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Why Do Humans Die?

An Exploration of the Necessity of Death in the Theology of Robert Jenson with Reference to Karl Barth's Discussion of "Ending Time"

Andrew Nicol

It is surely no surprise that Robert Jenson be invoked in a volume of essays on Karl Barth and trinitarian theology, but why death? It has often been suggested, not least by Jenson himself, that the doctrine of the resurrection is at the center of his dogmatics. Less apparent however, is the degree to which his proposals are shaped by the resurrection's necessary corollary—death. Furthermore, Jenson's understanding of the nature of death is located within a conception of human personhood that is thoroughly founded in and enabled by the triune God.

Following the lead of Augustine much Christian thought has tended to see death as a result of the fall, as an intrusion in the natural order of things.[1] Much like Augustine's fuller perspective, Jenson argues Thomas Aquinas taught that even though matter was corruptible, God's favor had preserved humans from death. The decay of death was allowed after God withdrew preservation of bodily existence after the fall.[2] However, some influential theologians, including in recent years Paul Althaus, Karl Rahner, and Eberhard Jüngel, have suggested that death is also part of God's original intention for human beings. Perhaps

1. Although, Jenson suggests that Augustine's fuller thought contends that originally humans could die, but did not because they were sustained by the tree of life. See Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2:330.

2. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, i–ii.85.5–6, cited in Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2:330.

the most influential of all however, has been Karl Barth. Consciously following his lead in this regard, Robert Jenson has also argued that death as such is an appropriate boundary to finitude. This essay explores the necessity of death in Jenson's theology and its critical location in an ontology of human personhood thoroughly sourced in triune personal relations. This theme emerges early in Jenson's thought and is consistently characterized by conversation with Barth—one of his earliest and most influential dialogue partners. For this reason the essay begins with a synopsis of Barth's construal of death as "Ending Time," and moves to an analysis of Jenson's thought that observes his ongoing affinity with Barth and his almost inevitable departures.

Barth and the Necessity of Death

For Barth death is intrinsically linked to temporality. Humans exist in time allotted by God and this time is the "divinely given space for human life."[3] This time has a beginning, certain duration, and an emphatic end. In Barth's view finitude, or temporal limitation, necessitates mortality.[4] Protest against this limitation is understandable for it is proper that life holds onto life.[5] However, his crucial point is that long life, even infinite life, has no guarantee of fulfillment—*life needs the reality of limited duration*. Barth's logic unfolds in three propositions:

1. Life in an allotted span is appropriate as such is our difference from God.
2. It is not a *disadvantage* to live a definite span.
3. It would in fact be dangerous for humans to have to live an indefinite span.[6]

3. *CD* III/2 554.

4. Wolfhart Pannenberg on the other hand, argues that finitude does not imply mortality. See especially Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology,* 3:560f.

5. Barth argues that it is proper to protest the barrier of allotted time, for "human life is ignorant of its own true nature when it accepts the fall as its original and authentic destiny, and therefore when it is not troubled by the demand for duration and finds no problem in the allotment of its time" (*CD* III/2, 555).

6. Ibid., 562f.

Fundamentally, life needs the negation of everything that negates it, and everlasting human time cannot achieve this.[7] Barth notes that "In an infinite life restless craving would remain unrest."[8] Human beings must therefore end this life—they must die. This, argues Barth, is a natural and inherently good aspect of their creation. There is thus divine intention in the necessity of our death.

One day we shall have had our life then. But, what we shall have and be on the far side of our life in time is what death calls into question. For Barth, death returns us to the same non-being as we began. That we emerged from non-being is not necessarily negative, nevertheless implicit in our return to non-being is a pervasive threat, in Barth's words, a "gloomy shadow." This threat, properly understood, is not merely non-existence, but negation—in other words, judgment. Barth states in vivid imagery that this judgment hangs over life like a "tree marked for felling. . . . [This life] is devoted and delivered to this judgment, like a bracket with a minus before it which changes every plus in the bracket into a minus. The bracket is still there, but the minus stands in front of it canceling every other prospect but this fatal change."[9] Beginning and ending bound a life of irreparable guilt. Most importantly, therefore, as we approach our end, we approach God.[10]

