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## Barth and the Reformed Doctrine of Providence

The doctrine of providence is the church teaching that God has not only created the world but also keeps taking care of it as its Lord. It is an ancient biblical teaching that has stayed close to the center of Christian faith. A brief survey of major theologians such as Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin would show how essential this doctrine has been in the history of Christian theology. We are living in a world, however, where it has become increasingly difficult to presuppose divine providence. It no longer stands at the center of much contemporary theological debate. As two theologians put it, “An aura of neglect hovers over the theological notion of providence.”<sup>1</sup>

1. Francesca Aran Murphy and Philip Gordon Ziegler, eds., *Providence of God: Deus habet consilium* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 1. Yet Maurice Wiles declares that providence “can never be very far away from the centre of religious concern” in Maurice Wiles, ed., *Providence* (London: SPCK, 1969), 9.

## Decline of the Doctrine of Providence

Why has the doctrine of providence declined in modernity? The explanation has a good deal to do with the rise of modern secularism as a result of developments in the natural sciences and philosophy. Especially devastating were the works of the “three masters of modern thought”<sup>2</sup>—Darwin, Marx, and Freud. Darwin’s theory of natural selection was not easily compatible with the previously held concept of divine design. His words were at times explicit: “There seems to be no more design in the variability of organic beings and in the action of natural selection than in the course which the wind blows.”<sup>3</sup> Following Feuerbach and Nietzsche in considering religion as a mere projection of wishful thinking, Marx and Freud turned the tide of modern thought decidedly against the belief in God’s providential care. Hence Freud could say, “We shall tell ourselves that it would be very nice if there were a God who created the world and was a benevolent Providence, and if there were a moral order in the universe and an after-life; but it is a very striking fact that all this is exactly as we are bound to wish it to be.”<sup>4</sup>

The cumulative effects of these and other modern thinkers undermined the traditional understanding of God’s care for the world. Theology came to be thought of as another form of anthropology, and humankind “as a prisoner of a closed system in which human conflicts are explained without recourse to God.”<sup>5</sup> In addition to these trends in modern thought, the modern world also witnessed the overwhelming power of evil through a series of wars and terrors, even up to the present day. It has, therefore, become

2. See the discussion of Darwin, Marx, and Freud in Horton Davies, *The Vigilant God: Providence in the Thought of Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Barth* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 4–5.

3. Charles Darwin, *Autobiography* (New York: Harcourt, 1959), 87.

4. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, ed. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1989), 42.

5. Davies, *Vigilant God*, 5.

more and more difficult to posit a benevolent and loving God behind it all.

One of the great achievements of Karl Barth was to recover the doctrine of providence as a robust site of theological discussion precisely in this kind of atmosphere. Barth attempts to revitalize the doctrine in the modern context, but he does not answer the challenge of modern secularism directly. His primary concern is a theological one. Rather than asking what the “masters of modern thought” have done to shake the belief in a providential God, he asks what Christian theology has done wrong to compromise its doctrine of and faith in providence. His judgment falls on the “older theology,” by which he means the Protestant theology of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He traces the seed of the problem back to the Reformers, indeed to Jean Calvin himself: “We have to take note of the astonishing fact that 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. Even in Calvin (*Instit.*, I, 16–18) we seek in vain for a single pointer in this direction.”<sup>6</sup>

According to Barth’s critique, the problem with the Reformed doctrine of providence is that it is not sufficiently “Christian” in its form and content. In his view, this is the fundamental problem of the Reformed understanding of providence starting from Calvin.<sup>7</sup>

6. Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* (Zürich: TVZ, 1938–65), III/3, 34 (hereafter cited as *KD* followed by volume, part, and page numbers); Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–69, 1975), III/3, 30 (hereafter cited as *CD* followed by volume, part, and page numbers). When citing non-English sources, I will cite from available English translations (sometimes in revised forms). I will provide my own translation when there is none available.
7. Randall Zachman emphasizes how radical Barth’s critique of the traditional Reformed doctrine of providence is. Especially against Caroline Schröder’s view that “nothing new exists under the sun” in Barth’s doctrine of providence, Zachman’s point is apt. On the other hand, Barth is neither a mere critic nor innovator. Despite his sharp criticism, he does not discard the Reformed tradition. He revises and rehabilitates it in his own way. We will see the elements of continuity as well as discontinuity in the rest of this book. See Randall C. Zachman, “Response to ‘I See Something You Don’t See,’” in *For the Sake of the World: Karl Barth and the Future*

Furthermore, Barth argues that Reformed theology reaped the results in modern times in the form of the decline of the doctrine of providence. Barth tries to demonstrate this through his sweeping reading of the history of the doctrine. According to him, the Reformers such as Calvin and Zwingli correctly emphasized the sovereignty of God the Creator over the creature. They had the right insight but failed to ground it properly; that is, they abstracted from the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ when talking about God the Creator and his relationship with the creature. Their Reformed successors carried their logic further with increasingly scholastic sophistication. As a result, Barth argues, the Reformed understanding of providence failed to exclude the possibility of fatalism akin to Stoicism or Islam.<sup>8</sup>

