

Karl Barth's Doctrine of Providence

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Abstract

Karl Barth's treatment of the doctrine of creation and providence centers on Jesus Christ, being thus a critique of natural theology, showing its limitations. The article will display Barth's Christo-centrism throughout his entire thinking regarding the providence of God. Moreover, the paper will show the implications of his thinking. Barth's peculiar approach to the doctrine of providence enables him to address the most pressing problems of human existence: human suffering, human limitations, fear, death, and evil. The article does not offer a critical analysis of Barth's theological construction of the doctrine of providence but aims at describing it as faithfully as possible, being thus a mirror, by which one could evaluate her theology in this regard.

Keywords: creation, providence, conservatio, concursus, gubernatio, world history, covenant history

Introduction

Barth's treatment of the doctrine of creation and providence is an attempt to make it Christian doctrine, and he does this by stressing the centrality of Jesus Christ for understanding both God and the world. Moreover, his attempt is an attack on *theologia naturalis*, which tries to understand God and the world by concluding with the general observation of the world (Tanner 2000, 111). This is extremely important for Barth because it constitutes the starting point of the doctrine: "The direction in which one's theological inferences run – from or to Christ – has im-

portant consequences for one understanding of the world as God's own" (Tanner 2000, 111).

The Christological approach is Barth's peculiar contribution to the doctrine of providence. Mueller (1972, 111) says that the doctrine of creation can properly be understood only through Jesus Christ because in this singular way one can know the Creator. In this respect, one can say without any reserve that Barth is consumed by Christology. Having Christ at the center, Barth works out from there the Christian understanding of the doctrine of providence (Crisp 2010, 28). This approach to creation differs from that of the Reformed tradition, especially in this "Christologizing" of creation. Barth strongly believed that apart from Jesus Christ, the Word of God, human beings are incapable to understand that this world is God's creation. Thus, this paper will attempt to show how Barth's Christological approach to the doctrine of providence both shaped its form and lead him to a certain understanding of it, which in many ways differs from that of Reformed tradition.

1. The Doctrine of Providence, its Basis and Form

When Barth speaks about divine providence, he chooses to divide the discussion into two main parts: *The Doctrine of Providence, its Basis and Form*, and *God the Father as the Lord of His Creature*. From the beginning, as usual, he offers us the thesis of his approach: "The doctrine of providence deals with the history of created being as such, in the sense that in every respect and in its whole span this proceeds under the Fatherly care of God the Creator, whose will is done and is to be seen in his election of grace, and therefore in the history of the covenant between himself and man, and therefore in Jesus Christ" (Barth 2004, 3).

Because he found the starting point in Jesus Christ, in this part Barth firstly speaks about several distinctions that are necessary to be made. Older dogmaticians understood the concept of providence as being founded upon God's sovereignty and the decisiveness of predestination. Thus, in this view, there were no limits on the lordship of God over the world. At this certain point, there is a strong formal break between Barth and previous dogmaticians, because of his Christological understanding of God's will in the election. In this sense, Kennedy (2007, 147) states: "Election becomes the hermeneutical key for interpreting world-occurrence generally, and human action specifically." This step is very important because the whole understanding of this doctrine depends on the proper comprehension of its basis. To show this proper basis, Barth highlights an important distinction between the basis of predestination and that of providence. Barth (2004, 5) says that predestination is "a matter of the eternal decree of God," therefore its root is the being of God: "without it, God would not be God." While predestination has to do with the being of God himself, the doctrine of

providence has its root in the finished work of creation and its existence, since it is grounded in the eternal decree of God in his Son Jesus Christ.

Having made this clear distinction between predestination and providence, Barth's solution is to integrate providence within the doctrine of creation. His choice sets the doctrine of providence in a subordination relationship with the election, as a secondary element that has its root in God's eternal election in Jesus Christ. Although he integrated it within the doctrine of creation, Barth is careful enough to show both the differences and the relationship between them. The most important difference is that of their basis: regarding their external basis both of them rely on the free will and resolve of God, but in providence's case the presupposed being of the creature is in addition; in terms of internal basis both of them are founded upon God's election of grace, meanwhile, the doctrine of providence relies furthermore upon creature's neediness in its relationship with the Creator. Speaking about the relationship between creation and providence, Barth depicts God as one who guarantees the preservation of the creation and its continuation. God co-exists with it and is never absent or passive, in contradistinction to Epicureanism, Stoicism, or Deism. He is "always present, active, responsible and omnipotent. He is never dead, but always living; never sleeping, but always awake; never uninterested, but always concerned; never merely waiting in any respect, but even where he seems to wait, even where he permits, always holding the initiative. In this consists his co-existence with the creature" (Barth 2004, 13). Thus, in this understanding, God in his providence does not only foresees but "God also provides" (Bromiley 1979, 142).