Thus Barth also wants to say that death as we *actually* experience it is not as God intended. Even so, because humans are indeed guilty, we find ourselves under the sign of judgment justly. While this sign of judgment does *not* belong to God's good intention, it is all the same used and ordained by him. If there is a true, natural, and good nature to death, Barth reflects, it is thoroughly concealed under this guise. Barth therefore develops an important distinction between a natural death, which constrains our temporality, and a fearful death, which we experience in the light of our guilt. It is in this latter sense that death is evil. Barth states, "As man's eternal corruption, but also as its sign, death is not a part of man's nature as God created it. But it entered the world as an alien lord—it is the wages of sin."[11]

7. Ibid., 561.
8. Ibid., 562.
9. Ibid., 597.
10. Ibid., 596.
11. Ibid., 600, Cf. Rom 5:12, 14, 17; Rom 6:23, 8:6; and 1 Cor 15:22, 56.

At this point Barth asks whether one should not stop and simply admit that death is an experienced evil. What warrants the enquiry however, is the critical mitigating factor—the possibility that we have been spared this plunge into rejection and negation because another has suffered this death for us. The very ministry of Jesus demonstrates God's onslaught against the evil invasion of death in the world of life. Barth reminds us that it is the demons who are first to recognize Jesus' true identity. God's permission of this oppositional force is proven provisional. God will not allow death to run its course forever. This "last enemy" of humanity is declared God's enemy too in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The New Testament therefore measures humanity by what God has done for it. Before and apart from what God has done in Jesus Christ, man is dead even while he lives. As Barth states: "our behavior makes our life *eo ipso* ['by that very fact'] a forfeited life given over to death."[12] Death is thus not a tyrant in its own right. *In the rule of death we have to do with the rule of God.* So, it is not only death, but God who awaits us. It is therefore God not death that is to be feared.[13]

The appropriate fear of God then, is to hold fast to the cross of Christ. God is really the boundary of death, as death is the boundary of man. God is therefore the Lord of death, but does not affirm it. Barth argues that the Old Testament question concerning deliverance from death is secretly pregnant with a positive answer: "His [Christ's] death, resurrection and coming again are the basis of absolutely everything that is to be said about man and his future, end and goal in God."[14] Those who believe in Jesus can longer look at their death as though it were in front of them. It is behind them. Their old man has been crucified with Christ. In the event of the cross time is fulfilled. The meaning of the cosmos has happened in this event. The sign remains and while we still suffer the threats of the enemy, we do *not* have to suffer the judgment.[15] Consequently, our death must be understood christologically. The life of Jesus Christ, as God's life with and for unworthy man, is the only goal of

12. *CD* III/2, 601.

13. Summarized from ibid., 608.

14. Ibid., 624.

15. Barth states, "No other man stands at this center, and therefore no other really stands under the judgment of God. Other men, Christians consciously and the rest unconsciously, find themselves somewhere on the periphery around this center, and therefore . . . under the sign of judgment" (*CD* III/2, 605).

history. Christ's death is our justification*, not as a death instead of ours*, but in the most literal sense our death by which we pass through God's judgment.

In what sense is human death necessary then? If Christ was in fact blameless, is there a sense in which death in terms of judgment was not his inevitable end? Must we not have to be able to die if what Christ has done is not in vain? Well, Barth contends, infinite life brings the potential to multiply guilt on an infinite scale and the tendency to postpone the ordering of relationship. Barth affirms that, "We have to be finite, to be able to die, for the ἐφάπαξ ['once for all'] of the redemption accomplished in Christ to take effect for us."[16] In Barth's judgment therefore finitude is not intrinsically evil: "It belongs to the revelation of his glory in us, to the final proclamation of our justification in the judgment, to the removal of the overhanging sign of God's judgment, to the settled and incontestable factuality of our participation in God's eternal life, that one day we should merely and definitively have been."[17]