Modernity in the post-Reformation era thus brought with it “the revolt against a capricious sovereign rule, and the despair or frivolity which is the inevitable consequence of this revolt.” Barth argues that this revolt took the form of the Counter-Reformation, which retreated to medieval synergism. The Lutherans, too, took offense at the overly logical Reformed doctrine of providence and accused Calvinists of apostasy to Islam. Even within the Calvinist camp, a rebellion arose in Arminius and his followers. At the end of the seventeenth century, the school of Saumur and the later orthodoxy of the Enlightenment “relapsed into a fairly crude semi-Pelagianism of a pietist-rationalist type.” Reformed theology launched a counter-counterattack that reached its apex with Schleiermacher, who exalted “against all forms of synergism the great conception of the sole dominion of God and the absolute dependence of the creature.”

*of Ecclesial Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 136–42. See also Caroline Schröder, “‘I See Something You Don’t See’: Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Providence,” in *For the Sake of the World: Karl Barth and the Future of Ecclesial Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 115–35.

8. *KD III/3*, 130; *CD III/3*, 115–16.

However, his doctrine was not a biblical but “a philosophical doctrine of the sole supremacy of God which rested upon the dialectic of nature and spirit.” The common problem that unites Zwingli, Calvin, their Reformed successors, and Schleiermacher is the failure to apply to the doctrine of providence the “proper centre of all Reformed knowledge [*eigentliche reformatorische Zentralerkenntnis*], the doctrine of grace and justification.” Whereas Schleiermacher, Barth argues, never understood the doctrine of grace and justification, his predecessors certainly understood it but did not know how to apply it. Hence the Reformed doctrine of providence after Schleiermacher had no better foundation. It was exposed to the suspicion even of “Spinozism, or more generally of a pantheistic-naturalistic monism.” As a result, “it was pushed more and more into the shadows, and this time seriously, in the eyes of all right-thinking men.”<sup>9</sup>

Barth presents here a radical and provocative criticism of Reformed theology. He lays the responsibility for the decline of the doctrine of providence in our time on Schleiermacher, but more importantly, he sees Schleiermacher’s concept of providence as a fruit of the seed sown by Calvin himself. In Randall Zachman’s words, “Barth claims that Calvin’s doctrine of providence, based on an abstract concept of divine omnipotence, led directly to Schleiermacher’s God as the Whence of the feeling of absolute dependence.”<sup>10</sup> Is Barth’s reading of Calvin and Schleiermacher fair and correct? If so, how does Barth address the inherent problem in the Reformed doctrine of providence?

### Barth’s Critique in Three Forms

Before answering these questions in the remaining chapters, I will first analyze in some detail Barth’s thorough and perceptive critique

9. Quotations throughout this paragraph are from *KD* III/3, 130–32; *CD* III/3, 116–17.

10. Zachman, “Response,” 139.

of the “older theology” as laid out in his discussion of providence in §48–50 in volume III/3 of the *Church Dogmatics*. What does Barth mean when he says that the Reformed doctrine of providence is not “Christian” in meaning and character? His criticism can be understood as three interrelated charges.

### The Problem of Christocentrism

First, Barth charges that the Reformed doctrine of providence, from Calvin to his Reformed successors, is not sufficiently centered on Jesus Christ. Barth argues that belief in providence is faith. It is neither an opinion nor a postulate nor a worldview. Because it is genuine faith, it cannot be based on the dubious self-assurance of the believer; it has to come from outside. Faith, in the simplest sense, is “a hearing and listening and receiving of the Word of God.”<sup>11</sup> More concretely, genuine faith is in “God Himself, in God as the Lord of His creation watching, willing and working above and in world-occurrence, but in *God!*”<sup>12</sup> We can see God at work in all of history and creation, but neither history nor creation is revelatory. Rather, God reveals himself through the Word of God, and the Word of God means for Barth primarily and ultimately Jesus Christ. That is why he concludes this train of thought by saying, “In its substance the Christian belief in providence is Christian faith, i.e., faith in Christ. The Word of God which it believes, in which it believes and which sets it in the light in which it may see the lordship of God in the history of creaturely being, is the one Word of God beside which there is no other—the Word which became flesh and is called Jesus Christ.”<sup>13</sup>

11. *KD* III/3, 15; *CD* III/3, 15 rev.

12. *KD* III/3, 20; *CD* III/3, 18 rev. (emphasis original in *KD*)

13. *KD* III/3, 29; *CD* III/3, 26.

In other words, the doctrine of providence must be based on Jesus Christ and oriented by Christian faith. By saying this, Barth does not collapse the distinction between the history of the covenant as manifested in the Old and New Testaments and the general history of world-occurrence. The great principle of his doctrine of creation is that creation is the external basis of the covenant and the covenant is the internal basis of creation.<sup>14</sup> Applying this principle, Barth argues that “the history of the covenant which follows creation also needs an external basis. Its external basis is the sway of divine providence.”<sup>15</sup> Hence our knowledge and faith in the providence of God is not limited to the history of covenant that takes place within the biblical framework. We may and must seek providence in general history as well. However, Barth emphasizes that God’s presence and lordship in this history remain hidden. As the external basis, faith in providence must always return to its internal basis for meaning and direction. That center, Barth insists, is none other than the one Word of God, Jesus Christ, through whom alone we come to know with certainty God’s care for and rule over the world.

