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Sovereignty of God in Light of Divine Omnipotence

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Introduction

The Reformed tradition cherishes the concept of God's sovereignty and this sovereignty is traditionally expressed by the notion of "all-powerfulness" or "omnipotence". In its religious use it sums up God's sovereignty over all things. Biblical authors typically speak of God's mastery over nature. They picture God as the creator, orderer and ruler of the world who sustains the order by an enlivening all-powerful providence. It is assumed that if God calls for trust, God has the almighty resources to act in the ways that justify it. All other powers depend on God for whatever power they possess. Traditionally the doctrine of the sovereignty of God includes the concept of secondary causes and their efficient role in the universe.³

¹ His books

² See www.cuni.cz

³ In the tradition it was customary to distinguish between a *potentia Dei absoluta* and the *potentia Dei ordinata*. However, Reformed theology adopted the distinction but rejected it in the sense in which it [Footnote continued on next page ...]

However, whatever processes exist, whatever forms and laws, whatever powers and order there may be, all are willed, allowed, anticipated, bestowed, and conferred by God. According to the traditional doctrine God chooses for reasons, which are purely God's own, to limit God's self in the exercise of power toward creatures. Although God alone is the total cause of all contingent occurrences and concurrently operates within their own operations and powers, every entity enjoys a capacity for partial self-determination. Every creature participates in and determines its own destiny and freedom as well as participating in and influencing the destiny and freedom (or the lack of it) of others.

While attributes like omnipotence were viewed as fundamental for the pastorally thoughtful theistic view of God, they always involved difficulties in understanding and formulation. Sometimes the scholastic (or scholastic-like) discussion of omnipotence led to bizarre, speculative questions as to what God can and cannot do. Such discussions were usually unrelated to specific biblical teachings about the power of God and sometimes led to a denial of the relative independence and moral responsibility of human beings. In a philosophically more disciplined train of thought, omnipotence meant power to do what seems logically possible or what could be intelligently thought as being brought about by God. Sometimes it was formulated negatively: omnipotence does not include the self-contradictory, it does not include that which is contradictory to the nature of God, it does not interfere with the freedom of man, it is not violated by self-limitation on the part of God, and it does not imply the use of all the power of God. Formulated positively, God's omnipotence means that God can do anything and everything that is consistent with God's goodness and love. God can be God in weakness as well as in strength, in defeat and suffering as well as in victory, in the form of a lowly Servant as well as in the form of an exalted Lord – sharing our human condition rather than looking down on us from the safety of a heavenly throne.⁴

was understood by the Scholastics, who claimed that God by virtue of God's absolute power could effect contradictions. (Cf. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Wm B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1949), 79-81.

⁴ Cf. Benjamin W. Farley, "The Providence of God in the Reformed Perspective," in Donald M. McKim (ed.), *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition* (Wm B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1992), 87-93; Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine* (Westminster/John Knox, Louisville, 1994), 111n.

A. Early and Medieval Church

Although Scriptures do not address the issue directly, they abound in expressions of the almighty power of God. The Early Church underscored this scriptural theme and both the Apostles' and the Nicene and Creeds begin by affirming: "I believe in God the Father Almighty." Already Irenaeus (c. 115–90) and Tertullian (160–220) pointed out that God enjoys unrestricted awareness of what can be done; God wills that the good be done, even beyond the range of our finite perceptions; God has the power to accomplish what God wills.⁵ While "Almighty" refers to God's way of expressing God's will, it does not imply that God wills in every instance everything that God can possibly will, for that would, according to Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215), suggest that God is capable only of willing but not also capable of not willing.⁶ According to Athanasius (c. 296–377), omnipotence might be defined as the perfect ability of God to do all things that are consistent with the divine character.⁷ For Gregory of Nyssa (330–95) power employs natural, historical, and human means for its accomplishment, but the use of means does not imply that God is limited by means that God alone created and freely sustains.⁸ Augustine (354–430) teaches that God's power is not always coercive, but may – honoring the freedom of creatures – exercise itself as persuasive.⁹ However, coercive power that directly determines all historical processes unilaterally could be exercised, if need be. Augustine also affirmed that God is capable of transcending the very order God creates – and do miracles.¹⁰

By ascribing omnipotence to God, medieval theologians referred to God's all-powerful *nature*. In their view it belonged among God's "natural attributes". The issue of the logical limits of divine power was also raised. Anselm (1033–1109) believed that it was no reduction of divine omnipotence, if God could not do, what by

⁵ *Ante-Nicene Fathers (ANF)* I, ed. A. Roberts, J. Donaldson et al. (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1867-1885), 347; *ANF* III, 481, 486ff.

