Barth began something of a theological revolution after the First World War with his commentary on Paul’s Epistle to the Romans (see text 1.1). His “God-intoxicated” theology, centered on Jesus Christ, was later worked out in the six million words of the Church Dogmatics, probably the most important work of twentieth-century theology. It begins with a theology of revelation rooted in the doctrine of the Trinity. The renewal of this doctrine was to become a distinctive feature of twentieth-century theology, with Barth being one of its most influential exponents. The second volume on God is marked by an original approach to the attributes (or “perfections”) of God as “the One who loves in freedom” and by a fundamental rethinking of his own Calvinist tradition’s teaching on predestination (or “election”) (see text 1.2). The third volume on creation includes an understanding of human being centered on the humanity of Jesus Christ. The fourth (unfinished) volume on reconciliation offers three interrelated approaches to Jesus Christ and, led by them, doctrines of sin, salvation, church, and Christian life in the Spirit. Each volume includes ethics – for Barth, Christian doctrine is inseparable from its working out in ethics and in politics. The theology is always strongly biblical, with much detailed interpretation of scripture, and engages with every period of Christian theology, often in robust argument. It relates to many other fields as they are relevant to the discussion, but insists on the distinctiveness of theological understanding whose criteria and horizon are set by God’s free self-revelation.

1.1 The Theme of the Epistle to the Romans

“Theology of crisis” is one of the terms applied to Barth’s commentary on Romans, with “crisis” carrying its usual meaning in relation to the situation of Europe and its religion in the aftermath of the traumatic 1914–18 World War and also its original meaning of “judgement.” Barth challenged the domestication and compromising of Christian faith, insisting on “letting God be God” – the God who, in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, radically judges the world and the


church, and who, in raising Jesus from the dead, freely gives a new life to be lived in faith. Knowledge of God must come from God. It is an ever-fresh gift of God through the living Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit, with theology and church teaching based on the revelation of Jesus Christ through the testimony of the Bible. This is not to be understood within the framework of other truths, which are radically questioned by it, and the power of the Gospel is a crisis for all other power. Barth is especially critical of “the arrogance of religion” and its many ways of avoiding or taming the Gospel.

The Theme of the Epistle

Romans 1. 16, 17

For I am not ashamed of the gospel: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is revealed the righteousness of God from faithfulness unto faith: as it is written, But the righteous shall live from my faithfulness.

I am not ashamed. The Gospel neither requires men to engage in the conflict of religions or the conflict of philosophies, nor does it compel them to hold themselves aloof from these controversies. In announcing the limitation of the known world by another that is unknown, the Gospel does not enter into competition with the many attempts to disclose within the known world some more or less unknown and higher form of existence and to make it accessible to men. The Gospel is not a truth among other truths. Rather, it sets a question-mark against all truths. The Gospel is not the door but the hinge. The man who apprehends its meaning is removed from all strife, because he is engaged in a strife with the whole, even with existence itself. Anxiety concerning the victory of the Gospel — that is, Christian Apologetics — is meaningless, because the Gospel is the victory by which the world is overcome. By the Gospel the whole concrete world is dissolved and established. It does not require representatives with a sense of responsibility, for it is as responsible for those who proclaim it as it is for those to whom it is proclaimed. It is the advocate of both. Nor is it necessary for the Gospel that Paul should take his stand in the midst of the spiritual cosmopolitanism of Rome; though he can, of course, enter the city without shame, and will enter it as a man who has been consoled by the Gospel. God does not need us. Indeed, if He were not God, He would be ashamed of us. We, at any rate, cannot be ashamed of Him.

