

# THE WHO, WHAT, AND HOW OF WISDOM: AN EXPLORATION IN KARL BARTH AND HIS 'DESCENDANTS'

---

KYLE McCRACKEN 

## Abstract

In light of recent interest among theologians in the category of wisdom, I offer my own reflection on the theme vis-à-vis the theology of Karl Barth, as well as two of his theological 'descendants' who have given a programmatic place to 'wisdom' in their seminal projects: David Ford and David Kelsey. I structure this exploration according to three fundamental questions: 1. With *whom* is wisdom identified? 2. *What* is wisdom to those who have been exposed to its revelation? 3. *How* is this wisdom revealed to people? I show how Barth argues that a true account of wisdom depends on answering the first question *first* and doing so with key reference to scripture's witness to God's saving activity.

## Introduction

In a recent article celebrating the twenty-first anniversary of the *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, Martin Westerholm observed the prevalence of 'wisdom' as a theological category in contemporary anglophone theology.<sup>1</sup> Given the widespread and diverse interest in wisdom among theologians today, I here offer my own focused reflection on the category vis-à-vis the theology of the most influential of modern theologians, Karl Barth, as well as two of his theological 'descendants' who have given a programmatic place to 'wisdom' in their major projects: David Ford and David Kelsey. In calling these two 'descendants,' I do not mean that their respective modes of doing theology are the same as Barth's, nor indeed are they identical between themselves. However, both theologians were formed in the 'post-Barthian' moment and both carry certain 'Barthian' intuitions even as they depart from Barth in significant ways. I structure this exploration

---

Kyle McCracken

The University of Aberdeen, PGR Divinity, 19 College Bounds, Aberdeen AB24 3DX, UK

Email: k.mccracken.20@abdn.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup> Martin Westerholm, 'Systematic Theology Today and *IJST* at Twenty-One,' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 22, no. 4 (October 2020): 463-72. One might also note the prominent place 'wisdom' has repeatedly occupied in the history of the Christian tradition, most robustly and creatively revisited through Russian Sophiology. For a recent and comprehensive account of the theme's prominence in Christian (following Jewish and Greek) thought, as well as its recasting by the 'sophiologists', see Marcus Plested, *Wisdom in the Christian Tradition: The Patristic Roots of Modern Russian Sophiology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

according to three fundamental questions: 1. With *whom* is wisdom associated? 2. *What* is wisdom to those who have been exposed to its revelation? 3. *How* is this wisdom revealed to humans? I suggest that Barth's prioritization of identifying wisdom with the saving God of Israel (i.e., the God whose saving activity is witnessed to in Israel's scriptures and is associated with Christ in the New Testament) determines the character of wisdom's 'what' and 'how', in such a way that primary interest in these latter categories could not lead to the identity which Barth affords wisdom. Crucially, Barth's soteriological emphasis in his elucidation of the doctrine of wisdom disallows for any easy analogies to be drawn between divine and human wisdom. The treatments of Ford and Kelsey, by contrast, fluidly move between the three categories in such a way that the divine identity of Savior, and thus the character of wisdom itself, is ultimately compromised.

### Part One: The 'Who' of Wisdom

Barth's sustained attention to 'wisdom' is found in his doctrine of the divine perfections.<sup>2</sup> The question of wisdom's identity is of central importance to Barth, as he recognizes how frequently wisdom (along with all divine attributes) has historically been defined in general terms, only to be subsequently filled out by scripture's witness to revelation. In arguing for wisdom's complete identification with Israel's God by describing its unity with the other divine perfections, known in God's self-involvement with Israel, Barth reaffirms his aversion to abstraction, by 'thinking after' (*nachdenken*) God's revelation. For Barth, to speak of the *wise* God as separate from the *holy* or *righteous* or *patient* God, is not to speak of God at all. Rather, when one thus compromises God's unity, one speaks only of principles.<sup>3</sup> This reduction of divine wisdom to a 'principle' is, for Barth, evident in the interlocutors he chooses to engage.

In his theology of wisdom, as explicated in *Church Dogmatics* II.1 (§30), Barth explicitly engages with five dogmatists from the past, namely, Johannes Andreas Quenstedt (1617-1688), Amandus Polanus (1561-1610), Hermann Cremer (1834-1903), J.H. Heidegger (1633-1698), and Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834).<sup>4</sup> His criticisms and positive affirmations of the first four of the five theologians are concentrated in one small-print paragraph wherein he presses the key point that the wisdom of God must be understood in relation to the divine love and not merely in terms of omniscience, as Polanus had defined it, nor simply as an attribute which transcends human knowledge, as Quenstedt maintained.<sup>5</sup> The commitment to understanding divine wisdom *positively*, in relation to the divine loving, is one which holds true for Barth's articulation of each

<sup>2</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II.1, eds. T.F. Torrance and G.W. Bromiley; trans. G.W. Bromiley et al. (London: T & T Clark, 2009), 422-39. Hereafter CD II.1.

<sup>3</sup> In her discussion of Barth on the divine perfections, Katherine Sonderegger helpfully points to an earlier section in II.1 wherein Barth rejects the *analogia entis* on the basis of maintaining God's unity. Summarizing his position, she writes, '... the true and deep and deeply dangerous element in the analogy of being is its willingness to "divide" or "partition" the doctrine of God, into an "abstract doctrine" ... in which divine being precedes act, and can be known, however partially or tentatively, as an autonomous reality, apart from the divine act of self-disclosure in Christ' (455). Sonderegger then proceeds to elucidate Barth's articulation of 'righteousness' as a divine perfection and shows how it is described with key reference to the work and person of Christ. Katherine Sonderegger, 'Barth and the Divine Perfections,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 67, no. 4 (2014): 450-63.

