

## Preface

*“Mache die Dinge so einfach wie möglich—aber nicht einfacher.”*

Albert Einstein

*“Es ist schwieriger eine vorgefasste Meinung zu zertrümmern, als ein Atom.”*

Albert Einstein

TRADITION HAS IT THAT IN 1770 WHEN MOZART WAS FOURTEEN YEARS old, he went to Rome and listened to Allegri's *Miserere* in the Sistine Chapel during Holy Week. It was forbidden under threat of excommunication to make a copy of the papal music, but after the service the young Mozart was able to transcribe the piece entirely from memory.<sup>1</sup> Some time later, Mozart met Charles Burney, a British historian of music, who bought the manuscript from him and took it back to London. When the piece was published the following year, the Pope ordered the young musician to appear before him, but rather than excommunicating him, he praised him for his accomplishment.

Regardless of this story's historicity, and whether or not Mozart truly possessed an eidetic memory, this anecdote illuminates something of the task of the theologian. For a musician to hear a piece of music and transcribe it can be thought to be analogous to a theologian's 'hearing' the Word of God by reading Scripture and writing down the interpretation for teaching and preaching. Though these two tasks share certain outward similarities like transcription, they are also deeply divided by inner dissimilarities when it comes to the method of interpretation. Whereas it might be possible for a musical genius like Mozart to transcribe a piece of music accurately having only heard it once, the task of theology is a somewhat impossible, limited,

1. See Vetter, "Mozarts Nachschrift," 144–47.

and paradoxical one. Impossible, because the theologian is wrestling with Scripture, the subject matter of which is the transcendent God, and the task of theology is to interpret his self-revelation, which depends on God and is only possible *ubi et quando Deo visum est*. Limited, because the theologian is bound by certain restrictions. The Word of God is dynamic, constantly exceeding human capacities. Even if God chooses to unveil himself in Scripture, with our limited minds and our human words it is never fully possible to comprehend or encapsulate what we hear and read about God in his Word. Paradoxical, because, as Karl Barth famously said: “As ministers we ought to speak of God. We are human, however, so we cannot speak of God. We ought therefore to recognize both our obligation and our inability, and by that very recognition give God the glory.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, “all theological thought and utterance is *theologia viatorum* and thus ‘broken’ [*gebrochen*] and ‘piece-work’ [*Stückwerk*].”<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, theology “has to be reapplied to the situation of the day if it is to give life.”<sup>4</sup> It is not the words of the Bible that have changed but the situations in which they are heard. “Some may wish to repeat a past theology, but this is not possible. The context has changed, and what is actually communicated and understood today can be very far from the original meaning.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, every generation has to grapple anew with the great theological questions and re-interpret pivotal Christian doctrines. Unlike a musical transcription therefore, theology does not simply involve restating a received body of knowledge. It also needs to be re-contextualised for every generation and reconfigured through ever-new expressions across time. Thus every theologian must apply the Reformation principle of a return *ad fontes*—to the text—to avoid remaining in a static tradition and instead to continue the Church’s dynamic message of Jesus Christ. Theology is a constant process of re-examination and re-engagement with Scripture.

As David Ford observes, it should be the purpose of basic theological Christian academic theology to describe the world in the light of a scripturally-informed picture of God that has been painted anew for every generation and culture.<sup>6</sup> Barth reminds us that we have to return constantly to Scripture because “critical scholarship of theology itself stands in constant

2. Barth, “The Word of God and the Task of Ministry,” 186.

3. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 294. Volumes of the *Church Dogmatics* will hereafter be cited as *CD*.

4. Hooker, *From Adam to Christ*, 10.

5. Ford, “Introduction to Modern Christian Theology,” 1.

6. See Ford, “Epilogue,” 761.

need of criticism, correction and reform.”<sup>7</sup> Theology is not only an academic discipline, but, as Barth points out, “a function of the Church,”<sup>8</sup> providing ecclesiastical self-examination and interpretation of the Bible for the Church today. The continued life of the Church depends on her ability and willingness to “hear the voice of Scripture [. . .] and on whether Scripture compels the Church continually to return to it.”<sup>9</sup>

However, if theology has an obligation to inform the Church, it appears to be falling short in its delineation of two crucial doctrines: election and the atonement. These two doctrines, which together Barth claims are the “sum of the Gospel,”<sup>10</sup> should unite Christians. But the dominant mainstream views on both election and the atonement split believers and have triggered bitter divisions, with parties questioning each other’s commitment and even faith.