The Gospel of the Resurrection is the — power of God [...] the disclosing and apprehending of His meaning, His effective pre-eminence over all gods. The Gospel of the Resurrection is the action, the supreme miracle, by which God, the unknown God dwelling in light unapproachable, the Holy One, Creator, and Redeemer, makes Himself known: What therefore ye worship in ignorance, this set I forth unto you (Acts xvii. 23). No divinity remaining on this side the line of resurrection; no divinity which dwells in temples made with hands or which is served by the hand of man; no divinity which needs anything, any human propaganda (Acts xvii. 24, 25), — can be God. God is the unknown God, and, precisely because He is unknown, He bestows life and breath and all things. Therefore the power of God can be detected neither in the world of nature nor in the souls of men. It must not be confounded with any high, exalted force, known or knowable. The power of God is not the most exalted of observable forces, nor is it either their sum or their fount. Being completely different, it is the krisis of all power, that by which all power is measured, and by which it is pronounced to be both something and — nothing; nothing and — something. It is that which sets all these powers in motion and fashions their eternal rest. It is the Primal Origin by which they all are dissolved, the consummation by which they all are established. The power of God stands neither at the side of nor above — supernatural! — these limited and limiting powers. It is pure and pre-eminent and — beyond them all. It can neither be substituted for them nor ranged with them, and, save with the greatest caution, it cannot even be compared with them. The assumption that Jesus is the Christ (i. 4) is, in the strictest sense of the word, an assumption,
void of any content that can be comprehended by us. The appointment of Jesus to be the Christ takes place in the Spirit and must be apprehended in the Spirit. It is self-sufficient, unlimited, and in itself true. And moreover, it is what is altogether new, the decisive factor and turning-point in man's consideration of God. This is what is communicated between Paul and his hearers. To the proclamation and receiving of this Gospel the whole activity of the Christian community – its teaching, ethics, and worship – is strictly related. But the activity of the community is related to the Gospel only in so far as it is no more than a crater formed by the explosion of a shell and seeks to be no more than a void in which the Gospel reveals itself. The people of Christ, His community, know that no sacred word or work or thing exists in its own right: they know only those words and works and things which by their negation are sign-posts to the Holy One. If anything Christian(!) be unrelated to the Gospel, it is a human by-product, a dangerous religious survival, a regrettable misunderstanding. For in this case content would be substituted for a void, convex for concave, positive for negative, and the characteristic marks of Christianity would be possession and self-sufficiency rather than deprivation and hope. If this be persisted in, there emerges, instead of the community of Christ, Christendom, an ineffectual peace-pact or compromise with that existence which, moving with its own momentum, lies on this side resurrection. Christianity would then have lost all relation to the power of God. Now, whenever this occurs, the Gospel, so far from being removed from all rivalry, stands hard pressed in the midst of other religions and philosophies of this world. Hard pressed, because, if men must have their religious needs satisfied, if they must surround themselves with comfortable illusions about their knowledge of God and particularly about their union with Him, – well, the world penetrates far deeper into such matters than does a Christianity which misunderstands itself, and of such a 'gospel' we have good cause to be ashamed. Paul, however, is speaking of the power of the unknown God, of – Things which eye saw not and ear heard not, and which entered not into the heart of man. Of such a Gospel he has no cause to be ashamed.

The power of God is power – unto salvation. In this world men find themselves to be imprisoned. In fact the more profoundly we become aware of the limited character of the possibilities which are open to us here and now, the more clear it is that we are farther from God, that our desertion of Him is more complete (i. 18, v. 12), and the consequences of that desertion more vast (i. 24, v. 12), than we had ever dreamed. Men are their own masters. Their union with God is shattered so completely that they cannot even conceive of its restoration. Their sin is their guilt; their death is their destiny; their world is formless and tumultuous chaos, a chaos of the forces of nature and of the human soul; their life is illusion. This is the situation in which we find ourselves. The question 'Is there then a God?' is therefore entirely relevant and indeed inevitable! But the answer to this question, that is to say, our desire to comprehend the world in its relation to God, must proceed either from the criminal arrogance of religion or from that final apprehension of truth which lies beyond birth and death – the perception, in other words, which proceeds from God outwards. When the problem is formulated thus, it is evident that, just as genuine coins are open to suspicion so long as false coins are in circulation, so the perception which proceeds outwards from God cannot have free course until the arrogance of religion be done away. Now, it is the Gospel that opens up the possibility of this final perception, and, if this possibility is to be realized, all penultimate perceptions must be withdrawn from circulation. The Gospel speaks of God as He is: it is concerned with Him Himself and with Him only. It speaks of the Creator who shall be our Redeemer and of the Redeemer who is our Creator. It is pregnant with our complete conversion; for it announces the transformation of our creatureliness into freedom. It proclaims the forgiveness of our sins, the victory of life over death, in fact, the restoration of everything that has been lost. It is the signal, the fire-alarm of a coming, new world. But what does all this mean? Bound to the world as it is, we cannot here and now apprehend. We can only receive the Gospel, for it is the recollection of God which is created by the Gospel that comprehends its meaning. The world remains the world and men remain men even whilst the Gospel is being received. The whole burden of sin and the whole curse of death still press heavily upon us. We must be under no illusion: the reality of our
The Gospel of salvation can only be believed in; it is a matter for faith only. It demands choice. This is its seriousness. To him that is not sufficiently mature to accept a contradiction and to rest in it, it becomes a scandal – to him that is unable to escape the necessity of contradiction, it becomes a matter for faith. Faith is awe in the presence of the divine incognito; it is the love of God that is aware of the qualitative distinction between God and man and God and the world; it is the affirmation of resurrection as the turning-point of the world; and therefore it is the affirmation of the divine ‘No’ in Christ, of the shattering halt in the presence of God. He who knows the world to be bounded by a truth that contradicts it; he who knows himself to be bounded by a will that contradicts him; he who, knowing too well that he must be satisfied to live with this contradiction and not attempt to escape from it, finds it hard to kick against the pricks; he who finally makes open confession of the contradiction and determines to base his life upon it – he it is that believes. The believer is the man who puts his trust in God, in God Himself, and in God alone; that is to say, the man who, perceiving the faithfulness of God in the very fact that He has set us within the realm of that which contradicts the course of this world, meets the faithfulness of God with a corresponding fidelity, and with God says ‘Nevertheless’ and ‘In spite of this’. The believer discovers in the Gospel the power of God unto salvation, the rays which mark the coming of eternal blessedness, and the courage to stand and watch. This discovery is, however, a free choice between scandal and faith, a choice presented to him always and everywhere and at every moment. Depth of feeling, strength of conviction, advance in perception and in moral behaviour, are no more than things which accompany the birth of faith. Being of this world, they are in themselves no more than unimportant signs of the occurrence of faith. And moreover, as signs of the occurrence of faith they are not positive factors, but negations of other positive factors, stages in the work of clearance by which room is made in this world for that which is beyond it. Faith, therefore, is never identical with ‘piety’, however pure and however delicate. In so far as ‘piety’ is a sign of the occurrence of faith, it is so as the dissolution of all other concrete things and supremely as the dissolution of itself. Faith lives of its own,
because it lives of God. This is the Centrum Paulinum [Pauline center] (Bengel).3

