

Intra-Trinitarian Obedience and Nicene-Chalcedonian Christology

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IN *CHURCH DOGMATICS* IV, 1, section 59, Karl Barth seeks to found a theology of redemption upon the crucifixion of Christ as an intra-Trinitarian event. In doing so he posits a “divine obedience” of God the Son in relation to God the Father, expressed in human form through the obedience and humility of Christ.¹ The idea has become a *locus classicus* for modern Trinitarian theology, as subsequent thinkers like Hans Urs von Balthasar, Jürgen Moltmann, and Eberhard Jüngel have all drawn inspiration from this text in their own writings.² Yet Barth’s claim that the obedience of God the Son is the “inner side of the mystery of the divine nature of Christ”³ also raises important questions. How consistent is Barth’s notion with the classical perspectives of Nicene-Chalcedonian Christology? Does this theological vision in fact import distinctly creaturely characteristics into the life of God? Does it adequately respect the unity of the Triune God?

As a way of responding to these questions, I will examine two basic ideas in Barth’s treatment of divine obedience in *Church Dogmatics*, IV, 1,

¹ See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV/1 (London: T&T Clark and Continuum, 2004), 157–357.

² Von Balthasar’s work is deeply influenced by Barth’s theology of divine obedience. See as indications, *Mysterium Pascale* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 79–83; idem, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. I (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 478–80; idem, *Theodrama*, vol. V (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 236–39. Jüngel’s *God’s Being Is in Becoming* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2001) adopts the perspective of this text systematically. For Jürgen Moltmann’s dependence upon this text, see *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 200–78, esp. 202–4, which begins Moltmann’s core reflection in the book.

³ *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV/1, 193.

section 59. The first is his affirmation that God is able to exist in the man Jesus Christ as one who is humble and obedient and that he does this without ceding his immutability, eternity, and omnipotence. In other words, God can take on the attributes of lowliness and service without ceasing to be the sovereign Lord of his creation. The second idea is that obedience, found in the man Jesus, in fact has its condition of possibility in a transcendent “pretemporal” obedience in the immanent life of the Trinity. God the Son is in some sense eternally obedient to God the Father, and this is the ontological “presupposition” for the Incarnation.

I will argue that the first of these ideas can be understood as profoundly consistent with a classical understanding of Chalcedonian Christology (represented here by Aquinas). I will argue that the second idea, however, is problematic for two reasons. As it is stated by Barth, the theory seems to suggest that obedience characterizes the *procession* of the Son from the Father.⁴ If this is the case, then the positing of such obedience in God renders obscure the confession of the unity of the divine will and power of God. Consequently, it would also make problematic the affirmation of a divine immutable omnipotence present in the incarnate Son. If this is the case, then, the second idea of Barth is in some real tension with the first one mentioned above, resulting in a kind of “Trinitarian antinomy.” There is an inevitable discord between the affirmation that the eternal, wise, and omnipotent God became human, and the affirmation that there is obedience within the very life of God that characterizes the person of the Son as distinct from the Father.

A more benign (re)interpretation of Barth’s pre-temporal obedience is possible, however. If we understand the Son’s pretemporal obedience as pertaining to his *mission* to become incarnate, received from the Father, then continuity between Barth’s two ideas is possible. According to classical Nicene orthodoxy, God the Word receives and possesses from the Father the unique divine nature, power, and will of God from all eternity. This personal “relationality” of the Word implies a “receptivity” of the divine nature without any ontological subordination or dependence. Extrapolating from this view one can affirm that the Son’s divine receptivity is the transcendent ontological foundation for his temporal mission among human beings. It is the Son as God who wills to become incarnate, yet he wills this mission not only with but also *from* the Father.

⁴ In this essay I employ the term “procession” in the broader Latin sense of *processio*, applicable to both the generation of the Word and the spiration of the Holy Spirit. However, this is without prejudice to the legitimate Eastern Orthodox concern to interpret the biblical and patristic Greek notion of *ekporeusis* (procession) as pertaining uniquely to the spiration of the Holy Spirit from the Father.

