ground for all men and the whole world to hope with him" (*CD IV/3.2*, 933). Above all, the life of hope has its foundation in the Spirit. The Holy Spirit, who is received by Christians as the Spirit of Jesus Christ, enables humans to be in relation with God, to speak with God; "He sets them in the position of hope. He gives them the power to wait daily for the revelation of what they already are, of what they became on the day of Golgotha" (*CD IV/2*, 330). However, Barth is concerned not to be misunderstood; the action of God is not magical and in his later discussion of Christian hope and the Holy Spirit he observes

the Holy Spirit, however, is not a good daemon intervening between God and man like a *Deus ex machina* to make possible the impossible by a kind of magic. As there is no human skill, so there is no supernatural magic, to make possible the impossibility of a human life in hope (*CD IV/3.2*, 941).

Life in hope is always a gift of the Spirit, never a human capacity acquired by any means. And the assertion that this is a gift of the Spirit does not imply that God overwhelms humans as did the gods of the classical world, but rather that "He treats [man] and indeed establishes him as a free subject. He sets him on his own feet as His partner"(CD IV/3.2, 941). God does this because his power of a different kind, it is that

which enlightens the heart of man...which persuades his understanding, which does not win him from without, but "logically" from within.....it is in this life in hope awakened by the Holy Spirit that he really comes to himself and may be himself. The man born.....of the Sprit, called to service and living in hope, is the man who is no longer self-alienated, and therefore he is real man (CD IV/3.2, 942).

This power of God gives to humans what they could never of themselves possess, the possibility of relation with God in Jesus Christ, the chance of living in hope.

C. Jesus Is Our Hope

The subject, object, and content of Christian hope is a person, Jesus Christ. Christians do not hope *for* things, but *in* a person. Our faith, love and hope are focussed on the person who calls us into relation, Christ, and "Our hope can only be hope directed upon Him, and can only be certain hope in Him as its content." (CD IV/I, 15). All other kinds of hope (and faith and love) depending on our initiation and sustaining, are subject to our fallibility, and cannot be certain. Rather, the promise of salvation is given in Jesus Christ, and the Christian is

the man who for himself and for others can notice and therefore hope. His hope derives from Jesus Christ, for Jesus Christ is himself the divine pledge as such. And he hopes in Jesus Christ for Jesus Christ is also the content of the divine pledge (CD IV/1, 115).

Jesus Christ is both the hope of the Christian and that which makes such hope possible. Barth says of Christian hope that Jesus Christ is

the theme and goal and basis of his subjective hope. Nor is it that he merely is his hope..... Jesus Christ, who does not merely accompany and precede him in time, who also comes to meet him from its end and goal, makes possible his being as Christian and witness even in the apparently dark time and empty time which is before him, including the hour of death. (CD IV/3.2, 915).

This combines both the subjective availability of Jesus Christ as known in the Christian community and his objective reality as cosmic enabler of the hope that community has. The formation of the Christian community follows the Spirit's empowerment of the human response to the invitation to hope in Christ.⁷ Further, Jesus Christ himself is the hope of both Christians and also non-Christians. Hope does not depend on knowledge of or about him. Barth observes "Whether known now or unknown, He is the future of all" (CD IV/3.1, 346). Jesus Christ is the cosmic reconciler, and is the fundamental and foundational renewer of all reality.⁸

Because humans may so hope, the Christian, even as *simul iustus et peccator*, can hope in the face of the question of personal salvation. In the battle with sin, "if he truly hopes in God, he will find himself summoned and enabled daily to play the man in that conflict, to fight a good fight for the cause of the righteousness and holiness of Jesus Christ...It is not required that he should be victorious in this fight. What is required is that he should fight it honestly and resolutely." (CD IV/3.2, 920). Here hope is seen again as a calling, something given. And what is required is the fight, not necessarily an immediate victory -- God is realistic! Hope and trust in Jesus Christ will not magically remove the realities of struggle, weakness and failure in the Christian's attempt to respond to God's call, but it will direct the course of the battle. Hope is moderate because it is not hoping in itself - and awareness of that moderation may be a useful safeguard. There is a difference between Christian hope and a self-deceiving, idolatrous certainty which actually depends on the human self rather than God.