⁶ *ANF* II, p. 185f.

⁷ *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (NPNF)* 2nd series, IV, ed. A. Roberts, J. Donaldson et al. (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1885), 18-30.

⁸ *Ibid.*, V, 331ff.

⁹ *NPNF* 1st series, II, 92f.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 227ff.

definition cannot be done, or of the divine will if God was free to adapt freely and responsively to the conditions of changing events.¹¹ Contradictions are by definition unable to be actualized. To Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), who retained many of the older views, it seemed difficult to explain in what divine omnipotence precisely consists, and he acknowledged that issues about logical and contingent possibility and necessity might yield possible contradictions if omnipotence is not somehow qualified. “The omnipotence of God does not take away from things their impossibility and necessity.”¹² Therefore, Aquinas did not see any contradictions in some supposed paradoxes: what is logically impossible is not an act of power at all. God is not an irrational, self-contradictory being. Hence omnipotence must denote the ability to do whatever is in accord with God’s own nature. The nominalists like Duns Scotus (1266–1308) and Ockham (c.1285–c.1349), who made great use of the distinction between God’s absolute and ordained power, completed the shift from ontological to logical categories. Now it was no longer possible to argue from God’s effects in the world back to God’s existence as Prime Mover, etc.

B. The Reformers

1. Zwingli

While the Reformers were biblical theologians, they retained some of the philosophical theism of the past. Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531) was among those who adopted the classical concepts of divine immutability and had a tendency to insert elements of determinism into their doctrines of God’s providence. The early chapters of Zwingli’s *De providentia* are thus instances of highly speculative thought. The relationship between God and the world is such that everything takes place through the will of God: Providence is the enduring and unchangeable rule over and direction of all things in the universe.¹³ The biblical allegations that nothing is beyond God’s reach or disobedient to God is taken literally.¹⁴ According to Zwingli

¹¹ Proslog., *Basic Writings* VII (Open Court, LaSalle, 1966), 12 ff.

¹² *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, Qu. 25, arts. 3. (Paris, 1886), 159f.

¹³ *On the Providence and Other Essays*, ed. Samuel M. Jackson and William J. Hinke (The Labyrinth Press, Durham, 1984), 2:136.

¹⁴ *The Exposition of the Faith*, The Library of Christian Classics, ed. J. Baillie at al. (Westminster, Philadelphia, 1953-61), 24:246.

we have to believe that God has done all these things on the basis of a plan that God's infinite wisdom has not wished to reveal to humanity. He lamented that "seemingly evil" things of the created world provoke "a vain and useless feminine curiosity."¹⁵ He believed that God not only knows all things, but also does all things, for "secondary causes are not properly called causes," and God alone is the primary cause of all things.¹⁶ If one were to deny this, he would be denying the very nature of God. Anything less than absolute pre-determinism would infringe the sovereignty and wisdom of God.

God's almighty providence is concerned not only with the great events of history but also with the trivialities of daily life. "We cannot but admit that not even the least thing takes place unless it is ordered by God. For who has ever been as concerned and curious as to find how much hair he has on his head? ... Indeed, nothing is too small in us or in any other creature, not to be ordered by the all-knowing and all-powerful providence of God."¹⁷

2. Calvin

John Calvin (1506–64) shared many views with the Early Church. God is not limited in any of God's attributes by anything external to Godself. No power has any other source than God. In picturing God as ruler of God's entire creation, Calvin echoed Zwingli. His doctrine of providence affirmed God's governance over all events. All events are directed by God's secret plan; all that happens is knowingly decreed by God. That all things take place under the rule and action of God does not only imply that God is the primary cause of all things, but also that God intervenes in all particular instances.¹⁸ God "directs everything by God's incomprehensible wisdom and disposes it to God's own end."¹⁹

¹⁵ *Commentary on True and False Religion*, ed. Samuel M. Jackson and Clarence N. Heller (The Labyrinth Press, Durham, 1981), 67.

¹⁶ *On the Providence*, 2:138.

¹⁷ *Writings I*, eds. E. J. Furcha and H. W. Pipkin (Pickwick Publications, Allison Park, 1984), 145. Cf. Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Broadman, Nashville, 1988), 122-126; Justo L. González, *A History of Christian Thought*, III (Abingdon, Nashville, 1975), 67-70.

¹⁸ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. 1, ed. John McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.16.3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.16.4.