Ultimately, the fact that death has good and evil aspects can only be understood with reference to the triune God. Why do humans die? According to Barth, "Nature as well as unnature, good as well as evil, God's creation as well as the disastrous collision between the holy God and fallible man, are all present in man's end, in his dying and death."[18] Ultimately however, death is itself not the judgment, nor is it as such the sign of the judgment of God. It is only so *de facto*. God is humanity's beyond as Barth decisively concludes: "If hope in Christ is a real liberation for natural death, this rests on the fact that by divine appointment death as such belongs to the life of the creature and is thus necessary to it. . . . If we did not have to do with the definitive end of human life, we should not have to do with its resurrection and definitive co-existence with that of God."[19]

The Thinking of Robert Jenson

There are several ways in which one could approach the question of death in the thinking of Robert Jenson. One such point in which Jenson

16. Ibid., 631.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 632.
19. Ibid., 639.

is in clear agreement with Barth is the utter actuality of Christ. On a related note, George Hunsinger once suggested that "Robert Jenson greatly advances the discussion [of Barth] by fully rising to the level of a 'strong misreading.'" Referring to Jenson's book *God after God*, he states, it is "perhaps the most provocative, incisive and wrong-headed reading of Barth available in English."[20] Yet, despite these concerns, Hunsinger goes on to acknowledge that Jenson clearly comprehends Barth's "real pulse"—the absolute priority of Jesus' existence. For Jenson too, it is this absolute priority that is the very possibility and meaning of our life and death. He insists that, "A human end that was not what we know as death is a might-have-been."[21] That God could have done things differently is simply counter-factual. Jenson is fond of Luther's dictum that "God has created us precisely to redeem us." In this sense there is no room for a hypothetically unfallen humanity for which the Son would have come. Thus the dialectic of death as an intended natural end and an intrusive evil force can be held together for both Barth and Jenson because of their commitment to the priority of God's redemptive purposes. In this way evil, while not enacted by God, is in Jesus Christ turned to God's purposes. He adds, "There would have been an undying humanity only in a created history that did not contain the cross, and under a God whose second identity was not the crucified Jesus."[22]

Human ending must therefore be understood in christological and consequently trinitarian terms. As Jenson sees it, God makes room for us within God's own triune life. We are brought into this triune conversation by virtue of our relation to Christ, as part of the *totus Christus*. For Jenson then, human being as such is constituted by inclusion in the triune conversation. Human personhood is created in accordance with God's triune personal life[23] and the image of God in creatures refers to our location in that God-relation itself.[24] Death is an intrinsic dimension of this conversation. The following section will focus on three interrelated spheres which illustrate how in Jenson's system the death or end of the person can be an intended natural end *and* the last enemy. The three key notions are: relationality, identity, and temporality.

20. Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 15.
21. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2:331.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 96.
24. Ibid., 65.

Relationality

Humans are determined in being-together. Jenson following a similar line to Barth summarizes this way: "God's address to us is the Son, who is the human person Jesus of Nazareth. To receive myself from God and be directed toward him is therefore to receive myself from and be directed toward a fellow human. And it is to receive myself from and be directed toward a human person who precisely to be himself brings others with him."[25]

Humans are unique among creatures because they are "praying animals."[26] A prayerful response is only enabled insofar as the triune God has addressed the creature and establishes human polity in mutually obligating discourse. Humanity's uniqueness is therefore the specific relation God takes up with us which overcomes our alienation from each other, and supremely from him. Jenson maintains that if personhood is intrinsically relational because it is founded in the creature's inclusion in triune personal life, eschatological inclusion in that life requires death. Deification requires resurrection and correspondingly death. That our supernatural end is in God means we must die, because as Jenson emphatically states: "The redeemed histories are complete in their deaths. And they are brought into the history of God as those for whom the Son died; they appear in God's life because and as Jesus' love infinitely interprets them. They are brought into God as the *interpretandum* of the inner dialogue of the Son's actual triune life."[27] This brings us to the second key notion. Death settles our identity.