<sup>4</sup> CD II.1, 426-33.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 426. For Barth's relation to Protestant Orthodoxy, see Rinse H. Reeling Brouwer, 'Barth and Post-Reformation Theology,' in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth*, eds. George Hunsinger and Keith L. Johnson (2 vols.; Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2020), 2:483-94. For discussion related to the divine perfections specifically, see 2:488-9.

of God's perfections, on the basis of the affirmation that the being of God is made known to humanity in God's self-revelation, which is itself a free act of love. It follows that the perfections discernible in God's loving self-disclosure to humanity cannot be distinguished from his being; and he has shown himself to be 'the One who loves in freedom.'<sup>6</sup> Although unpacking this driving descriptor for Barth's articulation of God goes beyond the scope of this article, the logic and significance of it is summed up by Barth himself in the opening header of §28:

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.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, by the time that Barth arrives at his articulation of wisdom, he has already firmly established his rejection of beginning from a concept (or doctrine) other than that of the Trinity in exploring the divine perfections (or in any other dogmatic endeavour, for that matter). He emphatically states that 'a Church dogmatics derives from a doctrine of the Trinity ...'<sup>8</sup> Therefore, any attempt to ground the divine wisdom in a concept foreign to the being of God known in his self-revelation is rejected outright. It is just such a tendency that Barth finds in the predecessors with whom he places himself in discussion and—it would seem—most characteristically in Friedrich Schleiermacher's account of wisdom.<sup>9</sup>

Barth's critique of Schleiermacher comes at the end of a lengthy repudiation of conceiving of wisdom as a 'principle of world interpretation' (*Welterklärungsprinzip*).<sup>10</sup> Barth thus implies that what he has been critiquing is exactly what is found in Schleiermacher's account. Yet, he still only explicitly mentions Schleiermacher once, and only to modify one sentence that appears in the *Glaubenslehre*. Schleiermacher's sentence reads: 'The divine wisdom is the principle which orders and determines the world for the divine self-communication active in our redemption.' Barth 'corrects' this to read: 'The divine wisdom is the divine self-communication ordering and determining the world for itself.'<sup>11</sup> Although Barth's critique here is brief, he seems to indicate that, in contrast to the Protestant orthodox theologians earlier engaged—who mistakenly allowed abstract concepts to govern their articulation of *divine* wisdom—Schleiermacher took a step further by effectively speaking of wisdom as less than divine. For Barth, Schleiermacher committed the great (and 'Hellenic') error of conceiving of wisdom as an *intermediary* between God and the world.<sup>12</sup> Whether Barth offers a

<sup>6</sup> CD II.1, 257.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>9</sup> Jan Stefan reads Barth's elucidation of the divine perfections as a self-conscious return to (as well as development of) his Protestant Orthodox predecessors and a 'loud protest' (*lauten Protest*) against Schleiermacher's mode of developing the divine attributes. Jan Stefan, 'Gottes Vollkommenheiten nach KD II/1,' in *Karl Barth im europäischen Zeitgeschehen (1935-1950): Widerstand - Bewährung - Orientierung*, eds. Michael Beintker, Christian Link and Michael Trowitzsch (2 vols.; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2010), 1:83-108.

<sup>10</sup> See CD II.1, 427; Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* II,1 (Zürich: TVZ, 1987), 482. Hereafter KD II.1.

<sup>11</sup> CD II.1, 433.

<sup>12</sup> See *ibid.*, 427-29; 432-33.

fair reading of Schleiermacher is an important question.<sup>13</sup> Like Barth, Schleiermacher aims to present a distinctly Christian account of the doctrine of wisdom. Defining the world as ‘the scene of redemption’ communicates Schleiermacher’s utter unwillingness to separate the world into elements that are directly related and those that are indirectly related to God’s redemptive goals. Wisdom, for Schleiermacher, is precisely that attribute of God which safeguards the harmonious interdependence of all things toward the end of God’s self-impartment, as wisdom is the perfect realization of the divine love.<sup>14</sup> Schleiermacher refuses to operate in the vein of his predecessors, who divided providence into the categories *generalis* (all creation), *specialis* (humanity), and *specialissima* (the Kingdom of God).<sup>15</sup> In his view, everything must be subsumed under and directed toward the Kingdom of God, and to claim otherwise would be to render other parts of creation less important and thereby conceive of God’s activity in the government of the world as disunified. Therefore, it ought to be acknowledged that Schleiermacher, as well as Barth, sought to maintain unity in God: Schleiermacher by equating God’s wisdom with the ordering of redemptive history to perfection, and Barth by keeping God’s wisdom bound to the other *divine* perfections.

Let us assume that Barth read Schleiermacher well and did not merely take issue with the latter’s use of ‘principle’ language. Why was it more important for him that the unity of God *first* be maintained in relation to his other perfections rather than in relation to his providence? In short, maintaining the unity of divine providence *without* specification of the divine *identity* fundamentally alters the character of that wise providence.