We make God the ruler and governor of all things, who in accordance with his wisdom has from the farthest limit of eternity decreed what he was going to do, and now by his might carries out what he has decreed. From this we declare that not only heaven and earth and the inanimated creatures, but also the plans and intentions of men, are so governed by his providence that they are borne by it straight to their appointed end.²⁰

Calvin insisted that the idea of divine “permission” denied to God what the Scripture attributed to God: a watchful, effective and continued engagement with the rule of the world God created. Any attempt to distinguish between an active and permissive will of God is just another attempt to diminish the glory of God.²¹

Since the order, reason, end and necessity of those things which happen for the most part lie hidden in God’s purpose, and are not apprehended by human opinion, those things, which it is certain take place by God’s will, are in a sense fortuitous.²²

We do not try to make God render account to us, but so reverence his secret judgments as to consider his will the truly just cause of all things.²³

There is thus only one way of speaking properly of any restriction upon God’s power: God cannot deny Godself.²⁴ The basic idea of omnipotence is that God has the ability to do whatever being God requires. God has sufficient power to do God’s will. However, it belongs to the nature of divine power to work in perfect correspondence with God’s character and in orderly conjunction with God’s other attributes. There are things that God either could not do without denying Godself, or would not do being who God is.²⁵

Pastorally relevant is the question of the relationship of God’s power to other powers that God has created. Human freedom can assert itself against God’s power, but only in limited and fragmentary ways that can never ultimately change or challenge the power of God.²⁶ The providence of God does not work in such a way as to negate or make unnecessary human effort. Even when God works

²⁰ Ibid., 1.16.8.

²¹ *Corpus Reformatorum* 35 (Halle/Saale, 1835-1860), 145-252

²² *Inst.*, 1.16.9.

²³ Ibid., 1.17.1.

²⁴ Ibid., 3.15.2

²⁵ Ibid., 1.4.2; 1.14.3

²⁶ Ibid., 1.18.1,2

through an evil person to achieve a divine purpose, God does not do it “as if he were a stone or a piece of wood, but he uses him as a thinking creature, according to the quality of his nature which he has given him.”²⁷

Despite his emphasis on God’s sovereign control, Calvin never equated providence with fatalism. While we are to look to God as the “first causes” of all things, we must also give attention to the “secondary causes”.²⁸ Calvin tried to avoid both ascribing everything to God at the expense of freedom and responsibility of creatures, and compromising the omnipotence of God by allowing real autonomy to creaturely activity. For him the doctrine of divine providence was a practical truth giving us confidence that God reigns and that evil is firmly under God’s control.

C. Modern and Contemporary Reformed Theologians

1. Schleiermacher

Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768–1834), the significant German theologian of Reformed background, identified God with “the source of absolute dependence” and this view is contained in his definition of omnipotence. For him there was no need to go beyond the natural order.

In the conception of divine Omnipotence two ideas are contained: first, that the entire system of Nature, comprehending all times and spaces, is founded upon divine causality, which as eternal and omnipresent is in contrast to al finite causality; and second, that the divine causality, as affirmed in our feeling of absolute dependence, is completely presented in the totality of finite being, and consequently everything for which there is a causality in God happens and becomes real.²⁹

Schleiermacher was convinced that in relation to God there is no distinction between the ‘potential’ and the ‘actual’ or between ‘can’ and ‘will’. Similarly, distinctions or contrasts between a ‘mediate’ and ‘immediate’, or ‘absolute’ and ‘ordered’, exercise of divine omnipotence, i.e. between cases “when it acts without or with intermediary causes within the divine omnipotence, between active

²⁷ *Treatises Against the Anabaptists and Against the Libertines* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1982), 245.

²⁸ *Inst.*, 1.17.6.

²⁹ *The Christian Faith* 1 (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1997), 211.

and inactive divine will, the idea of a precedent and consequent will, expressions which suggest the appearance of a change in the will of God” can be ruled out without any loss.