The integration of providence within the doctrine of creation offers to Barth the possibility to give it a practical meaning – the creature may always place itself under the guidance of its Creator:

In the belief in providence the creature understands the Creator as the One who has associated Himself with it in faithfulness and constancy as this sovereign and living God, to precede, accompany and follow it, preserving, co-operating and overruling, in all that it does and all that happens to it. And in the belief in providence, the creature understands itself as what it is in relation to its Creator, namely, as upheld, determined and governed in its whole existence in the world by the fact that the Creator precedes it every step of the way in living sovereignty, so that it has only to follow (Barth 2004, 14).

Here, Barth describes three essential delimitations by referring to the Christian belief in providence. Firstly, the Christian belief in providence is a hearing and receiving of the Word of God. Barth integrates the belief in providence within the sphere of the confession, in which our sole basis is the Word of God, the objective fact (Kennedy 2007, 148). Hence, the Christian belief in providence is "a statement of faith" (Barth 2004, 17). Secondly, Christian belief in providence is faith in God Himself as the Lord of His creation, who watches, wills, and works with, towards, and above it. The relationship between the Creator and his crea-

ture is much more emphasized, God, being the one who controls every aspect of the creature's life. His lordship is manifested in the world's occurrence, but it cannot be perceived from it. Therefore, there is the need for "an object" through which man is made able to see this – only through Jesus Christ, God himself, men can see this lordship. Thus, Barth draws a very clear distinction between the faith which arose from divine action and any human system invented by man to explain it, either philosophy of religion or human speculation or theory. Schröder is perfectly right when she states that "it is of the greatest importance for Barth to distinguish belief in providence from every type of worldview" (Schröder 2004, 119). Thirdly, Christian belief in providence is Christian faith, i.e. faith in Jesus Christ. Barth accentuates here that this God who is sovereign upon the whole creaturely occurrence is "the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Barth 2004, 29). Using the image of the election and adoption of the Christian in Jesus Christ, he speaks about God as Father, who is both "God over us" and "God for us." Hence, Barth stresses the idea that one is forbidden to use a non-Christian concept of God without this Christological basis. However, because many theologians failed to do this, they ended up doing "*theologia naturalis*" (Barth 2004, 32).

Barth concludes this first part by pointing out the relationship between world history and covenant history. This section functions as a bridge between the first and the second part of the III.3 volume. Barth comes now closer to the meaning and form of the providence of God and speaks about the singular will or intention for this world that was revealed in Jesus Christ. In this way, there is no room for suspicion, anxiety, or doubt. The theme of the Christian doctrine of providence has to do with a man who is God's servant, instrument, and material, and who is not alien in this world, because it fulfills the will of the Father as the "*theatrum gloriae Dei*" (Barth 2004, 48). Thus, Barth speaks here about the relationship between creaturely occurrence and covenant history in the context of revelation. Because history has to do with "the execution of the election of grace resolved and fulfilled by God from all eternity," the theme of providence has to do with the "thin line of salvation history within world history" (Barth 2004, 36). This section has several peculiar contributions, which are deepening the differences already created between Barth and the older dogmaticians: it "leaves more room for creaturely participation than most in the Reformed tradition" (Kennedy 2007, 153); in Barth's understanding of creature's self-determination and divine determination co-exist; God's eternal decree in Jesus Christ removes the possibility of him acting as *Deus absconditus* – there is no room for a multiplicity of providence.

As we have already seen, Barth's description of providence moves from a transcendental presentation of God as its basis, i.e. his eternal decree in Jesus Christ, to a personalized understanding of its meaning and form. Therefore, the proper understanding of providence can be achieved exclusively on the presupposition

of God's election in Jesus Christ. Kennedy (2007, 157) is right when he states that, in this regard, providence "mirrors Barth's significant modifications to election." Barth shows how election shapes providence, following that in the second to detail the outworking of this.

