

Testamentum Imperium
An International Theological Journal

www.PreciousHeart.net/ti

Volume 2 – 2009

**Divine Sovereignty in Light of Christ's Lordship:
Karl Barth on the *Heidelberg Catechism***

Dr. J. Scott Jackson¹

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Introduction

Is divine sovereignty *absolute* or is it *conditioned* by human freedom? This enigmatic question, which has vexed theologians and spurred controversy for centuries, implies a strict dichotomy that seems to entail a clear decision for the theologian: Either God's sovereign power is limitless and God exercises complete control over finite creatures, or else the presence of a genuine human freedom mitigates God's absolute lordship (whether this is through some inherent metaphysical constraint upon divine sovereignty or because of God's free choice to limit the scope or exercise of divine power).

As is the case with all doctrinal topics, when the theologian wrestles with the foregoing question, it is crucial to begin at the beginning, with the proper foundations and correct starting point: The issue of divine sovereignty must be related to the central affirmations of Christian faith. The theology of Karl Barth proves particularly instructive in exploring the question whether divine sovereignty is "absolute" or "conditioned." Indeed, the 20th century Swiss

¹ Scott Jackson is an independent scholar who also does work in campus and young adult ministry. He is the author of "Jesus Christ as Humble Lord: Karl Barth and N.T. Wright on the 'Christ Hymn' in Philippians," *Princeton Theological Review* (Spring 2008). Dr. Jackson can be reached at 69 South Pleasant St., Apt. 8, Amherst, MA 01002 USA, or at jsjackson15@hotmail.com.

Reformed theologian is perhaps most famous for launching a revolutionary movement to recover the theme of God's transcendence and majesty in contrast to prevalent 19th century liberal Protestant models that sought to derive theological claims from human religious experience.² Nonetheless, though Barth drew upon the riches of the Reformed theological heritage, he was troubled by some implications embedded in traditional notions of divine sovereignty as absolute, particularly in John Calvin and Protestant orthodox thinkers. The theme of divine sovereignty is woven throughout Barth's *Church Dogmatics* as a whole, from the account of revelation in the first volumes to the bold interpretation of reconciliation at the end of the unfinished work. A particularly rich, full and mature account of the doctrine of divine sovereignty, constantly in dialogue with historic theological sources, is found within Barth's account of providence in Vol. III/3.³

Steeped in the history of Christian thought yet seeking a fresh articulation of church theology in his own day, Barth was a respectful and close reader of classic Protestant confessional documents and theological treatises; yet, he found most of these sources lacking when it came to the central question of the scope and character of divine sovereignty. One exception stands out, however: He looked, in particular, to the 16th century *Heidelberg Catechism* as a model for a novel approach to the doctrine of God's lordship and providence. Barth adverts to the *Catechism* in several excurses that occur at points in his critique and reconstruction of the doctrine of providence. This material complements lectures Barth delivered specifically on the *Catechism*.⁴ Barth's interpretation of this historic confessional

² For a brief and self-critical account of modern theology and the dialectical theology movement, in Barth's own words, see Karl Barth, "Evangelical Theology in the 19th Century" in *The Humanity of God*, trans. Thomas Wieser and John Newton Thomas (John Knox, 1960), pp. 11-33. For an excellent general account of Barth and his significance, see John Webster, *Karl Barth*, series *Outstanding Christian Thinkers* (NY: Continuum, 2000), chapter 1. Barth's *magnum opus*, translated from the German, is the *Church Dogmatics*, 13 vols., eds. G.W. Bromily and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-1975).

³ See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. III/3: *The Doctrine of Creation*, Part 3, trans. G.W. Bromily and R.J. Ehrlich (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960) (hereafter, *CD III/3*).

⁴ At the beginning of his academic career, Barth gave a series of lectures on the *Heidelberg Catechism* at the University of Göttingen in the winter of 1921-22. In this first look at the catechism, Barth found much to affirm in the overall perspective of this document, but he disapproved of the way Question 1 begins with the believer's "sole comfort." See Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), p. 128. His assessment of the catechism was more irenic when he returned to this topic in a talk given to Swiss [Footnote continued on next page ...]

document gives important clues to how he addresses the question whether divine sovereignty is absolute or conditioned by human freedom. In what follows, I develop the following argument: According to Barth, the *Heidelberg Catechism* centers the doctrine of divine sovereignty squarely on the lordship of Jesus Christ; in so doing, this document facilitates a reconsideration of the traditional doctrine that eschews abstract notions of absolute sovereignty as naked, limitless, impersonal power. This doctrinal rubric directs theologians to ponder divine sovereignty not, primarily, with reference to independently derived philosophical-theological claims but, rather, with reference to the concrete confession of the identity and saving work of Jesus. When Barth does appropriate more abstract conceptions of absolute sovereignty, he does so with critical reservations and an attitude of freedom. This Christological starting point, in his view, should prompt theologians to interpret divine freedom in such a way that transcends the dichotomy of “absolute” vs. “conditioned” agency. In short, God’s omnipotent rule in the created world cannot be divorced from God’s fundamental character as the One who loves in freedom, a theme developed in a discussion of freedom as a crucial part of the doctrine of God.

