

The Incarnation of the Eternal Son: Fitting, not Necessary

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Abstract

In this contribution the author responds to Bruce Marshall's Thomist critique of Barth's theology, at the cost of a certain revision of Barth's mature exploration of the "being-for-others" of the eternal Son in CD IV/1. Affirming the eternity of the Son, the *Logos asarkos* and thus of the immanent Trinity, socially modeled, the article argues that this revision follows the cutting-edge of Barth's thought and provides a dispositional ontology which both allows for a properly divine mutability in the incarnation and at the same time preserves the freedom of reconciling grace.

Keywords

Barth wars, Paul Molnar, substance ontology, dispositional ontology, divine mutability, *Logos asarkos*, subordinationism, Arianism, divine hypostasis

I have been thinking about Karl Barth a great deal lately, especially since I published *Lutheran Theology: A Critical Introduction*.¹ In this 2020 book, and with provocation aforethought, I flipped the usual anti-ecumenical

1. *Lutheran Theology: A Critical Introduction* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020).

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intra-Lutheran slander of "crypto-Calvinism" into the ecumenically intended extra-Lutheran compliment that Barth was in fact a "crypto-Lutheran." Indeed, it is the subversive presence, I suspect, of Luther's Christology (in chief intent, at least)² that makes Thomist critics (be they Roman like Marshall or reprisinators of Reformed Orthodoxy like Steven J. Duby³) see in Barth a slippery slope: Luther's God, who in Christ comes down to the depths, prefigures the kenotic collapse of theology into anthropology. This collapse, it is charged, is represented by the epochal modern thought of George Friedrich Hegel and his left-wing interpreter, Ludwig Feuerbach. A return to substance metaphysics against Hegel's "historicizing of being," so it is urged, is the only way to block this theological death spiral.

To be sure, Barth wants it both ways. As much as he repudiates the absolute decree of double predestination with its correlative doctrine of limited atonement by appropriating from classical Lutheranism the objectivity and universality of Christ's saving work⁴ in fulfillment of the eternal election of the community of sinners beloved in Christ,⁵ he also retains muted versions of the *extra Calvinisticum* and of divine simplicity to safeguard the freedom of God's grace in Christ.⁶ An abiding dialectic thus informs Barth's mature theology of "the Lord who became a servant," wherein Barth refused ever to resolve one term of the dialectic into the other. The relation between subject and predicate is made irreversible in the matter of divine self-revelation,

2. CD IV/1 is the crux of the issue for Marshall and so I will respond in terms of this volume of the *Church Dogmatics, IV/1, The Doctrine of Reconciliation* trans. G. W. Bromiley & T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1974). As to the presence of Luther here see CD IV/1: 149, 238–400, 396–7, 415–6, 521–22, 545–27, 621, 642, 658, 690, 692–3, 763, 766. George Hunsinger asks, "How could Barth's massive accord with Luther come to be so roundly overlooked?" in his *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 280. I attempt to answer this question in my aforementioned critical introduction to Lutheran theology.
3. Steven J. Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2016). See my review in *Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies*, 4(2), 2019, 207–214, 224–227. For appreciation of Barth's critical reserve regarding divine simplicity, see my review essay of Jordan P. Barrett, *Divine Simplicity: A Biblical and Trinitarian Account* in *The International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 21(1), (2019, 111–115).
4. *Formula of Concord XI*; Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1899), 269–292; Paul R. Hinlicky, "Law, Gospel and Beloved Community," in *Preaching and Teaching the Law and Gospel of God* (Delhi, NY: ALPB Books, 2013), 91–114.
5. Paul R. Hinlicky, *Paths Not Taken: Theology from Luther through Leibniz* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 112–126. I argue in this book that Barth has an unacknowledged debt to Leibniz's modal reflections on divine choice.
6. CD IV/1: 180.

because here the Lord remains the Lord, always subject even when freely out of love he makes himself the object of human faith and its theological knowledge. Theological thinking must operate then in the to-and-fro between the *freedom* of grace (secured by the doctrine of the eternal and immanent Trinity) and the *objectivity and universality* of the act of reconciliation (warranted by Barth's ontology of act: *esse = operari*). In a specific sense which I will defend, the only issue here is whether this dialectic should be resolved into one of its terms or should be sustained – or better, should be revised in order to be sustained, as I will suggest in conclusion. The alternative is, with Marshall, to dispute Barth's ontology of act⁷ by arguing that *esse* (Marshall's "identity" of an "entity") simply *must* be conceived as prior to *operare*, whereas Barth argues that God is his act eternally and thus also in truthfully saving self-revelation to creatures of history.