2. God the Father as Lord of His Creature

In the second part of this volume, Barth follows the older theology's terminology relating to the doctrine of providence using the terms *conservatio*, *concursus*, and *gubernatio*. Although he follows this terminology, his understanding of providence has a different basis than that of previous theologians, a fact that shapes his view distinctly. Barth departs from the traditional use of these three terms especially by, as already have been mentioned, his "Christologizing" of the doctrine. In this respect, Crisp (2010, 28–33) found four areas in which Barth's view of providence overlaps that of the Reformed tradition: Barth understood the works of the Trinity within creation as indivisible (1); he accentuated the act of creation as a free act of God, not as something necessary (2); he was indeed supralapsarian in his doctrine of the divine decrees, but in the same time his supralapsarianism was different – God elects and reprobates Christ (3); finally, Barth saw a very close connection between the divine act of creation and the covenant of grace in Jesus Christ (4).

In this sense, Barth (2004, 58) begins his speaking about *God the Father as Lord of His Creature* with the following statement: "God fulfills his fatherly lordship over his creation by preserving, accompanying and ruling the whole course of its earthly existence. He does this as his mercy is revealed and active in the creaturely sphere in Jesus Christ, and the lordship of his Son is thus manifested to it."

Besides the profoundly Christ-centered aspect, Barth's view of divine providence discloses a second feature that constitutes a step forward in the Christian understanding of the doctrine of divine providence, i.e. its aspect. This perception of providence permits Barth to deal with the most important issues and apparent contradictions regarding the relationship between God the Creator and his creatures. Each of the three sections that follow will highlight these two specific features of Barth's teaching on providence.

a) The Divine Preserving (*conservatio*)

The basis of this preservation is Christological. If Jesus Christ exists or because God himself exists, then the continuance of the whole creation is guaranteed. This is the reason why Kennedy (2007, 157) speaks about the "Christological preservation" of the entire Creation. The constancy of this preservation is found-

ed upon the constancy of God's eternal intention for the creation. Thus, one can assume that "the patient faithfulness of God's loving intentions, which are so clear in Christ" guarantees the preservation of the whole creation (Tanner 2000, 122).

Having this fundament Barth mentions four aspects of this preservation. Firstly, Barth speaks about the preservation of a creature's limited being, but at the same time, he does not neglect God's capacity to preserve it eternally by the fact that he gives it time to exist eternally. In this sense, Barth did not fall into the trap in which the old dogmaticians fell, of the contradiction between the passing character of the creature and God's capacity to preserve it eternally in Jesus Christ. Secondly, Barth speaks about divine providence as mediated by creation itself. Though the preservation is a free act of God, Barth draws a very clear distinction between God's direct work in the salvation history and his indirect work in the world occurrence in general. Thirdly, Barth emphasizes the "modus" of divine providence as an act of God's free goodness. Thus, one cannot speak about capricious preservation because it is in accord with his holy being. Also, he cannot speak about a capricious election, but an eternal one because God's preservation is eternal since it has its roots in His divine being. Moreover, he cannot speak about a God who continues to create because this would be unnecessary. Thus, God is the basis on which the creature may have continuity: "Because of God it cannot continue; it cannot perish" (Barth 2004, 71). Lastly, Barth accentuates the distinction between what God wills ("the right hand of God") and what God does not will ("the left hand of God" – nothingness), between his "Yes" and his "No," or between existence and non-existence. He does this to highlight the fact that the creature needs God's preservation, i.e. his goodness. The creature is threatened by nothingness therefore it needs God's preservation. Because of this need, the creature is to partake in the share of God's denial of nothingness. In this way, the creature may continue in being, but not without any limits; this is not a curse but a blessing, because only in this way the creature may be actual: "The creature itself may be actual within its limits. For this it is indebted to the divine preservation" (Barth 2004, 86). Moreover, the creature may continue before God eternally because, on the one hand, its destruction is excluded in the revelation of Christ (the negative meaning – the non-existence did not triumph) and, on the other hand, it may continue eternally before God (the positive meaning):

This is the eternal preservation of God. It is not a second preservation side by side with or at the back of the temporal. It is the secret of the temporal. It is a secret of the temporal which is already present in the fullness of truth, which is already in force. And yet it has still to be present in the fullness of truth; it has still to come into force; it has still to be revealed in all its clarity. As we read in Psalm 136 (repeated twenty-six times): "For His mercy endures forever" (Barth 2004, 90).

b) The Divine Accompanying (*concursum*)

God's accompanying of the creature "mirrors God's action in Christ" (Tanner 2000, 123). In the same way that God preserves the creature in its actuality (*conservatio*), He preserves it in its activity (*concursum*). This preservation of a creature's activity is not static but a dynamic one, by God's accompanying. Barth's construction of this part of the doctrine is similar to Aquinas' explanation of the divine *concursum*. God's action always precedes the creature's activity, the latter always being only a response to the former; this order is irreversible. Moreover, God's action is never conditioned by a creature's action (Tanner 2000, 123). Although God determines all the world's occurrences, "He maintains it in its own actuality, that he gives it space and opportunity for its own work" (Barth 2004, 91). This section addresses one of the hardest matters from the whole exposition of the doctrine of providence, the relation between divine and human causality. Barth's approach gave him the possibility to avoid determinism, affirm the integrity of the creature, and explain properly the relationship between divine lordship and human autonomy.

