

The Freedom 'To Be'
*Karl Barth on Divine and Human Freedom:
A Protestant View*

George Kalantzis*

„Des Menschen Freiheit ist die Freudigkeit,
in der er Gottes Erwählung nachvollziehen darf“.
(Karl Barth, *Das Geschenk der Freiheit*)¹

Karl Barth was born in Basel, Switzerland, on 10 May 1886 and died in the same city 82 years later, on 9 December 1968. In-between, Barth transformed the character and trajectory of twentieth-century theology, especially among Protestant and Catholic theologians. Recognizing Barth's theological genius, Pope Pius XII called him the greatest theologian since Thomas Aquinas, while the late John Webster (†2016) recognized Barth as "the most important Protestant theologian since Schleiermacher", whose extraordinary descriptive depth of the Christian faith "puts him in the company of a handful of thinkers in the classical Christian tradition"². In over sixty years of teaching, preaching, and

* George Kalantzis is Professor of Theology at Wheaton College, U.S.A., and Director of The Wheaton Center for Early Christian Studies.

1. K. Barth, „Das Geschenk der Freiheit. Grundlegung evangelischer Ethik“. *Theologischen Studien*, 39 (Zürich 1953); translated as, "The Gift of Freedom", in K. Barth, *The Humanity of God*, Louisville / London: Westminster John Knox Press 1960.

2. J. Webster, *Barth*, London: Continuum ²2004, p. 1.

lecturing, Barth wrote millions of words in over 600 works, including books, essays, sermons, and letters. His *magnum opus*, the unfinished *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (1932-1967, published in English as *Church Dogmatics*)³ consists of 9.300 pages in thirteen volumes, whilst his *Der Römerbrief* (*The Epistle to the Romans*)⁴, his first commentary on St. Paul, was a turning point in early-twentieth-century biblical and theological studies.

Rightly considered alongside Thomas Aquinas, Jean Calvin, and Friedrich Schleiermacher, Barth "gave new impulses to Protestant theology during a critical phase, reshaping it fundamentally toward a systematic theology that had to cope with the grim realities of the 20th century"⁵. As principal author of the *Barmen Declaration* (1934) and the intellectual force behind the *Bekennende Kirche* (*Confessing Church*) Barth participated in the Evangelical resistance to National Socialism in ante-bellum Germany. For this, he was fired from his post as professor in Bonn and was forced to return to Switzerland in 1935, where he continued to champion the causes of the *Confessing Church*, the Jews, and to speak against systemic oppression, as well as to oppose post-war authoritarianisms and the rise of militarism, rejecting the nuclear arms race until his death. In 1948, Karl Barth was invited to deliver the keynote address at the inaugural assembly of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam, Holland, and was instrumental in the preparations for the second assembly in Evanston, Illinois, U.S., in 1954⁶.

Even during his life, Barth's theological project was not uncontroversial, and neither was his personal life. Barth enjoyed the benefits of

3. The English edition is, K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 13 vols., Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1956-75. Henceforth abbreviated *CD*.

4. Available in Greek as Karl Barth, *Ἡ Πρὸς Ῥωμαίους Ἐπιστολή*, translated by Giorgos Vlandis, Athens: Artos Zoes 2015.

5. B. Zellweger, *Karl Barth: Biography*, <https://barth.ptsem.edu/biography>, 28.07.2021.

6. The most significant biography of Barth based on original texts is Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barths Lebenslauf. Nach Seinen Briefen Und Autobiographischen Texten*, Göttingen: Gütersloh 1977. Available in English as *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, transl. John Bowden, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1994.

patriarchal power in his relationship with Charlotte von Kirschbaum his longtime live-in assistant and theological interlocutor, that imposed well-documented and inexcusable stress on his own family. And Barth's theological project itself was both attacked and supported fiercely by contemporary Catholic and Protestant theologians. Half a century after his death, Karl Barth and his theology still looms large over the post-Vatican II Catholic-Protestant rapprochement, and his influence on both Protestant and Catholic thought remains inestimable⁷.

Barth's rejection of Schleiermacher and his repeated break(s) with nineteenth-century liberalism, his opposition to the doctrine of pure nature⁸, and his rejection of classical metaphysics and Scholastic understandings of the *analogia entis* as the condition for theology marked a turning point in twentieth-century Protestant thought⁹. And the radical implications Barth contributed by placing the doctrine of election within the doctrine of God helped re-articulate Reformed theology within a more Christocentric, "theoanthropological", framework of divine grace and human agency, subjectivity and the *totaliter aliter*, the "Wholly Other".

7. For an excellent discussion see, D. S. Long, *Saving Karl Barth: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Preoccupation*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2014. Also, H. Urs von Balthasar, *Karl Barth: Darstellung und Deutung Seiner Theologie*, Köln: Jakob Hegner 1951. It is worth noting that Balthasar's book on Barth was prohibited from being published for over a decade.

8. As Long notes in *Saving Karl Barth*, p. 12, "[Barth] did not oppose natural theology; he thought it didn't exist. One may as well oppose flying pumpkins. If everything is created in, through, and for Christ, then there is no independent nature that can assess his claims on creation, as it were, from the outside. Where would such an outside be?"