In contrast to Schleiermacher, Barth argues for the *synonymity* between wisdom and God’s self-communication from the Old Testament wisdom literature—particularly chapters 1, 3 and 8 of Proverbs and chapter 28 of Job.<sup>16</sup> He thus chooses to speak of human acquaintance with wisdom in Scripture as encounter with a *who* (God) rather than a *what* (ordering principle). This commitment is first expressed in Barth’s insight that Proverbs’ prophetic and personal account of wisdom precedes and determines its cosmological account. Barth observes that in Proverbs 1 and 8, wisdom is presented as a ‘prophetic person’ (*prophetischen Person*) crying out in the streets, preaching that ‘well-known’ (*wohlbekannte*) sermon of ‘repentance, judgment and salvation.’<sup>17</sup> In Barth’s view, wisdom presented as a prophet who warns of the consequences of not following her ways, precedes and therefore informs the cosmological understanding of wisdom presented in Proverbs 3:19, where it is said that the ‘Lord by wisdom hath founded the earth; by understanding hath he established the heavens.’<sup>18</sup> That there are

<sup>13</sup> Paul Nimmo thinks not, and argues as much by pointing to a sentence of Schleiermacher’s which closely follows the one under fire: ‘... the divine wisdom is nothing but the Supreme Being viewed as engaged in this absolute (not compositely, but simply and originally, perfect) self-presentation and impartation.’ (Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, eds. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart [London: T&T Clark, 1999], 733.) Paul T. Nimmo, ‘The Divine Wisdom and the Divine Economy,’ *Modern Theology* 34, no. 3 (July 2018): 403–18. See 413, note 46.

<sup>14</sup> Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 727–30.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 725. As Dawn DeVries and B.A. Gerrish explain in their analysis of Schleiermacher’s doctrine of providence, ‘If the divine decree is one, then every single thing in nature and history must be construed within the perfect realization of that decree.’ ‘Providence and Grace: Schleiermacher on Justification and Election,’ in *Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher*, ed. Jacqueline Mariña (Cambridge: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 192.

<sup>16</sup> *CD* II.1, 427–31.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 428. *KD* II.1, 482.

<sup>18</sup> *CD* II.1, 428.

blessings attached to those who live according to the wisdom by which all things were created and are maintained (3:14, 15, 23-25) can only be understood in light of that same wisdom which calls people to repent and adhere to her ways. Because Barth emphatically attributes this 'preaching' to God himself, the promised blessings attached to following wisdom are direct actions of God, conditional on the acceptance of wisdom's sermon of repentance and salvation.<sup>19</sup> In other words, enjoying the fruit of wisdom does not come from independently discerning it in the cosmos, but from receiving the wise Word of God. Barth sees humanity's inability to enjoy wisdom on the basis of what one finds in the world as even more explicitly stated in Job 28, where it is said that wisdom has been concealed from the eyes of all the living (28:21) and cannot be searched out and then possessed as are gold, silver, iron and copper (28:1-2, 2-14).<sup>20</sup>

Barth thus views Schleiermacher as prioritizing an impersonal cosmological account of wisdom over a personal prophetic one by locating the substance of wisdom in a teleological ordering of history. To be sure, for Barth, God's wisdom secures the rationality of God's providential patience, which so often appears capricious.<sup>21</sup> In this sense, his understanding of divine wisdom is also teleological. However, by drawing the reader's attention back to the content of Wisdom's sermon, Barth is *not* suggesting that one should merely adjust one's understanding of world history to a more 'redemptive' model (as in the case of Schleiermacher). Rather, he is inviting readers to conceive of God's wisdom as related to his other perfections (holiness, righteousness, etc.) so that it becomes clear that Wisdom's sermon must be heard anew every day. By re-establishing wisdom as belonging to the holy and righteous God of Israel, Barth insists that this wisdom entails *judgment* on the world *as it orders the world to redemption*. Locating such ordering in an intermediary principle, by contrast, risks implying that God's ordering is a 'neutral' process which does not involve real confrontation and conflict between God and God's creatures. The identity and saving purposes of this God determine the character of his wisdom and wise providence.

One does not find the same emphasis on understanding divine wisdom via its relation to the other divine perfections in the respective treatments offered by David Ford and David Kelsey. This is primarily due to the fact that neither theologian situates his 'wisdom' project within the doctrine of God; Ford examines it as both a divine and human theme across the biblical corpus and Kelsey utilizes it in developing a theological anthropology. Thus, while in the course of pursuing their wider aims both theologians do describe wisdom as a divine attribute, such discussion is downstream from exploring wisdom as a category in its own right in the Bible. In other words, Ford and Kelsey allow the category of wisdom to stand on its own, without conforming it to divine revelation as salvific event. In this crucial sense, they depart from Barth. To be sure, both theologians offer explicitly Christian accounts, both identify wisdom with the God of Israel, and both extensively draw on scripture to elucidate the character of wisdom. However, their respective descriptions offer portraits of wisdom *as such* and allow the category to inform the doctrine of *divine* wisdom, rather than allowing the category to be transformed by God's self-revelation in salvific action. Ford, for example, points to what he calls the many 'moods' which characterize human wisdom and

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 428.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 430-31.