A. Putting first things first: The lordship of Jesus Christ

In general terms, the lordship of Christ is one of the most important guiding motifs of Barth’s theology as a whole. Indeed, this concept is a linchpin of Barth’s doctrine of revelation in *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. I/1.⁵ He argues that true perception of divine lordship is strictly a matter of God’s free self-revelation in Jesus Christ; this lordship cannot be derived from any analogy from the realm of creation (e.g., natural theology).⁶ The scriptural ground for the doctrine of divine sovereignty is the apostolic confession that Jesus Christ – not Caesar – is the Lord (*Kyrios Christos*). In an excursus, Barth ties the New Testament affirmation of Christ’s sole

teachers of religion in 1938 (“Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism”) and in a lecture series at the University of Bonn in 1947 (“Christian Doctrine According to the Heidelberg Catechism”). The two latter studies are reproduced in Karl Barth, *The Heidelberg Catechism for Today*, trans. Shirley C. Guthrie Jr. (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1964) (hereafter, *HCT*).

⁵ See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. I/1: *The Doctrine of God*, Part 1, trans. G.W. Bromily (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 306-307.

lordship to the Old Testament naming of Yahweh as Lord (*Adonai*), thereby proffering an exegetical argument for Jesus' divinity.⁷ Moreover, as the second article of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed asserts, Christ is the "one Lord," and the creed connects the Son's eternal divine nature with the mysteries of His Incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension. Both from eternity, and "[i]n relation to us He is the bearer of authority and power."⁸ Thus, Barth claims, theology must look to no higher a principle of divine lordship than the personal identity and rule of Jesus, and this sovereignty is grounded in the eternal deity of the Son.

The centrality of Christ's lordship in the history of Christian confession and doctrine is difficult to dispute; nonetheless, the question remains how well theologians have worked out the implications of this faith profession. According to Barth, the theme of Christ's sovereignty has remained underdeveloped in many theological treatments, for example, of the doctrines God and creation. Still, certain exceptions to this tendency stand out; one crucial case is the 16th century *Heidelberg Catechism*. Barth's deeply appreciative engagement with this historic Reformed confession illustrates a two-fold attitude toward historic confessional statements: On the one hand, he treats the document with respect and gratitude as a resource for contemporary church teaching. On the other hand, he approaches this early modern text with freedom, and shows a willingness to revise or criticize areas of the confession.⁹ Overall, Barth finds this catechism to be a trustworthy effort of 16th century German Reformed fathers to articulate the Christ-centered gospel for their own context, and as a modest part of an ongoing conversation in the history of Christian thought; this document does not proffer a set

⁷ Ibid., 400-406.

⁸ Ibid., 423.

⁹ The role that historic doctrinal confessions play in Barth's work is complex and exceeds the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say that Barth sees the articulation of the faith as an ongoing task of the Christian churches in each generation and that past statements of faith can be important markers for the critical dogmatic task without being prescriptive. All confessions of faith are strictly subordinate to scripture as the norm for faith. In a 1923 lecture cycle in Göttingen, Barth argues that, particularly within the Reformed heritage, confessions of faith are recognized as provisional human documents drafted to meet the needs of the churches in specific times and places. As evidence for this claim, he notes the plethora of confessions across the history of the various Reformed denominations, in contrast to the more fixed and permanent role of the *Book of Concord* within Lutheranism. See Karl Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, trans. Darrell L. and Judith J. Guder (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), especially chapter 1.

of absolutely fixed propositional truth claims.¹⁰ Barth acknowledges the historical distance between the 16th and 20th centuries, and he criticizes a narrow confessionalism that would seek to reprimarize some sort of “*Heidelberg orthodoxy*.”¹¹ Thus, for example, while he lauds the guiding Christological and soteriological framework of the document, he gently chides the authors of the confession for narrowing the scope of God’s saving concern to the sphere of the church, to the neglect, presumably, of the world as a whole.¹²

Several general characteristics of the catechism, following Barth’s exposition, bear upon the shape and grounding of a genuine notion of divine sovereignty vis-à-vis human agency. First, although the overall orientation of the document is soteriological and practical, it presupposes and articulates a coherent account of God’s being, character and agency. Barth writes:

The catechism contains a particular concept of *God*. It speaks of God as one different from all creatures; he stands free and superior over against man. This majesty of God, and the corresponding reverence of man before him, is the first characteristic of this theology.¹³

Such theological grounding guards the catechism against the danger of the anthropocentric focus that afflicts much modern theology. Second, according to Barth, the catechism seeks to establish Jesus Christ as the concrete norm of this theology, and thus serves as a bulwark against dangerous abstractions in this doctrine of God. “In this text God is no *Deus nudus, absolutus, absconditus* [“naked,” absolute, hidden God].”¹⁴ Third, this emphasis upon God’s sovereignty, as manifest in Jesus Christ, in no way contradicts a genuine freedom of the human subject. (This claim is particularly

¹⁰ The *Catechism* was authored in 1563 primarily by Caspar Olevianus and Zacharias Ursinus as part of an overall effort to give the Reformed churches in the Palatinate a standard for church order and teaching. Among early evangelical confessions, this text shows a distinctively ecumenical character, as the authors drew upon both early Reformed and Lutheran thinkers and tended not to emphasize contentious doctrines that divided Protestants. The *Catechism* has exercised the most influence historically among German, Dutch, Swiss and Hungarian Reformed Churches. For Barth’s brief overview, see *HCT*, 20-25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹² *Ibid.*, 26-27.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

important in light of the common charge – quite unfair, in my view – that Reformed theology asserts a stifling fatalism or determinism.)