9. Whether Balthasar's view that Barth had an erroneous understanding of the doctrine of the *analogia entis* or not continues to preoccupy theologians, but the fact remains that even Thomist disagree among themselves on the exact definition of the *analogia entis* itself. When Barth was teaching at the University of Münster, Balthasar's friend and mentor, the Jesuit Erich Przywara published his *Analogia Entis I. Metaphysik. Ur-Struktur und All-Rhythmus* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag 1932), which is often described as a "new Thomist existentialism" to which Barth responded quite negatively. On Barth's rejection of the Scholastic doctrine of the *analogia entis* for a modified one in the context of grace, what he termed the *analogia fidei* see K. L. Johnson, *Karl Barth and the Analogia Entis*, London: T&T Clark 2010. For an excellent treatment see, G.A. Siskos, «Η σύνθεση σχολαστικής θεολογίας και ύπαρξισμού στην Τριαδολογία της δυτικής χριστιανοσύνης: Karl Barth και Karl Rahner», *Theologia* 88/4 (2017) 41-77.

For Barth, "theology was responsible to the Word, it was not a "free science", but one "bound to the sphere of the church"¹⁰. At the end, even as Barth's theology contained elements that were "entirely new in the history of theology, it is equally true that it contained and was built upon modern elements ... [representing] a new stage of development in the history of modern theology, not a break with it"¹¹.

It is rightly to him, then, that we must turn for a robust Protestant discussion of Freedom – what it is and what it is not.

Modernity's Dilemma of Situationless Freedom

Charles Taylor has traced the historical evolution of the modern notion of subjectivity and its relationship to various operative conceptions of freedom. From his *Hegel and Modern Society* to the more recent *The Secular Age*¹², Taylor's narrative of secularity provides an illuminating description and a plausible account of how the notion that the cause of the good or right in the world is up to us came to comprise an important part of the modern self-understanding. In *Hegel and Modern Society*, Taylor concentrates especially on what can be considered to be "authentic freedom" as having come to mean "complete freedom", "the abolition of *all* situation, that is, a predicament which sets before us a certain task or calls for a certain response from us if we are to be free"¹³. This trajectory has come to dominate what one could identify as modernity's dilemma of situationless freedom, and the success of this endeavor has led to increased confidence in the unaided capacities of humans to reshape society. From Locke to Bentham and the original negative conception

10. Long, *Saving Karl Barth*, p. 20.

11. B. L. McCormack, "The Unheard Message of Karl Barth", in *Word and World* 14/1 (1994) 61.

12. C. Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1975; C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2007. Also, C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1989.

13. Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, p. 157. Emphasis added.

of classical liberalism, to Rousseau and the conception of freedom as *obeying only oneself*, to the Kantian notion of *autonomy*, and its successors right up to the Marxian idea of the “realm of freedom”, Taylor argues that such notions have culminated in the definition of freedom as the absence of any necessary order of nature shaping the self¹⁴. The result is the prevailing conception that “full freedom would be situationless”¹⁵.

This freedom has to be *won* by setting aside obstacles or breaking loose from external impediments, ties or entanglements. From communitarianism to libidinal libertarianism, such notions of “freedom as liberation” reappear in every conceivable contemporary context. Taylor identifies this as modernity’s dilemma of freedom, “a problem for all forms of modern expressivism, and in a sense also for the whole modern conception of subjectivity”¹⁶. In our contemporary idiom, claims Taylor: “To be free is to be untrammelled, to depend in one’s action only on oneself”. And he concludes: “Moreover, this conception of freedom has not been a mere footnote, but one of the central ideas by which the modern notion of the subject has been defined, as is evident in the fact that freedom is one of the values most appealed to in modern times. At the very outset, the new identity as self-defining subject was won by breaking free of the larger matrix of a cosmic order and its claim”¹⁷.

At the end, however, this situationless freedom would have no content, it would be *empty*. Viewed this way, “complete freedom would be a void in which nothing would be worth doing, nothing would deserve to count for anything”¹⁸. Furthermore, such a *situationless* self would be without defined purpose, for it would lack a *teleology*. And the dilemma is that, at the end, such a situationless *self* would not be free at all but rather, simply aimless. By contrast, Taylor asserts that what is required is a notion of “*situated* freedom”, which he defines as “recovering a conception of free activity which sees it as a response called for by a

14. *Ibid.*, p. 156-57.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 155-56.

18. *Ibid.*, *ad loc.*

situation which is ours in virtue of our condition as natural and social beings, or in virtue of some inescapable vocation and purpose"¹⁹.

Freedom as Concrete Actuality

From his earliest reading of the *Epistle to the Romans*, Barth was forced to react against the dominant nineteenth-century liberal moral culture and attempts at an *Ethik*, because in it he discerned a moral anthropology with which he was distinctly ill-at-ease. In his famous "break with modernity", or rather, modern liberalism, Barth did not accept interiority as fundamental to what it means to be human²⁰. For Barth, moral agency is "engaged", that is, "shaped by externalities, rather than governed by ideals of interiority, reflexivity and self-responsibility"²¹. Barth refused to allow that moral consciousness is basic as he identified such Kantian-in-origin notions of moral subjectivity to be based on anthropological claims that lacked serious consideration of human corruption (*i.e.*, sin) but also because they "project the moral self into a neutral space, from which it can survey the ethical question

19. *Ibid.*, p. 160. Among other similar critiques see also, A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1981.