As mentioned above, Barth here critiques the older theology for its “total failure.”<sup>16</sup> He argues that even Calvin failed to ask what Christ has to do with providence. To be sure, there are glimpses of insight among the Reformers. Barth cites questions 26–28 of the Heidelberg Catechism, which teach that “God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth” is the “eternal Father of our Lord Jesus

14. See *KD III/1*, 103–377; *CD III/1*, 94–329. The relationship between covenant and creation in Barth’s theology may be seen as an example of the “Chalcedonian pattern” at work. The two are not identical and cannot be reduced to one or the other, but they are in an inseparable relationship. Furthermore, the covenant holds an asymmetrical precedence over the creation. See George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 185–88; George Hunsinger, “Karl Barth’s Christology: Its Basic Chalcedonian Character,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 127–42.

15. *KD III/3*, 5; *CD III/3*, 7.

16. *KD III/3*, 34; *CD III/3*, 30.

Christ,” who “upholds and governs [heaven and earth] by his eternal counsel and providence, is for the sake of Christ his Son my God and my Father.” We can trust God as our Father because he is first and foremost the Father of his Son Jesus Christ. According to Barth’s reading of the Heidelberg Catechism, we can be certain of the Father’s fatherly faithfulness based on this, and we may confess, “I trust in him so completely that I have no doubt that he will provide me with all things necessary for body and soul.”<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere, Barth remarks regarding this part of the Catechism: “For if the Father of Jesus Christ is the Creator of heaven and earth, and if we know the Father of Jesus Christ as such, and Him again as our God and Father because we believe in His Son, it is difficult to see how we can know the Creator of heaven and earth other than in the same faith in the Son and therefore in Jesus Christ.”<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, Barth suggests that Calvin did rightly seek the connection between Christ and providence in a few places. He refers to Calvin’s foreword to his commentary on Genesis and calls it “the strongest testimony of theological tradition in this direction.”<sup>19</sup> Barth writes that Calvin

there explains that Christ is the image [*Bild*] in which God has shown us not merely His heart, namely, His love addressed to us in Him, but also His hand and feet, namely, His external works in the sphere of creation. And he there warns us that if we do not keep strictly to Christ we can only be betrayed into the wildest hallucinations in respect of these external works of God [*äußeren Werke Gottes*].<sup>20</sup>

17. Barth cites the whole of Questions 26–28 in *KD* III/3, 15; *CD* III/3, 15. The quote is from the English text of the Heidelberg Catechism in Arthur C. Cochrane, ed., *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 309–10.

18. *KD* III/1, 32; *CD* III/1, 31.

19. *KD* III/1, 32; *CD* III/1, 31.

20. *KD* III/3, 35; *CD* III/3, 30.



Barth also detects a similar trajectory in a line from Calvin's treatise *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*: "For the Church is God's own workshop, in which He exercises His providence—the chief theater of the same providence."<sup>21</sup>

Although Barth finds a gleam of light in a statement like this, he argues that Calvin never worked out this insight in the discussion of providence within his larger work of dogmatics, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1.16–18). Nor was such an idea developed in the age that followed Calvin. Thus the crucial connection between the belief in providence and the person of Christ remained undeveloped and was not theologically demonstrated by Calvin and the other Reformers, or by their successors.<sup>22</sup>

Instead, Barth argues, they largely construed the doctrine of providence as a general article of belief, constructing it in common with Jews, Muslims, and others who hold to a basic monotheism. In fact, Barth goes so far as to say that this "orthodox" theology was blatantly "liberal" before the rise of modern liberalism—in the sense of "liberation from the constraint of faith in Christ as the one Word of God not only in matters of providence but because at this point at every point." Here, Barth carries out a kind of slippery-slope argument. He asks, if Christ, the church, and the Bible had no real, inner necessity to the orthodox understanding of providence, why could they not be dispensable in other respects, and finally everywhere? Orthodoxy opened the "sluices to this flood" and could

21. "Denique ecclesia propria est Dei officina, in qua suam providentiam exercet et praecipuum eiusdem providentiae theatrum." Jean Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. Johann Wilhelm Baum, Eduard Cunitz, and Eduard Reuss, *Corpus Reformatorum* (Brunsvigae: C. A. Schwetschke, 1863–1900), 349. Hereafter *Calvini Opera* will be cited as *CO* and *Corpus Reformatorum* as *CR*. Barth cites Calvin's *De aeterna Dei praedestinatione* of 1552 as *CR* 8, but we would today cite it as *CO* 8 (*CR* 36); *KD* III/3, 35; *CD* III/3, 30. The English translation is from Jean Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. John Kelman Sutherland Reid (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 164.