II

Along these lines Bruce Marshall has thus offered a sharp – though I would suggest "Thomist" rather than "Catholic" – critique of the legacy of Karl Barth for contemporary theology. As evident from the foregoing, I write in response as an ecumenically-minded theologian in the tradition of Luther who is, while not a school Barthian, one who has learned most of all from him among the moderns, also in disputing with him. One would not have to search far to find a plethora of negative "Lutheran" appraisals of Barth paralleling Marshall's "Catholic" evaluation – in my view usually, if not always, expressions of willful ignorance and even bigotry,⁸ amounting to little more than outbursts of "confessional pigheadedness," as Barth once characterized Werner Elert's response to the *Church Dogmatics*.⁹ Thankfully, the ascendancy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theological reputation, coupled with the labors of Michael DeJonge in explicating Bonhoeffer's dual inheritance from Luther and Barth,¹⁰ is pushing contemporary Lutheran theologians into a

7. Bruce McCormack, "Grace and Being," Chapter 6 in John Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
8. For an egregious example of Lutheran bigotry, see Lowell C. Green, *Lutherans against Hitler: The Untold Story* (St Louis: Concordia, 2007). I analyzed this rank partisanship in *Before Auschwitz: What Christian Theology Must Learn from the Rise of Nazism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 53–64.
9. Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* trans. J. Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 429.
10. Michael P. DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer's Theological Formation: Berlin, Barth, & Protestant Theology* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012) and *Bonhoeffer's Reception of Luther* (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 2017).

more constructive engagement with Barth's thought.¹¹ In this appreciative vein, I have my own set of more or less "Lutheran" concerns about Barth's mature theology, especially with the Trinitarian problem of how his aforementioned dialectic, which resides within an exclusive "two-subject" Christology, truncates pneumatology, as I will indicate in the final section.

The point of the foregoing comment concerns the historicity of theological reasoning. Marshall acknowledges that his essay is a personal reckoning with the debt he owes to Barth's theological legacy, as it also marks a definitive leave-taking in favor of convictions he now holds to be central to theological truth. I am grateful for that candor because, in my view, one of the great virtues in Barth's way of theologizing is his commitment always to begin afresh, in thinking decisively formed by the present encounter of the historical creature, which the theologian is, with the living word of God; this is a methodological commitment that entails frank acknowledgment of the ineradicable historicity of the human thinker who thinks theologically, as also of the living word of God which speaks itself ever fresh in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. For Barth, but not any longer for Marshall, so it seems, this concrete human attentiveness first and always to the gospel of God entails that no milestone in the great theological tradition of thinking the gospel, be it the canonical Bible, the Nicene Creed, the *Summa Theologiae* or the *Church Dogmatics*, can stand as an absolutely fixed point transcending the fog and friction of the gospel's militant course through time and space. It is only Jesus Christ who is and remains the same yesterday, today and forever – that is to say: always for us *in truth* and thus *never* passing into our possession.

It seems true from the standpoint of my Lutheran formation, then, that the good news of election in Christ is that God has taken salvation out of my hands and into his own, and that I cannot and should not discover any difference in merit between myself who is gifted and burdened with faith and another who is not. While it remains an open question whether Barth's consequent *hope* for universal salvation should be taken dogmatically, it seems similarly that the difficulty of persistent human rejection face-to-face with electing grace in Christ cannot be swept under the rug without making divine grace coercive in the end. Thus I am inclined to share some of Marshall's soteriological concerns, though undoubtedly with a different accent.

Notwithstanding the well-merited critique of the European *Volkskirche's* promiscuous practice of infant baptism, the outcome of the *Church*

11. For example, Christine Helmer, *Theology and the End of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014). See my review *Pro Ecclesia* 25/1 (Winter, 2016), 105–111.

Dogmatics in CD IV/4 with its categorical dualism between Spirit baptism and water baptism signals a deeper problem in Barth's doctrine of reconciliation. As hinted, I refer to the relegation of the Spirit's role to little other than accrediting the subjective human apprehension of the objective act of the Word incarnate. What then of the withholding, presumably by the Spirit, of such apprehension? Otherwise, how can the Spirit be anything but a cipher for the human work of belief, contrary to Barth's stated intention? Whereas in fact the Spirit's role in the reconciling mission of the Word incarnate, from conception to resurrection, is an aspect of the *objectivity* of reconciliation – which is also how the Spirit's work in baptism into Christ should be understood.

III

In turning to the problem of divine ontology, let me further stipulate that I am in agreement with one of the *apparent* complaints Marshall registers against Barth regarding the necessity of a doctrine of the immanent and eternal Trinity as the necessary condition of free grace as actualized in the redemption of creation and its fulfillment.¹² I say "apparent," however, because Barth clearly and repeatedly affirms this doctrine (as Paul Molnar has demonstrated beyond any doubt¹³). Thus Marshall's complaint against Barth rests on an inference he draws which he then holds to be in contradiction to Barth's intended affirmation.