20. It is important to note here McCormack's necessary nuance to Barth's famous "break with modernity". In "The Unheard Message of Karl Barth", p. 61, McCormack insists that "such a move did not represent a simple rejection of modernity; on the contrary, it would not have been possible had he not continued to build upon a foundation laid by certain crucial elements he retained as part of his modern inheritance. From Hegel and his right-wing follower Philip Marheineke, Barth retained the view that revelation is to be strictly understood as *Self*-revelation. From Kant, he retained the epistemology set forth in the First Critique, and he used it to establish the limits or boundaries of human knowing in order then to locate the being of God beyond those limits. The result was a shift from [Wilhelm] Herrmann's idealistic theology (which understood God as a necessary postulate for the sake of ethical activity) to a critically realistic theology (which understood God as a Reality complete, whole, and entire in itself, apart from and prior to all human knowledge and therefore not caught in the Kantian subject-object split)".

21. Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought*, London: T&T Clark 1998, p. 44.

“from the viewpoint of spectators”²². Barth rejected such absolutizing of the self and its reflective consciousness which come to assume “the dignity of ultimateness”, because he understood them to produce an “image of moral reason as a secure center of value, omniscient in its judgements”²³. Barth would agree with Taylor that this freedom is false, above all because it is bound up with an image of the human person as situationless, transcending all particulars. Such freedom simply enslaves.

Christian theology and discourse, for Barth, is “an inquiry into the specific language peculiar to, in fact constitutive of, the *specific semiotic community* called Christian Church”²⁴. As such, the Swiss Reformed theologian did not enter discussions about ‘liberty’, ‘freedom’, or ‘the individual’, by abandoning –or even bypassing– classical Christian concepts of divine aseity, sovereignty, and telos to modern liberal notions of personhood, the individual, and right(s) that need to be adjudicated on the basis of arbitrary claims to authority, often in libidinal competition. Barth understood freedom with reference to God, whose existence with and love for humans are both *acts* of freedom. Freedom is not a general concept for Barth. “Freedom”, for Barth, “is non-objectifiable or non-theorizable in abstraction from the actuality of its occurrence”²⁵.

Contrary to modernity’s notions of freedom as situationless, a free-standing, quasi-absolute reality that both characterizes and validates the unique dignity of the human person, for Barth, human freedom is *situated*; it is situated *by* and *in* the history of the covenant between the triune God and God’s human partners (always in the plural, ‘partners’, first): “Freedom is *consent to a given order* or reality which encloses human history, an order which is at one and the same time a loving summons to joyful action in accordance with itself, and a judgment against our attempts to be ourselves by somehow escaping from or

22. Webster, *Barth’s Moral Theology*, p. 36. This is evident even in Barth’s, “The Problem of Ethics Today”, in K. Barth, *The Word of God and Theology*, translated by Amy Marga, Edinburgh: T&T Clark 2011.

23. Barth, “The Problem of Ethics Today”, p. 171.

24. H. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1992, p. 78.

25. Webster, *Barth’s Moral Theology*, p. 103.

suspending its givenness. Freedom is the real possibility given to me by necessity"²⁶. Barth would insist that *plena libertate* is "our deliverance from the ocean of unlimited possibilities by transference to the rock of the one necessity which as such is [the] only possibility"²⁷. "Freedom is always "the event of freedom"²⁸. Freedom is dynamic; it is responsive. Freedom is not fought for, it is not *won*; it is *given* freely by God, in Christ. It is grace. For Barth, then, freedom is situated by "that history [that] always *is*, anterior to all human choosing; it is a condition in which we find ourselves, and not somethings which we bring about through an act of will"²⁹.

Barth insisted that historic Christianity understood freedom not as "a natural freedom but the freedom which is given to us"³⁰. In Barth we find a conception in which freedom is given, lost, and restored in Christ. This freedom is "the freedom of the creature, but of the creature who is elect, reconciled, and living in expectation of redemption"³¹. "Where else can we learn that freedom exists and what it is", asked Barth, "except in confrontation with God's own freedom as offered to us as

26. *Ibid.*, p. 112. Emphasis added.

27. *CD IV/3*, p. 449.

28. Barth, "The Gift of Freedom", p. 76.

29. J. Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology*, p. 123.

30. K. Barth, "The Christian Understanding of Revelation", in *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-War Writings 1946-52*, London: SCM Press 1954, p. 239. Barth sees in Augustine a clear and liberating ally on the concepts of will and freedom. Augustine comes to the distinction between *libertas uoluntate* and *libertum arbitrium* repeatedly throughout his writings. From the Edenic *posse non peccare*, to the post-lapsarian *non posse non peccare*, human will is restored in baptism to *posse non peccare* as it moves to the teleological *non posse peccare* as the expression of true freedom in the eschaton. See e.g., *Natura et gratia*. 58.68 (CSEL 60:284); *Gratia et libero arbitrio*, 15.31ff.; *Ad Simplicianum* I.1.7 (CCL 44:13). The best recent study on Augustine and the will is Han-Luen Kantzer Komline, *Augustine on the Will: A Theological Account*, New York: Oxford University Press 2020. This is also a nuance that is expressed in the Origenist tradition (through Athanasius and the Cappadocians) of the distinction between *προαίρεσις* and *ἀντεξούσιον* and the eschatological movement from *κατ' εἰκόνα* to *καθ' ὁμολώσιν*.