22. *KD* III/3, 37; *CD* III/3, 32.

not prevent the rise of Pietist subjectivism. In this regard Barth sees a direct line from Calvin through the Protestant scholastics to Schleiermacher. Furthermore, this belief in God's providence without a Christian substance proved to be powerless before the catastrophes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—so much so that the word “providence” sank so far as to become a favorite one on the lips of Adolf Hitler.<sup>23</sup>

Barth does not doubt the good intentions of the Reformers and their successors. He acknowledges that they were seriously trying to be Christian in this doctrine as well as in others. Yet Barth argues that their concept of the providential God apart from faith in Christ led them astray. He calls for putting the doctrine of providence back on the common foundation with the rest of Christian theology: “If the doctrine of providence is a *primarium caput fidei* [first heading of faith]—and the older orthodoxy was right in this—it is hard to see how there can be in it any question or application of a different ontics and noetics from that which obtains in the case of sin or reconciliation, of justification or baptism.”<sup>24</sup> Characteristically, Barth does not completely discard the teachings of the older orthodoxy. He reviews them carefully and respectfully to see whether they are usable when taken up on a different basis.

### The Problem of Determinism

The second critique Barth has of Calvin and his successors regards the inherent determinism in their doctrine of providence. This charge is closely related to the first one. Because Reformed orthodoxy did not seek the basis for providence in Christ, knowledge of the caring and fatherly God was ambiguous at best. The Reformed doctrine of providence lacked a proper “ontic basis.” Without this, its “noetic

23. Quotations throughout this paragraph are from *KD III/3*, 37; *CD III/3*, 32–33.

24. *KD III/3*, 38; *CD III/3*, 33.

presuppositions” were bound to be shaky. Faith in God’s preservation of the world, therefore, could never be necessary and compelling.<sup>25</sup>

This methodological failure, according to Barth, had significant consequences. The Reformed fathers rightly saw the absolute supremacy and freedom of God in relation to creation. However, in abstraction from God’s work and revelation in Jesus Christ, they ended with God as a “purely formal concept, denoting a supreme being endowed with absolute, unconditioned and irresistible power.”<sup>26</sup> They could not demonstrate clearly and certainly that the “majesty of God’s work,” although absolutely above the power of the creature, is the “work of His *eternal love*.”<sup>27</sup> As a result, Barth argues, they left no room for us to freely and genuinely obey God. We are instead left with the unfortunate choice between resignation before and submission to a superior force. Barth asks how such an attitude toward God differs from the Stoic resignation in the face of an irresistible destiny or the Islamic submission to the inscrutable will of Allah.<sup>28</sup> Barth does not denounce here the fear of God; rather, he stresses that we should fear God and only God *because* he is love as revealed in his Son, Jesus Christ.<sup>29</sup> Wittingly or unwittingly, Reformed orthodoxy became susceptible to the fear of a tyrannical master, not a Father.

Another consequence of the failure to ground providence properly is the inevitable infiltration of foreign concepts. In discussing the concept of *concursum*, Barth gives a particularly perceptive reading of its history.<sup>30</sup> He observes that Reformation theology stood between

25. *KD III/3*, 82–83; *CD III/3*, 72–73.

26. *KD III/3*, 127; *CD III/3*, 113.

27. *KD III/3*, 121; *CD III/3*, 107 rev.

28. *KD III/3*, 127; *CD III/3*, 113.

29. *KD III/3*, 122; *CD III/3*, 109.

30. Barth follows the Reformed framework of *conservatio* (*das göttliche Erhalten*, or the divine preserving), *concursum* (*das göttliche Begleiten*, or the divine accompanying), and *gubernatio* (*das göttliche Regieren*, or the divine ruling) in analyzing the doctrine of providence. See *KD III/*

two dangers: the synergism of Roman Catholicism on the one hand, and the monism and fatalism of Islam on the other. Although the two camps of the Reformation shared common ground between these, the Lutherans tended toward the first, and the Reformed toward the second. Nevertheless, when explaining how God accompanies human work, both the Lutherans and the Reformed resorted to the philosophy of Aristotle and the theology of Aquinas, newly rediscovered at the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth. They adopted the concept of “cause,” which was already evident in the doctrine of providence in Zwingli and Calvin, and even in Luther.<sup>31</sup>

Barth does not contend that merely borrowing a concept from an external source is itself problematic, but he cautions that “every terminology is a possible source of error.” Even terminologies based on the Bible may be misleading if used wrongly. What matters is whether the terminology serves the Bible and carries its message faithfully. According to Barth, Protestant theologians were formally correct in adopting the concept of cause. God is indeed the source of all causes, and there is none before or above him. The failure, however, was that materially they gave no specifically Christian content to this causal relationship between God and the creature. Furthermore, there were no safeguards against the possibility of this same form being used in synergistic and monist ways.<sup>32</sup> Barth indeed thinks that the Reformed doctrine of providence opened the door to this danger too easily.