<sup>21</sup> See Ibid., 423.

suggests that God's wisdom can be analogously conceived.<sup>22</sup> Kelsey, for his part, locates wisdom within the triune life by associating it with the eternal generation of the Son by the Father, but is only able to call this 'wisdom' after sustained attention to the creation theology and pedagogical genre of the book of Proverbs.<sup>23</sup> Ford's reading of wisdom from below to above, as it were, and Kelsey's sole attention to Proverbs as creation pedagogy, promote a vision of divine wisdom marked by a strong continuity with human wisdom. While both associate wisdom with the God of Israel, it is here critically asked whether their modes of elucidating divine wisdom risk overlooking the divine attributes of holiness and righteousness (conceived with reference to God's saving action), which seriously call into question the possibility of a close analogy between divine and human wisdom. Despite this departure from Barth, as becomes evident in the section on the 'how' of wisdom, both Ford and Kelsey are able to retain something of the prophetic character of wisdom by situating its revelation within divine action.

### Part Two: The 'What' of Wisdom

We have seen that Barth is primarily concerned to clarify the One with whom wisdom is identified. But what are the descriptors Barth uses to reflect on divine wisdom? What concepts are taken up to elucidate the contours of the *wise* God? Barth maintains (without explicit supporting argument) that the primary understanding of wisdom must be deduced from the original Hebrew word *chokma*, meaning 'firmness and steadfastness' (*Festmachen und Festhalten*).<sup>24</sup> When taken up to describe God, what the word *chokma* connotes, in Barth's view, is the inner intelligibility and self-consistency within God's own being, whereas the other words which have been used for wisdom in the Christian tradition—namely, the Greek *σοφία* (*sophia*), meaning 'tact and skill' (*Geschicklichkeit*), and the Latin *sapientia*, meaning 'taste' (*Geschmack*)—relate to the perfect realization of the divine will in history.<sup>25</sup> Barth thus reaffirms his commitment to speaking of wisdom as descriptive of God's own eternal life before speaking of divine wisdom's relation to providence.<sup>26</sup> Wisdom relates to the intelligibility of God's being. Of course, this intelligibility is only called into question by creatures in light of his providence, which often appears random and capricious. Thus, in response to this creaturely question, Barth affirms that the wisdom of God is rooted in God's own life, the intelligibility of which is measured against no higher standard than itself. God's wisdom, in other words, is self-justifying. Barth writes, 'We cannot try to justify Him from above, measuring Him by this or that standard of value and reasonableness. Nor is it as if there is no answer to this Why? In God Himself, or as if we ourselves cannot understand this answer or know God Himself as the One in whom there

<sup>22</sup> See David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 248. That wisdom as a divine attribute can only properly be understood after a broader examination of the category is also reflected in the structure of Ford's book. The chapter on 'the God of wisdom' is the seventh and final *explicitly* theological chapter.

<sup>23</sup> See David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence* 2 vols. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 1:123-4; 1:226.

<sup>24</sup> CD II.1, 427. KD II.1, 481.

<sup>25</sup> CD II.1, 426-7. KD II.1, 480-81.

<sup>26</sup> There is, of course, the classic debate within Barth studies as to whether these two can be separated. See, for example, Paul D. Molnar, 'Can the Electing God be God Without Us?: Some Implications of Bruce McCormack's Understanding of Barth's Doctrine of Election for the Doctrine of the Trinity,' *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 49, no. 2 (2007): 199-222.

is an answer to this question. The answer is that God is wise.<sup>27</sup> Barth thus again reaches for a positive description of divine wisdom: It is a wisdom which is known by creatures who are exposed to its revelation, but it is—at the same time—not a wisdom that conforms to creaturely standards of intelligibility. The wisdom of God's wisdom, as it were, is measured according to the shape of God's own life, which is known in his 'dealings [*Handeln*] with Israel.'<sup>28</sup>

What then is the human wisdom that corresponds to this divine wisdom? Perhaps unsurprisingly for Barth, and in light of his reading of Job 28, he contends that whatever this wisdom is, it can never be understood as a human possession. As he so eloquently put it in a sermon on the fear of the Lord, years after writing *CD* II.1: 'Wisdom has this characteristic: nobody has it stored away; nobody is already wise, either in his mind, or, even less, in his heart. We may only *become* wise.'<sup>29</sup> The content of this becoming lies in 'heeding and accepting divine wisdom' and doing so in recognition of the fact that 'it is at the same time holy and just, that it is the meaning and the basis of God's patience with man.'<sup>30</sup> Learning to live in response to divine wisdom requires one to recognize that her own human wisdom is fundamentally at odds with that of God, and to acknowledge not only that God *is* patient but *to what end* God is patient. Barth earlier stated that the end of God's patience is human repentance and conversion, 'a summons to have faith,' which has ultimately been accomplished on humanity's behalf in Jesus Christ, but to which humans are still called.<sup>31</sup> Learning to be wise must begin with and return daily to the recognition of the fact that wisdom is, in fact, located in the One who is not only Wholly Other but *this* Other, the One who, Barth observes, is '[a]ccording to the New Testament ... the *μόνος σοφός* (Rom. 16.27; 1 Tim. 1.17) ...'<sup>32</sup> Because the God of Israel alone is wise, the only real content of human wisdom lies in *seeking* wisdom, which explains the biblical phrase Barth cites with approval: 'wisdom to the wise.'<sup>33</sup> The gift of God's wisdom is given to those who (wisely) seek wisdom from the hand of God.