31. C. Gunton, "Barth, the Trinity, and Human Freedom", *Theology Today* 43/3 (1986) 319.

the source and measure of freedom?"³² Barth understood freedom as rooted in the aseity of God,³³ which guarantees the non-competitive relationship between Creator and creature, and therefore the nature of the relationship as grace, a gift freely given: "God's freedom is not merely unlimited possibility or formal majesty and omnipotence, that is to say empty, naked sovereignty [*leere, nackte Souveränität also*]"³⁴. To the Scholastic description of God as *actus purus*, Barth added, *et singularis*³⁵, by which he meant that, "God is in Himself free event, free act, and free will", quite different than Plato's highest ideal or Aristotle's *πρῶτον κινῶν*³⁶. Such a conception of God as unconditional power "would be a demon and as such [God would be God's] own prisoner. Nor is this true of the God-given freedom of human beings. If we so misinterpret human freedom, it irreconcilably clashes with divine freedom and becomes the false freedom of sin, reducing man to a prisoner"³⁷.

Freedom is never a potentiality: it is a concrete actuality. Barth pointed to the insufficiency of the concept of God's *potentia agendi in aliud*, and instead insisted that "in God all potentiality is included in His actuality and therefore all freedom is His decision. Decision means choice, exercised freedom"³⁸. Because the triune God exists in the eternal decision to be in *self*-relation, God is always and already fully actualized *ad intra*. God is the only autonomously free personal being; God's freedom is the only ontic reality. God alone is self-grounded, self-determined, self-moved, unlimited, unrestricted, and unconditioned from without³⁹. God's freedom is *trinitarian* and, therefore, God's freedom is freedom for fellowship, embracing grace, thankfulness, and peace; God's freedom is revealed in space and time, it is not an abstract ontological concept

32. Barth, "The Gift of Freedom", p. 71.

33. *CD* II/1, p. 307.

34. Barth, "The Gift of Freedom", p. 71.

35. *CD* II/1, p. 264.

36. *CD* II/1, p. 264-65.

37. Barth, "The Gift of Freedom", p. 71.

38. *CD* I/1, p. 157.

39. *CD*, II/1, p. 273.

anterior to God's self-revelation: "Only in *this* relational freedom [–und nicht anders–] is God sovereign, almighty, the Lord of all"⁴⁰.

Freedom in Election

Since God's freedom is a predicate of God's trinitarian being, God's freedom is *relational*, and it is known in God's action⁴¹. God's *perichoretic* freedom as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is, therefore, situated. As relational and situated, God's freedom is also directional: "In His own freedom, as the *source* of human freedom, God above all *willed* and *determined* Himself to be the Father and the Son in the unity of the Spirit"⁴². Furthermore, "in Himself, in the primal and basic decision [*Ur- und Grundentscheidung*] in which He wills to be and actually is God ... God is none other than the One who in His Son or Word elects Himself, and in and with Himself elects His people"⁴³. This is the *locus* of freedom for Barth: the eternal election of the Son.

God's freedom is revealed to humanity relationally, in the election of Jesus Christ, who, on behalf of the world, overcomes alienation as the one true, free person by virtue of his joyful obedience to the Father. God is *self-determined* in Christ to be the elect One who shapes God and humanity. Barth devoted all of *CD* II/2 to the doctrine of election, which he saw as the very essence of the Gospel: "The election of grace [*die Gnadenwahl*] is the sum of the Gospel – we must put it as pointedly as that. But more, the election of grace is the whole of the Gospel, the Gospel *in nuce*"⁴⁴. This is, for Barth, the necessary corrective to nearly every prior conceptions of the doctrine of election (including Calvin's)

40. Barth, "The Gift of Freedom", p. 72.

41. *CD* I/2, p. 815-16.

42. Barth, "The Gift of Freedom", p. 71. Emphasis added.

43. *CD*, II/2, p. 76.

44. *CD* II/2, pp. 13f. Cf. B. L. McCormack, "Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology", in J. Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000, pp. 92-110.

for it brings *election* properly under the “doctrine of God”, and not anthropology, thus also reshaping soteriology⁴⁵.

Barth’s Reformed theology rejected explicitly Calvin’s *decretum absolutum*, insisting that “[t]he electing God of Calvin is a *Deus nudus absconditus*. It is not the *Deus revelatus*” in Jesus⁴⁶. Bypassing most of the post-Enlightenment theological and moral discourse, Barth turned to fourth century for support, noting that “with Athanasius the decree, or predestination, or election was in fact, the decision reached at the beginning of all things, at the beginning of the relationship between God and the reality which is distinct from Him. The Subject of this decision is the triune God – the Son of God no less than the Father and the Holy Spirit. And the specific object of it is the Son of God in His determination as the Son of Man, the God-Man, Jesus Christ, who is such as the eternal basis of the whole divine election”⁴⁷. The Incarnation reveals that actuality implies possibility: God has self-determined to reveal God’s self in the Person of Jesus Christ and thus bind God’s own self to what is not God. Though distinct from creation –a distinction that never escapes Barth– God shares humanity in Christ⁴⁸. In Christ, God encounters us as an *I* who encounters a *Thou*: “The Subject of revelation attested by the Bible, of whatever nature His being, language, and action may be, is the one Lord, not a half god, either descended or ascended. Communion with Him who reveals Himself there means for man, in every case and under all circumstances, that He confronts him as a Thou confronts an I and unites with him as a Thou unites with an I. Not otherwise!”⁴⁹. Jesus

45. *CD* II/2, pp. 106-115.

46. *CD*, II/2, p. 111. In “On the Humanity of God”, p. 49, Barth exclaims: “Would that Calvin had energetically pushed ahead on this point [*i.e.*, the humanity of God in Christ]) in his Christology, his doctrine of God, his teaching about predestination, and then logically also into his ethics!”.