[F]aith means precisely man's *freedom to action*. *Charis* (grace) is the foundation of man's *eucharistia* (thankfulness) and summons it as a call summons an echo. According to the *Heidelberg Catechism*, there is no conflict between the majesty of God and the hard work of man.¹⁵

The notion of freedom here is particularly addressed within the context of human salvation, but it is congruent with the more general treatment of the *concursum* of divine and human agency that Barth explores in *CD III/3*, par. 49.2. For Barth, divine action always precedes human action and is never conditioned by the creature's behavior. At the end of the essay, I discuss a significant way that Barth qualifies this claim in relationship to the Incarnation. God does not thwart human agency or drive it mechanistically; rather, God directs human action in a manner that elicits free obedience.¹⁶ God, in effect, coordinates the historical course of free human actions such that it harmonizes with the overarching institution and completion of the covenant of grace in Jesus Christ.

Among these general considerations, the Christological norm in this confession of faith is paramount. In Barth's view, the real strength and distinctiveness of the *Heidelberg Catechism* is that it seeks to establish the person and saving work of Jesus Christ as the criterion for church doctrine and proclamation as a whole; in true theology, the concrete shape of the gospel trumps any free-floating speculation that seeks to render truth in abstract, general concepts. In

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁶ In my view, recent Barth scholars have decisively established that the Swiss theologian offers a rich, full and positive affirmation of finite human freedom as God's good gift in creation and reconciliation. John Webster has masterfully shown that ethics is a driving preoccupation of the *Dogmatics*, and this commitment presupposes free moral agents. See John Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). For Barth, a robust affirmation of divine freedom grounds a genuine account of evangelical ethics. See *The Humanity of God*, op. cit., 69-96. In terms of the relationship of divine sovereignty to human freedom, Barth holds what Kathryn Tanner has called a "non-contrastive" account of divine and human agency: Because of the clear ontological distinction between the Creator and creatures, divine sovereignty and human agency cannot be considered on the same plane of causality. For a concise defense of a non-contrastive view of divine and human agency, see Kathryn Tanner, "God Beyond Kinds and Creation," in *Essentials of Christian Theology*, ed. William C. Placher (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003), pp. 119-130. See also Tanner's, "Creation and Providence" in John Webster, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 122-125. See also George Hunsinger's chapter, "Double Agency as a Test Case," in *How to Read Karl Barth* (NY: Oxford, 1991), 185-224.

terms of our specific topic, the first question lays out the proper basis for the doctrine of divine sovereignty. The catechist asks “What is your only comfort in life and death?” and the pupil answers: “That I belong – body and soul, in life and in death – not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil.”¹⁷ The following clause is crucial: Christ “protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head.”¹⁸ No aspect of human destiny stands outside God’s purposes accomplished in Jesus. For the believer, the certainty of the salvation objectively accomplished in Christ is sealed subjectively through the consolation of the Holy Spirit, over against everything in this life that would afflict the human heart and cause anxiety.

B. The content of the doctrine of providence: God the Father of our Lord

Questions 26-28 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* deal explicitly with the doctrines of creation and providence and their benefits for the believer.¹⁹ Consequently, Barth references these passages at key points in his own account of providence in *CD III/3*. The contribution of these sections to Christian teaching, as Barth sees it, is to tether the account of God’s works within creation to the basic confession of Christ’s lordship – to an extent rarely achieved in the history of Reformed doctrine. Barth summarizes the meaning of these three questions in this way:

Everything that is, is created, upheld and ruled by the one true God. Therefore the world is the theater and instrument of his righteous action, a mirror and echo of his living Word. And man, with whom God in Jesus Christ has bound himself, may count on the fact that, whether he sees it or not, already now and here he is not in foreign territory, but in the house of his eternal Father.²⁰

Two key claims ensue from this exposition of the catechism: Creaturely existence as whole belongs completely to the God of Jesus; moreover, in light of our being in Christ, we can begin to see

¹⁷ See *HCT*, 29-30.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 57-63.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

all world occurrence as ultimately subject to God's providential aims for our benefit (see Rom. 8:28).

In effect, the catechism recognizes that the second article of the Apostle's Creed, which centers on the person and work of Christ, determines the form and content of doctrine as a whole, impacting how we understand the first-article emphasis on God as Creator.

In the event of our redemption through righteousness in Jesus Christ, and there in God's becoming known to us in Christ as he who honors his own right and our right, also this is revealed: it is the *Ground of all being*, the Creator with unlimited power, who so acts. The Ground of all being, the Creator of all things, is none other than the holy and merciful God who meets us in Jesus Christ and in him brings his righteousness to victory.²¹

Thus, Barth does find in the catechism an affirmation of God's "unlimited" sovereign power. All creaturely being is utterly dependent upon God, and this Creator-creature relationship is in no way reciprocal. Nonetheless, this affirmation of God's sovereign power is never to be uncoupled from the basic confession of the divine character, just *who* this all-powerful God is as revealed in Christ. This second-article focus of the catechism forestalls an independent speculative interest in God's creative and providential agency. Thus, if we apply Barth's view of the catechism to our specific question, the theologian should not ask, first of all, whether God's sovereignty is absolute but just *who* is this sovereign and omnipotent God.