It might well be asked at this point whether there is *any* analogy between conventional understandings of wisdom and the wisdom of seeking God which Barth finds in scripture. Must the substance of wisdom 'as we know it' always crumble under exposure to divine revelation? If so, why even use the word 'wisdom'? Barth is not setting up irreconcilable dichotomies here. For example, he affirms that God's wisdom is the 'source of all true logical consistency' and that wisdom means 'the art of living' (*Lebenskunst*).<sup>34</sup> He thus concedes that even biblical wisdom entails rationality and living well. Crucially, however, Barth attributes the ordering of true logical consistency to God and describes the art of living within the context of a covenant relationship with *this* God. Conventional notions of wisdom may thus function as placeholders, but they are imbued with content by the God whose revelation may radically overturn their own

<sup>27</sup> *CD* II.1, 424.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 432. *KD* II.1, 486.

<sup>29</sup> Karl Barth, 'The Beginning of Wisdom,' in *Deliverance to the Captives*, trans. Marguerite Wieser (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 126-35.

<sup>30</sup> *CD* II.1, 430.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 418-19. See Paul Dafydd Jones, 'On Patience: Thinking With and Beyond Karl Barth,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68, no. 3 (2015): 273-98.

<sup>32</sup> *CD* II.1, 438.

<sup>33</sup> See *Ibid.*, 438.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 426; 433. *KD* II.1, 480; 488. The original German states the identification of 'logical consistency' with God even more emphatically: '... daß dieser Gott, der der Welt gegenüber seinen Heilsratschluß geltend macht, als solcher auch die ursprüngliche und eigentliche Folgerichtigkeit selber ist' (480).

provisional logic. This is why Barth rejects any notion of wisdom as some sort of inherent 'worldly shrewdness' (*Weltklugheit*) and does not list any wisdom qualities in humans beyond practices of anticipating revelation.<sup>35</sup>

It is important at this point to note Barth's language of the revelation and knowledge of God's wisdom as 'light' (*Licht*). The overall negative assessment of human wisdom, insofar as it corresponds to a positive knowledge of who God is, means that those who have been exposed to God's revelation may have 'confidence' (*Zuversicht*) and 'freedom' (*Befreiung*) in this knowledge: confidence in God's faithfulness and freedom from a misplaced preoccupation with human wisdom. The consistency between the divine perfections is secured by the fact that God is wise. God is never merciful today and righteous tomorrow, deciding on a whim who to be toward his creatures. Barth insists that God is always the One who freely loves us in Jesus Christ and his perfections are always descriptive of this *one* reality. The consistency of divine wisdom means that we can be confident that God truly is who he reveals himself to be.<sup>36</sup> The conflictual language which describes human confrontation with divine wisdom arises from a definite knowledge of God as Savior, and thus, a corresponding human wisdom does not issue in despair or self-involvement, but confidence in *this* God and his salvific purposes.

Ford and Kelsey also locate the substance of wisdom 'outside' the creature, but only in the sense that human wisdom is directed towards what is external to oneself. In stark contrast to Barth, the 'what' of wisdom corresponds to the 'who' of wisdom chiefly by analogy. Wisdom is wise because, *like* God's wisdom, it desires and attends to the 'other'. For Barth, on the other hand, human wisdom is wise because it seeks and responds to God's self-communication.

In *Christian Wisdom*, Ford's primary concern is to recommend wisdom as a mode of doing theology,<sup>37</sup> and the 'what' of wisdom, for him, ultimately lies in rightly-orientated desire. The virtue of this descriptor, for Ford, is that it is able to embrace the complexity of human faith as it is depicted in scripture and yields a mode of theology that is not absolutist.<sup>38</sup> Ford achieves this account of wisdom's 'what' by constructing a description that maps onto biblical accounts of divine and human action but which ultimately stands 'above' such action insofar as it is a quality common to both God and creatures. The fluidity with which Ford moves from speaking of human wisdom to speaking of the wisdom of God (as shown above) fundamentally construes wisdom as a principle that takes form in action: sometimes divine, sometimes human.

Kelsey's account of wisdom's 'what' is closer to Barth in that it is described decidedly within the context of divine action. For Kelsey, human wisdom is constituted by its responsiveness to God's active relating (more on this in the next section). However, Kelsey offers a description of divine action which separates God's relating to creation *creatively* from God's relating to creation *to save*.<sup>39</sup> Kelsey roots this separation in the distinct character of the Hebrew wisdom literature which, in contrast to the majority of the Old Testament, depicts God's relating to human creatures in language unmarked by God's

<sup>35</sup> CD II.1, 433.

<sup>36</sup> CD II.1, 424-25. KD II.1, 478-79.

<sup>37</sup> See Ford's introduction, subtitled 'theology as wisdom.' *Christian Wisdom*, 1-13.

<sup>38</sup> See *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>39</sup> See Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 1:176-89.



salvific activity in Israel's life.<sup>40</sup> Within his broader aim of constructing a theological anthropology, Kelsey finds the creation theology of the book of Proverbs to be a helpful resource because it is not prone to the danger (ubiquitous in modern theology) of anthropologies of 'self-actualization,' which locate the 'real' human in some future eschatological existence. Kelsey argues that attention to God's creative mode of relating, evident in Proverbs, shows how 'the real and authentic human being is the ordinary, everyday human person.'<sup>41</sup>

On Barth's terms, however, dividing and separating divine action amounts to sundering the divine identity. In the same way that God's wisdom must always be understood in relation to the other perfections, so must God's actions (from which we deduce the perfections) be unified. Kelsey derives the 'what' of wisdom—which is, ultimately, empowering the 'other' to be wise in themselves—from a description of the triune life which is informed by the biblical wisdom literature.<sup>42</sup> The way in which God attends to creatures and calls them to be wise mirrors the relation between the Father and the Son. Kelsey's reading of Proverbs follows the mainstream of scholarship on the biblical wisdom literature in its claim that it describes a mode of divine relating to creation that is simply not interested in soteriology. Barth, by contrast, maintains that the soteriological sermon of Wisdom in Proverbs must precede and condition its cosmological statements, and this in order to preserve divine unity. For Barth, this ordering is internal to the structure of Proverbs and also makes sense of the unity of *this* God with the God of the rest of the Bible.