47. *CD*, II/2, pp. 109-110.

48. In *CD* I/1, p. 468, Barth insists on the ontological distinction between God and the world while at the same time maintaining what he terms a “togetherness [*Zusammensein*] at a distance”.

49. *CD* I/1, p. 438. Barth opened *CD* II/1, p. 57, by framing this dialectic: “Bearing witness to Himself, but also veiling Himself by means of this sacramental reality, God

has made manifest that in God's "innermost being" God is the "kind of God" in whom it is not "unnatural" to be what God is not, human⁵⁰. Herein lies the freedom of God.

In "On the Humanity of God", Barth was explicit: "It is when we look at Jesus Christ that we know decisively that God's deity does not exclude but includes His *humanity*"⁵¹. Because the Father relates to the Son so that God is reiterated in human history, we cannot talk about *Λόγος ἄσαρκος* as someone abstract, one who is eternally self-existent without any need of reference of being a *pro nobis*. "God in his identity with himself (the Word of God is God) becomes related to us (the Word of God is "God with us")"⁵². Without positing a separation in the divine ontology, this spatiality allows Barth to argue that "[t]he being of God is an ordered freedom which is the ordered freedom of God"⁵³. As the second Person of the Trinity, the Son is not only the *object* of election, but also the electing *subject*, he is not an abstract concept, a *Λόγος ἄσαρκος*, rather, he was, is, and always will be Jesus Christ. Or rather, any conception of the *Λόγος ἄσαρκος* is determined by the *Λόγος ἔνσαρκος*, the *Logos incarnandus* is determined by the *Logos incarnatus*. God and humanity relate as free subjects in a *common covenant history*⁵⁴. In this subject-object dialectic, we always have to do with "a movement in which God Himself is the *terminus a quo* and the creature the *terminus ad quem*. God speaks and is heard; He reveals Himself and is

comes before man as the One who addresses him and who is to be addressed in return, a He who says "thou" to us and to whom we may say "Thou" in return".

50. C. Gunton, "Karl Barth's doctrine of election as part of his doctrine of God", *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 25/2 (1974) 381-392. Gunton highlights that Barth's move is from time to eternity, and not the reverse.

51. Barth, "On the Humanity of God", p. 49.

52. H. Frei, *The Doctrine of Revelation in the Thought of Karl Barth, 1909-1922. The Nature of Barth's Break with Liberalism*, unpublished dissertation, Yale 1956, pp. 107f.

53. Gunton, "Barth, the Trinity, and Human Freedom", p. 318.

54. Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology* p. 106. Gunton, "Barth, the Trinity, and Human Freedom", p. 317 notes that "among Barth's achievements are the restoration of the link between history and the Trinity and the insertion into the Augustinian tradition of elements from the Cappadocian Fathers".

known; He comes and is present; He goes and comes again. He acts and effects; He gives and takes; He hastens and waits"⁵⁵. In Barth's radical *Christocentricity*, the fundamental relation of God with humanity is made concrete and complete in the Person of Jesus Christ, the true "God of man" [*Gott des Menschen*] and true "Man of God" [*Mensch Gottes*]. And herein lies human freedom.

Situating Freedom

God is. This seemingly simple statement is the foundation of all Christian theology and moral discourse. We can know nothing of God or ourselves outside of God's *ownself*-revelation. "God is who He is in the act of His revelation. God seeks and creates fellowship between Himself and us, and therefore He loves us. But He is this loving God without us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in the freedom of the Lord, who has His life from Himself"⁵⁶. Fully actualized *a se*, God's freedom is *non-competitive* – either within the triune self or with creation, God's own self-expression. It is because of the free, non-competitive relationality of God *a se* that humanity is a *true* partner with God⁵⁷. And it is because of the free, non-competitive relationality of God *a se* that God is free to be *pro nobis*, first, and, then, *pro me*. Central to Barth's thought is that "God's freedom is essentially not freedom *from*, but freedom *to* and *for* ... [*und zwar konkret*] God is free for *man*, free to coexist with man and [*seine Selbsterwählung und Selbstbestimmung*], as the Lord of the covenant, [*und so*] to participate in his *history*"⁵⁸.

55. *CD* III/3, p. 429.

56. *CD*, II/1, p. 257.

57. See Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology*, pp. 99-124. Also, C. Gunton, "The Triune God and the Freedom of the Creature", in S. W. Sykes (ed.), *Karl Barth. Centenary Essays*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988, pp. 46-68.

58. Barth, "The Gift of Freedom", p. 72. Emphasis is original. We have to be careful here to note that, as Johnson observes, "For Barth, this means that we cannot say that God positively wills everything that human creatures will. For example, God does not will

It is worth quoting him at length at this point:

We may conclude that as God preserves the creature, it may continue in being. Man may continue to be man. ... That the creature may not only be, but may continue to be what it is, running its course within the limits marked off for it; ... God does not begrudge it this, or deprive it of it; that there is a delighting or sport in which first the Creator and then the creature has a part: this is the grand free mystery of the divine preservation ... And so 'man goeth forth unto his work and to his labor unto the evening' (*Ps.* 104. 23); to which it belongs that he can use his senses and understanding to perceive that two and two make four, and to write poetry and to think, and to make music, and to eat and drink, and to be filled with joy and often with sorrow, and to love and sometimes to hate, and to be young and to grow old, and all within his own experience and activity, affirming it not as half a man but as a whole man, with head uplifted and the heart free and the conscience at rest: 'O Lord, how manifold are thy works' (*Ps.* 104.24). It is only the heathen gods who envy man. The true God, who is unconditionally the Lord, allows him to be the thing for which He created him. He is far too highly exalted to take it amiss or to prevent it.... There can be no doubt that with autonomous reality God does give to man and to all His creatures the freedom of individual action⁵⁹.