He begins the argumentation with three basic statements about how God accompanies the creature. Firstly, he never abandons the creature because in Jesus Christ he already graciously acted for this creature. Thus, Barth integrates the creature in the covenantal framework and understands God's accompany within it. Secondly, God respects the free activity of the creature because "just as he himself is active in his freedom, the creature can also be active in its freedom" (Barth 2004, 92). Thirdly, Barth reaffirms the lordship of God as the One who rules the world in its freedom. In his attempt to explain how the divine co-existence with the creature functions, Barth rejects any kind of mechanical lordship which will give the creature the function of a puppet. Furthermore, he explains this co-existence by referring to the incarnation and how God's lordship and human freedom confirm one another. In the last part of this discussion, Barth emphasizes the need for the re-thinking of the matter. He criticizes the method of the Reformed theologians according to which the doctrine of providence was explained using concepts that were filled out with Christian meaning.

Thus, Barth brings into discussion a re-thinking of this method, i.e. a return to the biblical witness which can successfully guard us against any error in this respect. Therefore, the activity of God the Creator is first of all the activity of the merciful God. Thus, God predetermines the activity of the creature, but he does not underlie its free activity; at the same time creature's activity it is not preceded or determined by an autonomous causal nexus that precedes it. Although God predetermines the activity of the creature, he also accompanies it, and in this accompanying, their activities become a single action: "He is so present in the activity of the creature, and present with such sovereignty and almighty power, that his own action takes place in and with and over the activity of the creature"

(Barth 2004, 132). If this would be different, then God would not be God because he cannot be absent at a certain moment, but always and everywhere present. Because there is always both this unity and this distinction between the activity of God and the activity of the creature, the fulfillment of God's will in creaturely occurrence is a matter of mystery. This mystery is even more accentuated when Barth speaks about God's activity as rich in itself and explains this using the antithesis between single – uniform – united, and manifold – not uniform – monotonous and undifferentiated. Although his activity is a mystery, there is no room for anxiety or fear because God of the Bible and his operation are made known to us by his action in Jesus Christ. His operation is twofold: objective by his Word and subjective by his Spirit. Although the mystery of his operation is safeguarded, the freedom of the creature's activity is not negated, and at the same time, fear does not have a place in this equation because God, as the Father of Jesus Christ, is our Father: "If our Christian perception and confession does not free us to love God more than we fear him than it is obvious that we should necessarily fear him more than we love him. At root, this is the only relevant form of human sin. And this is the only reason why it is so hard to grasp that the freedom of creaturely activity is confirmed by the unconditioned and irresistible lordship of God" (Barth 2004, 147).

After he focused his attention both upon the past dimension of God's providence (its preservation) and upon the present one (*concurrit*), in the end, Barth accentuates the future aspect of it. This is related to the being of God and to the fact that He acts in time, therefore the effects of the creature's activity are under his control. Barth (2004, 153) explains this by referring to God's control of human words and their effects: "God decided concerning my word even before I uttered it. He decides concerning it at the very moment when I utter it." In their variety and motion, these effects remain under God's lordship and entirely fulfill his will.

c) The Divine Ruling (*gubernatio*)

In this section, Barth focuses on both the meaning and the goal of divine providence. Starting from the fact that God alone rules, i.e. that he is irreplaceable in his ruling and that there is no collateral rule, Barth firstly explains the meaning of this ruling as both God's ordering and controlling of creaturely occurrence. Thus, he negates any contradiction that could exist between God's sovereignty and the creature's freedom: "Between the sovereignty of God and freedom of the creature there is no contradiction. The freedom of its activity does not exclude but includes the fact that it is controlled by God" (Barth 2004, 166). Because a creature's activity is controlled by God, the goal of it is God himself; he directs its activity towards himself. Thus, the creatures serve God's plan in the same way that Jesus Christ executes God's reconciling plan for the world (Tanner 2000, 123). Barth

does not negate the particular endings of the creature's activities, but he accentuates that without this main goal their particular endings would be pointless. God indeed "makes the acts of creatures God's own without jeopardizing their integrity" (Tanner 2000, 124).