Because this receptivity (as proceeding from the Father) characterizes his very person, he can be obedient *in and through his human actions* in a characteristically filial way, that is to say, as the *Son* made man. His human obedience thus reveals his eternal, personal relativity to the Father.

This latter perspective does not imply any real multiplicity of wills in God, nor an obedience in God “according to his divine nature.” It certainly does not imply ontological dependency of creature to creator. Rather, it predicates “obedience” to the pre-incarnate Word uniquely in a figurative or metaphorical sense, as denoting improperly what is in fact the transcendent divine receptivity proper to eternal generation. Despite the fact that this “Thomistic” interpretation contradicts some of Barth’s explicit statements, it nevertheless renders certain of Barth’s influential intuitions more internally coherent, and permits an interpretation of his theology more consistent with the classical Christological tradition.

Obedience in God Without Divine Self-Alienation

God in Christ has revealed himself as one who is obedient. Therefore, divine obedience exists in God. These are affirmations that Barth establishes in *Church Dogmatics*, IV, 1, section 59, by recourse to an epistemological principle, and a principle of the divine economy. The epistemological principle is his insistence that the obedience of Christ is a unique locus of revelation that must in turn critically regulate any other concepts of God. The God of the New Testament alone has revealed himself as one who chooses in his freedom to become obedient and humble in the man Jesus. Correspondingly, then, there can be no epistemological warrant in “alien” speculation as to whether God is *able* to exist in this “lowly” way *in himself*. He is free to do it because he has done it.⁵ The second principle is related: What God has done in Christ, through the temporal economy of the servant Jesus, reveals who God is in his very being. Consequently, the humility and obedience of the Son of God as man manifests to us that a divine lowliness exists in God, in his mode of being as Son.⁶

⁵ See these points in *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV/1, 159, 163–64, 176–77, 186–87.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 177: “Who the true God is, and what He is, i.e., what is His being as God . . . his divine nature . . . all this we have to discover from the fact that as such he is very man and a partaker of human nature, from His becoming man. . . . For, to put it more pointedly, the mirror in which it can be known (and is known) that He is God, and of the divine nature, is His becoming flesh and His existence in the flesh. . . . From the point of view of the obedience of Jesus Christ as such, fulfilled in that astonishing form, it is a matter of the mystery of the inner being of God as the being of the Son in relation to the Father.” Although Aquinas would certainly disagree with Barth’s prohibitions on any natural, philosophical knowledge of God, these two principles can be reformulated succinctly in Thomistic

Second, however, God is also able to do this without relinquishing in any way the prerogatives of his divine sovereignty. The latter implies a divine transcendence, constancy or immutability, and omnipotence, all of which characterize God's dynamic relationship to creation as its Lord. His obedience made manifest in Christ, therefore, entails no contradiction with respect to such attributes. On the contrary, God can humble himself without ceding his sovereign freedom and without ceasing to be God.⁷ It is important to note that Barth frequently restates this point in soteriological terms: God is revealed in Jesus as one who is free to be God-with-us, who can truly enter our sphere of life as a servant and in humility. Yet precisely in order to reconcile us with himself (in his Lordship), God can and must do this while remaining truly himself. More to the point, it is because he is not alienated from his divine prerogatives (of eternity, omnipotence, etc.) that he can act dynamically and authoritatively in Christ in order to save human beings effectively. And in choosing in particular to assume suffering and obedience as a way to save humanity, God has in fact offered the distinctive "proof" of his authentic power and dynamic freedom as savior and creator.⁸

There is no doubt that this first idea concerning a "divine obedience" takes on a paradoxical form of expression in Barth's writing. Yet, the prescribed view of the *Church Dogmatics* in IV, 1 on this point is also in substantive continuity with the classical Christological tradition of Chal-

terms: (1) An agent is known by its effects, and consequently God as an unknowable transcendent agent is known in a unique way by his actions and effects of grace; (2) The revelatory agency of God *ad extra* reveals (imperfectly but truly) who he is *ad intra*. For more on this latter principle in Barth, see Paul Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002), 128–34.