There is no man who ought not to believe or who cannot believe. Neither the Jew nor the Greek is disenfranchised from the Gospel. By setting a question-mark against the whole course of this world and its inevitability, the Gospel directly concerns every man. As surely as no one is removed from the universal questionableness of human life, so surely is no one excluded from the divine contradiction that is in Christ, by which this questionableness seeks to make itself known to men. The Jew, the religious and ecclesiastical man, is, it is true, first summoned to make the choice; this is because he stands quite normally on the frontier of this world and at the point where the line of intersection by the new dimensional plane (i. 4) must be veritably seen (ii. 17–20; iii. 1, 2; ix. 4, 5; x. 14, 15). But the advantage of the Jew provides him with no precedence. The problem ‘Religion or Irreligion’ – not to speak of the problem ‘Church or World’ – is no longer a fundamental problem. The possibility of hearing the Gospel is as universal as is the responsibility to hear it, and as is the promise vouchsafed to them who do hear it.

In the Gospel is revealed the great, universal secret of the righteousness of God which presses upon every man of every rank. In Christ the consistency of God with Himself – so grievously questioned throughout the whole world, among both Jews and Greeks – is brought to light and honoured. What men on this side resurrection name ‘God’ is most characteristically not God. Their ‘God’ does not redeem his creation, but allows free course to the unrighteousness of men; does not declare himself to be God, but is the complete affirmation of the course of the world and of men as it is. This is intolerable, for, in spite of the highest honours we offer him for his adornment, he is, in fact, ‘No-God’. The cry of revolt against such a god is nearer the truth than is the sophistry with which men attempt to justify him. Only because they have nothing better, only because they lack the courage of despair, do the generality of men on this side resurrection avoid falling into blatant atheism. But in Christ God speaks as He is, and punishes the ‘No-God’ of all these falsehoods. He affirms Himself by denying us as we are and the world as it is. In Christ God offers Himself to be known as God beyond our trespass, beyond time and things and men; to be known as the Redeemer of the prisoners, and consequently, as the meaning of all that is – in fact, as the Creator. He acknowledges Himself to be our God by creating and maintaining the distance by which we are separated from Him; He displays His mercy by inaugurating His krisis and bringing us under judgement. He guarantees our salvation by willing to be God and to be known as God – in Christ; He justifies us by justifying Himself.