But Marshall's inference depends upon the imposition of a metaphysical framework on Barth in which invisible, intangible, ineffable self-same persistence, i.e., "substance," supposedly underlying the phenomenal change apparent to physical creatures, denotes the really real. *Homoousios* notwithstanding, the so-called Great Tradition is not simply unproblematic in respect to the question here. Just this in fact is what was in dispute between Nicaea in 325 and Constantinople 381 until the distinction between *ousia* and *hypostasis* was worked out, while semi-Arian opponents, not without cause, accused the Nicene *homoousios* of

12. Indeed, I am indebted to Bruce Marshall and Lewis Ayres in this regard, as I acknowledged in my response to Katherine Sonderegger in the symposium on my systematic theology, *Beloved Community*, in *Pro Ecclesia* 26/2 (Spring, 2017), 159–185. In turn, however, I lauded the "tilt toward Scotus" i.e., the "formal distinction," in the first volume of Sonderegger's *Systematic Theology* and the development in it of a notion of properly divine mutability, in the symposium on her *Systematic Theology*, Volume 1, *The Doctrine of God*, in *Pro Ecclesia* 27/1 (Winter, 2018) 56–62.
13. Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2017).

modalism.¹⁴ In Barth's own words, consequently, "it is not enough simply to follow the great line of theological tradition and to reject all thought of an alterability or alteration of God in his presence and action in the man Jesus."¹⁵

A "grammar" is in any case a rule for language; it is not *eo ipso* any particular metaphysics, let alone the Platonist or Aristotelian metaphysics of persistence. If the use of terminology borrowed from the metaphysics of being or essence or substance or nature or form (or any other metaphysics) serves theologically as a grammar of faith, it works no more and no less than as a logical placeholder for the articulation of the eminently biblical and evangelically necessary distinction between Creator and creature. Reconciliation, as Barth repeatedly reminds us, would be pointless apart from this distinction, and so this distinction must be observed in speech to communicate the miracle of the Creator becoming a creature in order to reconcile creatures lost in enmity and captive to anti-divine powers. This is what the ecumenical creeds *grammatically* maintain and require, leaving the metaphysical conceptualization of the Creator-creature distinction an open question for theologians to debate.

Neither a metaphysically fixed "grammar," as Marshall seems to hold, nor Barth's persistent polemic against Supreme/Perfect Being theology¹⁶

14. An historical note here: Lewis Ayres in *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006) minimizes the enormous problem created by the *homoousios* of Nicaea in 325 AD when the Christian world awoke to the fact that it had jumped from the frying pan of Arianism (the Logos as a created god, not the only-begotten God) into the fire of modalism (the Son and the Father as *simply* the *same* entity, appearances notwithstanding). The brouhaha over *homoousios* was patched up politically a scant two years after Nicaea when Arius was reinstated while the semi-Arian Eusebius of Caesarea, correlative with his "triumph of the church" in subordination to the imperial state, inveighed against Athanasius, who did not suffer exile seven times for nothing. Athanasius remained allied to the outspoken champion of this new modalism, Marcellus of Ancyra, in the battle against semi-Arianism until the Cappadocians made clear to him what was at stake in maintaining in the divine ontology the personal distinctions of the three. For the details, see Paul R. Hinlicky, *Divine Complexity: The Rise of Creedal Christianity*, (St. Paul, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 207–212.
15. CD IV/1, 183. Just as in opposition to a new iteration of the same difficulty of unbaptized essentialism, the Fifth Ecumenical Council had to affirm that "one of the Trinity suffered" to qualify the semi-Nestorianism of the Tome of Leo. See Robert W. Jenson, *Unbaptized God: The Basic Flaw in Ecumenical Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1992).
16. E.g., "He is God only in these relationships and therefore not in a Godhead which does not take part in this history, and the relationships of its modes of being, which is neutral towards them. This neutral Godhead, this pure and empty Godhead, and its claim to be true divinity, is the illusion of an abstract 'monotheism' which usually fools men most successfully at the high water mark of the development of heathen religions and mythologies and philosophies." CD IV/1 203.

at this connection (and the subsequent school of Barth interpretation that attempts to bring his Trinitarian critique of substance theism to completion in theologies like those of Moltmann, von Balthasar, Jenson,¹⁷ et al., as Marshall mentions) have succeeded in resolving questions that Barth has in fact opened up about a properly divine mutability as required by the incarnation. This seems to me to be a decisive point. Theology in the wake of Barth would continue to learn *what* God is from *who* God is, an unfinished task bracketing all preconceptions regarding the divine nature of the One of Israel who is and claims to be creator of all that is not God. The usual preconceptions of natural theology will be little more for Barth and those who would follow him, per hypothesis, than the idolatrous fantasies of sinfully estranged creatures who want to be God, and do not want God to be God, and therefore construct a humanly useful notion of divine nature in accord with their own ambitions to become gods in its image.