The non-competitive directionality of God also means that God's freedom is not threatened by the freedom of the creature. For it is the freedom of a *creature*. God's determination –that is, the covenant established by God– that the creature be included in the eternal will as a partner does not negate human freedom, but *establishes* it⁶⁰. As such, God's freedom axiomatically disallows human freedom to compete with or limit God. Creating in self-determined freedom, God granted autonomous human existence (established and maintained by God)

the evil that creatures do, nor does God actively will every particular thing that takes place in nature or history", in "The Being and Act of the Church: Barth and the Future of Evangelical Ecclesiology", in B. L. McCormack and C. B. Anderson (eds.), *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2012, p. 211.

59. *CD* III/3, pp. 84-87.

60. *CD* III/3, p. 285.

and decided to be *for* humanity, determining –not compelling– us to be God’s children⁶¹. "He who does *that* is the living God. And the freedom in which He does *that* is His deity"⁶². As John Webster noted, Karl Barth aims to eradicate from Christian theology what he identifies as the "abstract notion of “a superior and absolutely omniscient, omnipotent, and Omni operative being”"⁶³, which Barth terms, "This empty shell"⁶⁴. Barth also rejected such language because, in its abstractness, any such notion "fails to state how God is “omnipotent *in* the freedom of His creatures"⁶⁵, rather than omnipotent in competition with, or opposition to, that freedom"⁶⁶. God’s love for the creature is the motive which plans and orders the relationship, establishing freedom on the One who can accomplish it⁶⁷. "God’s high freedom in Jesus Christ is His freedom for *love*".⁶⁸ God’s eternal intratrinitarian decision to elect the Son, establishes for Barth two simultaneous principles: on the one hand, "it crowds out and replaces the idea of *decretum absolutum*"⁶⁹, and on the other, established God’s relationship with humanity as *der Liebende in der freihei*.

Freedom ‘To Be’

Freedom is not shapeless and arbitrary; it is to a particular end. Freedom, to be freedom, must have a shape, a form⁷⁰. God establishes both the form and the purpose of freedom in Jesus. God’s self-revealed love makes human freedom possible: "How could it be freedom of the divine mercy bestowed on man", exclaims Barth, "if it suppressed and

61. Gunton, "The Triune God", p. 59.

62. Barth, "The Humanity of God", p. 45. Emphasis original.

63. Webster, *Barth’s Moral Theology*, p. 105.

64. *CD* III/3, p. 31.

65. *CD* II/1, p. 598.

66. Webster, *Barth’s Moral Theology*, p. 105.

67. *CD* III/3, p. 188.

68. Barth, "The Humanity of God", p. 48.

69. *CD*, II/2, p. 103.

70. Gunton, "Barth, the Trinity, and Human Freedom", pp. 318-19. Emphasis added.

dissolved human freedom? It is the grace of revelation that God exercises and maintains His freedom to free man"⁷¹. Providing a deeply-needed corrective to the more recent synopsistic parodies of the doctrine, Barth insisted that election is *to* something, a *telos*. That *telos* is likeness to God, in whose image we are made. In a fashion analogous to God's self-election in Christ, the human's election of God can only be a *response* to the divine. This is, at the end, also how *autonomy* is properly understood for Barth, namely, "a simple but comprehensive autonomy of the creature which is constituted originally by the act of eternal divine election, and which has in this act its ultimate reality"⁷². It is *this* God, Barth insisted, who establishes true relationship with the human covenantal partner as agent. God capacitates the human to be and act. Human agency is derived from the reality of God's *hypostatic* action in Christ which constitutes, grounds, and makes possible our own. True human agency flows from *die Gnadenwahl*⁷³. This is an autonomy, "but it is a *given one*, shaped and –if we use the word carefully– determined by God" in Christ⁷⁴.

At the heart of Barth's reaction to modernity is that it "falsely considers the transcendent freedom of God's will to be essentially alien to the cause of humanity, and thereby commits itself to develop an anthropology in which the only safe haven against the insistent requirements of God is undetermined moral inwardness"⁷⁵. For Barth, *grace* precedes freedom; gracious election enables free response, and God's will is the condition of human freedom – not its limitation⁷⁶. In God's "*gracious election*", the election of the Son, God in God's relational freedom, also sets the creature free *to be* itself. When Barth spoke of the "execution of the election of grace", Keith L. Johnson observes, one understands the specific and particular will of God for the reconciliation of humanity⁷⁷:

71. *CD* I/2, p. 365.

72. *CD* II/2, p. 177.

73. Variably translated as "gracious election" or "election of grace".

74. Gunton, "Barth, the Trinity, and Human Freedom", p. 319.

75. Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology*, p. 64.

76. *CD* II/1, p. 560.