2. Hodge

According to the American Reformed theologian Charles Hodge (1797–1878) it is necessary to distinguish between the absolute and ordinate power of God. The absolute power is the divine efficacy, as exercised without the intervention of secondary causes; while ordinate power is the efficacy of God exercised by the ordered operation of secondary causes.³⁰

It is by removing all the limitations of power, as it exists in us, that we rise to the idea of the omnipotence of God. We do not thus, however, lose the idea itself. Almighty power does not cease to be power. We can do very little. God can do whatever He wills. We, beyond very narrow limits, must use means to accomplish our ends. With God means are unnecessary. He wills, and it is done. He said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. He, by a volition created the heavens and the earth. At the volition of Christ, the winds ceased, and there was great calm. By an act of the will He healed the sick, opened the eyes of the blind, and raised the dead. This simple idea of the omnipotence of God, that He can do without effort, and by a volition, whatever He wills, is the highest conceivable idea of power, and is that which is clearly presented in the Scriptures... The Lord God omnipotent reigneth, and doeth his pleasure among the armies of heaven and the inhabitants of the earth, is the tribute of adoration which the Scriptures everywhere render unto God, and the truth which they everywhere present as the ground of confidence to his people. This is all we know, and all we need to know on this subject; and here we might rest satisfied, were it not for the vain attempts of theologians to reconcile these simple and sublime truths of the Bible with their philosophical speculations.³¹

3. Barth

The Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) replaced the traditional notion of divine “attributes” with that of “perfections” and discussed “the positive characteristics of the divine omnipotence” in the context of “Perfections of the Divine Freedom” in the first part of his doctrine of God.³²

³⁰ *Systematic Theology* I (Thomas Nelson & Sons, London, 1880), 410f.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 407f.

³² *Church Dogmatics (CD)* II/1 (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1957), 543-607.

The divinity of the freedom of God consists and confirms itself in the fact that in Himself and in all His works God is One, constant and eternal, and therewith also omnipresent, omnipotent and glorious.³³

Barth is critical of the classical view of divine immutability. The immutable as such cannot be equated with the living God. “If...the pure immobile is God, death is God.”³⁴ God is “immutably” the living God in divine *freedom* and *love*. Barth wanted to underscore God’s dynamic relationship with the world while at the same time upholding God’s own unique integrity. Divine “integrity” must be so conceived as to affirm divine “relationality” – God’s intrinsic desire to be gracious to the other, and determination not to be God without us. The symmetry between integrity and relationality is best observed in Barth’s treatment of the divine perfections of “love” and “freedom”. He presents two sets of them: The sets of “perfections of divine loving” include grace and holiness, mercy and righteousness, patience and wisdom; the sets of “perfections of divine freedom” include unity and omnipresence, constancy and omnipotence, eternity and glory. Constancy and omnipotence indicate the God can do a “new thing” and still be God. God’s “constancy” is thus not a static or impotent unchangeableness. Barth calls God’s ability to remain always the same in every change “holy mutability.”³⁵

Correspondingly, God is also “omnipotent” or “all-powerful” in the sense of having all the power that is true power by being the power to act in ways that are conciliatory and redeeming. In contrast to the versions of orthodoxy that place omnipotence at the head of God’s attributes and interprets it as God’s arbitrary ability to do anything God wishes, Barth places omnipotence deep into his dogmatic structure and construes it as a power that works in the midst of suffering. God is not “omnipotent” if that means having all the power there is. Absolute power would be evil *per se*.³⁶

God’s “constancy” does not prevent God from having a real history with God’s creation. The creature’s opposition to God and God’s own resistance to this opposition do not bring conflict or

³³ Ibid., 440.

³⁴ Ibid., 494.

³⁵ Ibid., 496.

³⁶ Cf. William S. Johnson, *The Mystery of God: Karl Barth and the Postmodern Foundations of Theology* (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1997), 52-54.

change in God.³⁷ Yet, they do not leave God untouched. An immutable being, in the sense of the being that is unmoved and immovable, would not be powerful but powerless.

God, on the other hand is not powerless but powerful, indeed, all-powerful, with power over everything; everything, that is, which as His possibility is real possibility. God has possibilities – all the possibilities which, as the confirmation and manifestation of His being, are true possibilities. As this omnipotent God, He is constant. As this omnipotent God, He is distinct from the changeable: which means, on the one hand, that which is not capable of everything that it wills, that which cannot do everything that is a real possibility, that which does not have all true possibilities; and on the other hand that which is capable of what it does not will, that which can do what is not really possible, that for which untrue and impossible possibilities are not impossible. As this omnipotent God, He is also distinct from the unchangeable, whose unchangeableness inevitably means utter powerlessness, complete incapacity, a lack of every possibility, and therefore death. God omnipotent distinguishes Himself from all these positions (which are occupied by the creature or his false gods) as God, and as the true, the living God. In his omnipotence He stands over the reality which He has created as its Lord, and revealing Himself He is exalted in its midst. In his omnipotence He is the source of all created life and its preservation.³⁸

In God's constancy God can do all that God wills to do in a power defined by Godself. God's omnipotence is power, exerted in God's acts and not in a general "omnicausality." The rule of God is exercised by God's Word and Spirit and not by unilateral and coercive power, for God is not the sole actor. While accepting the distinction between absolute and exercised power, Barth rejects the interpretation of this as a distinction between extraordinary and ordinary power. God's omnipotence is the omnipotence of love.³⁹

The personal character of God's omnipotence ensures that it is wider, not narrower, in scope than the classical definition allows.