3, 67, 102, 175; *CD III/3*, 58, 90, 154. However, Barth radically critiques the concepts and rehabilitates them for his own use. His positive construction of the doctrine, therefore, is inseparable from his close reading of the Reformed tradition. For the Reformed threefold framework, see Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thompson (London: Allen, 1950), 256.

31. *KD III/3*, 107–10; *CD III/3*, 94–98.

32. *KD III/3*, 112–13; *CD III/3*, 99–100.

Barth goes on to suggest five conditions under which the concept of cause may be used to describe God's *concursum* with creatures.<sup>33</sup> These conditions reveal what Barth thinks is problematic with the Reformed use of the concept: (1) The term *causa* must not be regarded as a cause that is effective automatically. God's working with the creature should not be thought of in terms of some kind of mechanism. There is indeed a mechanical aspect between God and the creature due to the necessity of God's action, but it must be distinguished from what we usually think of as mechanism. (2) The term *causa* should not imply that God and the creature are two "things." Falling into such a way of thinking gives us the false impression that God and the creature are manageable objects of the same class that we can understand on our own. (3) The term *causa* is not a master concept to which both God and the creature are subject. By speaking of *causa prima* and *causa secunda*, Aristotle and Aquinas undermined the qualitative difference between the Creator and the creature, and the effect was inherited by Protestant orthodoxy. (4) The concept of *causa* should not fall into purely philosophical thinking; it has to be used theologically. (5) Lastly and most importantly, when the concept is used, its content must be that of the Father of Jesus Christ in relation to the creature. Fulfilling the first four conditions depends on fulfilling the fifth. Barth thinks that the older dogmatics did not even mention the last one; that is why they were not secure even in respect of the first four.

Barth sees Schleiermacher as the endpoint of a serial wrong use of the concept of cause in the doctrine of providence. In it, God is reduced to the source of omnicausality, absolutely dominant but totally transcendent and impersonal. Not only is the creature's freedom to obey undermined in this scheme, but in Schleiermacher's

33. *KD* III/3, 114–20; *CD* III/3, 101–7.

philosophical—rather than theological—framework, God works only in relation to the totality of the creation, not directly and immediately upon the individual.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the absolutely free God of Schleiermacher is not free to love and work for the individual creature. It is as if the causal system is a thing greater than both God and the creature. Barth argues that Schleiermacher followed the dangerous path left open by Calvin and his successors to the end.

### The Problem of Nothingness

Any doctrine of providence must account for that which seems to defy God's rule—the problem of evil. Barth places this problem within his wider discussion of “nothingness,” the paradoxical being that does not exist because God has rejected it, and yet poses a radical threat to the creature affirmed by God.<sup>35</sup> In this discussion, too, Barth critiques Calvin and his successors, and the third criticism is closely related to the first two. Barth argues that because the older doctrine of providence lacked a firm basis in Jesus Christ, it lacked the certainty that God preserves and protects the creature from overthrow by that which is not. As we saw above, Barth thinks that the only necessary and compelling reason to believe in God's preserving of the world is that God has elected the creature through his Son, that God loves the creature in the Son, and for the sake of the Son he will not allow it to perish.<sup>36</sup> The flip side of this line of thinking is that, without the assurance of God's preserving of the world, there is no real security against the threat of nothingness. Therefore, the third form of Barth's implicit critique of the Reformed doctrine of providence is that it did not take the problem of evil and non-being seriously enough—not

34. *KD* III/3, 192–96; *CD* III/3, 170–73.

35. I follow the English editors of *CD* in their choice of the term “nothingness” for *das Nichtige*. For the explanation of the choice, see *KD* III/3, 327; *CD* III/3, 289.

36. *KD* III/3, 82; *CD* III/3, 72.

because it lacked the experience of it, but because it failed to establish firm ground for the good and being.

Barth regards the knowledge of Christ as the key in every area of theology, and the problem of nothingness is no exception. We have true and certain knowledge not only of creation but also of nothingness only in Christ. By becoming flesh, the Word became a lost creature. It means that God took upon Godself this challenge from the alien element. Nothingness is “reality” only in the sense that God was willing to subject himself to it in Jesus Christ in order to overcome it. Therefore, Barth stresses that “only from the standpoint of Jesus Christ, His birth, death and resurrection, do we see it in reality and truth, without the temptation to treat it as something inclusive or relative, or to conceive it dialectically and thus render it innocuous.”<sup>37</sup> Only in knowing Christ, then, do we become fully aware of the seriousness with which God opposes and pours his wrath on nothingness.

