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THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD IN RECONCILIATION WITH KARL BARTH AS GUIDE

Rev. Victor Sinclair

Introduction

God is sovereign. That means that he makes his own plans and carries them out in his own time and way. To state it otherwise, this is simply an expression of supreme intelligence, power, wisdom and love. This in turn means that God's will is not arbitrary, but acts in complete harmony with his character.

The eternal and absolute sovereignty of God was an integral part of the Jewish Faith and T.W. Manson briefly summarised the doctrine:

At the beginning it is national: in the end there is no limitation from without, and any self-limitation which there may be is only for the time being. That is, the purpose of God is what gives meaning to the world and to the life of man; and this purpose is conceived as wide enough to include the possibility and the actuality of wills hostile to it, without ceasing to be in its entirety the purpose of God. A rule of God, spiritual, world-wide and all comprehensive.⁸¹

This revelation of the sovereignty of God we find in its fullness in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. According to Manson,

the sovereignty of God is essentially the working out, to a pre-determined and inevitable end, of God's holy purpose,.....Its motive is love, its means service, and its end a state of things where the will of God is done on earth as in heaven.⁸²

The sovereignty of God is thus the active divine resolve which cannot remain in the sphere of thought but demands action. Here is the basis and purpose and execution of the plan of salvation. In the language of the New Testament, God,

having made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he has purposed in himself, that

⁸¹ T.W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus*, Cambridge, 1951, p.158

⁸² *Ibid*, p.170

in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth, even in him.⁸³

Karl Barth understands God to be the one who reveals himself as sovereign and operative in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. The sovereignty of God is essentially the freedom of God. But it is not a naked sovereignty nor a limited freedom. It does not mean an absolute, arbitrary power of disposal which is inconsistent with the nature of God. Nor can man as creature set limits upon God. God, however, is free to limit himself. He can reveal himself or he can conceal himself. God is free to become incarnate and to perform his work in the shape of miracle. He is free to be provoked and rejected, to be merciful and to bless and to make alive. The full range of the freedom of God must be allowed.

His presence in the life and being of the world is his personal and therefore actual presence expressed according to his sovereign decisions. This is how he meets us in Jesus Christ. His revelation in Jesus Christ embraces all these apparently so diverse and contradictory possibilities. They are all his possibilities. If we deny any one of them, we are denying Jesus Christ and God himself. Instead of recognising and adoring God, we are setting up an idol. For we are imposing upon him - in defiance of the freedom which he has actually proved to us - a bondage which can be only that of our own self-will that would like to deny God and put itself in the place of God.⁸⁴

The mystery and majesty of revelation and reconciliation in Jesus Christ is that in giving himself in love and grace to man God does not give up or lose his sovereignty.

⁸³ *Ephesians* 1:9,10

⁸⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* vols. 1-14, E.T., Eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, Edinburgh, 1956-1975 (hereafter C.D.) 11/1, pp.314-315

A. The Gospel of Reconciliation

Man is the object of God's love and saving purpose, and the recipient of God's gracious will and action in Jesus Christ his son. Through the Holy Spirit he is lost in wonder, love and praise. According to Barth, this Gospel of reconciliation - of the Grace of God in Jesus Christ - has for its summary, the doctrine of election.

The doctrine of election is the sum of the Gospel because of all the words that can be said or heard it is the best: that God elects man: that God is for man too, the one who loves in freedom. It is grounded in the knowledge of Jesus Christ because he is both the electing God and elected man in one. It is part of the doctrine of God because originally God's election of man is a predestination not merely of man but of himself. Its function is to bear basic testimony to eternal, free and unchanging grace as the beginning of all the works and ways of God.⁸⁵

The Election of Grace

It will be helpful and relevant to note the salient points of Barth's exposition which is a radical restatement and revision which is contrary to most traditional views. Herbert Hartwell writes,

Barth claims....that the thought of sinful man's reconciliation with God in Jesus Christ and of God's fellowship with sinful men, thereby made possible for him and for men, was in the mind of God before the world and men were created and thus even before sin became a reality. The unparalleled precedence thereby given to the idea of reconciliation over creation and sin has to be seen in the light of Barth's teaching on creation..... the Nihil and reconciliation.....before its true meaning can be grasped.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ C.D., 11/2, p.3

⁸⁶ H. Hartwell, *The Theology of Karl Barth : An Introduction* London, 1964, p.109