⁷ *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV/1, 186–87: "As God was in Christ, far from being against Himself, or at disunity with Himself, He has put into effect the freedom of His divine love, the love in which He is divinely free. He has therefore done and revealed that which corresponds to his divine nature. His immutability does not stand in the way of this. It must not be denied, but this possibility is included in His unalterable being. He is absolute, infinite, exalted, active, impassible, transcendent, but in all this He is the One who loves in freedom . . . and therefore not His own prisoner." On the same page Barth also mentions the eternity of the deity of Christ.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 185 and 187: "Of what value would His deity be to us, if it came to be outside of Him as He became ours? What would be the value to us of His way into the far country [of our humanity] if in the course of it He lost Himself? . . . His omnipotence is that of a divine plenitude of power in the fact that . . . it can assume the form of weakness and impotence *and do so as omnipotence, triumphing in this form*" (emphasis added).

cedon. To show this, we can make a brief comparison between Barth and a prominent medieval representative of this tradition, Thomas Aquinas. Here I will note three relevant parallels between the two theologians.

First, Aquinas follows the Chalcedonian tradition in ascribing all properties and actions of both the divine and human natures of Christ to their one and only concrete subject, who is the incarnate Son of God. This logical pattern of ascription follows upon an ontological foundation: It is the hypostasis of Christ who is the principle of unity in the Incarnation.⁹ Because the Son exists as both God and man, his subsistent, personal being is the ground of attribution of all predications, both human and divine.¹⁰ This means that while one may not ascribe “abstract” properties of the divine and human nature to each other directly (“the divine nature suffers”; “humanity is omnipresent”), one may refer to the natures of Christ as subjects *in their concrete mode*, that is to say, insofar as they directly denote Jesus.¹¹ Consequently, one may say that “in Christ the impassible one humbles himself,” or “God exists as this obedient man.” The concrete subject is that one who is truly God, who is this obedient man, et cetera, because the subject is the Son, the God-man who operates dynamically in and through two natures.

Second, for Aquinas this dynamic activity of God in the man Jesus cannot entail any loss or curtailment of the prerogatives of the divine nature. The reason for this is that the union is hypostatic rather than natural, such that the essential characteristics of the divine and human natures of God remain distinguishable. It also follows for the same reason that for Aquinas there is no *contradiction* implied by paradoxical phrases such as “the

⁹ *Summa theologiae*, III, q. 2, a. 2; q. 17, a. 2.

¹⁰ *ST* III, q. 16, a. 1: “Now of every suppositum of any nature we may truly and properly predicate a word signifying that nature in the concrete, as *man* may properly and truly be predicated of Socrates and Plato. Hence, since the Person of the Son of God for Whom this word *God* stands, is a suppositum of human nature, this word *man* may be truly and properly predicated of this word *God*, as it stands for the Person of the Son of God.” All English translations of the *ST* are taken from *Summa theologiae* (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1947). Some slight modifications have been made.

¹¹ *ST* III, q. 16, a. 4: “[The Nestorians] granted that Christ was born of a Virgin, and that He was from eternity; but they did not say that God was born of a virgin, or that the Man was from eternity. Catholics on the other hand maintained that words which are said of Christ either in His Divine or in His human nature may be said either of God or of man. . . . The reason of this is that, since there is one hypostasis of both natures, the same hypostasis is signified by the name of either nature. Thus whether we say *man* or *God*, the hypostasis of Divine and human nature is signified. And therefore . . . of God may be said what belongs to the human nature, as of a hypostasis of human nature.”

impassible one suffers” or “the sovereign Lord obeys and is humbled.” This is the case because such seemingly contrary attributes are not attributed directly to one another. (To do so they would have to be predicated of each other abstractly!) Nor, however, are they predicated to the unique subject of Christ *under the same aspect*, but rather to the same subject *under different aspects*, by virtue of the two natures in which the Son of God exists.¹² The contraries of obedience and omnipotence both exist in the unique being of God the Son made man (as do, for St. Thomas, impassibility and suffering). Yet they subsist in a unique subject without existing under the same natural aspect. To say, therefore, that there is obedience in the very being of God the Son is entirely warranted, according to this form of Chalcedonian predication of attributes.