Barth holds that instead of starting from this concrete knowledge of Christ and the history of covenant through which God carries out the salvation of the world, Reformed theology began with abstraction. It treated God, the creature, and the reality of nothingness as if they were philosophical concepts that had to be resolved or brought into a systematic framework. Such a proceeding inevitably fell to the dilemma of theodicy—an attempt to balance out God’s goodness and omnipotence in the face of rampant evil in the world. Barth says that, with their typically intense and meticulous labor, post-Reformation theologians still could not produce definitive statements regarding the nature, ground, character, and final conquest of nothingness. Their thoughts were prone to be lost in

37. *KD* III/3, 346; *CD* III/3, 305.

scholastic discussions without a valuable contribution to theology and the church.<sup>38</sup>

Without a focus on Christ—his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection—the problem of evil becomes something that does not touch God himself. Again, Barth sees a hidden line that connects Reformed orthodoxy to Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher pushes the concept of cause to its logical end and reduces God to omnicausality—to the point of calling God the “author” of sin. Now, Barth reads Schleiermacher carefully and argues that Schleiermacher means God is the “author” in the sense that he negates sin. God “ordained” sin in the form of this negation so that we would be displeased at ourselves and be aware of the need for redemption. Barth finds a similarity here with his own understanding that nothingness, too, owes its reality to God because God rejects it. The problem, however, is that for Schleiermacher, God has no part in the struggle against sin. He stands, inviolate, above it. As the cause of all causes, he stands totally unaffected, unassailed; hence he is neither wrathful against sin nor merciful toward sinners. But Barth asks, “How can anything have reality for us if we are convinced that it has none for God?” If the problem of sin and evil is not real for God, how can it be real for us?<sup>39</sup>

To be accurate, Schleiermacher does try to incorporate Christology in his doctrine of sin, and Barth commends him for it. He tries to honor Christ by making him the historical point of connection with the religious consciousness of the Christian. But, in Barth’s judgment, Christology is not the true starting point in Schleiermacher’s doctrine of sin. His premises do not require Christ. Therefore, Christ is a mere passing point that disappears before the pole of individual consciousness. Sin becomes an exclusively

38. *KD III/3*, 422–23; *CD III/3*, 365–66.

39. *KD III/3*, 373–78; *CD III/3*, 326–30.



subjective matter that has no reality in the life and death of Christ, and hence no reality in God.<sup>40</sup>

As a corollary to the concept of cause, the “older theology” often resorted to the concept of permission in discussing the problem of evil. Barth says that even this concept could be beneficial if used with a properly theological content.<sup>41</sup> What happened, however, was that it was used without the content filled by Christ and the history of covenant. As a result, Calvin and his successors did not emphasize clearly that God not only permits evil but also actively takes it upon himself by becoming a lost creature in the Son. In Barth’s judgment, the problem remains fundamental from Calvin through a long, tortuous line to Schleiermacher.

### **Barth and Reformed Theology**

We should now put Barth’s criticism of Calvin and his successors in a historical context. This is particularly pertinent in light of the recent movement among some historians to reappraise the relationship between Reformation and post-Reformation theology. The most persistent and thorough critique comes from Richard Muller.

According to Muller’s analysis, the study of the relationship between Reformation and post-Reformation theology, and more specifically Calvin and the Calvinists, went through two phases in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>42</sup> The first phase followed the argument of Alexander Schweizer that the orthodox Reformed theologians tried to build a synthetic and deductive system of theology based on the central dogma of predestination.<sup>43</sup> A student of Schleiermacher, Schweizer understood absolute divine causality

40. *KD* III/3, 375–76; *CD* III/3, 327–28.

41. *KD* III/3, 425; *CD* III/3, 367.

42. See Richard A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Durham, NC: Labyrinth, 1986), 1–13.

as the central theme behind Schleiermacher's "feeling of absolute dependence," and he viewed the development of predestination as the central dogma in Reformed orthodoxy positively, coming to ultimate fruition in Schleiermacher. While theologians such as Baur and Gass followed this positive attitude, Heppe took a more negative stance, seeing Theodore Beza as responsible for this development.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, throughout the nineteenth century theologians agreed on the importance of predestination as the central dogma in the development from Reformation to post-Reformation theology.

This view was revised in twentieth-century scholarship by, among others, Weber and Bizer.<sup>45</sup> In this second phase, scholars such as Locher, Niesel, and Wendel underscored christocentrism as the defining feature in the Reformers—not only Calvin but also Zwingli. They came to regard the development of predestination as a central principle in post-Reformation orthodoxy as a break from the christocentric theology of the Reformers.<sup>46</sup> In other words, where Schweizer and even Heppe saw the fruition of Calvin's insight in the later systematization, scholars in this phase saw a disruption or distortion. They attributed the "distortion" to the rise of an

43. Alexander Schweizer, *Die christliche Glaubenslehre nach protestantischen Grundsätzen*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Leipzig: G. Hirzel, 1877); Alexander Schweizer, *Die protestantischen Centraldogmen in ihrer Entwicklung innerhalb der reformirten Kirche*, 2 vols. (Zürich: Orell, Fuessli und comp., 1854).

44. Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Lehrbuch der christlichen Dogmengeschichte*, 2nd rev. ed. (Tübingen: L. Fues, 1858); Wilhelm Gass, *Geschichte der protestantischen Dogmatik: In ihrem Zusammenhange mit Theologie überhaupt*, 4 vols. (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1854); Heinrich Heppe, *Geschichte des deutschen Protestantismus in den Jahren 1555–1581*, 4 vols. (Marburg: N.G. Elwert, 1852); Heinrich Heppe, *Dogmatik des deutschen Protestantismus im sechzehnten Jahrhundert*, 3 vols. (Gotha: F. A. Perthes, 1857).