Barth is concerned not to create some abstract necessity of universal acceptance to correspond to the divine sovereignty of electing grace. He writes,

The proposition from which we must start is that in the determination of the rejected we have to do with the will of God in what is by definition a wholly different sense, than in the determination of the elect. The one will of God which determines both is here the almighty, holy and compassionate non-willing of God. No eternal covenant of wrath corresponds on the one side to the eternal covenant of grace on the other.⁸⁷

Barth's whole argument is based on the fact that Jesus Christ is electing God and elected man. As the elected man he is the reality and revelation of the will of God on behalf of an unlimited number of other men. He is elected to bear their rejection, but also to overcome and therefore, to be for them the promise and proclamation of their own election in time.

If we cannot simply say for all, but can only speak of an unlimited many, this is not because of any weakness of limitation of the revealed divine will in Jesus Christ. This will of God, as is continually and rightly said in harmony with I Timothy 2:4 is directed to the salvation of all men in intention, and sufficient for the salvation of all men in power..... . When we remember this, we cannot follow the classical doctrine and make the open number of those who are elect in Jesus Christ into a closed number to which all other men are opposed as if they were rejected. Such an assumption is shattered by the unit of the real and revealed will of God in Jesus Christ..... . This means however that the intention and power of God in relation to the whole world and all men are always his intention and power - an intention and power which we cannot control and the limits of which we cannot arbitrarily restrict or enlarge. It is always the concern of God to decide what is the world and the human totality for which the man Jesus Christ is elected, and which

⁸⁷ C.D., 11/2, p.450

is itself elected in and with him....We cannot consider their number as closed, for we can never find any reason for such a limitation in Jesus Christ. As the reality and revelation of the omnipotent loving-kindness of God, he is not dead, but lives and reigns to all eternity. This event in and for the world, and therefore its movement and direction at any given moment, its dimension and the number of those whom the event affects at any moment, are all matters of his sovereign control. For the very same reason, however, we cannot equate their number with the totality of all men.⁸⁸

All of this is penetrating and helpful and while it could be argued that it leads to the teaching of universal salvation, Barth stops short of such a position. He rejects the logical reasoning, and at times, speculating of the human mind, even the 'mind' of men of faith, and prefers to leave the issue to rest in the 'divine logic' and freedom, the sovereign freedom of the divine grace in Jesus Christ. C.K. Barrett has some very helpful comments, including a quotation from Barth himself, on this important subject. He states:

The history and personal make up of the Church are not due to chance or to arbitrary human choices, but represent the working out of God's plan. Only here can peace and security be found. Our own intentions, like our own virtues, are far too insecure to stand the tests of time and judgementPredestination is the most comfortable of all Christian doctrines, if men will accept it in its biblical form, and not attempt to pry into it with questions which it does not set out to answer. It is not a 'quantitative limitation of God's action, but it is a qualitative definition', the final statement of the truth that justification, and, in the end, salvation also, are by the grace above, and through faith alone.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Ibid., pp.421-422

⁸⁹ C.K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans* A & C Black, London, 1962, 1971 pp.179-171

B. The Sovereignty of God in Reconciliation

The sovereignty of God in reconciliation is to be recognised and distinguished in the fact of God becoming man in Jesus Christ, i.e. the incarnation, a sovereignty in 'flesh'. In the fact also, of God in Jesus Christ bearing man's sin and bearing it away, i.e. the atonement, a sovereignty in 'death'. And again, in the fact of God blessing man with light and life, i.e. the resurrection and triumph of Jesus Christ, a sovereignty, in communication.

(a) The Man Christ Jesus

Barth states it thus :

The Christian theological tradition has always been in agreement that the statement ' the Word was made flesh' is not to be thought of as describing an event which overtook him, and therefore overtook God himself, but rather a free divine activity, a sovereign act of divine lordship, an act of mercy which was necessary only by virtue of the will of God himself.⁹⁰

And again,

It is his sovereign grace that he wills to be and is amongst us in humility, our God, God for us.⁹¹

The atonement made in Jesus Christ will be seen to be wholly an act of the grace of God and therefore an act of sovereignty which cannot be understood in all its profundity except from the fact that God is this God and a God of this kind.⁹²