It is rather a bold claim to make, but I am thinking that the Barthians, the Barthian revisionists, and Marshall too are insufficiently attentive to the *historicity* of Barth's thinking here. What I mean specifically is that Barth articulates his startling doctrine of the Son's particular divine personhood against a contemporary competitor that he names "absolute paradox," i.e., the existentialist revival of the theology of the late medieval and early modern *Deus exlex*. Here contradictions in terms, like the Creator is a creature, the infinite is finite, the holy is sinful, etc., are not taken as meaningful innovations in language indicating a novel reality but rather celebrated as direct instantiations of an outlaw God, unbounded either internally or externally.¹⁸ Appearing within Trinitarian theology, absolute paradox vitiates the personal distinction between the Father and the Son by the inconsequent affirmation of

17. I once said to Jenson that my Christology would be rather more traditional than his, i.e., I think that he too much follows Barth in making Jesus Christ the one subject in place of the classical doctrine of the one person of the divine Son who, in the hypostatic union assuming humanity, personally communicates to his humanity those divine properties needed for the mission of reconciliation and also, so the Lutherans would add, those human properties to the deity likewise needed for the mission. Jenson defended himself against egregious misreadings of his position as Hegelianism simpliciter in J. F. Keating and T. J. White, O.P. (eds), *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 117–126.

18. By way of contrast, I follow Eberhard Jüngel's interpretation of rhetorical paradox in Luther's theology as a catachrestic metaphor in "Metaphorical Truth and the Language of Christian Theology," in R. David Nelson (ed.), *Indicative of Grace, Imperative of Freedom: Essays in Honor of Eberhard Jüngel in His 80th Year*, (London and New York: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2014), 89–100.

the suffering of the Father, i.e., patripassianism, when in truth the Father's Son alone became incarnate.¹⁹

In Barth's own words by way of contradistinction to this existentialist rival: there

is not a disorderliness and carelessness in God. But if 'the Father's Son, by nature God, a guest this world of ours he trod' (Luther), if God made use of his freedom in this sense, then the fact that the use of this freedom is an act of obedience characterizes it as a holy and righteous freedom, in which God is not a victim driven to and fro by the dialectic of his divine nature, but is always his own master. He does not make just any use of the possibilities of his divine nature, but he makes one definite use which is necessary on the basis and in fulfillment of his own decision. ... [The Son's obedience] takes place in the freedom of God, but in the inner necessity of the freedom of God and not in the play of a sovereign *liberum arbitrium*.²⁰

Barth's critique of absolute paradox in favor of divine self-revelation is, of course, vitally connected with Barth's well-known concern about the uncritical assumption of alien ideas of the divine nature into Christian theology. We should note as well his employment here of modal logic to make intelligible divine choice and decision.

Marshall knowingly turns attention to *CD IV/1*, where Barth pries open the question of divine nature by speaking provocatively of humility and obedience in the eternal life of God in the divine person of the Son. We have actually

to affirm and understand as essential to the being of God the offensive fact that there is in God himself an above and below, a *prius* and a *posterius*, a superiority and a subordination ... that it belongs to the inner life of God that there should take place within it obedience. ... His divine unity consists in the fact that in Himself He is both One who was obeyed and Another who obeys. ... Not in unequal but equal, not in divided but in the one deity, God is both One and also Another, His own counterpart, coexistent with Himself.²¹

This is the *crux intellectus* on which the opposing schools of Barth interpretation turn, for it is here that Barth explores intensively and, to the mind of the Western theological tradition explosively, the personal, i.e., hypostatic, difference between being God as the Father and being God as the Son. Such exploration, to

19. This was Barth's critique of Moltmann, according to Molnar, 70.

20. *CD IV/1* 194-95.

21. *CD IV/1* 200-01.

be sure, rings the alarm bell of Arianism in the ears of Western theologians up to and including Molnar, going all the way back to Augustine (who admitted his bafflement at the distinction in Greek between *ousia* and *hypostasis*). Molnar, however, in his sprawling campaign against Barth revisionism in the second edition of his *Divine Freedom*, concedes that Barth has given the revisionists ammunition in CD IV/1 by projecting back into the eternal and immanent Trinity features that belongs solely, so Molnar holds, to the economy, i.e., to the assumed human nature.²² Marshall makes the same point when he affirms that “apart from his becoming flesh, subjection, prayer, obedience, and death would not belong to God at all” but only on account of the incarnation. Marshall is right, however, that for Barth this offloading of negativities onto the human nature “isn’t good enough.” It is not good enough for Barth, he argues, because otherwise in Barth’s mind “we revert to the specter of the hidden God” – unsettling the confidence that faith can place in the decided God, the revealed God of manger and cross who is for us unreservedly, indeed, from *all* eternity, *all* the way up and *all* the way down – no *Logos asarkos*!²³

I have to remark here that this reflects too typical a “Catholic” reduction of Protestant theology to subjectivism – *as if* Barth’s *objectivism* were not the special bone of contention among real subjectivists, Protestant²⁴ and Catholic! *As if* it were not for the sake of this objectivity that Barth locates humility and obedience in the *deity* of the Son! What Barth is worried about is not religious uncertainty but rather the dangerous and indeed lethal certitude of the sin of pride in conjuring up a *Deus exlex* for it to emulate – as recent German history had dramatically demonstrated. Barth’s actual target here, as mentioned, is contemporary existentialist theologians who for apologetic purposes play with fire by making a natural theology out of Luther’s *Deus absconditus* and its nominalist metaphysical background to find a proselytizing point of contact with the modern experience of meaninglessness.