Thirdly, one might even admit the phrase, “the divine nature has assumed a human nature into itself,” so long as the claim is rightly qualified. This qualification would need to be twofold, pertaining to efficient and final causality respectively. To say that the divine nature is *able* to unite itself with human obedience and suffering is true for Aquinas first insofar as this refers to God’s *capacity* (by virtue of his omnipotence) to take a human nature into God’s very *existence*. However, since this “union” does not entail any alteration of God’s transcendent and ineffable nature, one must inquire into the mode of this assumption. Here, a teleological qualification is required. The deity is “able” to assume human obedience into itself in a hypostatic mode of being, or “enhypostatically.” That is to say, the divine nature can assume human obedience into to itself *personally* in God’s mode of being as Son.¹³ It does so without in any way diminishing itself in its divine prerogatives of immutability, omnipotence, eternity, or the like.

Does this perspective correlate profoundly with Barth’s own affirmations, or is such an attempt at conciliation artificially irenic? It is true that Barth’s work contains no distinct development of a “Christian philosophy” of existence as the basis for his enhypostatic explanations of the Incarnation, nor does he present an explicit study of logical regulations governing the “communication of idioms.” Nevertheless, his densely ontological Christology does clearly parallel Aquinas’s Chalcedonian reflections on each of the above-mentioned points.

¹² ST III, q. 16, a. 4, ad 1: “It is impossible for contraries to be predicated of the same in the same respects, but nothing prevents their being predicated *of the same in different aspects*. And thus contraries are predicated of Christ, not in the same but in different natures,” (emphasis added).

¹³ This conceptual interpretation can be found in ST III, q. 3, aa. 3–4. The idea has recently been studied by Gilles Emery in his “The Personal Mode of Trinitarian Action in Saint Thomas Aquinas,” *The Thomist* 69 (2005): 31–77, esp. 47–48.

The first parallel is evident in Barth's affirmation of an irreducible diversity of "essences" in Christ, united enhypostatically in the Son incarnate (or in Barth's language, in God's mode of being as Son). Barth insists that God the Son in Christ is a unique agent always acting in and through two distinguishable natures.¹⁴ Even in the dynamic unity of the being of Christ, a transcendence of the divine essence and subordination of the human essence remain. While on earth, God acts historically through his humanity as the "instrument" or "organ" of salvation. Even when the man Jesus is exalted and glorified at the ascension, his human characteristics cannot partake of or be identified with some of the characteristics he possesses uniquely by virtue of his divine essence (as omnipotent, omnipresent, etc.).¹⁵ Correspondingly, the operations of the divine

¹⁴ It is true that Barth also seems to posit one unique subject in God, who is present as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in three modes. Yet he also clearly wishes to maintain the Cyrillian insistence on the unity of Christ as a personal agent. This point of view is thematic in *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV/2, sec. 64. Clear indications of it are found in *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV/1, on page 183. Correspondingly, Barth distances himself at points from classical Lutheran orthodoxy's use of the communication of idioms. The seventeenth-century Lutheran schools of Giessen and Tübingen, for example, presupposed a certain communication of properties of the divine nature to the human nature due to the grace of the hypostatic union. They then disputed whether one might affirm that the historical Jesus during his earthly life was in fact omnipresent and omnipotent in creation *as man*, and whether these attributes were ceded during this time or merely veiled. See *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV/1, 180–82, for Barth's description of this controversy, where he ultimately refuses any such perspective by refusing presuppositions embraced by both sides of the controversy. This is more readily apparent in *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV/2, 76–80, where he goes on to discuss what he terms the Lutheran theory of a *genus majesticum* in which divine attributes such as impassibility and omnipotence are communicated to the human nature of Jesus in glory by virtue of the Incarnation, and again reaches the same conclusions. In *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV/2, 73–76, Barth appeals to a Reformed doctrine of the "communication of idioms" very similar to that of Aquinas, and distinguishes this from what he takes to be the above-mentioned perspectives. He cites the pithy formula of Polanus, the seventeenth-century Reformed thinker: "Proprietates utriusque naturae Christi personae ipsi communicantur. Quae enim naturis singulis sunt propria, ea personae Christi sunt communia." Bruce McCormack has recently explained very clearly aspects of Barth's thought on these matters in "Karl Barth's Christology as a Resource for a Reformed Version of Kenoticism," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8 (2006): 243–47. For an account of Barth's Christology emphasizing Chalcedonia character, see George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 131–47.