The account Barth offers of God's *saving* Wisdom which calls listeners to cling to her reaches distinct clarity in his reading of 1 Corinthians 1-2, wherein Christ 'is made wisdom to us' (1 Cor. 1:30). In this passage, the human wisdom, which corresponds to God's wise action, is simply faith in the One who is wise over and against the foolishness of the world. The fool, who clings to his own self-purported wisdom, is unable to encounter the One who is really wise because he is unable to see that wisdom is truly revealed in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. It is there that God is known in his wisdom, 'i.e., where His wisdom actually was and acted and revealed itself.'<sup>43</sup> Those who know God to be wise *in this way* have their life from *this* Christ. With Christ in his humility, they 'fall under the judgment of that Greek world,' even as they triumph over the foolishness of the world in the power of the resurrection.<sup>44</sup> For Barth, any proper account of divine wisdom cannot exclude God's acting to save in Jesus Christ because it is in him that the wisdom which is witnessed in the prophets, sages, and apostles is revealed. Moreover, in the 'event' of Jesus Christ the salvific character which determines the divine-human relationship is specified, disallowing for the 'what' of human wisdom to simply mirror the triune life, insofar as human wisdom is revealed to be at enmity with the ways of God. The only human wisdom which corresponds to God's *saving* wisdom involves confident and penitent faith in this God.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, *Ibid.*, 1:220.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:204.

<sup>42</sup> See *Ibid.*, 1:168; 1:236.

<sup>43</sup> *CD* II.1, 435.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 436. Reflecting on the radical reappropriation of 'wisdom' in 1 Corinthians 1-2, Colin Gunton writes, 'Whatever we may wish to make of other aspects of Barth's programme, here Paul is a "Barthian" in his understanding of language, in wishing to commandeer a concept in current employment for a new and specific use: to say that, whatever the world thinks wisdom, this is the real thing.' Colin Gunton, 'Christ, the Wisdom of God: A Study in Divine and Human Action,' in *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?: Wisdom in the Bible, the Church and the Contemporary World*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 249-61. Quote on 254.

The once-for-all wisdom of God revealed in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ must never deform into another ‘principle of world interpretation.’ Rather, the revelation of *this* wisdom must occur again and again. The mode of this revelation, however, is not specified by Barth. It is his ‘descendants’ who seek a scripturally-informed answer to this question.

### Part Three: The ‘How’ of Wisdom

Barth’s reticence regarding the ‘how’ of wisdom’s revelation can be understood along the same lines as his unwillingness to locate the ‘what’ of human wisdom in any inherent creaturely quality. To say that wisdom’s revelation happens *only here* or *only in this way* risks confining the action of God to sinful and all-too-human expectations and desires. When this happens, the supposed mode of revelation replaces actual revelation. Indeed, this is a key reason why, for Barth, the Word of God must always be understood as ‘event’ rather than, say, the Bible itself. Barth’s ‘descendants’, by contrast, are willing to elucidate wisdom’s mode of revelation and do so with careful attention to scripture. The pictures these two theologians present, however, substantially differ.

David Ford opens chapter one of his *Christian Wisdom* with the statement, ‘Prophetic scriptural wisdom is inextricably involved with the discernment of cries’<sup>45</sup> and closes the same chapter by quoting the key ‘cry passages’ from Proverbs 1 and 8.<sup>46</sup> In this opening chapter, entitled ‘Wisdom cries’, Ford chiefly engages Luke-Acts, wherein he explores the many instances in the Gospel where wisdom, with Jesus as its truest embodiment, is seen to be in connection with various cries, which include cries of blessing (surrounding the birth and baptism of Jesus and upon those who ‘take no offense’ at him),<sup>47</sup> suffering (‘shouting and shrieking demons, a weeping bereaved mother, the hidden sin of a paralyzed man ...’),<sup>48</sup> judgement (in Jesus’ ‘cries of ‘Woe!’ to the Pharisees and lawyers ... and of ‘You hypocrites!’ to the crowds’),<sup>49</sup> and more. Near the end of his development of the theme of cries, Ford notes that presenting a conclusive summary is risky in that it abstracts from the particularity of each passage.<sup>50</sup> He further writes of Jesus, ‘His life was a drama punctuated by cries of many sorts ...’<sup>51</sup> These statements communicate Ford’s unwillingness to reduce biblical wisdom to any abstract principles and further express his view that the Gospel presents the wisdom of Jesus as having been ‘*shaped through the passionate multiple intensities embodied in all the cries that have pervaded his ministry ...*’<sup>52</sup> The substance of these statements lies in the commitment to discerning wisdom ‘within earshot of cries’,<sup>53</sup> that is, close to concrete intensities, so that wisdom may be learned, not as an abstract concept, but as a scripture-inspired prophetic call within historical situations. Ringing true to Barth’s association of wisdom

<sup>45</sup> Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, 14.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-18.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 33. Italics in the original text.