Question 26 deals with the fatherhood of God and with the doctrine of creation as a whole. When asked to account for this belief in God, the pupil replies "that the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ... is for the sake of Christ his Son my God and my Father."²² This rubric interweaves a central soteriological claim of the Reformers – that the Father is gracious to human beings for Christ's sake – with the affirmation of the Father's creative agency and general governance of the world. Question 27 elaborates this perspective in relation to the *providentia dei*, and Question 28 lays out the assurance and consolation amid adversity that believers receive from knowing God in this way.

²¹ Ibid., 58.

²² Ibid., 59.

The claims found in the response to Question 27 bear closer attention, for it is at this point, especially, that the critique and rearticulation of a Reformed doctrine of sovereignty advocated by Barth comes to the fore. The catechism defines divine providence as follows:

The almighty and ever-present power of God whereby he still upholds, as it were by his own hand, heaven and earth together with all creatures, and rules in such a way that leaves and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and unfruitful years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, and everything else come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand.²³

As Barth exposts this passage, God foresees and oversees the destiny of all creatures. Providence means divine beneficence freely bestowed on the finite created order. From the revelation of God as the Redeemer, it is clear that all God's intentions for creation are good and cannot be disrupted ultimately by the existence of evil. Creation as a whole serves as a theater for the manifestation of God's glory and points to the ultimate fulfillment of created being in the kingdom of God. According to Barth, creation on the whole serves as the external basis for the history of the covenant of grace; the finite created order exists to create a space for the divine-human partnership.²⁴ "The providence of God is nothing other than God's free grace, and God's free grace in Christ is providence."²⁵ Thus, the sovereignty revealed in God's creation and governance of the world cannot be divorced from the lordship of the Savior; nature exists to serve grace. By contrast, the problem for much traditional Reformed doctrine, in Barth's view, stems not from bold claims for divine sovereignty *per se*, but from the indeterminate and heavy-handed character such ideas can take on when they become detached from the central affirmation of God's grace in Christ.

The foregoing themes have integrated profoundly Barth's bold attempt to reconstruct the doctrine of providence in *CD* III/3. In paragraph 48, Barth seeks to lay the foundations for a genuine doctrine of providence on the basis of the specific content of the faith,

²³ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁴ See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. III/1: *The Doctrine of Creation*, Part 1, trans. J.W. Edwards, O. Bussey, H. Knight (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), par. 41.2, where this notion of creation as the external basis of the covenant is developed.

²⁵ See *HCT*, 62.

God's revelation in Jesus Christ; paragraph 49 elaborates the doctrine materially in terms of the divine preservation, accompanying and ruling of the creature before moving on to the role of God's lordship in the life of faith. Barth draws upon the catechism in sketching the general definition of providence²⁶; in support of his decision to link providence formally with the doctrine of creation rather than with the doctrine of God, as some thinkers have done, and to underline the orientation of the doctrine toward the covenant of grace²⁷; in relation to the Christian's attitude of trust toward God²⁸; in support of the focus on God as the father of Christ²⁹; in elaborating the doctrine of the divine-human *concursum* (double agency) in a way that is not rigid or static (in distinction from the Aristotelian-Scholastic schema of first and second causes)³⁰; and finally, in relation to God's preservation of the church.³¹ (Barth's appropriation of this document within his account of evil as nothingness in paragraphs 50-51 does not concern us here.)

In the opening pages of his account of providence in *CD III/3*, Barth cites questions 26-28 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* in support of what is, I would argue, one of the distinctive moves in Barth's reconstruction of the doctrine: The catechism roots the doctrines of creation and providence in the covenant of grace completed in the person and work of Christ.³² With its strict attention to the concrete claims of Christian faith, in Barth's view, the catechism offers a sanative corrective of the tendency to frame providence within an abstract "worldview" derived from other sources independent of that confession. He argues that this tendency to abstraction became increasingly common in 17th and 18th century thought, as the pressing concerns of the Reformers themselves faded and subsequent

²⁶ See *CD III/3*, 4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 17-18, 63.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 115.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 204-205.

³² *Ibid.*, 14-15. I am not claiming that Barth was primarily dependent upon the catechism for this insight or that he derived his doctrine as a whole from this one confession of faith. The genetic question of how Barth's study of historic confessional documents shaped his theology is fascinating but goes far beyond the limited scope of this essay. Much more modestly, I am trying to demonstrate the affinity, which Barth acknowledges himself, between this particular confession and his interpretation of divine sovereignty within the doctrine of providence.

generations of Protestant thinkers sought to consolidate doctrine and fend off the perceived threat of Enlightenment rationalism.³³ According to Barth, Protestant orthodoxy lost some of the inner context of the doctrine (God’s saving work in Christ) as it sought to become more rigorous and systematic, while pietism reacted by turning inward to the sphere of the individual; at the same time, rationalist critics of traditional Christianity sought to reorient religious claims around an autonomous human subject. Some of the more dubious aspects of pietism and rationalism were united in the “naturalistic and historicist positivism” of Albrecht Ritschl, who buried the doctrine of God’s fatherly care within a dialectic pitting humanity against the natural world.³⁴ These historical developments are complex, as are Barth’s views on them, but the important point for the present discussion is how the catechism offers a clear and cogent alternative. The straightforward simplicity of the confession is disarming, but its effect is profound in turning the theologian away from the speculative construct of a “Christian worldview” and back to the norm of God’s revelation in scripture.