45. Hans Emil Weber, *Reformation, Orthodoxie und Rationalismus*, 2nd ed., 3 vols., Beiträge zur Förderung christlicher Theologie, 2nd Series (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1966); Ernst Bizer, *Frühorthodoxie und Rationalismus*, Theologische Studien (Zürich: EVZ, 1963).

46. Gottfried Wilhelm Locher, *Zwingli's Thought: New Perspectives*, Studies in the History of Christian Thought (Leiden: Brill, 1981); Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956); François Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

Aristotelian scholasticism within Reformed theology, thanks to Beza. As a result, Calvin's christocentric and more humanistic thought was replaced by a more scholastic and decretal system.<sup>47</sup> Muller contends that this "Calvin against the Calvinists" thesis has been very influential in the contemporary study of Reformed theology.<sup>48</sup>

Muller has criticized both of these trends, arguing that they are dogmatically motivated. The theologians in the first phase, under Schleiermacher's influence, presented Schleiermacher's theology as the full realization of Calvin's central motif of God's determination of all things. Those in the second sought a doctrinal return to Calvin in the form of "neoorthodoxy."<sup>49</sup> Muller calls for a departure from dogmatic motivation and recommends a critical reappraisal of the two phases based on more careful historical analysis. Against the first phase, Muller argues that neither the Reformers nor their seventeenth-century successors were interested in building a synthetic, deductive system based on a single principle—be it divine decree or Christology. Rather, they continued to use the *loci* method, gathering theological topics drawn out of their exegetical work into a coherent whole.<sup>50</sup> Against the second, he argues for the continuity between Reformation and post-Reformation theology. The two may have been different in method but not in content. Muller contends the orthodox theologians adopted contemporary philosophical concepts without falling captive to them, and their codification was an inevitable and necessary process in the development of Reformed

47. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 4:383. Hereafter abbreviated as *PRRD* followed by volume and page numbers.

48. Muller gives an extensive bibliography of English-language works influenced by this line of thinking in *ibid.*, 1:45 n. 24.

49. *Ibid.*, 4:384.

50. Muller goes so far as to urge "setting aside the agendas of neoorthodox and other dogmatically laden historiographies as intellectually bankrupt." *Ibid.*, 4:384; cf. 1:39.

theology as the church born out of the Reformation movement became an institution.<sup>51</sup>

The significance of Muller's criticism to this discussion is that Muller presents Barth as a contributor to the "Calvin against the Calvinists" thesis. The problem, however, is that at least regarding the doctrine of providence, Barth does not fit into this category. As we have seen, Barth sees *continuity* between the Reformers and their orthodox successors in their doctrine of providence. Indeed, he draws a long and tortuous line from Calvin through Reformed orthodoxy to Schleiermacher. In this sense, Barth might fit closer to what Muller describes as the first phase. Carl Trueman, another historian who aligns with Muller's project, emphasizes Barth's indebtedness to Heppel, who presents Schleiermacher as the heir of Calvin.<sup>52</sup> However, the crucial difference from the first phase, including Heppel, is that Barth does not champion Schleiermacher as the *crown* of Reformed theology. He sees the whole Reformed doctrine of providence from Calvin to Schleiermacher as problematic and tries to correct it.

Barth's doctrine of providence does not fit neatly into *either* of the two phases that Muller describes. The problem is that Muller and

51. *Ibid.*, 1:43–44; 4:386, 396.

52. Carl R. Trueman, "Calvin, Barth, and Reformed Theology: Historical Prolegomena," in *Calvin, Barth and Reformed Theology*, ed. Neil B. MacDonald and Carl R. Trueman (Milton Keynes, U.K.: Paternoster, 2008), 10. As Barth himself testifies in his foreword to Heppel's *Reformed Dogmatics*, he was indeed greatly indebted to this work for his rediscovery of the riches of Reformed theology while he was frantically preparing for his first dogmatics lectures at Göttingen in 1924 (Heppel, *Reformed Dogmatics*, v). See Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909–1936* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 334–37; Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1976), 153–54. However, recent scholarship on Barth's Göttingen years shows how widely and perceptively Barth studied Reformed theology. He was by no means singlehandedly under Heppel's spell, as Trueman implies. See, for example, Matthias Freudenberg, *Karl Barth und die reformierte Theologie: die Auseinandersetzung mit Calvin, Zwingli und den reformierten Bekenntnisschriften während seiner Göttinger Lehrtätigkeit* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1997); Georg Plasger, *Die relative Autorität des Bekenntnisses bei Karl Barth* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2000).

scholars sympathetic to his vision do not see how nuanced yet radical Barth's project is.<sup>53</sup> Muller observes correctly that the Reformers assumed the truth of much of received doctrine. They tried to correct only what they perceived to be errors, such as the teachings on Scripture, grace, justification, and the sacraments. Thus they left mostly intact the doctrines of the Trinity, Christology, creation, and providence.<sup>54</sup> What Barth tries to do, though, is take "the proper centre of all Reformed knowledge, the doctrine of grace and justification" and apply it to all other areas of theology.<sup>55</sup> He thus rethinks what God's providence means, given the revelation of grace in Jesus Christ, so as to make this doctrine truly Reformed—and, more importantly, truly Christian. He does not take the "central dogma" approach that Muller criticizes; he does not try to build a synthetic, deductive system. Rather, Barth reconstructs even the doctrine of predestination from this center, and this center is none other than Jesus Christ—not a doctrine or concept of Christ, but the living Lord himself.