From faithfulness the righteousness of God reveals itself, that is to say, from His faithfulness to us. The very God has not forgotten men; the Creator has not abandoned the creation. Though the secret has been kept in silence through times eternal and shall be kept in silence (xvi. 25); though men shall continue to prefer their ‘No-God’ to the divine paradox; though the manifestation of what cannot be made known be the impossibility before which only the thoughtless are not terrified; yet, the faithfulness of God to men still abides; there still abides too that profound agreement between the will of God and that which men, longing to be freed from themselves, also secretly desire; there abides the divine answer which is given to us when the final human question awakes in us. – We look for new heavens and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness. And because we have been appointed to this awaiting, we perceive the faithfulness of God.

Unto faith is revealed that which God reveals from His faithfulness. To those who have abandoned direct communication, the communication is made. To those willing to venture with God, He speaks. Those who take upon them the divine ‘No’ shall themselves be borne by the greater divine ‘Yes’. Those who labour and are heavy laden shall be refreshed. Those who do not shun the contradiction have been hidden in God. Those who honestly allow themselves to be set to wait know thereby that they ought, must, and can, await the faithfulness of God. Those who stand in awe in the presence of God and keep themselves from revolt live with God.

In them is fulfilled the prophecy – The righteous shall live from faithfulness! (Hab. ii. 4). The righteous man is the prisoner become watchman. He is the guard at the threshold of divine reality. There is no other righteousness save that of the man who sets himself under judgement, of the man who is terrified and hopes. He shall live. He has the expectation of
true life, for, recognizing that this life is naught, he is never without the reflection of the true life in this life, never without the prospect of incorruption in that which is passing to corruption. The great impossibility has announced to him the end and goal of every trivial impossibility. He shall live of the faithfulness of God. Whether we say of the faithfulness of God or ‘of the faith of men’, both are the same. The form in which the prophet’s words have been handed down already points in both directions. It is the faithfulness of God which we encounter so unescapably in the prophet’s ‘No’: God the Holy One, the altogether Other. It is the faith of men which we meet in the awe of those who affirm the ‘No’ and are ready to accept the void and to move and tarry in negation.

Where the faithfulness of God encounters the fidelity of men, there is manifested His righteousness. There shall the righteous man live.

This is the theme of the Epistle to the Romans.

Endnotes
1. [Martin Luther (1483–1546), German theologian, the primary instigator of the Protestant Reformation.]
2. [Soren Kierkegaard (1813–55), Danish philosopher and theologian.]
3. [Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687–1752), German Lutheran pietist clergyman, best known for editing the first critical edition of the New Testament since Erasmus’ 1516 edition.]

1.2 Jesus Christ, Electing and Elected

Barth’s Calvinist tradition was noted for its teaching on “double predestination,” according to which God from all eternity, in a mysterious decretum absolutum (absolute decree), chose some people for salvation and some for damnation. Barth attacked this combination of good and bad news as being untrue to the Gospel, and he offered instead what was perhaps his single most original theological proposal. For him there is indeed double predestination (or “election” as he preferred to call it) but it is centered on Jesus Christ, who is both rejected (as enacted in his crucifixion) and elected (as enacted in his resurrection), and the inner truth of this election lies in him being the one who both elects and is elected. So there is no symmetry between the “no” of rejection and the “yes” of election: the good news of election has the last word, and therefore there is hope for all people (even Judas Iscariot, who is discussed at length) in the light of Jesus Christ who died for all.

Jesus Christ, Electing and Elected

In its simplest and most comprehensive form the dogma of pre-destination consists, then, in the assertion that the divine predestination is the election of Jesus Christ. But the concept of election has a double reference – to the elector and to the elected. And so, too, the name of Jesus Christ has within itself the double reference: the One called by this name is both very God and very man. Thus the simplest form of the dogma may be divided at once into the two assertions that Jesus Christ is the electing God, and that He is also elected man.

In so far as He is the electing God, we must obviously – and above all – ascribe to Him the active determination of electing. It is not that He does not also elect as man, i.e., elect God in faith. But this election can only follow His prior election, and that

means that it follows the divine electing which is the basic and proper determination of His existence.

In so far as He is man, the passive determination of election is also and necessarily proper to Him. It is true, of course, that even as God He is elected; the Elect of His Father. But because as the Son of the Father He has no need of any special election, we must add at once that He is the Son of God elected in His oneness with man, and in fulfilment of God's covenant with man. Primarily, then, electing is the divine determination of the existence of Jesus Christ, and election (being elected) the human.

Jesus Christ is the electing God. We must begin with this assertion because by its content it has the character and dignity of a basic principle, and because the other assertion, that Jesus Christ is elected man, can be understood only in the light of it.