77. Johnson, "The Being and Act of the Church", p. 111.

"When we say "the will of God" we have to understand His fatherly good-will, His decree of grace in Jesus Christ, the mercy in which from all eternity He undertook to save the creature, and to give it eternal life in fellowship with Himself"⁷⁸. All creation, Barth wrote, "took place on the basis of this purposed covenant and with a view to its execution", and as a result, "the meaning of the continued existence of the creature, and therefore the purpose of its history, is that this covenant will and work of God begun in creation should have its course and reach its goal"⁷⁹. The will and freedom of God, precisely because it is the will and freedom of this God, is neither a capricious, arbitrary, irrepressible *libido dominandi*, nor an anthropomorphic indeterminacy. It is in his engagement with doctrine of the *concursum Dei*, that Barth "seeks to explain how it is that God executes *this* [specific] will in time"⁸⁰. God is the Almighty high above all creatures, the *causa causarum*⁸¹. Yet, because Barth saw the relationship as freely covenantal, he refused to identify divine omnicausality with divine sole causality⁸². God "wills "all things" only in the sense that he wills this world and its history *as the context* in which the covenant of grace is played out"⁸³. Hence, God's "causare consists, and consists *only*, in the fact that He bends [human beings'] activity to the execution of His own will which is His will of grace, subordinating their operations to the specific operation which constitutes the history of the covenant of grace"⁸⁴. The covenant of grace gives human actions their form, but, as Johnson notes, it does not violate the integrity of these actions as creaturely actions⁸⁵. The temptation is

78. *CD* III/3, p. 117.

79. *CD* III/3, p. 36.

80. Cf. Johnson, "The Being and Act of the Church", p. 211. Also, McCormack, "The Actuality of God: Karl Barth in Conversation with Open Theism", in B.L. McCormack (ed.), *Engaging the Doctrine of God*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2008, p. 228.

81. *CD* III/3, p. 117.

82. *CD* IV/4. See W Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology*, p. 108, n. 45.

83. B. L. McCormack, "The Actuality of God", p. 228.

84. *CD* III/3, p. 105. Vid. K.L. Johnson, "The Being and Act of the Church", pp. 201-214.

85. See, Johnson, "The Being and Act of the Church", p. 211. Cf. *CD* III/3, p. 122.

to understand this covenantal relationship through a “God everything and man nothing” formula as a description of grace, says Barth. This “is not merely a “shocking simplification” but complete nonsense”⁸⁶. Barth insisted that God “does not play the part of the tyrant” toward the creature⁸⁷. “Man is not nothing. He is God’s man. He is accepted by God. He is recognized as himself a free subject, a subject who has been made free once and for all by his restoration as the faithful covenant partner of God”⁸⁸.

God’s “mighty deeds” in and through Israel, Jesus, and the Church, are not a narrational vacuity, but concrete, covenantal reality that cannot proceed without God’s fellow covenant partners, precisely because they are God’s “mighty deeds” *in* and *through* Israel, Jesus, and the Church. As John Webster observes, “Barth’s “contextualism” is not some kind of principled pluralism but a simple limitation of the theology of freedom to the description of the encounter between *this* God –Father, Son and Holy Spirit, whose life is actual as a power which generates human freedom– and *this* human being – the one whose liberation is a summons to responsibility”⁸⁹. Situated in God’s self-revealed covenant in Christ, the fullness of human freedom is revealed in Jesus, the obedient Son. God freely pardons, removes shame, encounters humanity in grace and love, and overcomes death. Thus, we are called to be *free* in the obedient, loving *response* which corresponds to God’s own being⁹⁰. It is because for Barth the non-competitive freedom of God is God’s inexhaustible capacity to be God *for us* in Christ that he can see clearly human freedom as the joyful and active consent to the mystery of divine grace – for God has set us free *to be* like Jesus⁹¹.

86. CD IV/1, p. 89.

87. CD III/3, p. 122.

88. CD IV/1, pp. 89-90.

89. Webster, *Barth’s Moral Theology*, p. 102.

90. J. Thompson, *Christ in Perspective: Christological Perspectives in the Theology of Karl Barth*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1978, p. 102.

91. CD II/2, p. 30.

Conclusion: Free to be for the Other

On 21 September 1953 Barth addressed the meeting of the Gesellschaft für Evangelische Theologie, in Bielefeld. At the beginning of the lecture he titled, *The Gift of Freedom [Das Geschenk der Freiheit]*, Barth provided the three-stage argument on freedom we have seen here in the form of summary proposals and highlighted its resultant social consequence:

First: *God's freedom is His very own*. It is the sovereign grace wherein God chooses to commit Himself for man [*für den Menschen*]. Thereby God is Lord as *man's God [Gott des Menschen]*.

Secondly: *Man's freedom is his as a gift of God*. It is the joy wherein man appropriates [or understands, *nachvollziehen*] God's election. Thereby man is God's creature, His partner, and His child as *God's man [Mensch Gottes]*.

Thirdly: Evangelical⁹² ethics is the reflection upon *God's command to human action* which is circumscribed by the gift of this freedom⁹³.

Barth was very clear that all Christian discourse, particularly our ethical reflection, circles back to who God is, insisting that "the dogmatics of the Christian Church, and basically the doctrine of God, is ethics"⁹⁴. As we have seen, Barth's account of human freedom is grounded on the theological character of human life, for it is dependent on the very character of the free, self-giving love that is God. True freedom is given by the triune God, animated and sustained by the Holy Spirit, and returned back to God as

92. For Barth, "'Evangelical' means informed by the gospel of Jesus Christ, as heard afresh in the 16th-century Reformation by direct return to Holy Scripture". K. Barth, "Evangelical Theology in the 19th Century", in K. Barth, *The Humanity of God*, London: Collins 1962, p. 11.