Likewise, death also may be faced with hope, because it is not an annihilation, but a limit to a period of witness and service. Dying is

⁷ And this is the reason, as Tim Gorringe explains, that Barth held negative views on infant baptism; Gorringe points out that "After baptism we become personally co-responsible for the execution of the missionary command which constitutes the community. The purpose of mission is not primarily church growth but that an account should be given of the hope that is in us" (T. J. Gorringe *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 261 - 263).

⁸ Revelation and salvation are acts of God that are mediated in creation, and are real and effective whether or not they are perceived by the creature. See the discussion of Objectivism in Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 1991.

one form of the end, and the end is "departing to be with Christ" (*CD IV/3.2*, 926). This is to be welcomed as Jesus Christ takes the human "out of the darkness of present not yet being and into the light of His consummating revelation" (*CD IV/3.2*, 927). And even in the context of the Last Judgement, Christians may hope in Jesus Christ actually as Judge, because the Christian is sustained by the Judge Himself - "If they hope in Him, as they may and should in their moving toward this Judge, then it is He Himself, the Subject of this hope, who lives and thinks and speaks and acts in ...gracious judgement..." (*CD IV/3.2*, 923). The Christian hope which is in the person of Jesus Christ, not for any set of expectations or objects, can and will sustain humans through all these ultimate challenges .

That hope for Barth is personal, relational hope in Jesus Christ is illustrated by John McDowell in his explorations of the Barth - Brunner controversy. ⁹ McDowell analyses the meaning of hope in terms of the relation between the basis of a hope and the possibility of it being realised. Hoping for a win on the lottery is not the same as hoping for a baby. McDowell asks what Christian hope is, and suggests that it is characterised by the particular ends that Christians may hope for. He does this by revisiting the Barth - Brunner controversy on the limitations of humanity. Brunner's account of the human is of a "secure, knowing subject", a self which, says McDowell, "remains stabilized and secure *apart from grace*". ¹⁰ This kind of being could know things and hope for things, defineable, graspable 'object-ives'. On the other hand, Barth's conception of the self is radically decentred and unstable in itself; only within the relation to Jesus Christ can there be true knowing. Consequently, there is no possibility of the independent human subject knowing or having any objective knowledge about God; what the human comes to know in relation *is* God, and what the Christian may hope for is Christ himself. McDowell cites the support of Karl Rahner; "*Christ* himself is the hermeneutical principle of all eschatological assertions. Anything that cannot be read and understood as a christological

⁹ J. C. McDowell 'Karl Barth, Emil Brunner and the Subjectivity of the Object of Christian Hope' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8:1 (2006) 26-41.

¹⁰ McDowell, 'Karl Barth, Emil Brunner and the Subjectivity of the Object of Christian Hope' 2006, 33.

assertion is not a genuine eschatological assertion".¹¹ McDowell traces the development in Barth's earlier thought and shows the emergence of the recognition that, for Barth, eschatology is about Jesus Christ's "effective presence" of "resurrected life, pneumatological presence, and consummating coming"¹² which characterises the elaboration of the subject in the later *Church Dogmatics*.

D. Hope Is Not Futurism

It follows from the previous section that for Barth, Christian hope is not an expectation of some external object or thing, nor a belief in an automatically unfolding future ordained by some *deus ex machina*. The message that announces salvation, that 'God is with us', is the narrative of Jesus Christ, who himself confers meaning on it, mediated in the human act of hearing that history (*CD IV/I,16-18*). It is not dependent on any unreliable philosophical foundations, so its communication is not a matter of the human transfer of information - it does not "recount an anonymous history to be taken as truth and reality only in concepts and ideas" (*CD IV/I,16*). Barth points out that humans in themselves could "perhaps imagine either "immortality" in another life...or all kinds of significant possibilities in this life" (*CD IV/1,114*), but this could not possibly be Christian hope. The contents of what we might imagine in our own right, apart from our relation with God (if that were possible), amount to a kind of theological philosophy and cannot be depended on.¹³ Barth says "no man can imagine of himself his future with God, his service of God as his

¹¹ Karl Rahner 'The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions', *Theological Investigations* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961-92) vol 4, 342 - cited by McDowell, *op cit*, 35.