We may notice at once the critical significance of this first assertion in its relation to the traditional understanding of the doctrine. In particular, it crowds out and replaces the idea of a *decretum absolutum*. That idea does, of course, give us an answer to the question about the electing God. It speaks of a good-pleasure of God which in basis and direction is unknown to man and to all beings outside God Himself. This good-pleasure is omnipotent and incontrovertible in its decisions. If we are asked concerning its nature, then ultimately no more can be said than that it is divine, and therefore absolutely supreme and authoritative. But now in the place of this blank, this unknown quantity, we are to put the name of Jesus Christ. According to the witness of the Bible, when we are called upon to define and name the first and decisive decision which transcends and includes all others, it is definitely not in order to answer with a mysterious shrug of the shoulders. How can the doctrine of predestination be anything but “dark” and obscure if in its very first tenet, the tenet which determines all the rest, it can speak only of a *decretum absolutum*? In trying to understand Jesus Christ as the electing God we abandon this tradition, but we hold fast by Jn. 1:1-2.

Jesus Christ was in the beginning with God. He was so not merely in the sense that in view of God's eternal knowing and willing all things may be said to have been in the beginning with God, in His plan and decree. For these are two separate things: the Son of God in His oneness with the Son of Man, as foreordained from all eternity; and the universe which was created, and universal history which was willed for the sake of this oneness, in their communion with God, as foreordained from all eternity. On the one hand, there is the Word of God by which all things were made, and, on the other, the things fashioned by that Word. On the one hand, there is God's eternal election of grace, and, on the other, God's creation, reconciliation and redemption grounded in that election and ordained with reference to it. On the one hand, there is the eternal election which as it concerns man God made within Himself in His pre-temporal eternity, and, on the other, the covenant of grace between God and man whose establishment and fulfilment in time were determined by that election. We can and must say that Jesus Christ was in the beginning with God in the sense that all creation and its history was in God's plan and decree with God. But He was so not merely in that way. He was also in the beginning with God as “the first-born of every creature” (Col. 1:15), Himself the plan and decree of God, Himself the divine decision with respect to all creation and its history whose content is already determined. All that is embraced and signified in God's election of grace as His movement towards man, all that results from that election and all that is presupposed in such results — all these are determined and conditioned by the fact that that election is the divine decision whose content is already determined, that Jesus Christ is the divine election of grace.

Thus Jesus Christ is not merely one object of the divine good-pleasure side by side with others. On the contrary, He is the sole object of this good-pleasure, for in the first instance He Himself is this good-pleasure, the will of God in action. He is not merely the standard or instrument of the divine freedom. He is Himself primarily and properly the divine freedom itself in its operation *ad extra*. He is not merely the revelation of the mystery of God. He is the thing concealed within this mystery, and the revelation of it is the revelation of Himself and not of something else. He is not merely the Reconciler between God and man. First, He is Himself the reconciliation between them. And so He is not only the Elect. He is also Himself the Elector, and in the first instance His election must be understood as active. It is true that as the Son of God given by the Father to be one with
man, and to take to Himself the form of man, He is elected. It is also true that He does not elect alone, but in company with the electing of the Father and the Holy Spirit. But He does elect. The obedience which He renders as the Son of God is, as genuine obedience, His own decision and electing, a decision and electing no less divinely free than the electing and decision of the Father and the Holy Spirit. Even the fact that He is elected corresponds as closely as possible to His own electing. In the harmony of the triune God He is no less the original Subject of this electing than He is its original object. And only in this harmony can He really be its object, i.e., completely fulfill not His own will but the will of the Father, and thus confirm and to some extent repeat as elected man the election of God. This all rests on the fact that from the very first He participates in the divine election; that that election is also His election; that it is He Himself who posits this beginning of all things; that it is He Himself who executes the decision which issues in the establishment of the covenant between God and man; that He too, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is the electing God. If this is not the case, then in respect of the election, in respect of this primal and basic decision of God, we shall have to pass by Jesus Christ, asking of God the Father, or perhaps of the Holy Spirit, how there can be any disclosure of this basic decision of God. Even the decretum absolutum (Jn. 17:21) is the electing God. If this is not the case, then the Spirit of obedience itself, and for us the Spirit of adoption. When we ask concerning the reality of the divine election, what can we do but look at the One who performs this act of obedience, who is Himself this act of obedience, who is Himself in the first instance the Subject of this election.