There can be no room for the thought, or even a possibility of the thought, that our will on its side is not completely and omnipotently perceived and therefore foreordained by God in all the possibilities of its choice. Nor can there be any room for the idea of a possibility given us with this freedom to assert ourselves in relation to God. And of course, there is no place either for the notion that the freedom of our wills is destroyed by this foreordination, or that our choice is not

³⁷ *CD* II/1, 502f.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 522f.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 539ff.

responsible choice, or that our evil choice is thereby excused. We are foreordained and perceived by God in our genuine human self-determination. That it is under divine foreordination does not alter the fact that it is genuine human self-determination.⁴⁰

Barth asserts that “there is no place...for the notion that the freedom of our wills is destroyed by this foreordination, or that our choice is not responsible choice, or that our evil choice is thereby excused.”⁴¹ As it was paradigmatically expressed in God’s action on Good Friday, nothing can finally stand in the way of God’s suffering love.⁴² It does not endanger or destroy the freedom of the creature but is omnipotent in it.⁴³ Omnipotence can be understood properly only when it is understood christologically as the omnipotence of the one God who is free and loves us in divine freedom.

Barth’s insistence that God is not ‘power in itself’ gets a profound expression in his exposition of the Creed.

God’s power differs from powerlessness, is superior to the other powers, is victoriously opposed to ‘power in itself’, in being the power of law, i.e. of His love activated and revealed in Jesus Christ and thus the content, the determination and the limit of everything possible, and the power over and in all that is real... God is the basic measure of everything real and everything possible. There is no reality which does not rest upon Him as its possibility, no possibility, no basis of reality, which would limit Him or be a hindrance to Him. He is able to do what He wills. Thus God’s power might also be described as God’s *freedom*... He is mighty over everything that is possible in space and in time...But all this has a very philosophic ring and with it we have by no means reached the meaning of almightiness as an attribute of God. There is much that is called might and would like to be called almightiness, which has nothing to do at all with the almightiness of God... When Hitler used to speak about God, he called Him ‘the Almighty’. But it is not ‘the Almighty’ who is God; we cannot understand from the stand point of a supreme concept of power, who God is. And the man who calls ‘the Almighty’ God misses God in the most terrible way. For the ‘Almighty’ is bad, as ‘power in itself’ is bad. The ‘Almighty’ means Chaos, Evil, the Devil. We could not better describe and define the Devil than by trying to think this idea of a self-based, free, sovereign ability.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Ibid., 585f.

⁴¹ Ibid., 586.

⁴² Cf. Colin E. Gunton, *Becoming and Being: The Doctrine of God in Charles Hartshorne and Karl Barth* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1978), 205-212.

⁴³ CD II/1, 598f.

⁴⁴ *Dogmatics in Outline* (Harper & Row, New York, 1959), 46f.

Barth's opposition to "blind power" as descriptive of God's might arises from his conception of God's power as revealed in reconciliation. This is for him the only legitimate framework within which we can speak of God's omnipotence. It is thus in reconciliation as the area in which God's power is revealed "that we must take our point of departure if we would rightly think and speak about God's omnipotence."⁴⁵ God is the power of God's free love in Jesus Christ, activated and revealed in Him. "All power" is given to Him. In this work of God divine omnipotence becomes visible and alive as saving and righteous power. It is in this way that God is the content, the determination, the limit of all that is possible.⁴⁶

Barth's criticism of tradition is continued in his treatment of divine providence. While deeply respectful of his own classical Reformed theological tradition, he wanted to break free from a doctrine of providence based on the logic of control or domination.⁴⁷ Divine sovereignty must always be understood in the light of God's revelation in Christ.