Barth's critics may see in this project a break from Reformed theology. Trueman argues that "what should be expected in doctrinal development is not so much the emergence of dramatic new formulations or paradigms but modifications and refinements of well-established patterns of thought," and concludes that Barth breaks away from these "well-established patterns of thought" of Reformed theology.<sup>56</sup> But if, as Barth insists, Reformed theology was not sufficiently Christian and biblical in its doctrine of providence, is it so

53. Muller's portrayal of Barth's theology as a rebellion of limited significance, as a mere reactionary moment within the nineteenth-century liberal tradition, fails to do justice to the degree to which Barth attempted to *reform* Reformed theology. See Richard A. Muller, "Karl Barth and the Path of Theology into the Twentieth Century: Historical Observations," *Westminster Theological Journal* 51, no. 1 (1989): 25–50.

54. Muller, *PRRD*, 1:34.

55. *KD* III/3, 130–32; *CD* III/3, 116–17.

56. Trueman, "Calvin, Barth, and Reformed Theology," 25–26.

wrong to step off this path, however well-trodden it may be? Since Muller argues that, although Reformed orthodoxy was different in its method and manner of presentation, it was in continuity with the Reformation,<sup>57</sup> it seems fitting that Barth's critical genealogy should contest the doctrinal network around providence from Calvin to Schleiermacher as a continuous line.

There are, however, points to be heeded from these historians. In evaluating Barth's critique of Calvin and Schleiermacher—Calvin especially—we must be wary of anachronism. As Muller stresses, we should constantly be aware that nineteenth- and twentieth-century questions are rarely answered in the materials of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—certainly never in nineteenth- and twentieth-century terms.<sup>58</sup> Recent scholarship on the relationship between Calvin and Barth is well aware of the danger of reading the premodern Calvin through modern critical lenses.<sup>59</sup> We should ask whether Barth's charge of insufficient christocentrism in Calvin's doctrine of providence successfully avoids this pitfall.

At the same time, there is a limit to their criticism. Just because Calvin is a premodern, pre-Kantian theologian, it does not mean that Barth cannot critique him. My purpose here is to go beyond the historical analysis and see whether the historical material has anything to offer our situation here and now. We can and should

57. "Continuity must not be conceived simplistically as static reproduction, and discontinuity must not be explained, equally simplistically, as change." Muller, *PRRD*, 1:44. Surprisingly, this concept of doctrinal development finds an unlikely echo in Brian Gerrish's defense of Schleiermacher as the one who faithfully followed the Reformers' path without mimicking them. According to Gerrish, even Schleiermacher could thus announce, "The Reformation still goes on!" See Gerrish's essay "Continuity and Change: Friedrich Schleiermacher on the Task of Theology" in B. A. Gerrish, *Tradition and the Modern World: Reformed Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 13–48.

58. Muller, *PRRD*, 4:385.

59. For example, Cornelis van der Kooi treats Calvin and Barth with Kant in the dividing middle, as if Calvin and Barth were two panels of a diptych with Kant as the hinge between them. See Cornelis van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror: John Calvin and Karl Barth on Knowing God: A Diptych*, Studies in the History of Christian Traditions (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

ask whether Calvin's doctrine of providence has indeed led to the detrimental state of the doctrine in our day, as Barth thinks. Also, we should use the historian's skeptical lens to see whether Barth's critique of Calvin is not shaped by his reaction to Schleiermacher. Does Barth see Calvin's doctrine of providence for what it is, or does he project Schleiermacher back into Calvin? Also, does Barth accurately understand Schleiermacher's doctrine of providence?

With these questions in mind, we will now proceed to Calvin's doctrine of providence, followed by Schleiermacher's. I will try to present them as fairly and accurately as possible to examine whether Barth's criticism is valid. Finally, I will return to Barth's own reformulation of the doctrine. In the course of these movements, we will see that, in his critique of the Reformed doctrine of providence, Barth does indeed read Schleiermacher's problem back into Calvin's doctrine. Nevertheless, the nuanced nature of Barth's relationship with these two predecessors is such that his critique of Calvin still carries a powerful force that cannot simply be dismissed, even though his strong opposition to Schleiermacher colors his reading of Calvin. Furthermore, Barth's critique of Schleiermacher ironically cannot be understood without the line of continuity that runs between Schleiermacher and Barth.