<sup>53</sup> See *Ibid.*, 5.

with prophecy which cannot be tied to any single principle, Ford remains distant from an abstracted account of how God's wisdom relates to the world.<sup>54</sup> Yet, Ford is also critical of Barth's doctrine of wisdom, arguing that Barth's emphasis on 'knowing and knowledge, clarity, theology as *scientia*, truth and falsehood, and imperatives' is at odds with the more complex picture Barth himself invites readers to find in Israel's history.<sup>55</sup> Ford drastically departs from Barth by wanting to allow that even *divine* wisdom has something in it that is analogous to human wisdom, which is marked not only by knowing and commanding, but also by questioning, hoping and—above all—desiring.<sup>56</sup>

David Kelsey paints quite a different picture from Ford by locating wisdom's voice in the mundanity, rather than the intensities, of life. He does so with careful attention to the book of Proverbs, not focusing on the urgent character of personified wisdom's cry but on the contexts in which she calls listeners. Creation itself, Kelsey argues, is presented in the Old Testament wisdom literature as being understood in terms of 'the lived world as the quotidian, the everyday finite realities of all sorts—animal, vegetable, and mineral—in the routine networks that are constituted by their ordinary interactions ...'.<sup>57</sup> Wisdom, Kelsey explains, is not interested in an eschatological future; the substance of humanity's 'proximate contexts' is *not* found in teleology but in the mundanity of the everyday.<sup>58</sup> Included in this context are the various socially-established practices in which people engage.<sup>59</sup> Proverbs, especially, frequently mentions 'practices of securing justice and correcting injustice; of borrowing, lending, and managing money; and above all, practices of using language either truthfully or deceptively.'<sup>60</sup> Drawing from Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, Kelsey writes that every such practice has a 'standard of excellence' against which it is measured and which 'partly define[s]' the practice.<sup>61</sup> In the Old Testament wisdom literature, this 'standard of excellence' is wisdom itself; it is the 'normative edge' of humanity's 'proximate contexts.'<sup>62</sup> Wisdom is the vocational dimension of the various contexts into which people are born; it is God's call 'through creation' to live wisely within the practices of one's community for the 'well-being' of oneself and the broader 'quotidian.'<sup>63</sup> Moreover, '[t]he relative excellence of enactments of these practices is measured by their appropriateness as, precisely, responses to God's call.'<sup>64</sup> Therefore, God's call stands above human practices in

<sup>54</sup> Ford's theme of wisdom's 'immersion' in history is further developed in his chapters on Job. It is worth noting here that many of Ford's insights in his engagement with Job come indirectly from Barth, as are some of his criticisms formed over against Barth, through Ford's former student, Susannah Ticciati, and her published thesis *Job and the Disruption of Identity: Reading Beyond Barth* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), which critically engages Barth's reading of Job.

<sup>55</sup> Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, 247.

<sup>56</sup> See *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>57</sup> David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 1:190.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:191.

<sup>59</sup> Kelsey writes, 'By a practice I mean *any form of socially established human interactivity that is conceptually formed, is complex and internally coherent, is subject to standards of excellence that partly define it, and is done to some end but does not necessarily have a product.* Any such practice is enacted in the context of a host society, its culture, and its history. Hence any such practice is historically contingent, deeply shaped by and relative to some society and its culture.' (*Ibid.*, 1:14)

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:194.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:193.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:194.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:194.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:197.

that it is precisely that which determines their relative legitimacy. Kelsey does not view wisdom's implicitness within creational contexts as a testament to cosmic order (a view that he recognizes as closer to the Greek *sophia*, the product of contemplating 'the eternal good'). Rather, biblical wisdom is closer to the Greek *phronesis* in that it is practical ad hoc insight regarding 'the ever-changing political and social world.'<sup>65</sup> Kelsey's account finds resonance with Barth's in its rejection of wisdom as a grand principle and in its emphasis on heeding the divine call in particular contexts. However, by specifically relating—with reference to Proverbs—wisdom's call to practices, Kelsey goes beyond Barth in offering a more tangible and social account of wisdom's potential presence. It may be argued that relating wisdom to what is socially established excludes the Barthian theme of the new and unexpected. Yet, Kelsey's view of wisdom as a vocation partially implicit within a variety of lived contexts forces the one seeking wisdom to be continually alert to the changing circumstances of life and develop wise practices accordingly, being aware of God's providential presence in every location and knowing full well that every quotidian is 'deeply deformed by evil.'<sup>66</sup> In other words, wisdom's social presence does not necessarily imply that it is a static reality to be discovered and possessed, nor that any given social context embodying wisdom is ideal. While wisdom is, in a sense, located in what is established, there is no necessary danger of complacency in Kelsey's model, for measuring up to the 'standard of excellence' involves an alertness in responding to God's continuous call.

Having seen that both Ford and Kelsey develop respective theologies of wisdom which bear resonance with significant themes in Barth's account, and yet differ in their biblical assessments regarding the mode of wisdom's revelation (the one discerning it in cries, the other in the mundane), demands that we ask whether these two accounts may be in any way reconciled.