Furthermore, in order for theology to be life-giving there are two challenges for every ‘new’ theological idea explored and endorsed, particularly in the academy. First, academic theology is always at risk of being only fully understood within an academic setting. Thus the first challenge for theologians, if their ideas are to be useful and give life to the Church, is to ensure that those ideas are communicated as comprehensibly as possible. At the same time, it is vital to avoid the opposite error—that of oversimplifying simply to give quick answers to difficult questions.

Secondly, as Bruce Chilton warns, any “progress in theology is difficult to attain. One might imagine that one should build directly on the foundations of consensus, and extend our knowledge in that manner. But the foundation of theology is the study of texts, and the understanding of texts is prone to change. Theologians must therefore keep a wary eye on the foundations upon which they build, lest their castles be left in the air; every act of theological thinking should grow from the bottom up.”<sup>11</sup>

The varied understandings of key texts can obstruct consensus in theology. And yet, theology is best done in conversation. When this dialogue does not take place, the stronghold of various doctrines and opinions (often safeguarded by a small minority who thereby position themselves as the ‘gatekeepers of orthodoxy’) becomes a difficult one to penetrate with new ideas. This has both positive and negative implications. Though it means that certain doctrines are retained and defended in order to maintain

7. *CD IV/3*, 881.

8. *CD I/1*, 3.

9. *CD I/2*, 691f.

10. *CD II/2*, 3.

11. Chilton, *Isaiah Targum*, xi.

orthodoxy, this might also mean that in some circles there is almost no scope for revision, correction, or challenge. Once a particular doctrine is perceived as being scripturally informed (and is thus widely embraced as 'orthodox'), it can become a pillar of a certain theological framework, even if the scriptural foundation is disputed. By this point, however, the doctrine might be established so strongly in the tradition that it eludes all challenge simply because such questioning is immediately interpreted as a direct attack on the integrity of Scripture. The result of this approach is that, within the particular tradition, self-examination, critical engagement with outside opinion, and genuine re-engagement with Scripture are sometimes forgotten. As we shall see, this has occurred with the doctrines of election and the atonement.

However, if we are to acknowledge, as Barth tells us, that all theological thought is *Stückwerk*, then theology would benefit from the example of the history of science. Einstein's new insights required him to leave some (though not all) of Newton's thoughts behind.<sup>12</sup> In order to achieve progress in theology, we need to remember that the key to understanding a hermeneutical circle may sometimes require leaving older, less accurate biblical interpretations behind.

Karl Barth was aware of the difficulties of attaining progress in theology as well as the reality that any life-giving theology needs to rest on a biblical foundation. When reading Scripture, he was confronted with a 'strange new world' which caused him to change his theological starting point to one focused on the text of the Bible itself. This new engagement with Scripture was therefore the main impetus behind Barth's reconstruction of the doctrine of election, and though Barth was aware that he had radically departed from his Reformed tradition and was criticized for his new approach, he felt that the authority of Scripture compelled him to do so.

Likewise, the following study, driven by that same authority, will also say *No* to certain prevailing understanding of the doctrines of election and atonement. The *No* that is uttered must ultimately be viewed as a positive *Yes* to a challenging but hopeful new perspective. As Karl Barth said when

12. For the paradigm shift in science and the implications *for* and impact *on* theology, particularly contemporary pneumatology, see Wolfgang Vondey, "The Holy Spirit and the Physical Universe." Vondey argues in the abstract of his article that "a methodological shift occurred in the sciences in the 20th century that has irreversible repercussions for a contemporary theology of the Holy Spirit. Newton and Einstein followed fundamentally different trajectories that provide radically dissimilar frameworks for the pneumatological endeavor. Pneumatology after Einstein is located in a different cosmological framework constituted by the notions of order, rationality, relationality, symmetry, and movement. These notions provide the immediate challenges to a contemporary understanding of the Spirit in the physical universe."

interviewed late in his life for a documentary: “Actually, by nature I’m not spoiling for a fight. [. . .] Someone who forcefully says ‘yes’ also needs to say ‘no’ with the same vigor.”<sup>13</sup> It is important to emphasize, however, that the *Yes* that this present project offers does not intend to boastfully promote itself at the expense of others. Another prominent churchman has perfectly expressed the spirit in which this study is intended to be read when he wrote, “winning is a word not about succeeding so that other people lose, but about succeeding in connecting others with life-giving reality.”<sup>14</sup>

It is by following Barth’s example and applying the method exemplified in the *Church Dogmatics* that we can re-examine the doctrines of election and the atonement for a new generation and culture.

Matthias Grebe  
Bonn, Lent 2014

13. Barth, *JA und NEIN–Karl Barth zum Gedächtnis*, video.

14. Williams, *Silence and Honey Cakes*, 32.