¹⁵ For Aquinas's doctrine of "theandric" actions of the Son, which transpire in and through two co-operative natures, see *ST* III, qq. 18 and 19. He specifies in q. 16,

nature of Christ remain distinct from those of his human essence during the time of his earthly life. Arguably, therefore, according to Barth the Word of God continues to operate in all creation even while being historically present in the limited human agency of Jesus.¹⁶

Second, Barth refuses what he deems a Hegelian theory of the Incarnation whereby the human attributes of the man Jesus exist in God in some form of contradiction with the prerogatives of the divine nature. He explicitly refuses the idea that there can be any contradiction in the life and being of God.¹⁷ Yet if obedience can exist in God the Son with-

a. 5, ad 3, that the human nature, as an instrument of the Son's person, does "participate" in the divine nature by the derivation of the effects of the latter. However, because certain attributes of God can in no way be transmitted to created reality they are not participated in by the human essence of Christ. Here he specifically refers to omnipotence as such an "unparticipated" characteristic. Barth alludes to what is at least in certain ways an analogous doctrine with regard to the humanity of Christ as the "organ" of the divine nature in *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV/2, 70 and 97. And he develops an explicit doctrine of "non-reciprocal" mutual participation between the divine and human natures in Christ. "The participation of His divine in His human essence is not the same as that of His human in His divine. . . . The determination of His divine essence is to His human, and the determination of His human essence *from* His divine. He gives the human essence a part in His divine, and the human essence receives this part in the divine from Him" (70). He makes clear that this "participation" entails no admixture. Even in the exalted glory of Christ his human essence remains utterly distinct from his transcendent divine essence and is determined to cooperation with it by the grace of the latter: See *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV/2, 63ff., and 88–92. Clearly, while there are important differences between the two thinkers on these points, there are also significant similarities.

¹⁶ I am referring here to Barth's qualified acceptance of the so-called "extra-Calvinisticum": The Word continues to sustain the world in being even during the Incarnation. See *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV/1, 180–81.

¹⁷ Stating a view that he rejects categorically, Barth writes: "It pleased Him [in His activity and work as the Reconciler of the world created by Him] not to alter Himself, but to deny the immutability of His being, His divine nature, to be in discontinuity with Himself, to be against Himself, to set Himself in self-contradiction. In Himself He was still the omnipresent, almighty, eternal, and glorious One. . . . But at the same time among us and for us, He was quite different . . . limited and open to radical and total attack. . . . His identity with Himself [across these two states] consisted strictly in His determination to be God . . . the Reconciler of the world, in this inner and outer antithesis to Himself." He goes on to state explicitly (184–88) that God entered into our state of contradiction with God (through sin and death) and reconciled us with himself without incurring contradiction within himself. See also *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV/2, 146–47, for similar views. Paul Molnar (*Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity*, 264) has correctly contrasted this understanding of Barth's with Jüngel's idea of a dialectic of being and non-being that occurs in the essence of God. For

out being in contradiction with his immutable omnipotence as God, then this is only because (as with Aquinas) there is not an attribution of contraries to the same subject under the same aspect. This unity of properties seemingly transpires without contradiction because it occurs in the being and the person of Christ, and not in a confusion of natures.¹⁸ This seems to be what is implied, at any rate, by the claim that God's becoming man does not require any self-alienation on God's part. God can enter history without introducing any new alterity or contrary into himself, and without any dialectic in his being.