It might well be noted that the difference between Ford and Kelsey lies not only in the differing forms they present, but potentially also in their content: what is the character of that wisdom which is heard through cries and what is the character of that which is known in the mundane? What if the established mundane is one which excludes cries? Or, to put it in David Kelsey's words (summarizing John Thiel's critique of *Eccentric Existence*): 'On whose every-day-ness does it focus, and does it lead to the false universalism that liberation theologies have attributed to traditional theologies?'<sup>67</sup> Part of Kelsey's reply to this critique is that the picture of the mundane that Proverbs presents encompasses a 'realistic acknowledgement that the everyday includes injustice and suffering.'<sup>68</sup> It is within such contexts that practices are formed which respond to God's call. Therefore, perhaps one way of merging the two accounts of wisdom would be to allow the 'standard of excellence' to be determined precisely by those cries which are discerned to be wise. On the other hand, given the risk of idealizing the voices of those who cry out, presuming that God's wisdom may only be revealed in intense moments indeed limits God's speaking to a specific sphere of reality, whereas Kelsey's account can be, in a sense, all-inclusive. This tension between the intense and the mundane is one which is truly present in life. It therefore seems

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:195. Kelsey's reading of *sophia* clearly departs from Barth's understanding of *sophia* as meaning 'tact and skill.' Barth's definition of *sophia* is closer to Kelsey's definition of *phronesis*.

<sup>66</sup> See *Ibid.*, 1:192.

<sup>67</sup> David Kelsey, 'Response to the Symposium on *Eccentric Existence*,' *Modern Theology* 27, no. 1 (January 2011): 72-86.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

appropriate to hold on to this tension in listening for God's Word. Ford and Kelsey thus both maintain Barth's commitment to the prophetic character of wisdom and imaginatively point to how God might be speaking anew. However, given the fact that the respective generalities these accounts offer ('cries' and 'social practices') require constant modification (i.e., 'discernment' of cries and 'ever-changing' social contexts), I want to suggest that they cannot be *determinative* for a dogmatic account of wisdom. Barth's reticence to write on the 'how' of wisdom does not exclude the accounts of Ford and Kelsey, but it does poignantly insist on the freedom of God by refusing to limit the revelation of divine wisdom to a single mode. Moreover, Barth's sustained attention to the *who* of wisdom, as well as his insistence that its active communication is a *self*-communication, better prepares one to be able to discern the wisdom of cries and practices even as it heightens suspicion regarding the possibility of human discernment. To be sure, the One with whom wisdom is identified is ever surprising and cannot be possessed, but, as Barth maintains, the positive revelation of the God of Jesus Christ does not leave us in total darkness; his wisdom is 'light.'<sup>69</sup> The perfections of God revealed in his dealings with Israel, and supremely so in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, give us much to say about the wisdom of God. At the same time, as Barth would go on to explicitly articulate in his doctrine of reconciliation, the revelation of God in Christ simultaneously uncovers the reality of our enmity towards God. In light of this enmity, one must take care that in proclaiming divine wisdom one is not in fact proclaiming one's own. The discernment that such 'taking care' requires depends neither on human ingenuity nor on assent to a principle—even a 'biblical' principle—of interpretation. The only strategy it can hope to rely on is to address the One who *is* our wisdom, asking that once again he will grant us 'wisdom from above' (James 1:5; 3:17).<sup>70</sup>

### Concluding Remarks

The present interest of theologians in the category of 'wisdom' has taken form under a diversity of doctrines. In this article, I have chosen to reflect on Karl Barth's doctrine of wisdom as a divine perfection. By situating wisdom under the doctrine of God and by clarifying the identity of wisdom through positioning it in relation to the other divine perfections, elucidated with special reference to God's saving action in Jesus Christ, Barth suggests the difference this decision makes for what one concludes about the 'what' and 'how' of wisdom. For Barth, the identification of wisdom with the holy and righteous God who saves calls for a corresponding human wisdom which is marked by seeking and responding to this God's active and saving Word, the mode of which is constrained to no particular creaturely sphere. In this scheme, human wisdom is not a quality that is analogous to a divine quality. Ford's account, by contrast—though it retains something of the prophetic character of wisdom—ultimately defines wisdom in terms of desire, and thus construes it as a 'what' that is shared by God and humans. Kelsey, likewise, retains the mode of wisdom as existing within divine action, but alters the relationship between the righteous God and sinful humans by confining wisdom to a mode of divine relating that is effectively uninterested in rescuing creatures from their enmity towards God. This redescription of the divine identity through the

<sup>69</sup> See CD II.1, 424-5.

<sup>70</sup> See *Ibid.*, 439.

pedagogical character of the book of Proverbs ultimately presumes the possibility of a human wisdom which genuinely corresponds to the shape of God's own triune life.

If 'wisdom' is to occupy a programmatic place in contemporary theology, theologians will have to wrestle with the question of the identity of the God to whom biblical wisdom witnesses.<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> Paul Nimmo's 'The Divine Wisdom and the Divine Economy' is a positive step in this direction, as there—with particular reference to the attribute of divine wisdom—he ably narrates contemporary divergent (but not necessarily irreconcilable) modes of thinking about the being of God and recommends a Christological focus as the best way forward. In his recent work engaging the very different voices of modern Russian sophiology, Marcus Plested also argues for the necessary identification of Sophia with the triune God and not merely with an intermediary principle— a 'free floating category' —between God and creation. (Plested, *Wisdom in the Christian Tradition*, 240-41) He further critiques Russian sophiology's preoccupation with the 'rather ambiguous figure' of Sophia 'at the expense of the rather more concrete wisdom figure of the New Testament—Christ' (ibid., 230). Although Plested's work functions as more of a survey and diagnosis than a constructive project, he offers a 'framework for a re-oriented sophiology' that is counterintuitive to Barth's theology in a whole host of ways yet is committed to always holding the 'who' of wisdom in view. (See ibid., 241-42).