Finally,

this intrinsically perfect and unsurpassable action has a distinct character.....It's donation sovereignly precedes all reception on our part in the fact that in itself it is not merely real but true, the truth, and that as such it is not dark and dumb but perspicuous and vocal, that it may and will therefore be received, but is independent of our actual reception, being the sovereign basis of all reception and

⁹⁰ C.D., IV/3. I, p.179

⁹¹ Ibid, p.193

⁹² Ibid, p.80

therefore conditioning our reception but not conditioned by it.⁹³

Barth regarded the incarnation as that which is impossible for men to know and grasp by themselves. He called it 'the mystery of revelation.'⁹⁴ In summary definition he stated it thus:

it consists in the fact that the eternal Word of God chose, sanctified, and assumed human nature and existence into oneness with himself, in order thus, as very God and very man, to become the word of reconciliation spoken by God to man. The sign of this mystery revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the miracle of his birth, that he was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary.⁹⁵

For Barth, then, this revelation and gospel are part of the one historical Jesus. This means that,

the revelation of the incarnate Word will be thus manifest to us in its truth by its own cogency and agency and not by any capacity belonging to us.⁹⁶

An important perspective in the understanding and statement of Barth in this respect is noted by John Thompson who writes:

Barth continued to affirm strongly the truth of the incarnation, but its focus and the point from which it is understood is that of reconciliation centred in the cross and resurrection as the integrating factor in the being and work of Christ. It is from this point that the whole life of Christ is to be retrospectively viewed and evaluated.⁹⁷

(b) The Death of the Cross

It is clear from Barth's theology that in his understanding of the Christian gospel, election, incarnation and reconciliation are intimately and indissolubly related to one another. The purpose of

⁹³ C.D., IV/3, I, p.8

⁹⁴ C.D., I/2, p.122

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ J. Thompson, *Christ in Perspective*, St. Andrews Press, Edinburgh, 1978, p.24

⁹⁷ J. Thompson, 'On the Trinity' *Theology Beyond Christendom*, Ed. by John Thompson, Pickwick Publications, Pennsylvania, 1986, p.16

the incarnation is truly revealed in the atonement which is the heart of the gospel as it relates to the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Here we see the revelation of his glory which includes within itself our salvation. To quote Barth:

We can read it only from the fact in which the omnipotent mercy of God is exercised and effective and revealed, in which his own glory and our salvation meet, in which that which God does for himself, is also done for us.⁹⁸

Barth places strong emphasis upon the concept of vicariousness, the divine 'focus' in Jesus Christ. He elucidates from aspects of this substitution by Jesus Christ, viz. He is (1) the Judge, (2) who is judged in our place, undergoing the judgement we deserved; (3) whose judgement was in the death on the cross; (4) establishing the righteousness of God - the Judge, the Judging, and the Judgement are the justice of God.

(1) He is in our place as Judge

Man as sinful and arrogant in his foolish pride considers himself his own judge inevitably vindicating himself and pronouncing others guilty. In a striking phrase, Barth describes man as a 'pseudo-sovereign creature' who asserts his independence of God.⁹⁹ But Jesus Christ as Judge has thus displaced him - his is the true sovereignty of judgement. Hence we have been deposed and abased 'in the humiliating power of what took place in Jesus Christ.'¹⁰⁰ A new sense of liberation and hope are therefore opened up to man because God in Jesus Christ as Judge will deal with him in an infinitely more just way.

(2) He is judged in our place

Jesus Christ is pure, spotless and sinless yet in the mystery of divine mercy and righteousness he accepted the alienation and lostness of the sinful state of the world in order to establish real peace and genuinely reconcile it to himself. This means that (a) the fact of our sinnership is made known and inescapable. 'In that God acknowledges us as sinners in Jesus Christ, his truth is the guarantee

⁹⁸ *C.D.*, IVI, p.214

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* p.231

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* p.233

that we are such.’¹⁰¹ Also (b) the fact of our forgiveness is assured. ‘We are now summoned - not in ourselves but in Him to see and acknowledge that by his taking our place - our sin is cancelled and forgiven....that the responsibility which we owe Him in this matter has been borne by Him. We do not believe in Jesus Christ if this is not our fully assured confidence.’¹⁰²

(3) He bears the judgement in our place - His passion

Barth notes four points about the passion of Jesus Christ:

(i) It is active - Jesus Christ as willing subject allowed himself to become the object of this suffering and death. ‘It is with a free self-offering of this kind and therefore with an act and not a fate that we have to do in this passion.’¹⁰³

(ii) It is historical - The action took place on earth, in time and space. ‘The Gospels....indicate a very definite point in world history.’¹⁰⁴

(iii) It is personal - The mystery of this passion has to do with who Jesus Christ is and what he has done ‘for us’ on the cross. ‘His person: It is the eternal God Himself who has given Himself in His Son to be man, and as man, to take upon Himself this human passion. His Mission: It is the Judge who in this passion takes the place of those who ought to be judged, who in this passion allows Himself to be judged in their place.’¹⁰⁵

(iv) It is unique - What is being fulfilled in this passion is the reconciliation of the world of God. ‘In this humiliation God is supremely God, that in this death He is supremely alive, that He has maintained and revealed His deity in the passion of this man as His eternal Son....We are dealing with sin itself and as such: the preoccupation, the orientation, the determination of man as he has left his place as a creature and broken his covenant with God; the

101 *Ibid*, p.240

102 *Ibid*, p.242

103 *Ibid*, p.245

104 *Ibid*

105 *Ibid*, p.246

corruption which God has made His own, for which He willed to take responsibility in this one man....He has Himself borne the consequence of this separation to bear it away.¹⁰⁶

(4) He established the Righteousness of God

Barth underlines that what has been stated under (1), (2) and (3) is the positive act of God. The suffering and death of Jesus Christ are the NO of God in and with which He assents the sovereign determination of His YES to man. Jesus Christ in all of this does justly manifest the righteousness of God. This means that

As the Judge, as the Judged, as the One who is his own person has accomplished the judgement, He is the end of the old aeon and the beginning of the new.¹⁰⁷

Barth understands the atonement to mean the actual and complete reversal of the sin, the disobedience, the unrighteousness of man by Jesus Christ who as the Son of God was obedient to the Father in the fulfilment of this action of God, and became obedient into death, even the death of the cross.

In so doing He acted justly in the place of all end for the sake of all.....In so doing, in His own person, He reversed the fall in their place and for their sake.¹⁰⁸

Barth was well aware that no theory of the atonement can adequately and fully elucidate its deepest meaning, not least his own,

no doctrine of this central mystery can exhaustively and precisely grasp and express the extent to which God has intervened for us here. Do not confuse my theory of the reconciliation with the thing itself.¹⁰⁹

However, Barth insists that there is a real exchange, a true substitution, He took 'our place'

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 257

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p.259

¹⁰⁹ K. Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, E.T. London, 1949, 1982, p.116

Pay attention to this for us: nothing must be deducted from it! Whatever a doctrine of reconciliation tries to express, it *must* say this. ¹¹⁰

It is important to recognise that we cannot add anything to this four-fold work except the Amen of our acceptance. Moreover, this four-fold 'for us' is the veritable centre of the doctrine of reconciliation, and indeed, of all theology. Barth writes

If the nail of this four-fold 'for us' does not hold, everything else will be left hanging in the void as an anthropological or psychological or sociological myth, and sooner or later it will break and fall to the ground. ¹¹¹

The cross of Jesus Christ is thus a finished work. His name is glorified and his saving power made known.

(c) The Lord of Glory

Inevitably, if the reconciliation between God and man, and man and God is complete, and that in an objective sense, how does this event become real and effective in the subjective experience of man? Barth supplies the answer in the fact of the resurrection which affords the true light of the knowledge and experience of God, and in the action and ministry of the Holy Spirit.

For Barth, the resurrection is a new and independent act of God declaring the verdict of the Father concerning the death of his son, Jesus Christ. For there is no such thing as atonement and reconciliation apart from the resurrection. In the event of the resurrection, related to the cross and continuous with it. God justified himself, his son and all mankind. The Easter event

with its manifestation and self-declaration.....as the prophet, Witness and Preacher entered into the world, as the light of his Mediatorship, he is the living Jesus Christ,.....the light which shines in the world and can never be extinguished. ¹¹²

The all embracing relevance of the resurrection then, its reconciling significance for us, is to be understood, as God's sovereign, free act of grace.