Viewed in this way, the Christian idea of divine providence has a threefold goal: to make it concrete, to actualize, and verify it. In this sense, the constant presupposition that one must have is that the world's history can be concretely understood only from the perspective of salvation history: "For if we did not know him already in his revelation, how could we ever perceive him in world-occurrence as a whole?" (Barth 2004, 197). Finally, to show even better God's ruling, Barth discusses four special elements: the history of the Holy Scripture, the history of the Church, the history of the Jews, and the limitations of human life. He picks these four elements and he never ceases to show both God's governance and human freedom in each of them. He chose these elements because they seem to be the best options in which one can see God's providence.

d) The Christian Under the Universal Lordship of God the Father

In the last section of the second part, Barth connects theory to practice because in his understanding they cannot be separated. In his understanding, the Christian participates in the divine world-governance as the true creature, from within. He knows what all is about because his knowledge is a response to the Word of God. In this section Barth analyses how this knowledge is actualized in the life of the Christian through faith, obedience, and prayer. Thus, this section focuses on the human, his construction of providence being personal and dynamic, involving the full participation of the creature. The Christian participates in divine providence simultaneously through faith, obedience, and prayer, none of these three elements being separated from the other two, but each of them contains fully the other two. Here it is worth mentioning that Barth compares the relationship between these three elements with the relationships within the Holy Trinity. Thus, participating in God's providence through Jesus Christ the Christians see:

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in the humiliation but also in the exaltation of His humanity, and himself united with Him, belonging to Him, his life delivered by Him, but also placed at His disposal. And seeing Him, he sees the legislative, executive and judicial authority over and in all things...He sees himself subjected to this authority as the one who is united with and belongs to the Son...God the Father as the ruling Creator is obviously not an oppressor, and Christ as a subject creature is obviously not oppressed (Barth 2004, 241).

In this light, Christians accept their creatureliness and can renounce any self-assertion. Because they have opened their eyes, the Christians have the will to always perceive the positive meaning of their creaturely setting. In their faith awakened by the Word of God, in their obedience which comes from the Spirit

and reflects Jesus' lordship, and in their prayer which results from what they have received from God, the Christians are freed to be "the friends of God" (Barth 2004, 285).

Conclusion

As one could easily see, especially one who has read this part of Barth's doctrine of providence, the complexity of his argumentation could not be fully addressed in this paper. However, several important features could be observed throughout it. The most important characteristic mentioned was that Barth's providence is profoundly Christological, and has certain personal articulations. What makes Barth's doctrine of providence peculiar is exactly its Christological character from the beginning toward the end. Because of this, Barth can interact with the deepest and most uncomfortable problems of creaturely occurrence: death, evil, suffering, human limitations, fear, and others. This certain fact makes Barth's approach highly valuable. Moreover, this is the reason why, especially in the second part – *God the Father as Lord of His Creature*, a pastoral tone resounds relentlessly in the reader's mind. Barth succeeded to speak both about God's absolute lordship and the creature's freedom, avoiding any kind of determinism, synergism, or monism. Although he succeeded to keep them together, he does not assume that he fully reconcile them. On the contrary, Barth's approach leaves to the reader a strong knowledge and feeling about both God's transcendence and his immanence. One can see the results of his dialectical thinking throughout the doctrine of providence. On the one hand, this fact discloses God's character revealed in Jesus Christ, but on the other hand, it throws it into mystery. Thus, the Christian finds himself thrilled, full of joy and hope in Jesus Christ, but at the same time always waiting for new ways of knowing and seeing God at work in his providence.

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Barthov nauk o providnosti

Sažetak

Karl Barth u središte svojega pristupa nauku o stvorenju i providnosti stavlja Isusa Krista, čime kritizira prirodnu teologiju i ističe njezina ograničenja. Ovaj će rad pokazati središnje mjesto Krista u Barthovu cjelokupnom razmišljanju o Božjoj providnosti, kao i implikacije toga razmišljanja. Barthov specifičan pristup nauku o providnosti otvara mu mogućnost bavljenja gorućim problemima ljudskoga postojanja: ljudske patnje, ljudskih ograničenja, straha, smrti i zla. Rad ne nudi kritičku analizu Barthove teološke građe nauka o providnosti, nego ga nastoji što vjernije opisati i na taj način biti ogledalom kojim osoba može procijeniti vlastitu teologiju u ovome pogledu.