In any case Barth’s positive point concerns the truthfulness of God in the event of self-revelation.²⁵ As God is, so God reveals. In other words, *only*

22. Molnar allows that there is a genuine question “whether and to what extent Barth illegitimately read back elements of the economy into the immanent Trinity and thus, against his own intentions, uncharacteristically introduced an element of subordination into the immanent Trinity” (*Divine Freedom*, 158). The counter-question is whether this was instead a breakthrough to strong Trinitarian personalism.
23. CD IV/1 53. But here too we should see that the denial of the *Logos asarkos* is a consequence of the two-subject Christology in which the subject, Jesus Christ, has replaced the classical view of the divine Son as the agent and patient of the incarnation.
24. Emil Brunner, *Dogmatics*, volume 1, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, trans. O. Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 349–50.
25. CD IV/1 185.

the Son becomes incarnate because only the Son *is* in the divine life as *being generated* by his Father, *receiving* his being as God from God and so always personally exercising his deity in the humility of *filial* gratitude. Marshall concedes that for Barth such divine Sonship “bestows the ultimate ontological dignity on subordination. It’s a way of being divine.” Though churlishly put, that is precisely right. But surely Marshall’s usage of the language of subordination tips into an uncharitable fallacy of equivocation by using the term “subordination” to imply or impugn Arian ontological inferiority²⁶ when Barth’s meaning is *filial*, according to the irreversible hypostatic sequence running from Father to Son by which personal alterity is established in the eternal processions.

Marshall raises three points against the late-in-life emergence of such strong Trinitarian personalism in CD IV/1. (1) It is not clear whether the ascription of subordination can be made to God without implying inequality. (2) Nor is it clear that ontological subordination can account for the gracious “becoming” flesh of the incarnation (3) But it *is* clear that if God’s being simply is for us, incarnation is not an expression of grace at all but a necessary expression of his nature. I respond to each of these three points now, not so much to defend Barth as a final position, as to keep open the question he has raised about divine “nature” and a properly divine mutability which can be articulated through strong Trinitarian personalism.

First, does filial subordination of Son to Father entail ontological inferiority? Not if it is the manifest (i.e., Johannine) glory of our God that he comes down to the depths. So Luther famously affirmed in the treatise, *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper*, which Barth echoes: “It is not paradoxical or absurd that God becomes and is man. It does not contradict the concept of God. It fulfills it. It reveals the glory of God.”²⁷ Consistent with Barth’s method, then, it is the concept of “equality” which must be baptized so that it no longer denotes the timeless self-sameness of a single entity which only appears to be unequally three when refracted through the prism of time and space. Equality as the one God must be reconceived, if the Son’s equality with God was in fact not something to be coveted or exploited, but rather truthfully exercised in the incarnation and the subsequent way of obedience unto ignominy in exercise of the divine freedom to love those unworthy of love. For God the Father is not simply commander or rather dictator, as if The Absolute were God, such that truly to be God, the Son too must be equally

26. For Barth’s explicit rejection of Arianism in this connection see CD IV/1 195–96.

27. CD IV/1 419. Barth also invokes the Cappadocian Gregory of Nyssa in support in CD IV/1 192.

domineering. Rather, God is the Father of this Son by way of asking for the Son's obedience to his saving will and waiting upon its incarnate achievement, sparing him not but giving him up for the sake of us all. Father and Son are equally God, then, if *esse Deum dare*, though each freely and personally exercises the divine being of self-giving, other-benefiting love in personally distinctive ways, eternally and so also temporally: the Father willing the Son's journey into the far country for our sake and the Son willing to be there as the Judge judged in our place.

For Barth, consequently, what is involved is not a metaphysically unbaptized notion of natural equality by way of timeless, spaceless sameness but rather a dynamic divine unity which dramatically puts itself in jeopardy for our salvation: The Father "in giving [the Son] – and giving Himself – exposes Him – and Himself – to the greatest danger. He sets at stake His own existence as God ... in the venturing of his own self-offering, in this hazarding of his own existence as God." In offering the Son, that is to say, the Father offers "that without which he cannot be God."²⁸ Note how this self-risking venture of divine love for the sake of unworthy others can only be articulated in terms of strong Trinitarian personalism, just as it presses against unbaptized preconceptions of divine simplicity.

Second, how can this filial – not servile – subordination account for the gracious becoming of John 1:14? The *becoming* in "the Word who *became* flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth," is certainly not the becoming of metamorphosis, the kenotic mutation of divine being into another being of flesh. Classically, the divine Son in the hypostatic union takes to himself and makes his very own the human nature who is Jesus Christ in our midst, glorifying him henceforth and forever. That is how the divine Son's incarnation is a fitting but not necessary act of grace. Notice, however, that this represents a one-subject Christology, i.e., that one and the same divine person of the Son/Logos undertakes a history passing from eternal proximity with God to temporal incarnation, thence into the incarnate life of obedience leading to death in humiliation, yet only to be vindicated by the verdict of the Father and so exalted as victorious Lord on behalf of all those for whom he has lived and died.²⁹ This single subject passing through states of humiliation and exaltation was certainly Luther's Christological take in his polemic against Zwingli's Nestorianism in the *Confession Concerning Christ's*

28. CD IV/1 72.

29. Corresponding to the two-subject Christology, Barth denies that humiliation and exaltation are two successive states of one subject but rather simultaneous dimensions of the one event of Jesus Christ, CD IV/1 133.