¹¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹¹ C.D., op.cit., p.273

¹¹² C.D., iv/3,1,p.291

Barth was especially concerned to underline and communicate the truth that Jesus Christ is the Mediator between God and man in his prophetic work. The prophetic work is 'the disclosure of completed reconciliation and man's opening up to it.'¹¹³ Our understanding of the prophetic work of Jesus Christ in self-revelation, of his resurrection as the commencement of its fulfilment, must needs be interpreted and communicated to us by the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the one eternal God in his particular power and will so to be present to the creature in his being and activity, so to give himself to it, that it can recognise and embrace and experience himself and his work and therefore the actuality and truth of its own situation.¹¹⁴

So then, it is the living Lord Jesus Christ, who by his Spirit 'expounds himself', giving the knowledge of who he is and what he has done. Moreover, it is not just information that is imparted. Rather, the recipient finds himself transformed, and given a new direction, standard, power and hope. Jesus Christ is victorious. Barth finds in Paul's conversion and commission on the Damascus Road, a dramatic illustration of the triumph of the living Lord.

Jesus is Victor in the history of his persecutor and apostle. He is this both as the One who overcomes him and as the One who ordains, arms and sends him forth to overcome, enabling him to participate as a future victor in the fellowship of his own victorious being, action, suffering and triumph, in the fellowship of his own warring and all conquering prophecy. 'If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away: behold, all things are come new' (2 Corinthians 5:17).¹¹⁵

Hence for Barth, the revelation and authentication of the Christian faith is Christ himself.

The question however, arises; if Jesus Christ is and does all of this work and action in the office of his prophetic ministry - what part does man play? It must be admitted that, at times, Barth almost

¹¹³ *Ibid*, p.221

¹¹⁴ *C.D.*, iv/1, p.148

¹¹⁵ *C.D.*, op.cit., p.209

seems to suggest practically none. Granted that, as has been noted above, he does this as the living Lord in the promise and power of the Holy Spirit. But does this mean therefore, that man is simply a mere 'echo' of his word and action? Barth undoubtedly teaches that Christian life in its commencement, continuance and consummation is God's act which is accomplished on the basis of God's reconciliation in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Barth does not deny an active human role in participation but is rightly concerned to stress that this is to be conceived as taking place within the gracious mystery and miracle of the divine operation. It is within the God-given freedom of enabling grace that a person believes and receives Jesus Christ as the living Lord and Saviour by the Holy Spirit. Barth states it thus:

The mystery and miracle of the event of which we speak consists in the fact that man himself is the free subject of this event on the basis of a possibility which is present only with God.¹¹⁶

Barth's approach, as always, is not only to correctly interpret and understand the biblical and theological (particularly the Christological) teaching, but also to safeguard and reflect the glory of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

We may sum up by stating that Barth's insights and emphases follow the biblical order and pattern.

(i) In the first place, he keeps on insisting that it is God's plan and that it is God's activity with which we have to do. To use the language of the scriptures, it is always 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us.....' That is the starting point. We are concerned with something that God has done and is doing. It is something which he has planned 'before the foundation of the world.' Here is the foundation for our faith. There is nothing contingent about God's plan. What God is doing is not dependent upon man, not even dependent upon the response of man. It is all ultimately of God.

¹¹⁶ C.D., iv/4, p.5

(ii) In the second place, Barth reminds us that it is all entirely due to God's grace and love and mercy and compassion. Everything is 'to the praise of the glory of his grace', 'unto the praise of his glory'.

(iii) Again, in the third place, everything according to Barth, is all in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no such thing as salvation without Jesus Christ at the centre. All blessings come in him, through him, from him, by him. It must all centre upon him, and if he is not absolutely central to us we have no right whatsoever to the name Christian. 'In everything he is to have the pre-eminence'.

(iv) Finally, it is the divine word which informs us as to what God has done for us and offers to us in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. This is in order that 'we might know the things that are freely given to us by God', that 'we might set our affections on things above, not on things on earth', and that we might rejoice with a 'joy unspeakable and full of glory'.

Barth takes us to the heart of the gospel and reminds us that we need to know the majesty of God, the sovereignty of God, and to feel the sense of awe and of wonder. Above all, we need to recapture the greatest emphasis of all, namely, the glory of God.

I gladly acknowledge the teaching of basic principles of New Testament interpretation by Professor E.A. Russell. It is with gratitude therefore, that I recall the kindness and encouragement which I received, and so welcome the opportunity to be part of this tribute to him according honour and respect.

Rev. Victor Sinclair