What then is the character of the Christian affirmation of providence, as it impacts the question of divine sovereignty? According to Barth, the sovereign power that rules creation is not just any sovereignty but that of the “fatherly lordship of God” – that is, of the Father of Jesus Christ.³⁵ “The Christian belief does not gaze into the void, into obscurity, into a far distance, height or depth, when it knows and confesses God as the Lord of the history of created being.”³⁶ In other words, when seeking to articulate the scope and extent of divine sovereignty, the theologian must first clarify God’s basic character and identity. In Barth’s view, the doctrine of God does not begin properly with general philosophical or religious principles but, rather, originates with God’s self-revelation. Christian profession of faith in God is not a specific subset of a general “theism” that believers hold in common non-Christian philosophies and religious systems.³⁷ Theology should not elaborate its distinctive

³³ Ibid., 17-18.

³⁴ Ibid., 18.

³⁵ Ibid., 28.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 27-28.

claims in “reference to a supreme being which is supposed to have certain qualities”³⁸; rather, theology begins with the identity of the Incarnate one who was fully divine, the second person of the Trinity and Word of God made flesh, who was crucified and raised for our salvation. If the foregoing claim is true, it follows that a proper interpretation of sovereignty cannot be grounded upon a non-critical acceptance of notions of power derived from sources outside the fundamental Christian confession. As I will now show, in light of specific commitments to who God is on the basis of God’s revelation in Christ, Barth raises some critical reservations about attempts to describe divine sovereignty as “absolute.”

C. Divine Sovereignty: Freedom beyond absolutes

Throughout the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth tends to confine his critiques and expositions of specific theologians, movements, confessional documents and theological treatises to excurses in fine print. These expositions are not mere marginal notes but often contain the meat of the theological decisions that structure the arguments in the main body of the text. In *CD III/3* alone, Barth cites the *Heidelberg Catechism* a total of eleven times (including the key passages I cited above), and these references all support the development of Barth’s argument.

In relation to our topic, the catechism serves as one major peg in a broader argument that seeks to guard the doctrine of sovereignty from misleading, and ultimately non-Christian, notions of absolute power. The irenic and rather modest statement of classic Reformed faith becomes grist for Barth’s challenging and sometimes severe critique of traditional modes in theological discourse. It might seem that his account of sovereignty is on the way to abandoning abstract notions like absoluteness altogether, in favor for the narrative theological framework found in the catechism, but that would be to oversimplify the matter. I am not suggesting that Barth rejects every implication of the traditional claim that divine sovereignty is “absolute”; indeed, he is at pains to preserve the divine prerogative in theology by any means necessary, and such a concept as absoluteness can be serviceable to that end. I merely am arguing that, in light of

³⁸ Ibid., 29.

Barth's worries, contemporary theologians would do well to critically question typical notions of absoluteness when elaborating a positive doctrine of divine power. It might be the case that such notions as absolute sovereignty and omnipotence need to be thoroughly reconstructed, as old theological language is set in a new key.

In a brief yet crucial excursus, Barth advances the startling claim that the major representatives of classic Protestant orthodoxy (that is, the Reformers and the post-Reformation confessionalists and dogmaticians who attempted to systematize accounts of Christian truth) imported “non-Christian” conceptions of God into the heart of the theological enterprise, sometimes with very detrimental effects.³⁹ Nor does Barth limit such a critique to the putative “heretics” and “liberals” of modern theology. Rather, he writes, even “the older Protestant theology was guilty of an almost total failure even to ask concerning the Christian meaning and character of the doctrine of providence, let alone to assert it.”⁴⁰ Barth includes Calvin's doctrine of providence within this indictment. Without getting into the details of the texts and thinkers involved (nor without assessing the historical merit of Barth's interpretation), I would summarize the critique as follows: The traditional Lutheran and Reformed orthodox writers defined and explicated divine sovereignty over creation without beginning at the point where Christian faith itself begins – God's work of saving love completed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The claim is not, of course, that Protestant orthodoxy denied the importance of Christology and soteriology for the life of believers and the church. Rather, what they failed to do is to apply this central claim methodologically to Christian doctrine as a whole. They did not grasp the truth (so central for Barth) that the person and work of Christ is the key to all of God's ways and works from election, through creation to eschatological consummation. Lacking this Christological norm, the early Protestant dogmaticians developed the doctrine of sovereignty in ways that often created an unnecessary tension with the basic message of salvation. These thinkers present divine lordship “as the act of a superior and absolutely omniscient, omnipotent and omni-operative being whose nature and work do of

³⁹ See *CD III/3*, 30-33.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

course display such moral qualities as wisdom, righteousness and goodness, etc. But this is all.”⁴¹ The notion of an absolutely powerful divine sovereign is easily subject to this sort of misleading abstraction, according to Barth. Christians, presumably, come to trust in God’s lordship through an encounter with the living Christ as Mediator, not through the kind of open-ended meditation on God’s naked sovereignty that could so terrify a Luther or a Calvin. Barth argues that theology should apply this insight from the order of knowing to the order of being, to the way attributes are predicated of God; *how* we come to know God is inextricably linked to what we know *about* God. “It does not seem to have occurred to whole generations of Protestant theologians to ask what this lordship has to do with Jesus Christ.”⁴² As Barth seems to imply, this failure often has had deleterious consequences to the clarity with which the church proclaims the gospel and, especially, with regard to the pastoral potential of its basic message.