4. Brunner

Barth's contemporary and one-time theological partner, the Swiss Protestant theologian Emil Brunner (1889–1966), makes the point that the biblical teaching on divine power always allowed for the relative independence of creatures. God's omnipotence "means that He is free to deal with the universe He has created when and how He wills."⁴⁸ Brunner reminds us that in the work of medieval or post-reformation theology omnipotence usually appears near the end of the list of divine attributes. However, if God be defined as "Being", then what the Bible understands by divine omnipotence can only be of secondary significance. *Omnipotentia* becomes closely related to the

⁴⁵ *Church Dogmatics I/1* (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1975), 663. Cf. G. C. Berkower, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Wm B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1956), 308-312

⁴⁶ *Dogmatics in Outline*, 46-49.

⁴⁷ Some critics point out that "while offering new direction for a Christian doctrine of providence that refuses to adopt a priori definitions of deity and omnipotence and concentrates instead on the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, Barth's treatment of the reality of evil and of our part in the struggle against it leaves many questions unresolved. The coincidence of an all-determining power and a gracious love seems a questionable claim in the face of radical evil. (Cf. Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Wm B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids/Cambridge, 2004), 127; Sheila G. Davaney, *Divine Power: A Study of Karl Barth and Charles Hartshorne* (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1986), 241.

⁴⁸ *The Christian Doctrine of God: Dogmatics I* (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1949), 252.

speculative tendency in theology: it is based upon the idea of “being able” derived from the speculative ontological starting point, the equation of God with “Being”. This brings with it an even more dangerous set of problems confusing God’s omnipotence with the *potestas absoluta*. The attempt to overcome this danger with the distinction between God’s absolute and ordinary power is not sufficient. The Biblical teaching about divine omnipotence is concerned with the relation of God to God’s creation. God has power “over all” – it is an attribute, not a “conception of being.” God as “the Almighty” is free and sovereign Lord, whose power cannot be limited by anything or anyone. Yet, God limits Godself by creating something which is not God.

Thus from the very outset the Biblical idea of God as Almighty is related to revelation. It can only be understood in its correlation with this divine self-limitation which lies in the nature of His Creation. For this very reason it is entirely free from the problems raised by that idea of *potestas absoluta*, which makes all other forms of existence appear as nothing, which takes from them every vestige of independence, and above all leaves no room for the freedom of the creature.”⁴⁹

God remains in authority over the universe which God has created. The independence granted to the creature does not mean that it can resist the will of God.

The Omnipotence of God is nearly always mentioned only in connexion with His work of revelation and redemption. This comes out plainly in the way in which the Bible speaks of miracles. In miracle, in the freedom of God over the course of Nature which He Himself has ordained and ordered, we are meant to see chiefly the “All-power” of God in the Biblical sense of the word; yet the idea of “miracle” is to be understood in its specifically Biblical sense, and not in the general sense.⁵⁰

This idea of omnipotence shares in the “paradoxical unity of revelation and hiddenness” which is bound with the nature of true revelation.

As the Holiness and Sovereignty of God merge into Love, which finds its highest expression in complete self-giving, so is it also with Omnipotence. God shows His Omnipotence in highest sovereignty where the impotence of the

⁴⁹ Ibid., 251.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 253.

Crucified, the defeat of the Son of God, must accomplish the work of revelation and reconciliation.⁵¹

God so wills to be “almighty” over us, that God conquers and wins our hearts through God’s condescension in God’s Son, in the Cross of the Son. No other “Almighty Power” of God could thus win our hearts. For one is never so free as where one in faith allows oneself to be arrested by the love of God. In this faith there is not coercion, nor unwillingness. And it is precisely where this freedom is greatest, that God also gives the highest proof of God’s “royal freedom.” Indeed, it is this royal freedom on God’s part that makes humans free.

5. Weber

Barth’s approach influenced the thought of the future generations of Reformed theologians. The German Reformed theologian Otto Weber (1902–66) points out that when we abstractly consider the concept of omnipotence, we are combining two conceptual components, namely that of unlimited capacity and that of unrestricted will. Inwardly it refers to the unrestricted determination of the self and outwardly to the unrestricted determination of all that is outside of that self. As almighty activity, God’s activity is free from what we might regard as “consistency.” We shall constantly waver between the assumption of a God who can do “anything conceivable” (and contradictions are also conceivable) and who is then certainly not reliable, and the assumption of God who is bound by the rules of the creaturely processes which Godself have established and thus has no freedom over against our knowledge of these rules.

There is one fact which stands between a freedom of God which is totally capricious and a self-imposed binding of God to his own work which ultimately leads to God’s predictability and his replacement by an idol conceived by our thoughts; this one fact is the basis for the decision about what is possible and impossible. God really does the impossible: he becomes man, he kills death, he justifies the godless—and based upon that, all of his activity is miraculous. And yet this impossible stands under the unusual *dei* (it must) of the Bible...that is under the completely paradoxical assertion that his impossible is not only possible, but necessary!⁵²

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² *Foundations of Dogmatics* I (Wm B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1981), 441 f.