The passages in Jn. 13:18 and 15:16, 19, in which Jesus points to Himself as the One who elects His disciples, are not to be understood loosely but in their strictest and most proper sense. It is clear that at this point John knows nothing of a rivalry which can and should be dissolved by subordination. If Jesus does nothing “of himself” (ἀϕ’ ἑαυτουˆ, Jn. 5:30), there is the closely corresponding verse: “Without me ye can do nothing” (Jn. 15:5). The statement: “All mine are thine,” is balanced by the further statement: “Thine are mine” (Jn. 17:10). Jesus was “sent,” but He also “came.” As He is in the Father, the Father is also in Him (Jn. 14:19). “As the Father hath life in himself, so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself” (Jn. 5:26). The Father glorifies Him, but He, too, glorifies the Father (Jn. 17:3-5). It is Jesus’ “meat to do the will of God. If God elects us too, then it is in and with this election of Jesus Christ, in and with this free act of obedience on the part of His Son. It is He who is manifestly the concrete and manifest form of the divine decision – the decision of Father, Son and Holy Spirit – in favour of the covenant to be established between Him and us. It is in Him that the eternal election becomes immediately and directly the promise of our own election as it is enacted in time, our calling, our summoning to faith, our asent to the divine intervention on our behalf, the revelation of ourselves as the sons of God and of God as our Father, the communication of the Holy Spirit who is none other than the Spirit of this act of obedience, the Spirit of obedience itself, and for us the Spirit of adoption. When we ask concerning the reality of the divine election, what can we do but look at the One who performs this act of obedience, who is Himself this act of obedience, who is Himself in the first instance the Subject of this election.
But again, He, Jesus, is the way, the truth and the life, and no one cometh unto the Father but by Him (Jn. 14:6). The Father is the husbandman, but He, Jesus, is the true vine (Jn. 15:1). And for this reason He prays (!): “Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me” (Jn. 17:24). In the light of these passages the electing of the disciples ascribed to Jesus must be understood not merely as a function undertaken by Him in an instrumental and representative capacity, but rather as an act of divine sovereignty, in which there is seen in a particular way the primal and basic decision of God which is also that of Jesus Christ. And so, too, behind that summons to “discipleship” which is so frequent in the Synoptics, there stands the statement of Mt. 11:27: “Neither knoweth any man the Father, save … he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him.” And that other statement in Mt. 16:17, that the Son may be known only by revelation of the Father, does not in any way restrict this truth, but rather expounds it according to its true sense. Even in those places where it is said of Christ that He “emptied” Himself and “humbled” Himself (Phil. 2:7), or that He “gave” Himself (Gal. 1:4, 1 Tim. 2:5), or that He “offered” Himself (Gal. 2:20, Eph. 5:2), or that He “sacrificed” Himself (Heb. 7:27, 9:14); even in those passages which treat of His obedience (Phil. 2:8, Heb. 5:8), we cannot but see the reflection of the divine spontaneity and activity in which His own existence is grounded, and together with it the covenant between God and man.

[...]

The election of Jesus Christ is the eternal choice and decision of God. And our first assertion tells us that Jesus Christ is the electing God. We must not ask concerning any other but Him. In no depth of the Godhead shall we encounter any other but Him. There is no such thing as Godhead in itself. Godhead is always the Godhead of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. But the Father is the Father of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of Jesus Christ. There is no such thing as a decretum absolutum. There is no such thing as a will of God apart from the will of Jesus Christ. Thus Jesus Christ is not only the manifestatio [and speculum nostrae praedestinationis]. And He is this not simply in the sense that our election can be known to us and contemplated by us only through His election, as an election which, like His and with His, is made (or not made) by a secret and hidden will of God. On the contrary, Jesus Christ reveals to us our election as an election which is made by Him, by His will which is also the will of God. He tells us that He Himself is the One who elects us. In the very foreground of our existence in history we can and should cleave wholly and with full assurance to Him because in the eternal background of history, in the beginning with God, the only decree which was passed, the only Word which was spoken and which prevails, was the decision which was executed by Him. As we believe in Him and hear His Word and hold fast by His decision, we can know with a certainty which nothing can ever shake that we are the elect of God.

Jesus Christ is elected man. In making this second assertion we are again at one with the traditional teaching. But the christological assertion of tradition tells us no more than that in His humanity Jesus Christ was one of the elect. It was in virtue of His divinity that He was ordained and appointed Lord and Head of all others, the organ and instrument of the whole election of God and the revelation and reflection of the election of those who were elected with Him.