Third, for Barth, the assumption of obedience "into the being of God" does not entail any evacuation or substantial alteration of God's divine nature *per se*. This affirmation is evident above all in Barth's rejection of the nineteenth-century kenotic theories of Gottfried Thomasius. The latter claimed that God the Son *as God* ceded his omnipresence and omnipotence during the time that he was dynamically present and active as the historical man Jesus. (These were supposedly attributes of God that were somehow proper to him only in "relation" to creation, and not characteristic of God *per se*. They could therefore be ceded freely by the deity.) In contradistinction to such an idea, Barth insists that God the Son does not and cannot cede or alter his divine characteristics when he becomes man. Nor does he relinquish his omnipotence and omnipresence with respect to creation. The divine life does not undergo a process of self-abdication or self-transformation in the Incarnation.¹⁹ God is *free* in his being to assume a human obedience into himself. Yet he is free to do so without altering what he is *from all eternity*.²⁰ If our concept of the

examples of this later view, see Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One; in the Dispute Between Theism and Atheism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 219, 346–47.

¹⁸ This point could be contested if in fact Barth wishes to maintain that there is only one subject in God, who is omnipotent in "his" mode of being as Father, and impotent in "his" mode of being as Son. Yet whatever we make of such language, we cannot ignore Barth's important insistence (especially in *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV/2) on the unicity of the subject of Christ in whom there are the irreducibly distinct divine and human essences.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. IV/1, 183: "God for His part is God in His unity with this creature, this man, in His human and creaturely nature—and this without ceasing to be God, without any alteration or diminution of his divine nature."

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 193: "It is His sovereign grace that He wills to be and is amongst us in humility, our God, God for us. But He shows us this grace, he is amongst us in humility, our God, God for us, as that which He is in Himself, in the most inward depth of His Godhead. He does not become another God. In the condescension in which he gives Himself to us in Jesus Christ, He exists and speaks and acts as the One He was from eternity and will be to all eternity. The truth and actuality

divine being and nature of God is to be guided by what he has done in Christ, then it must hold firmly to *both* the principles initially elaborated above: The action of God in history reveals who God truly is. It reveals who he is precisely in his non-created and transcendent identity, that is to say in his sovereignty as Lord.

It is this last thought, however, that leads to the next aporia in our consideration of Barthian thought. If God *can* assume a temporal obedience into himself without self-alteration, and if he has this capacity in his being from all eternity, then what does the event of the Incarnation reveal about the immanent, eternal life of God? What is the eternal “capacity” in the life of God that makes his existence in humility and obedience possible? It is in answering this question that Barth develops his second idea of divine obedience: as something pretemporal, existing in the eternal life of the Trinity. It is to this idea that I will turn next.

Pretemporal Obedience of the Son as Procession

According to Barth, there must exist a condition of possibility in the life of God such that God can become obedient in history in the incarnate Son.²¹ Therefore, the transcendent corollary for the economic manifestation of God in Christ is a pretemporal obedience that exists in God from all eternity.²² It is the latter that serves as the ontological foundation for the event of the passion and cross of Christ. Based upon a successive exclusion of modalism and subordinationism, Barth determines dialectically that this reality of divine obedience must concern God in himself, as the “posited and self-positing God” in his mode of being as Son and Father, respectively. In other words, this reality has to be understood in Trinitarian terms. It is something that characterizes the eternal relation between the Father and the Son, in their distinctness and reciprocity. This relationship is prior to creation, and serves as the basis for both the elec-

of the atonement depend on this being the case. The one who reconciles the world with God is necessarily the one God Himself in His true Godhead. Otherwise the world would not be reconciled with God. Otherwise it is still the world which is not reconciled with God.”

²¹ Ibid., 194: Obedience in Christ reveals an eternal “possibility grounded in the being of God.”