The doctrine of divine lordship, so construed, is open to predications of God that are decidedly non-Christian, perhaps even anti-Christian. If one begins with the notion of an absolute sovereignty in relation to the doctrine of God or creation, and then only subsequently introduces the balm of Christ’s lordship in the doctrines of election and redemption, it is quite possible that the later conception will overpower the former. To be sure, I do not think Barth is denying the Reformers and their progeny are unaware of this potential dilemma; rather, I think he is arguing – quite validly – that certain inherited theological terms and concepts (Protestants, after all, did not invent the doctrine of divine sovereignty) ill served a fundamentally liberating gospel message. Barth’s worry is that, as a result of the abstraction of sovereignty from the Christological basis of doctrine, God’s exercise of power can come to be seen as an end unto itself, with the result that absolute power as such is (or at least can be) worshipped. Such conceptions may imply “the absolute exercise of the absolute will of an absolute power in an absolutely subjected sphere of power.”⁴³ The divine glory consists, in such a

⁴¹ Ibid., 31.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

distorted view, in God's absolute power over the creature in and of itself, quite apart from what God's ends for humanity are as they are concretely revealed in Christ. *What* divine power is – utter control of everything that exists or could exist – is isolated from a genuine apprehension of just *who* this sovereign God is. In the wrong hands, such a conception of God as the absolute sovereign could become a worship of an infinite and indeterminate source of power. Certainly, Barth is not claiming such malign intent among these theologians, whom he draws upon repeatedly elsewhere in more positive ways, but he sees the temptation to hold up a false conception of God as a constant temptation in doctrine and the life of the church.

The foregoing discussion of divine sovereignty in light of providence sheds some light on a more abstruse treatment of these issues in Barth's earlier account of the doctrine of God.⁴⁴

In particular, Barth's critique in the excursus I discussed above reiterates a similar line of argument in his earlier account of "God as the One who Loves in Freedom" in *Church Dogmatics* Vol. II/1.⁴⁵ In the passage on God's being, Barth does affirm ways in which absoluteness can be predicated of God, but the overall effect of his argument is to relativize the notion very thoroughly. At a general level, the discussion of divine sovereignty, for Barth, begins with the conception of God's identity; for, within the mystery of divine simplicity, God's being and act are one.⁴⁶ God's being-in-act is that of the One who unites perfect love and perfect freedom, both immanently within the Trinity and economically within the realm of revelation, creation and salvation. From the depths of the divine life, God just is love, but the converse statement does not hold: Love is not God – that is, the personhood of the divine Subject is never subordinated to an abstract quality of being or action. More specifically, God's life and act consist in self-bestowing and thus self-involving love.⁴⁷ The crucial point here is that, according to Barth, the doctrine of God's freedom is never to be constructed in isolation

⁴⁴ I will not attempt to weigh in here on the fascinating but complex question of how much genetic change and development occurs in Barth's thinking over the course of the dogmatics.

⁴⁵ See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. II/2: *The Doctrine of God*, Part 1, trans. T.H.L. Parker, W.B. Johnston, Harold Knight, and J.L.M. Haire (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), par. 28.3.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 283-285.

from the *character* of God as the one who loves both inwardly, within the eternal Triune life, and outwardly, in the acts of creation and providence and in the miracle of grace that saves and restores sinners to right relationship with their Creator. To exercise a freedom that does not conform to this love would violate the divine character and sever the unity of God's identity and actions. The God Christians profess to know in Christ is no cosmic tyrant.

Furthermore, Barth defines God's freedom as the depth dimension of the divine living and loving; this mode of freedom belongs to God alone.⁴⁸ Through this conception of divine freedom, Barth attempts to retrieve and affirm what is true and salutary in traditional accounts of the aseity of God, including, in a qualified sense, notions of the divine being as absolute. As the One who lives *in se* (in and from Godself), God is the Lord whose being-in-act is self-moved and self-grounded. God does not need anything nor anybody to be the unique One God is. Likewise, God's love is sovereign, self-moved and free from any external conditioning or inner necessity.⁴⁹ The essence of divine lordship resides in the depths of God's freedom, which, indeed, is absolute in contrast to all that is relative, but, more specifically, in the sense that it is the freedom of the unique One who lives and loves in infinite perfection. God's perfect freedom is "absolutely God's own, in no sense dictated to Him from outside and conditioned by no higher necessity than that of His own choosing and deciding and willing and doing."⁵⁰ God's freedom, though it is not conditioned from without, is much "more than the absence of limits, restrictions, or conditions."⁵¹ To be sure, the biblical witness attests to this negative dimension of divine freedom, for God transcends all that exists contingently. Still, God's sovereign freedom, even at its infinite depths, can never be identified with pure, formless potentiality. Divine sovereignty has a definite content, which just is the being of God as the One who loves in perfect freedom. To say God's freedom is infinite is to claim that his love is boundless. Thus, Barth understands divine aseity primarily in

⁴⁸ Ibid., 298.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 300.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 301.