Supper, the affirmation (albeit with the two-subject reservation) on the basis of which Barth launched his discussion of the true deity of the obedient Son.

Now if we have disposed of the implication of Arianism as a canard, and reiterated the necessity of the doctrine of the eternal and immanent Trinity as the conceptual basis for the graciousness of the economy, it may be conceded that there is still an issue here, although it is not the one Marshall thinks. What remains deeply unsettled in Barth's thought is the tension between his early view of the oneness of the triune God as one subject in three modes of being and the robust view of Trinitarian personalism emerging in CD IV/1. Granting that "models" are not to be taken literally but are heuristic devices for imagining divine things difficult to conceive, I do not see that Barth resolves this tension between the earlier and predominantly psychological model of the Trinity,³⁰ and an emergent social model. But surely the latter model accounts for the graciousness of the act of incarnation for our salvation and in the process sharply specifies this grace as no mere clarification of some generally theistic benevolence but the surpassing achievement of mercy for real and not fictitious enemies of God. For here we have to do with "a dynamic and living unity, not a dead and static" one.³¹

The Father who ventures his own divine existence in offering up the Son achieves a surprising and indeed self-surpassing grace to justify the ungodly in vindicating the love for sinners concealed under the ignominious death of that Son. This was the revealing verdict spoken on Easter morn; it is the very gospel of God. It is in the light of the gospel knowledge of *who* God is

30. "The statement that God is one in three ways of being, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, means, therefore, that the one God, i.e. the one Lord, the one personal God, is what He is not just in one mode but ... in the mode of the Father, and the mode of the Son, and in the mode of the Holy Ghost" (CD I/1 359). This position is reiterated in CD IV/1: "Christian faith and the Christian confession has one Subject, not three. But He is the one God in self-repetition, in the repetition of His own and equal divine being, and therefore in three different modes of being – which the term 'person' was always explained to mean. He does not exist as such outside or behind or above these modes of being. He does not exist otherwise than as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He exists in their mutual interconnection and relationship. He exists in their difference, not in their identity His being as God is His being in His own history." (CD IV/1 205). Barth sharply rejected as "mythology" the notion of several divine subjects and therefore Father and Son as "two legal subjects who can have dealings and enter into obligations with one another ... God is one God. If He is thought of as the supreme and finally the only subject, He is the one subject" (CD IV/1 65). See *Paths*, 131–32, where I trace this psychological model's immediate source to the transcendental idealism of post-Kantian philosophy, especially Fichte's self-positing subject. This commitment to the psychological unity of "the Lord" as a single psychological subject animates Barth's horror at the notion that "there are three personalities in God. This would be the worst and most extreme expression of tritheism" CD I/1:351.

31. CD IV/1 202; cf. CD IV/1 209.

– namely Jesus, the God of Israel whom he addressed as Abba Father, and the Spirit whom the Father breathes upon the Son in whose power the Son returns the glory to the Father – that we learn *what* God is, albeit as in a glass darkly: the living being of God is self-giving, other-benefiting love. And trusting that the self-revelation of God in the gospel is truthful, we may further say that this eternally is *what* God is in and for God. So we may conclude that the eternal *act of God's being* simply is the Father's generation of the Son on whom he breathes his Spirit. And saying this, we have the proper doctrine of the immanent and eternal Trinity. So here in ultimate reality *esse is operare*.³²

Thirdly, if God's being is for others by nature, is it not free grace for us? The grace of our salvation in Christ is not metaphysically necessitated, since the *miracle* of the justification of the *ungodly* achieved in the earthly obedience of the incarnate Son for the salvation of the *true* not fictitious *sinner*, can in no wise be inferred deductively from the triune being of God as love. Holy love is manifest from heaven against what is against love: jealously, militantly, wrathfully against the ruin of the good creation by sin. Yet the God of the gospel overcomes this hell into which we have justly fallen by suffering it in the person of the incarnate Son (one subject!), harrowing hell in order to capture us. What early Enlightenment thinkers as diverse as Leibniz and Edwards suggested is helpful here, namely, that the doctrine of the immanent Trinity gives us a *dispositional* ontology, one that *inclines without necessitating*. Modal consideration of possibilities available to God in consideration of the questions, *Cur Deus homo?* (Anselm) or, What was God in his goodness to do? (Athanasius), allow us to see why precisely the Son became incarnate to suffer divinely in a glorious act of freedom on behalf of unworthy others. So in hindsight we see how this was the *fitting* act of the triune God: that one of the three should suffer, namely the one of the three who is God as Son – *fitting*, but *not* necessary.