¹² McDowell, *op cit*, 36.

¹³ Theological language is a kind of analogy; in itself it is profoundly different from that which it describes, but God's grace in creation allows such language to transcend itself to make reference to God possible. Likewise, this action of God is the source of the reliability or objectivity of theological claims; they do not depend on philosophically indefensible premises. (See the discussion of Realism in chapter 2 of Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 1991, and Paul Molnar in this journal - P. Molnar 'Karl Barth and the Analogy of Grace', *Testamentum Imperium 2* (2009) 1-20.)

future being (in this life as in that which is to come)" (CD IV/1, 114). Further, as we have seen, hope is not a static condition of expectation, but a calling into relationship and action. This is equally clear when Barth discusses the hope of the first Christians. They did not hope as a response to the obvious failings of the world and themselves; they did not look for "a God who would reveal himself, or Jesus Christ, as some Deus ex machina..."(CD IV/1, 326), to rescue them from their own problems. Instead, "they looked for Jesus Christ Himself...the One He once was, as the One who was with them and indeed in them, but also as the One who stood before them as eternally future" (CD IV/1, 326-7). They looked to the encounter with the person, not the expectation of things. This kind of hope, Christian hope, is what generates active engagement with the world in the here and now, in the struggle for good. The eye of hope is not fixed on what is "beyond the veil" but sees the present world in both its positive and negative aspects, and calls for action (CD IV/3.2, 934 -939).

Hence Christian hope is not to be identified with a pre-eminence of a human understanding of the future, and Gerhard Sauter can argue that Barth's theology is not a kind of futurism or 'theology of hope' like Moltmann's. It is true that in his *Epistle to the Romans*, Barth made a provocative comment that Christianity must be reducible to eschatology or it would have nothing to do with Christ. This may have misled some into thinking that he was making the mistake of adopting a theological 'futurism'. Sauter observes of his own engagement with Barth that "Certainly I would have taken a wrong path had I simply connected 'eschatology' with an understanding of future that gives it priority as a dimension of time."¹⁴ But in his paper, Sauter points out that the passage in Romans is followed by Barth explaining and amplifying the point. Barth says that hope defined as a fixed future

is fate, not divine fulfillment. It is not God, but a reflection of man unredeemed...Redemption is that which cannot be seen, the inaccessible, the

¹⁴ G. Sauter 'Why is Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics not a 'Theology of Hope'? Some Observations on Barth's Understanding of Eschatology', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 52:4 (1999) 407-429: 408.

impossible, which confronts us as hope. Could we wish to be anything other and better than men of hope, or anything additional?¹⁵

What he says here is borne out by his repeated explanations in the later *Church Dogmatics*, where as we have seen, hope confronts humans in the person of Jesus Christ, who gives humans the invitation of relationship with Himself, empowered by His Spirit, summoning them to hope in Him. As Sauter explains, the terms and expression used by Barth at different times reflect his changing theological context and the contemporary issues misunderstandings that he was engaging with. Barth's position may be further elucidated by his reaction to Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*, where Barth suggests that Moltmann has "baptised" the futurist philosophy of Ernst Bloch¹⁶, and thereby transformed hope from a personal relationship of trust in God to an abstract principle of philosophy.

While Colin Gunton agrees that "Salvation, eschatologically considered, means the completion of the purpose of election which takes its origin in the very eternal being of God",¹⁷ he suggests that "'salvation' is in central respects an eschatological concept involving safe and final arrival at one's intended destination".¹⁸ This seems to imply something under human control, with specified parameters, propelled forward in time. It may be argued that this departs too far from Barth's understanding of salvation as a summoning into relationship, and is too close to an unfolding of the future as formulated by Bloch. It does not allow enough for the graced, the gifted which comes *from* the future as salvation from and in Jesus Christ.