⁵¹ Ibid.

positive terms. Precisely as the absolute sovereign, God is not the unmoved mover but is self-moved. “In this positive freedom of His, God is also unlimited, unrestricted and unconditioned from without.”⁵²

Is the problem with notions of absolute sovereignty merely semantic, then? It seems that Barth (in this section, at least) does affirm the absoluteness of God, as long as this conception is laid out clearly in concert with other Christian claims (“God is love”, etc.). Does the claim that God’s perfect freedom transcends some narrower conception of “absolute” being posit a distinction without a difference? On the contrary, I think something more is at stake for Barth here (and for us too, as we seek to articulate an authentic account of God for our own day). This discussion of divine aseity circles around to one of the most profound commitments in Barth’s thought as a whole: At issue is the way the logic of the Incarnation assumes, subverts and transforms traditional theological language. Christology impinges upon virtually every major topic covered in the *Dogmatics* – revelation, the Trinity, election, protology, hamartiology, soteriology and ecclesiology – and I cannot possibly do this theme justice here.⁵³ Suffice it say that Barth’s understanding of the Incarnation gives a double character, a “both-and” aspect, to the problematic of the absolute vs. the conditioned. The sovereign God, though unconditioned from without, is free to take on human flesh and thereby freely submit to the sphere of contingent existence, even to the point of death on the cross; moreover, in the person of the Son, God accomplishes this self-emptying (*kenosis*) without sacrificing the prerogatives of deity. This freedom sets the true God apart from all false deities. Barth writes:

According to the biblical testimony, God has the prerogative to be free without being limited by his freedom from external conditioning, free also with regard to His freedom, free not to surrender Himself to it, but to use it to give Himself to this communion and to practice this faithfulness in it, in this way being really free, free in Himself. God must not only be unconditioned but, in the

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ The crucial importance of the Incarnation for Barth’s doctrine of God is the subject of my doctoral dissertation. See J. Scott Jackson, *Jesus Christ as the God who Loves in Freedom*, doctoral dissertation, the University of Chicago (2006). In chapter 5, in particular, I discuss how Barth, in the first part of his doctrine of reconciliation, connects the perfectly free love of God to the mystery of Christ’s Incarnation and death.

absoluteness in which He sets up this fellowship, he can and will also be conditioned.⁵⁴

Thus, it becomes clear that Barth refuses to give a univocal definition to absoluteness as a predicate of the divine being and acting; material commitments to the central profession of faith in Christ tend to govern how he appropriates – or subverts – the basic concepts of philosophical theology. If God's sovereignty is conditioned, it is only as a result of the Son's free decision to be united with frail and sinful human flesh. Even in this submission to creaturely existence, though, Christ remains the eternal Son who rules the cosmos; he remains the sovereignly active agent even at the point of his humiliation and death. In Jesus, the absolute God embraces contingent existence. God can be both absolute and conditioned, and also in some sense neither. This reveals the depths of God's perfect freedom.

In addition to a (highly qualified) affirmation of divine being as absolute in terms of God's aseity, Barth does also affirm a second sense in which God's being is unconditioned from without: God freely exercises the power to be distinct from everything that is not God.⁵⁵ To put this point another way, the absolute Creator-creature distinction is not simply a given but falls within the realm of God's free choice. In positing this distinction – a chasm which only God, not the creature, can bridge – God exercises sovereign freedom to make space and time for entities that are not divine but are utterly dependent upon their Creator. According to Barth, the realm of the Creator-creature relationship is the proper sphere to consider God's freedom from external conditioning. In essence, the affirmation of God's freedom within the divine life *in se* logically precedes the explication of God's freedom from external conditioning. This Creator-creature distinction, for Barth, is a crucial presupposition for his doctrine of the Incarnation and hypostatic union of divine and human natures in Jesus Christ, which as I argued above pushes the logic of the absolute-conditioned dialectic to its extreme. Thus, even in this discussion of God as Creator vis-à-vis the realm of creaturely existence, the notion of absoluteness will have only limited heuristic application.

⁵⁴ See *CD II/1*, 303.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 308.

This discussion of God's absoluteness, though abstruse at times, has practical import for Christian doctrine. In particular, Barth seeks to employ the notion of divine freedom to forestall the danger of idolatry that is inherent in all human discourse, in religious or theological language most especially. This dynamic concept of freedom, in Barth's view, sets the living God of Jesus Christ apart from the powers and deities that are, in actuality, false projections and idealizations driven by the human lust for power. As the divine Subject is utterly unique, divine freedom is *sui generis*, and thus is not a general property shared by other natural or supernatural beings. When elucidating the mystery of God's freedom, Barth writes:

We are not trying to discover a characteristic mark of divinity which this God will have in common with other gods. We are not concerned with any idea of the divine under which we will subsume the only true God with other gods. We are well aware that, if we do this, we shall be enquiring in fact not about the idea of God, but, in common with the worshipers of these other gods, about the idea of man, about the sum total of his wishes and longings about the highest embodiment, in absolute form, of our own being.⁵⁶

This dense quotation reveals Barth's worries about misleading notions of divine being as absolute, if such conceptions mean that all-too-human experiences and fantasies of power are projected, *a la* Feuerbach, upon the canvass of the infinite.⁵⁷ Barth clearly is concerned that a notion of divine freedom that absolutizes false notions of limitless possibility will lead to idolatry. Not even Christian interpretations of God's sovereignty as absolute are free from this danger. To worship the deity on the basis of human notions of power, extended into infinity, is to worship what we in our fallen prideful state wish we could be: We wish we could have our way without the disruptive counterclaims of the other, whether that other one is God or our fellow creatures.