Now without our first assertion we cannot maintain such a position. For where can Jesus Christ derive the authority and power to be Lord and Head of all others, and how can these others be elected “in Him,” and how can they see their election in Him the first of the elect, and how can they find in His election the assurance of their own, if He is only the object of election and not Himself its Subject, if He is only an elect creature and not primarily and supremely the electing Creator? Obviously in a strict and serious sense we can never say of any creature that other creatures are elect “in it,” that it is their Lord and Head, and that in its election they can and should have assurance of their own. How can a mere creature ever come to the point of standing in this way before God, above and on behalf of others? If the testimony of Holy Scripture concerning the man Jesus Christ is true, that this man does stand before God above and on behalf of others, then this man is no mere creature but He is also the Creator, and His own electing as Creator must have preceded His election as creature.
In one and the same person He must be both elected man and the electing God. Thus the second assertion rests on the first, and for the sake of the second the first ought never to be denied or passed over. Because of this interconnexion we must now formulate the second statement with rather more precision. It tells us that before all created reality, before all being and becoming in time, before time itself, in the pre-temporal eternity of God, the eternal divine decision as such has as its object and content the existence of this one created being, the man Jesus of Nazareth, and the work of this man in His life and death, His humiliation and exaltation, His obedience and merit. It tells us further that in and with the existence of this man the eternal divine decision has as its object and content the execution of the divine covenant with man, the salvation of all men. In this function this man is the object of the eternal divine decision and foreordination. Jesus Christ, then, is not merely one of the elect but the elect of God. From the very beginning (from eternity itself), as elected man He does not stand alongside the rest of the elect, but before and above them as the One who is originally and properly the Elect. From the very beginning (from eternity itself), there are no other elect together with or apart from Him, but, as Eph. 1:4 tells us, only “in” Him. “In Him” does not simply mean with Him, together with Him, in His company. Nor does it mean only through Him, by means of that which He as elected man can be and do for them. “In Him” means in His person, in His will, in His own divine choice, in the basic decision of God which He fulfils over against every man. What singles Him out from the rest of the elect, and yet also, and for the first time, unites Him with them, is the fact that as elected man He is also the electing God, electing them in His own humanity. In that He (as God) wills Himself (as man), He also wills them. And so they are elect “in Him,” in and with His own election. And so, too, His election must be distinguished from theirs. It must not be distinguished from theirs merely as the example and type, the revelation and reflection of their election. All this can, of course, be said quite truly of the election of Jesus Christ. But it must be said further that His election is the original and all-inclusive election; the election which is absolutely unique, but which in this very uniqueness is universally meaningful and efficacious, because it is the election of Him who Himself elects. Of none other of the elect can it be said that his election carries in it and with it the election of the rest. But that is what we must say of Jesus Christ when we think of Him in relation to the rest. And for this reason, as elected man, He is the Lord and Head of all the elect, the revelation and reflection of their election, and the organ and instrument of all divine electing. For this reason His election is indeed the type of all election. For this reason we must now learn really to recognise in Him not only the electing God but also elected man.

[...]