Identity

Central to Jenson's understanding of personhood is self-transcendence. This refers to that human ability to take up a vantage point outside ourselves, to make ourselves our own objects. Jenson argues that self-transcendence is the most fitting conception of a *vestigia trinitatis*. He states, "We transcend ourselves toward God and each other. . . . We are counterparts of the Father as we find ourselves in the

25. Ibid., 73.

26. See especially Jenson, "Praying Animal," 311–25.

27. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2:348.

Son in whom the Father finds himself."[28] As Francis Watson puts it, in Jenson's system the "doctrine of the Trinity provides a social model for human as well as divine personhood. . . . And the ground of this socially realized personhood, in which apperception, ego and freedom are united, is the triune God."[29]

Accordingly, drama and coherence appropriate to the story, are vital factors in Jenson's overall construal of reality. To be self-transcendent is to recognize ourselves in a story that awaits a proclaimed conclusion. Because people are stories, they have a plot. While we live, our story is of course unfinished. Each of us lives our lives as the hero of a drama missing its last act. "What am I here for?" remains an open question. This is why humans posit a suitable end to their story. For the most part this end does not, according to Jenson, successfully conceive of the extinguishment of consciousness. He maintains that to the concept of truly vanished consciousness, no projected experience or representation can correspond.[30] So often our projected cessation of being involves some conception of a continued ability to apprehend it. In a sense the termination of my consciousness turns out to be impossible to think. The religious quest is thus the human attempt to take care of our own ending. This is the essence of religion according to Jenson—it is the invention of eternity in the flight from temporality and death.

This means that death is the key. Jenson insists that only death makes our life a bounded whole. But, of course this is not a whole that one can apprehend. We do not live the now of our death—I am never therefore this whole for myself. There is however, one sense in which we may apprehend ourselves as a bounded whole. This occurs when another communicates their anticipation of my finished self. As Jenson outlines, "We are persons in that I am something for you and you are something for me. What I am for you is the player of a role assigned neither by you only, nor by me only, but by an inherited pattern of life together, into which history inserts each of us at his unique place."[31] We may thus obtain a glimpse of our possible coherent story through the communicated reflection of others.

28. Ibid., 65.

29. Watson, "'America's Theologian,'" 210.

30. For an extended discussion of this point see the first chapter on death in Jenson, *On Thinking the Human*.

31. Jenson, *Story and Promise*, 71.

Nevertheless, this address which enables a proleptic view of our final self can also be threatening. It may be a word that binds or manipulates, as we too bind and manipulate others in our address to them. This is the dilemma of original sin. If to be is to be addressed, the selfish nature of our address will bind. Death even dictates that the promissory nature of our love will ultimately be interrupted. As Jenson reflects, "What makes death the Lord's enemy, and fearful for us, is that it separates lovers. . . . Having no more being would be no evil were being not mutual."[32] Death breaks relationship and death is often so painful and tragic because we are mutual.

Supremely however, Jenson, like Barth, insists that the brokenness of our actual experience of death must be seen in the light of the cross and resurrection of Christ. Death, even as an enemy of God in one sense, settles our identity in time, because it is *that life* which is eschatologically interpreted by the triune God who transcends and conquers death itself. Jenson states: "If we were to simply continue after death, in whatever fashion, those raised would not be identified by their lives lived toward death and made whole entities by it. And that is to say their death would not have been their death, and their new life would not be God's victory over death. . . . The life that will be appropriated into God is the life that ends in death. . . ."[33] Death is necessary because it appropriately bounds our temporal existence. This leads us to the third key notion—temporality.

Temporality

The explication of death and personhood in Jenson's work is undergirded with an idiosyncratic conception of temporality and futurity. To further understand how death plays its part we must return to what Hunsinger sees as Jenson's "wrongheadedness." For Jenson this represents a fundamental and determinative move away from Barth.[34] He relates this development in a 1972 autobiographical article. As previously mentioned Jenson had learnt from Barth to "confess the earthly history

32. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2:331.