32. "A doctrine of the Trinity which takes seriously the mutuality of loving communion opened up for humanity in Christ by the Spirit suggests the ultimate identification of the source of being in the communion of the Trinity. The communion of God is in no sense to be conceived as a qualification of a more foundational category of 'Being' or 'Substance.' The triune communion characterizes Reality (Being) at the most fundamental level – it is that in which we live and move and have our being. The communion of the Trinity as such constitutes the *arche* and the *telos* of all that is. It provides the hermeneutical criterion of all that has existence (good as well as evil) and compels us to conceive and reinterpret being in terms of divine personhood and the ultimacy of the intra-divine personal communion. That the critical controls on the understanding of this would have to remain radically theological (and therefore *a posteriori*) and not anthropological is expressed in Barth's emphatic reminder, 'this is the unique divine trinity in the unique divine unity.'" Alan J. Torrance, *Persons in Communion: Trinitarian Description and Human Participation* (Edinburg: T & T Clark, 1996), 258–59.

IV

I conclude this response to Bruce Marshall now by indicating a correspondingly different kind of critique regarding Barth's account of the human participation in salvation. In this, I do not wish to reiterate the usual objections to Barth's "objectivism," i.e., against his supralapsarian Christological self-determination of God which supposedly evacuates the "decisiveness of history." In fact Barth develops a theological compatibilism which accommodates both the prevenience of God's grace and the free obedience of the newly faithful creature; with this compatibilism, moreover, comes a proper and more powerful *Lebensbezug* than that of theological ambulance chasers who have opposed him in the name of contextual relevance.³³

I see rather a problem of misplacement in Barth's dialectic. As mentioned, Barth's dialectic is Christologically located, oscillating between the Lord who becomes a servant and the servant who becomes Lord – between, then, divine nature in act and human nature in act – *as if* natures were agents rather than abstract baskets of characteristic possibilities for the classification of things or agents. This dialectic of abstractions posing as agents is held together in Barth by the sheer assertion of their personal identity as the one Jesus Christ. While this Western Chalcedonianism is not quite Nestorianism, just as Barth's earlier psychological Trinitarianism of one subject in three modes is not quite modalism,³⁴ and while the concerns behind these innovative moves are worthy ones, the dialectic is misplaced.

33. Barth's theological compatibilism affirms that "the real freedom of man is decided by the fact that God is his God. In freedom he can only choose to be the man of God, i.e., to be thankful to God. With any other choice he would simply be groping in the void, betraying and destroying his true humanity" (CD IV/1, 43). This active human participation in salvation is modeled in Barth's two-subject Christology, specifically in the human subject of Jesus, the Servant who becomes lord. I criticize this as a misplacement of a necessary dialectic and thus also as a misstatement of the dialectic needed, which is the eschatological one between the *already* of the incarnate Son's accomplished reconciliation and the *not yet* of the Spirit's prosecution of his case, such that the Son's achieved obedience is inconceivable apart from the Spirit's lead and the Spirit's completion of the work of prosecution is inconceivable apart from the Son's final defeat of the contrary powers.

34. The reason I decline Bruce McCormack's revisionist proposal that Barth should have treated the triune being of God as a consequence of the eternal decision of God to be the God of humanity, is not only because of the logical problem of what prior subject is supposed to be there to make such a decision, but more deeply because of the suspicion that McCormack presupposes this psychological model of an antecedent single subject deciding and consequently organizing itself in a Trinitarian way. I hold with the Eastern Church to the so-called monarchy of the Father as the principle of unity in the divine life. The unbegotten Father of the Son and breather of the Spirit is the ultimate in reality and thought, the mystery beyond which no creature ascends.

What is needed instead is the Trinitarian dialectic of the Word and the Spirit, such that the Son can only be the Son of the Father that he is by reference to the Spirit, and the Spirit can only be the Holy Spirit that he is by reference to the Father who breathes him upon this Son. This Trinitarian dialectic of essential relations gives us a different understanding of the relationship of *esse* to *operare*, in that the being of the triune God is eternally operative in being in relation, so that the operation of any one person of the Trinity in time as in eternity is always specific to its personal distinction from and corresponding relation to the others. God is not naked being itself, then, but being for others. As Barth puts it, "God is *a se* and *per se*, but as the love which is grounded in itself from all eternity. Because He is the triune God, who from the first has loved us as the Father in the Son and turned to us by the Holy Spirit, He is God *pro nobis*."³⁵

Accordingly, in the economy, faith is not a human decision or work of obedience, the subjective apprehension of the objective truth of reconciliation in Christ – a human act of acquisitive knowledge which may be verbally but not really ascribed to the Holy Spirit. Rather, faith is *divine* faith, a suffering of divine things, a patency giving rise to new agency; it is first of all the faith of the Spirit-baptized "Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me," and only as such also the faith bestowed by the same Spirit on believers in this Son incarnate *pro nobis*. As such, the Holy Spirit is an integral and distinct participant in the *objective* work of reconciliation accomplished by the Son incarnate.³⁶