God's omnipotence is revealed as God's freedom toward the creature in the Son, who became man in divine freedom. From this point of view it becomes impossible to think that God is a kind of competitor of creaturely freedom. It is impossible to conceive of God and the creature in a causal relationship to each other. The creature is not ontologically God's equal counterpart. God makes Godself into the partner of it in that God calls it into existence, in that God establishes his covenant with it and takes it upon Godself in all its lostness. We should thus never speak of God in such a way as to make God appear to be an uninvolved spectator.

This is also the reason that the idea of God's "permitting" evil cannot be accepted, in the form in which it is usually meant. Evil stands under the mystery of divine freedom and omnipotence. But...it is no longer possible to think of God as the omnicausal factor, as the epitome of a closed system of interrelationship within which we are located, or as the One whose honor is impugned when man acts in his space and time in the freedom given to him. For God gives freedom in that he reveals himself as the Almighty.⁵³

Jesus Christ is the central point from which we may understand God's omnipotence. God's omnipotence is shown to us as the omnipotence of his free grace. The believer will honor God's omnipotence in all its impenetrable sovereignty. He should not seek, however, to incorporate it into a system and rob it thus of its freedom. But he should not find God's omnipotence to be a dark and ominous fate hanging over him.⁵⁴

6. Torrance

The Scottish theologian Thomas F. Torrance (1913–2007) argues that we must reject all abstract notions of divine omnipotence, for omnipotence is not to be understood in terms of what we think God can do, defining it as "potence raised to the nth power," i.e. as omnipotence, but only in terms of what God actually *is* and actually *has done*.

We do not define God by omnipotence but define omnipotence by the Nature and Being of God as he has revealed himself to us in his creative and redemptive activity. His power is not different from his Nature... We may say that he does not do, and cannot do, what is other than what he actually and eternally is as the

⁵³ Ibid., 446.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 447.

Lord God, or what is other than the nature of his Being a God and Father. There is and can be no valid or meaningful discussion of God's sovereignty or power in detachment of his sovereignty from his Being or in abstraction of his power from his being God the Father...That would be an empty movement of thought. Hence abstract questions postulated about what God can do and can not do are empty of meaning and give rise to nonsensical answers, for they are false questions posed apart from the reality and nature of God's being. A proper and realistic understanding of the almightiness of God must be formed on the basis of the identity between God's transcendent reality and his power... God's power is as unlimited as God himself is, and is limited only by what God himself is.⁵⁵

Conclusion

Most writers of the Reformed tradition accept the philosophical argument that while omnipotence denotes an ability to bring about any logically possible state of affairs, the point of divine omnipotence concerns the applicability of the concept for God, for whom goodness and power remain necessary characteristics. It is of the essence of Christian theism to hold that God exercise his omnipotence by limiting Godself. Some argue that omnipotence itself need not be a necessary quality of an omnipotent being. God may choose to limit and to contain divine power in the interest of goodness and love, and such a choice is itself an act of omnipotent, sovereign, free will.⁵⁶ God has power over his power; God's power is under the control of God's wise and holy will. Since all such self-limitation is free, it is the act and manifestation of God's power. An adequate concept of the power of God should include the fullness or plentitude of his power to execute and fulfill his purpose, but the doctrine should not be pressed into speculative excesses or made to support a view that makes humans helpless and irresponsible puppets of God.⁵⁷ Human freedom is not suppressed by divine omnipotence, but exists by virtue of it. It is an act of omnipotence when God humbles himself to the taking of human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ.⁵⁸ In a Christian understanding of omnipotence, God's almighty power is discerned

⁵⁵ *The Christian Doctrine of God* (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1997), 204f.

⁵⁶ Cf. Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (Wm B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1974); Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Clarendon, Oxford, 1977).

⁵⁷ James L. Garrett, *Systematic Theology I* (Wm B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1990), 223.

⁵⁸ Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Reformed Free Publishing Association, Grand Rapids, 1966), 288.

most profoundly in the cross of Christ and in what God achieves through it.