But the elected man Jesus was foreordained to suffer and to die. That is how His selection, and sending, and, as we have seen, His election, are understood in the New Testament. The free grace of God directed in Him towards the creature took on this form from the very first (from all eternity). According to Phil. 2:6 it is obedience unto death, even unto the death of the cross, to which the Son of God predestines Himself when He empties Himself of His divine form of being. And this predestining is the content of the divine decree at the beginning of all things. “The Word became flesh” (Jn. 1:14). This formulation of the message of Christmas already includes within itself the message of Good Friday. For “all flesh is as grass.” The election of the man Jesus means, then, that a wrath is kindled, a sentence pronounced and finally executed, a rejection actualised. It has been determined thus from all eternity. From all eternity judgment has been foreseen – even in the overflowing of God's inner glory, even in the ineffable condescension of God's embracing of the creature, even in the fulness of self-giving by which God Himself wills to become a creature. For teleologically the election of the man Jesus carries within itself the election of a creation which is good according to the positive will of God and of man as fashioned after the divine image and foreordained to the divine likeness (reflection). But this involves necessarily the rejection of Satan, the rebel angel who is the very sum and substance of the possibility which is not chosen by God (and which exists only in virtue of this negation); the very essence of the creature in its misunderstanding and misuse of its creation and destiny and in its desire to be as God, to be itself a god. Satan
(and the whole kingdom of evil, i.e., the demonic, which has its basis in him) is the shadow which accompanies the light of the election of Jesus Christ (and in Him of the good creation in which man is in the divine image): And in the divine counsel the shadow itself is necessary as the object of rejection. To the reality of its existence and might and activity (only, of course, in the power of the divine negation, but to that extent grounded in the divine will and counsel) testimony is given by the fall of man, in which man appropriates to himself the satanic desire. When confronted by Satan and his kingdom, man in himself and as such has in his creaturely freedom no power to reject that which in His divine freedom God rejects. Face to face with temptation he cannot maintain the goodness of his creation in the divine image and foreordination to the divine likeness. This is done by the elected man Jesus (Mt. 4:1-11). In himself and as such man will always do as Adam did in Gen. 3. And for this reason, according to the will and counsel of God, man in himself and as such incur the rejection which rests upon his temptation and corruption. He stands under the wrath which is God's only answer to the creature which abuses and dishonours its creatureliness. Exposed to the power of the divine negation, he is guilty of death. But it is this very man in himself and as such who in and with the election of the man Jesus is loved of God from all eternity and elected to fellowship with Him: he who was powerless against the insinuations of the tempter and seducer; he who in his actual temptation and seduction became the enemy of God; he who incurred rejection and became guilty of death. In this one man Jesus, God puts at the head and in the place of all other men the One who has the same power as Himself to reject Satan and to maintain and not surrender the goodness of man's divine creation and destiny; the One who according to Mt. 4 actually does this, and does it for all who are elected in Him, for man in himself and as such who does not and cannot do it of himself. The rejection which all men incurred, the wrath of God under which all men lie, the death which all men must die, God in His love for men transfers from all eternity to Him in whom He loves and elects them, and whom He elects at their head and in their place. God from all eternity ordains this obedient One in order that He might bear the suffering which the disobedient have deserved and which for the sake of God's righteousness must necessarily be borne. [...] If He did not stand at their head, if they were not elected “in Him,” without Him and outside Him they would be for ever rejected. They have nothing which they can call their own except their transgression. Yet these transgressors are the ones on whose behalf the eternal love of God for Jesus Christ is willed and extended. They knew nothing of this love. They did not even desire it. But for His part the Elect who stands at the head of the rejected elects only the rejected. The Gospel tells us unequivocally in this connexion that “the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which is lost” (Lk. 19:10), that the sick have need of Him and not the whole (Mk. 2:17), and that in heaven there is more joy over one sinner that repenteth than over ninety and nine just persons which have no need of repentance (Lk. 15:10). Who is the Elect? He is always the one who “was dead and is alive again,” who “was lost and is found” (Lk. 15:24). That the elected man Jesus had to suffer and die means no more and no less than that in becoming man God makes Himself responsible for man who became His enemy, and that He takes upon Himself all the consequences of man's action — his rejection and his death. This is what is involved in the self-giving of God. This is the radicalness of His grace. [...] If it is true that this man is the Elect of God, if it is true that the free grace which is the basis of all election is the reality of the divine and human steadfastness determined and actualised in this man, the reality of the resurrection and the prayer of Jesus, then in respect of those who are elected “in Him” it follows that their election consists concretely in their faith in Him. The mystery of the elected man Jesus is the divine and human steadfastness which is the end of all God's ways and works and therefore the object and content of the divine predestination. And the fact that it is actualised in Him and on their behalf is the fact to which those who are elected “in Him” must cling, the fact in which their confidence must repose the fact from which their joy and consolation must be derived. And this fact is one which is ever new, and one which is their strength and wisdom in all circumstances. Being elected “in Him,” they are elected only to believe in Him, i.e., to love in Him the Son of God who died and rose again for them, to laud in Him the priest and
victim of their reconciliation with God, to recognise in Him the justification of God (which is also their own justification), to honour in Him their Leader and Representative, their Lord and Head, and the kingdom of God which is a kingdom above all other kingdoms. It is as they love Him and laud Him and recognise Him and honour Him in this way that they can have their own life, their rejection being put behind them and beneath them, rejected with His rejection. To believe in Jesus means to have His resurrection and prayer both in the mind and in the heart. And this means to be elected. For it is the man that does this who “in Him” is the object of the divine election of grace.

Endnotes

1. [“Absolute decree,” see text introducing this piece.]
2. [God’s operation ad extra, “directed outwards,” refers to the divine activity towards creation, rather than within the Trinity.]