Barth certainly wants to affirm that this event of faith is the work of the Holy Spirit, whose calling is effective in anyone who so hears and believes. "This difference is their calling" and "they are different because of their calling."³⁷ Others "do not possess the Holy Spirit. They do not stand in the area of proclamation and faith. They even refuse this whole offer with hostility." This refusal is the "futile attempt to live the life of one rejected by God." So this, then, is "how the elect and others [not reprobates!] differ from one another: the former by witnessing in their lives to the truth, the latter by lying against the same truth."³⁸

35. CD IV/1 422.

36. I have developed this interpretation in chapter 4 of my systematic theology, *Beloved Community: Critical Dogmatics after Christendom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 294–392. Of course, Barth is aware of the objectivity of the Spirit's work and even emphasizes it from time to time, e.g., CD IV/1, 308. But his two-subject Christological schematization obscures the affirmation and its implications for human participation in salvation.

37. CD IV/1, 345.

38. Ibid., 346.

In this account it is hard, however, to see that the effective calling of the Holy Spirit makes the difference Barth claims, if in truth the Sovereign Spirit prosecuting the universal case for the Judge judged in our place does not universally bestow faith. Barth indeed drew back from a doctrine of *apokatastasis* on the grounds that it would presume upon divine freedom: "the intention and power of God in relation to the whole world and all men are always His intention and power – an intention and power which we cannot control and the limits of which we cannot arbitrarily restrict or enlarge."³⁹ Maintaining divine freedom this way, Barth settled for the view that "it is enough for us to know and remember that at all events it is the omnipotent loving-kindness of God which continually decides this ... in new encounters and transactions ..."⁴⁰ The "Holy Spirit of the Father and the Son lives and works at this or that place or time, in which He rouses and finds faith in this or that man, in which He is recognized and apprehended by this and that man in the promise and in their election ... all [these are] matters of His sovereign control."⁴¹

Just so, the question that *must* arise is why *from the very beginning of the gospel* (Romans 9–11!) faith is withheld from some but granted to others – if indeed the truth of the gospel is that none less than Sovereign God is determined to redeem and fulfill the creation in the missions of his Son and Spirit. Barth suggests that the reason why faith is granted to some, not all, is *not*, as in the Augustinian tradition, to save the few and so demonstrate mercy while damning the mass to demonstrate justice. Instead, those effectively called to faith are "elected" for service.⁴² This fresh reading of Romans 9–11 is an invaluable advance in theological understanding, especially in the West where Augustine's doctrine of divine simplicity has entailed a necessitarian construal of predestination and supported the notorious inference of the double predestination of individuals either to eternal life or to eternal death.⁴³

39. Ibid., 422.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.

42. Instead of the foregoing "cul-de-sac," Barth says the biblical view "opens at this point another door. For as those who expect and finally receive eternal life, as heirs in faith of eternal glory, the elect are accepted for this employment and placed in this service. They are made witnesses." Ibid., 423.

43. John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of the Saints*, translated with an introduction by J. K. S. Reid (Louisville: Westminster John Knox 1997). Reid's introduction is particularly helpful; Lezek Kolakowski, *God Owes Us Nothing: A Brief Remark on Pascal's Religion and on the Spirit of Jansenism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

Nevertheless, Barth does not and cannot succeed in transcending the traditional conundrum, and its nagging question now recurs in a new form: If the effective calling of the Spirit is a liberation from the lie of godlessness and so empowerment to live the new life of Christ for “service,” why indeed does the Sovereign Spirit blow as he wills? A strategic reading of the Spirit’s sovereign election to faith in history will keep open the question of the ultimate fate of persistent disbelief in the face of redeeming grace, but it will not retreat into agnosticism and mystery-mongering in another form of the theological abstractionism against which Barth consistently warned. Instead it will follow the Johannine clues about the Spirit’s prosecution of militant grace,⁴⁴ the crisis brought upon the world by the Spirit’s preaching of the gospel, convicting the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment. This is the *Holy Spirit* as a *prosecuting* attorney on behalf of the Son of the Father – precisely not any self-comfort which the pious afford to themselves, blasphemously calling their religious self-communing the Holy Spirit. In the dialectic between the Word incarnate once and for all and the Spirit who prosecutes this case against the world for the sake of the world, theology in its historical finitude sustains the necessary dialectic between the already and the not yet, between the finished work of Christ and the unfinished work of the Spirit,⁴⁵ without the incoherence of double-subject Christology, let alone nostalgic retreat into “a self-sufficient, self-affirming, self-desiring supreme being, self-centered and rotating about himself. Such a being is not God.”⁴⁶

Author biography

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44. Philip G. Ziegler, *Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic Turn and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 2018).

45. The collapse of this tension into a realized eschatology under the themes of the Lordship of Christ, meaning the objective reality of universal reconciliation (as opposed to the embattled Lordship of Christ whose reconciliation is still being prosecuted by the Spirit by word and sacrament) stands behind the development of so-called postwar “political Barthianism,” where the world sets the agenda for the church. See *Before Auschwitz*, 147–154 and *Beloved Community*, 712ff.

46. *CD IV/1* 422.