While many philosophers and theologians retain the term “omnipotence” derived from the mainly Latin tradition of theology, others insist that we should go behind it to the Greek term from which it is derived, namely *pantokrator*, the Almighty One.⁵⁹ There are other ways of understanding “power” than “power over”. One might distinguish between power as authority, power as “back-up” and power as capacity. The New Testament underlines the sustaining power of the divine providence. The Almighty One underlines God’s capacity as Father and Creator. However, this does not denote “all power” in an exclusive sense, as if God left no power for others. This logic of power embraces concepts in which “almighty” better denotes an enabling power that springs from love than “power over” that suggests domination, oppression or taking power from the other. In other words, the biblical notion of divine all-mightiness does better justice to theological tradition and to conceptual analysis than the philosophical notion of divine omnipotence.⁶⁰

Are there essential differences between biblical and philosophical perspectives as even some philosophers seem to suggest? Some doubt the idea of divine omnipotence for philosophical reasons. Because traditional theism depicts God as exercising coercive power over things and persons in his creation, process philosophers and theologians believe omnipotence is a mistake.⁶¹ They point out that classical theism can hardly escape being read as declaring God responsible for everything that happens in the way that it happens. In this case there arises the inevitable and legitimate protest that the evil of the world contradicts the claim that God is perfectly good. When this view of God’s omnipotence is combined with the Christian doctrine of man’s accountability, there appears the monstrous idea that God’s justice holds humans responsible for sins even though Godself is ultimately their author. To avoid seeing God as the author

⁵⁹ The substantive *pantokrator* meaning the “all-powerful One” or the “Almighty” was used in Revelation and in 2 Cor. 6:18.

⁶⁰ Cf. Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God: A Study of the Doctrine of Divine Omnipotence* (Kok Pharos, Kampen), 1993.

⁶¹ Cf. Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (SUNY, Albany, 1984), 10-26.

of evil without denying God any significant power, one needs to reconceive divine power as the power of persuasion. If we think of God as persuasive power, we might still use the term “omnipotence”, but its meaning would be quite changed. It would no longer mean that God has a monopoly of power and compels everything to be the way it is. It would mean that God exercises the optimum persuasive power in relation to whatever exists.⁶²

Traditional theists would see this as greatly diminishing the power and greatness of God, as making God distinctly less “worth of worship” than if God were omnipotent. The process thinker would certainly reply that God’s greatness is enhanced, not diminished, by God’s inability to use coercive power, but it is clear that this stance is at best in tension with the theological traditions of most theistic faiths, which clearly portray God as capable of exercising both persuasive and coercive power.⁶³

However, some reformed theologians argue that pastoral concerns do not require the concept of coercive divine power. The Czech theologian Jan Milič Lochman reminds us that face to face with the collapse of spiritual and cultural values, the protestant philosopher Emanuel Rádl found “comfort” in the idea of God’s nonviolence.⁶⁴ In his booklet *Comfort from Philosophy* he says:

God acts the way Jesus acted. He forces no one; he is a completely powerless being, he does not interfere with events with force; he produces no miracles, does not send lightning nor floods nor pestilence, he does not protect wheat from weeds... He acts as Jesus acted: God takes no offence and suffers everything, including the crucifixion. But he is exceedingly fond of people and helps in the way defenceless people help: he teaches, sets an example, admonishes, warns...⁶⁵

Lochman points out that Radl’s moving sentences which sound much like Whitehead’s appealing to the “Galilean origin of Christianity” over against the predominant cult of brute force in his turn to theism

⁶² Cf. John B. Cobb, Jr., *God and the World* (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1969), 87-102.

⁶³ Cf. Michael Peterson et al, *Reason & Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford University Press, New York/Oxford, 2003), 67-70.

⁶⁴ Jan Milič Lochman, “Reconsidering the Doctrine of Providence,” in Wallace M. Alston, Jr. and Michel Welker (eds.), *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity* (Wm B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2003), 281-293.

⁶⁵ Emanuel Rádl, *Útěcha z filosofie* (Praha, 1946), 23 (transl. J. M. Lochman).

in *Process and Reality*,⁶⁶ were not the voice of a faith that has given up, that has lost hope of God's victory and has fallen prey to feelings of powerlessness. It is not a word about God's absence but about how he is present, about how he really acts. Lochman believes that a doctrine of providence that is justifiable in the Protestant context is precisely about such praise of God from the depths, including times of doubt. The power of God reveals itself in the power of love: "not actions of a *deus absconditus* for whom simply "everything is possible," but the omnipotence of nonviolent love, which in life, as in death, has the final word."⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Alfred N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (The Free Press, New York, 1979), 343.

⁶⁷ "Reconsidering the Doctrine of Providence," 286.