E. The "Now" and "Not Yet"

Christians live in the space between the announcement of Christ, His inauguration as man, and the fulfilment of creation in the

¹⁵ Barth, K., 1922, *The Epistle to the Romans* 2nd ed, cited in *CD II/1*, 634 following ; this passage cited by Sauter, 'Why is Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics not a 'Theology of Hope'? ' p408-409.

¹⁶ Barth, K. 1981, *Letters 1961-1968*, eds Fangmeier, J & Stoevesands, H, trans Bromley, G.W. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans) nos 172, 174-176, 175. Cited in Sauter, 'Why is Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics not a 'Theology of Hope'?', 413.

¹⁷ Gunton, 'Salvation' 145.

¹⁸ Gunton, 'Salvation' 144.

parousia. Barth observes "They exist in the great tension which does not exclude but relativises, critically reduces and purifies all little tensions, their eye on this goal...they are like arrows waiting to be shot from a bow stretched to the very utmost" (CD IV/3.1, 343). He actually asks if such existence is tolerable, but asserts that Christians have no other possibility. The issue is not how certain hope is, but how unavoidable for the Christian. The fact that Christian hope is about a relationship, a trust in a person, allows a better understanding of eschatological time contexts. The 'now and not yet' of the Kingdom leaves a space of incomplete knowledge between the revelation of Christ in the here and now, and that which is looked for at the end of time (CD IV/3.2, 902) But this is not a "twilight", not a negative or even a neutral space. It is filled with the promise of God, and is unequivocally good, and the acknowledgement of this space is Christian hope, realistic in the face of the manifest evils of present time, but certain in its trust in Jesus Christ. (CD IV/3.2, 908-909). Hope is also given in the face of the ultimate judgement, and Barth cites 1 Cor 4:5, "Judge nothing before the time (the *kairos*) until the Lord comes" (CD IV/3.2, 921). Here again, hope is not in an indifferent, "neutral, ambivalent, and therefore obscure future" (CD IV/3.2, 921) but in Jesus Christ Himself. A Christian may hope "in Him, confidently. For He alone, but dependably, is the origin, theme and content of his hope" (CD IV 3.2, 921 - 922). In this waiting time, the calling/vocation of the Christian as witness inevitably involves affliction, and this can be endured because "even in the storm into which he is plunged as a witness of this Word, he is engaged in movement and transition towards the future of that revelation...there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying (Rev 21: 4)" (CD IV/ 3.2, 643). The Christian is not to be overwhelmed by the "not yet" but to live in love in the face of questions and mystery (CD IV/3.2, 917 - 918). This is because hope gives the capacity to face an undetermined future, rather than giving an expectation of the content of the future as object.

Conclusion: Certainty, Rationality and Hope

Barth is clear that The Word of God in Jesus Christ cannot be transcended by any other word, in content, necessity, or goodness (CD IV/3.1, 102). It is known by humanity incompletely until the end of time. "The self transcendence of Jesus Christ as the one Word of

God" is what gives knowledge of "His total presence, action and revelation which will conclude and fulfil time and history" (*CD IV/3.1*, 103). The certainty of Christian hope is that this word is given, and cannot be gainsaid, and this is confirmed in the self-transcendence of the *eschatos* himself. This is summarised by Barth - "Knowing that He came yesterday, and is present today, [the Christian] need not doubt but can have full assurance that He is coming again...Already, in celebrating Easter, the Christian may celebrate the dawn of the Last Day on which the veil will be taken away" (*CD IV/3.2*, 916).

In his paper in this journal, on Barth's understanding of the analogy of grace, Paul Molnar discusses the rationality underlying Barth's views on the possibility of knowing God.¹⁹ He says that Barth "consistently argued that all knowledge of God which takes place in the church continually must find its certainty in Jesus Christ himself who is the finger of God who enlightens us as to the meaning of the word God itself" and at the same time describes Thomas F. Torrance as having similarly "argued that our knowledge of God is secure only because God himself has empowered us and now empowers us to know him".²⁰ Knowledge of God is "always grace and miracle because at all times God is fully hidden from all historical, psychological and philosophical analysis and can be disclosed to us only on his own initiative". In the same section, Molnar also thinks it important to understand that Barth is clear that "We may know God in himself but not as God knows himself; we know him only as God has made himself known to us".²¹ These assertions are not claims for some supernatural infusions of mystical knowledge. Rather, they allow for a form of knowing which can be judged to be properly rational, and have real certainty.