33. Ibid., 346.

34. One may clearly observe this move in Jenson's first book and adaptation of his doctoral thesis, *Alpha and Omega*.

of Jesus as itself the 'crisis' of all other time."[35] But, he fears that in the equation of eternity with Jesus' time there is a danger of drawing "Christ off and back into a Calvinist place 'before all time.'"[36] Eternity, maintains Jenson, cannot be a timelessly available other realm. He sees in Barth's view of eternity a form of "supra-temporality" which only partly corresponds to what time is for us. For Jenson there is no archetypal temporality outside of history. Paul Cumin has observed that for Jenson archetypal temporality *is* the Trinity itself as three interacting yet unified poles of historical time.[37] This "move" is essential to our discussion of death, because in Jenson's proposal God has to work out his identity in temporal history—*God too must face death*. The working out of the triune God's self-identity in time clearly has critical theological implications. While this paper does not have the scope to explore these implications, their sheer weight, even audacity, require acknowledgement. These issues notwithstanding, one might ask whether Jenson has fully acknowledged the nuances of Barth's perspective on eternity and time. Has he misunderstood Barth or chosen to read Barth a certain way in order to go "beyond" him? Whatever the case (and I suspect the latter), Jenson sees himself departing from Barth at this point. His definitive standpoint is that God does not exist in abstract timelessness.

Death then is a brute existential fact of finitude. Jenson wants to agree with Heidegger that we get a sense of "totality" by facing the death that lies temporally ahead of us. For Heidegger however, what defines humanity is immersion in the historicity of human Being-in-time. However, this radical sense of human temporality makes nothingness the far side of being. Fulfillment no longer points beyond death. Sartre on the other hand had objected that death actually breaks off life and robs it of meaning. Either way, death equals non-being, and as Jenson maintains you can't be there for your own non-being.[38] The fabric of reality in Jenson's thought is unreservedly temporal, however for him the far side of being is not nihilism, but inclusion in the triune life.

35. Jenson, "About Dialog," 40.

36. Ibid.

37. This insight is taken from the analysis of Paul Cumin in, "Robert Jenson and the Spirit of It All," 164.

38. Jenson emphasizes this point in several places including *On Thinking the Human*, 2–4; and *Systematic Theology*, 2:327–28.

Whilst God is not timeless, our time is however encompassed in God's triune life. In this sense, God is the Beginning and End of time. In and through time God reconciles the world to its goal.[39] Jenson states, "[And] if the triune God is the real God, then time is the *accommodation* this life makes in itself for the particular History that the Son in fact and freely is, Jesus' history with what is not God."[40] This temporal life for Creator and creatures is orientated to the future. To be is to be a relation to the future. Early in his career Jenson says he learnt from Rudolf Bultmann "to see time as the horizon of the Bible's explication of human life; and to understand God's transcendence as 'the Insecurity of the future.'"[41] Futurity has remained an important aspect of Jenson's theology. However, he insists that Bultmann failed to "narrate the crisis in which God will be the End."[42] So, Jenson's thought emphasizes that the gospel is a promise with content; the word of a narratable future, and of God as the power of that specific future. The specificity comes from the story of Jesus. Thus for Jenson the biblical God is not the Persistence of the Past but the Power of the Future. It is from the future that he creates and commands us to himself. Reality is essentially eschatological and it is that "we *will* be what we will be with him, that we *are* at all."[43]

Death however, is a fundamental condition on any human promise. Only a promise that had death behind it could be unconditional. Jenson states, "Only love that has undergone death for the other and just thereby lives anew can be sure in itself."[44] Therefore, "Only the success of death, only resurrection, can be the act of life from the future free from and for the past. . . . If Jesus is risen, this life is enacted."[45] For Jenson it is the triune transcendence of death through resurrection which is the key to the conquering of death. This is both the *defeat of an enemy* and an intended means by which *identity is settled*. An implication of this triumph is not that the creature evades death but that through it they meet the living God. Jenson states this clearly when he says: "God's overcoming of death is not, therefore, only his overcoming of some-