This account of divine freedom coheres with what I have discussed in Barth's doctrine of providence. It is precisely at this

⁵⁶ Ibid., 299.

⁵⁷ Barth was fascinated with and profoundly troubled by the theological work of the 19th century philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, who argued that all theology consists in a projection of ideal humanity upon the false conception of a transcendent deity. Barth worried that the modern liberal Protestant theology, with its anthropocentric emphasis, vindicated Feuerbach's central claim. See Karl Barth, *Protestant Thought from Rousseau to Ritschl*, trans. Brian Cousins (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1959), chapter 9.

point that a concrete statement of faith such as the *Heidelberg Catechism* can help theology stay grounded in its basic message and guard against the dangers of abstract speculation that occludes the good news of God's saving work in Christ. Among Reformed confessional and dogmatic writings, according to Barth, the account of providence in the *Heidelberg Catechism* stands out as an exception to the tendency to interpret the sovereignty of God too abstractly.⁵⁸ As I discussed above, Questions 26-28 emphasize the decisive notion of God's fatherly character and frame this concept in Christological terms. To be sure, God is sovereign, without equal, whose purposes are in no way thwarted by creaturely agency; the only limit to this "absolute" God is the breadth of the divine loving-kindness and mercy. To conceive of God's power as "absolute" in the sense of pure, undirected potentiality would be to do violence to God's decisive self-revelation in Christ. According to Barth, the catechism reiterates and reinforces this Christological orientation in Question 50 as well, which affirms the ascended Christ's magisterial rule of creation from his exalted post at the Father's right hand. Barth states the matter eloquently in his lectures on the catechism. The first statement is something any Christian could affirm on the basis of the Apostles Creed: "He who is true God and true man, he who has reestablished both the right of God and the right of man, he who is the humiliated and exalted one, he who is the Head of the church – he sits at the right hand of God."⁵⁹ The immediately following comment reveals a distinctively Barthian position: "He [Christ] who was and is and shall be is the subject of *all* divine action."⁶⁰ The lordship of Christ over the church "corresponds" to the sovereignty of the true and only God, as this is laid out in Questions 27-28. "[T]he reigning will of God in Jesus Christ (thus in the work of his righteousness which is grace, and in the work of the life which is recognizable to the Christian church) is at the same time the secret, the meaning, and the power of the divine ruling and governing in creation in general."⁶¹

⁵⁸ See *CD* III/3, 30-31.

⁵⁹ See *HCT*, 79.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

The only limitation to the power of this God is God's own very character as the font of love and freedom – but this wellspring is indeed boundless. Barth, perhaps more than most theologians, seeks to take with radical seriousness the claim that God intends for us to know the height, breadth and depth of God's character and sovereign will by focusing utterly on Jesus, even when the consequences are counterintuitive. Barth finds support for this confidence in the *Heidelberg Catechism*, which seems systematically to exclude any speculation that would distract the believer from Christ and his saving work. In the incarnation, death and resurrection of the Son, the Father has bestowed *all* authority on Christ as exalted Lord. With this positive affirmation, the negative corollary follows: “The ‘hand’ which governs all things (qq. 27-28) is not some kind of dark power which manages and rules us however it likes; it is the hand of him who is revealed to us in Jesus Christ.”⁶² The Father's lordship over the world and the Son's headship of the church are two modalities of one divine sovereignty, united in the depths of their Triune communion.⁶³ If I may put the matter thus, this God is absolutely self-existent in Godself and absolutely active in all creation in a freedom that transcends any mere “absolutes” that the human mind can fathom.

Conclusion.

I began with the question: Is the sovereignty of God absolute or conditioned by human freedom? At first blush, this issue seemed difficult but relatively straightforward. My investigation of Karl Barth's interpretation of God's sovereign will in providence, with particular reference to the *Heidelberg Catechism*, has shown some potential difficulties with this dichotomy and the terms of it. In particular, using Barth, I have raised questions about the utility and appropriateness of describing divine sovereignty as absolute, and I have suggested that Christ-centered account of God's freedom can offer a more comprehensive way to affirm the priority of God's agency as rooted in the depths of the character of the One who just is self-giving love. Barth's account of sovereignty, as I've sketched it,

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 80. For Barth's interpretation of the divine *perichoresis* in being and act among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, see *CD I/1*, par. 9.

can be instructive and challenging to contemporary theologians pondering these issues. First, he encourages us to reconsider and perhaps re-envision inherited theological language and concepts. Such an exploration can only enrich our current theological work that seeks to articulate eternal truths in fresh and often startling ways. Second, through careful attention to this particular catechism, Barth shows how Reformed theology, in particular, is a living conversation upon which we can draw to enliven contemporary work. The tradition itself may offer resources for its self-critique and reformulation. Finally, as Barth's work as a whole does so well, this particular discussion urges each of us to be diligent in seeking and articulating the essence of the gospel in all areas of our theological research. "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself" (2 Cor. 5:19, KJV). There is no higher statement of God's sovereign glory than that.