The critics of the Enlightenment, especially Heidegger, showed that the distinction between subject and object, permanence in time, the persistence of an idealist self, could no longer be taken for granted. A rational account of the possibility of human knowledge

¹⁹ Paul Molnar, 2009, 'Karl Barth and the Analogy of Grace', *Testamentum Imperium 2*, 1-20.

²⁰ Molnar, 'Karl Barth and the Analogy of Grace' 2.

²¹ Molnar, 'Karl Barth and the Analogy of Grace' 9-10

recognises that knowledge alters the knower, and that what is known depends on its context, which in turn includes the knower. A rational account recognises the time conditioned nature of the given world, which is new and different as every moment passes by. And it recognises that the human self owes its identity to the continuity of its narrative of experience and change. The old idealist certainties no longer hold. God cannot be known as a timeless object, even according to contemporary philosophy. Against this background, Molnar can summarise Barth's position "We know that we cannot know God as God knows himself. But by the grace of God in his movement toward us in knowledge and love, we do really know God indirectly and in faith and through the humanity of Jesus Christ as the Son reveals God to us (*CD II/I*, 56f.)".²² This knowing is not a kind of 'knowing that', a claim to the objective knowledge of facts and figures, but instead, the 'knowing of' a person, a knowing in relationship. And it is the specific person of Jesus Christ who gives himself to be known. Hence Molnar can say

What this means is that one cannot acquire a knowledge of the truth by claiming it on the basis of one's correct thinking about the Trinity, however accurate that may be in detail. However perfect our theological statements may be, none of them has the power to disclose the truth of God.²³

Certainty is not to be found here. Instead, it is found in faith in Jesus Christ; that is, in a trusting, responsive commitment to Jesus Christ. This is nevertheless a rational trust, because such a commitment involves change in the believer. For Barth, faith is about conduct, and those who claim the strongest belief are often the most faithless in the sense of doing the opposite of what they profess. Barth says unbelief is sin, because it is about bad behaviour, not misunderstood propositions. The rational criteria for belief are given in Jesus Christ himself, for he is the standard by which conduct is evaluated.²⁴ Molnar also notes that Barth would be resolutely opposed to

²² Molnar, 'Karl Barth and the Analogy of Grace' 15.

²³ Molnar, 'Karl Barth and the Analogy of Grace' 17.

²⁴ As already mentioned, theological language of necessity includes rational and cognitive elements. The subject / object of theology, God as revealed in Jesus Christ, provides criteria for the way in which these elements are used in the construction of doctrine. See the discussion of Rationalism in Chapter Two of Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*.

contemporary theologies which posit a general human 'pre-understanding' of God; he says

Indeed the clearest evidence, in Barth's view, here that such approaches to knowing God necessarily fail, is that in every case they do not approach God the Father through his Son and in his Spirit but rather on the ground of something knowable beforehand apart from faith in Christ himself. For Barth, there is literally no way to the Father except through the Son.²⁵

Barth bases his account of Christian hope on the most certain and truly knowable source, which is Jesus Christ himself, and this grounding is not an unreasonable exercise in simplistic piety but a deeply thought out and rational foundation.

In conclusion, it can be seen that Barth's conception of Christian hope gives it ethical force; Christians are summoned to hope, and hope is participation in a relation with Jesus Christ, who himself is the practical standard of evaluation for the life that is conferred by the relationship. Christian hope is not focused on the individual, but is hope for the community. It is not about expectations of objectifiable benefits for individuals, nor an anticipation of a predictable future, which can never be certain even from a philosophical standpoint. Rather, it is a gift from Jesus Christ, who is both now and yet to come, which empowers Christians to live in the present and to face what the future may bring. Christians can therefore have a true hope in the One who is ultimately reliable and trustworthy.



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²⁵ Molnar , 'Karl Barth and the Analogy of Grace' 20.