39. Jenson, "Creation as a Triune Act," 40.
40. Ibid. Emphasis in the original.
41. Jenson, "About Dialog," 40.
42. Ibid.
43. Jenson, "Creation as a Triune Act," 42. Emphasis in the original.
44. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2:332.
45. Jenson, *God after God*, 17.

thing intruding into his creation. It is simultaneously his transformation of creature's natural temporal finitude, and just so his achieving of his original end for the creation in one of its defining aspects."[46]

Ultimately, Jenson proposes that our death cannot be thought in any other way than as Christian trinitarian theology. Otherwise we cheat; we must always produce a concept of death paired with a representation of not-quite death.[47] Humans die as a means by which the creature's life in time is brought to a necessary conclusion. Both Barth and Jenson emphasize however that this is far from the final word—the triune God is on the far side of death.

Conclusion

Jenson's depiction of personhood and the necessity of death is richly sourced in the life of the triune God. The contention that death has a basis in God's original intent for humanity is provocative and faces squarely the angst of temporal existence. This is something Barth and Jenson elucidate insightfully. Humans must die because it makes their temporal existence a whole. The good news says Jenson, is that the bounded life we have led, whether broken, cut short, or long and fulfilled, will be divinely interpreted by love in the infinite eschatological community of the triune God.

There are also many questions that arise from this construal. In conclusion however, two important issues are offered for brief critical reflection. Firstly, does Jenson's phenomenology of death make salvation *too* eschatological an event? In Jenson's system it is the motive force of the Spirit that pulls events powerfully and coherently toward realization. Just how the Spirit determines the dramatic coherence of God's life in history, without "approaching" from the future, relies on a "helix-like" conception of time with the risen Christ at its center.[48] Jenson is aware that this is difficult to conceive, and imagination notwithstanding, one is inclined to question its overall coherence.[49] Douglas Farrow has

46. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2:331.

47. Jenson, *On Thinking the Human*, 15.

48. Jenson, "Scripture's Authority in the Church," 35.

49. Whilst criticized by some for not showing a "suitable" degree of metaphysical imagination, Oliver Crisp clearly raises issues of logical coherency in Jenson's notions of time and pre-existence. See Crisp, "Robert Jenson on the Pre-existence of Christ," 27–45.

argued that such a dominant futurity actually conflates ontology and soteriology, whereby rising from the dead constitutes *true* being.[50] In his attempt to eschew a protological determination of reality, has Jenson somehow diminished temporal existence in preference for eschatological openness?

Secondly, the explication of sin and judgment is notably light in Jenson's theology of death. Again, Farrow observes that Jenson, by construing death as "native to humankind," has adopted a piece of natural theology that "even Barth failed to excise."[51] Whilst both Barth and Jenson may be defended on this charge, this criticism emphasizes the lack of emphasis on death as the "wages of sin," particularly in Jenson. This is no new criticism. Jenson, in characteristic candidness, recounts in the preface to the reprint of *Story and Promise* how the critical appraisal of the book by his revered *Doktorvater* Peter Brunner struck deeply. He relates Brunner's words: "There was simply something missing he said . . . or at best only present 'in disguise' under the notion of 'alienation': the sheer reality of sin and judgment. 'That my death nakedly and inescapably . . . confronts me with the holiness of God; . . . a confrontation in which the issue is my eternal lostness . . . and merciful rescue, for Christ's sake, from this deserved and established fate—this function of death is hardly worked out in your discussions. Has not Barth triumphed over Luther here?'"[52] Yet despite this passionate admonition, Jenson has made a choice. He is most certainly aware of the weight of sin, but in his judgment the church's message in the second person is always and only that, "because the Lord Jesus has risen, you are God's beloved child, and our saying this to you is your last judgment, let out ahead of time."[53] It is in this sense that the necessity of death loses its sting. But, does it leave something unsaid? Indeed, has Barth triumphed over Luther?

50. Farrow, Demson, and Di Noia, "Robert Jenson's Systematic Theology," 93.
51. Ibid., 92.
52. Jenson, *Story and Promise*, 2.
53. Ibid., 4.

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