93. K. Barth, "The Gift of Freedom", p. 69, with some alterations to retain Barth's original emphasis.

94. *CD II/2*, p. 515.

acknowledgement of God's Lordship. As such, true human freedom is situated by its *teleology*: it is situated in the freedom to be in the likeness of God, to *become* partakers of divine nature.

Situating freedom, however, is quite different from absolutizing situations. Obedience is free and extemporaneous – shaped by the command of God *and* by the concrete situation. It is not a deterministic, rote obedience. At the same time, obedience is not relativistic or arbitrary. As with everything else, Barth aimed for an account of ethics that is Christocentrically determined, including his reflection on sin, whether personal or systemic. In sum, Barth understood not only evil to be a *privatio boni*, but also sin. He recognized sin as “the absurdity of nothingness” that “contradicts our being, and so constitutes something that we cannot do, and yet do”⁹⁵. This “absurd act” of “nothingness is that which God does not will. It lives only by the fact that it is that which God does not will. But it does live by this fact”⁹⁶. If obedience is the acknowledgement of the Lordship of Christ, disobedience is an absurdity that claims reality where none exists, a *res* where there is only a *privatio*⁹⁷. Barth's assertion that sin is nothingness ought not to be confused, however, with “the foolish assertion that sin is not what men and women do. For it is just that – the wrongdoing of “the average man””⁹⁸. On the contrary, human sin is positive evil, fraught with consequence⁹⁹. To sin against another is to deprive one of *this* freedom of joyful obedience and, therefore, to impede their divinely appointed *teleology*, while simultaneously also derailing our own freedom from its appointed end – the *likeness* of God.

Barth recognized human freedom as “a very definite [*ganz bestimmt*] freedom”¹⁰⁰. There is a proper specificity to human freedom. Human

95. Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology*, p. 71.

96. *CD* III/3, pp. 352.

97. *CD* IV/1, p. 419.

98. Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology*, p. 71.

99. This is also why Barth repeatedly objected to the language of *Erbsünde* (inherited sin) and rather preferred *Ursünde* (original sin) “because inheritance ultimately cannot be one's own act”, in Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology*, p. 72.

100. *CD* II/2, p. 585.

freedom is realized in acts of joyful, obedient response¹⁰¹, for it is located in and situated by the particular Spirit-produced acknowledgement in the form of the confession *Κύριος Ἰησοῦς* (1 Cor. 12.3). Acknowledgement involves "submission to the authority of the other"; acknowledging Jesus as Lord denotes submitting to the authority of God in joyful obedience. The confession of Jesus as Lord, however, is neither hemming human freedom nor is it a passive acquiescence, or even a resignation before fate, the kind of "necessity" Hegel identified in the theology of ancient Greece and Rome¹⁰². Rather, it is "the most positive affirmation ... that gives [the creature] its specific and genuine reality"¹⁰³, specifying the human as the creature of *this* God. "By the outpouring of the Holy Spirit it is possible in the freedom of man for God's revelation to meet him, for God to be revealed involves the dislodging of man from the estimation of his own freedom, and his enrichment with the freedom of the children of God"¹⁰⁴. This dislodging of the self as the referent and center sets us free *to be* in Christ.

Our freedom in Christ, therefore, is also directional. As proper human freedom is the response of joyful obedience to God's free *self*-revelation in Jesus, so is the acknowledgement of the Lordship of Christ the source of all Christian *Ethik*; a joyful reply to *God's command to human action* which is circumscribed by the gift of freedom: "It is a matter of man's direction into the freedom for which he is made free in Jesus Christ ... the place and kingdom which already surrounds him, in which he is

101. In *CD* II/2, p. 586, Barth adds: "The man who stands under the jurisdiction of all those commands of God and is not refreshed [*unerquickte*] is not the obedient man but the man who disobeys God". For an excellent comparative treatment see, M. Folsom, *A Comparative Assessment of the Concept of Freedom in the Anthropologies of John Macmurray, John Zizioulas, and Karl Barth* (Ph.D. Thesis), University of Otago, New Zealand, 1994. Also, J. M. Capper, *Karl Barth's Theology of Joy* (Ph.D. Thesis), University of Cambridge, United Kingdom, 1998, especially Chapter 6.

102. G.E.F. Hegel, "The Concept of Necessity and Extreme Purpose", in *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. II, *Determinative Religion*, P. C. Hodgson (ed.), Berkeley: University of California Press 1988, pp. 499-501.

103. *CD* III/4, p. 567.

104. *CD* II/1, pp. 257-260.

already placed, in which he has only to find himself. God's direction is to do this, to make use of his freedom. ... [Thus,] freedom means being in a spontaneous and therefore willing agreement with the sovereign freedom of God"¹⁰⁵. Because it is derived from our union with Christ, such is not the pursuit of archaic magnanimity, but rather a recognition of our mutuality and co-dependence. True human freedom finds its actualized expression in the active pursue of "*the good of the other*", in *imitatio Dei*.

True human freedom is situated by the inexhaustible divine love *pro nobis* and is properly directed to the fellow image-bearers in a reversal of the absurdity of *Genesis 4.9*: "Am I my brother's keeper?" "Yes!" has always been God's unequivocal response, "for without your sister *you* cannot be; you have no ontology apart from your brother, you have no past, no present, no future apart from your sister, for without her you cannot be in my likeness!" To be free is to be *for* the other.

105. *CD IV/1*, p. 100.