²² Ibid., 200–201: “We have not only not to deny but actually to affirm and understand as essential to the being of God the offensive fact that there is in God Himself an above and a below, a *prius* and a *posterius*, a superiority and a subordination. And our present concern is with what is apparently the most offensive fact of all, that there is a below, a *posterius*, a subordination, that it belongs to the inner life of God that there should take place within it obedience.”

tion and creation of humanity, as well as for the Incarnation of the Son in history.²³

Two important observations need to be made concerning the description of this intra-Trinitarian obedience. First, this eternal, divine obedience clearly seems to concern the *deity* or *divine nature* of Jesus Christ.

In this happening we have to do with a divine commission and its divine execution, with a divine order and *divine obedience*. What takes place is the divine fulfillment of a divine decree. . . . But it is clear that once again, and this time in all seriousness, we are confronted with the mystery of *the deity of Christ*.²⁴

Second, this relationship of obedience is a characteristic through which one can and must understand and interpret the eternal *generation* of the Son by the Father.

The One who in this obedience is the perfect image of the ruling God is Himself—as distinct from every human and creaturely kind—God by nature, God in His relationship to Himself, that is, God in His mode of being as the Son in relation to God in His mode of being as the Father, One with the Father and of one essence. *In His mode of being as the Son He fulfils the divine subordination*, just as the Father in His mode of being as the Father fulfils the divine superiority. *In humility as the Son who complies, He is the same as is the Father in majesty as the Father who disposes. He is the same in consequence (and obedience) as the Son as is the Father in origin.* He is the same as the Son, that is, as the self-positing God . . . as is the Father as the self-positing God. . . . The Father as the origin is never apart from Him as the consequence, *the obedient One*. The self-positing of God is never apart from Him as the One who is posited as God by God. *The One who eternally begets is never apart from the One who is eternally begotten.*²⁵

We can conclude from these two points that the divine obedience thus characterized somehow pertains for Barth to what is classically termed the eternal *procession* of the Son from the Father. The reasons for concluding this should be, I think, uncontroversial. In classical Trinitarian monotheism, the divine nature of God is considered an ineffable and transcendent

²³ Ibid., 201: “We have to reckon with such an event even in the being and life of God Himself. It cannot be explained away either as an event in some higher or supreme creaturely sphere or as a mere appearance of God. Therefore we have to state firmly that, far from preventing this possibility, His divine unity consists in the fact that in Himself he is both one who is obeyed and Another who obeys.”

²⁴ Ibid., 195, emphasis added.

²⁵ Ibid., 209, emphasis added.

mystery, but it is also confessed to be unique: There is only one God. Because this divine nature is common to the three persons of God, the latter can only be distinguished hypostatically by their relations of origin.²⁶ The Son possesses the fullness of the divine nature in a relative way, as one proceeding eternally from the Father as his Word. Being generated constitutes the Son as Son, because he receives all that he is (the ineffable and transcendent being and nature of God) from the Father. And indeed, as Aquinas points out, these same “subsistent relations” of the persons of God themselves constitute the inner life of God.²⁷ Ultimately, then, they *are* the divine nature itself.²⁸ This nature subsists *hypostatically* in three Trinitarian “modes” of being: It is communicated from the Father to the Son by way of generation, and to the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son by way of spiration.²⁹

It follows from such perspectives that whatever “founds” the relations of origin *in* God serves as the principle for the distinction of persons in the life of God, permitting us to “interpret” the persons in light of such relations. In turn, this distinction of persons (through their relations of origin) constitutes the very nature of God, insofar as that nature itself only exists in distinctly personal ways. For Barth obedience characterizes the relations of origin of the Son from the Father, and therefore characterizes the distinction of persons (or “modes” of God’s being) in God eternally. This relationship of commanding and subordinate obedience is, therefore, also constitutive of the divine nature and deity of God as triune, as Barth affirms repeatedly. This obedience as described in the *Church Dogmatics*, IV, 1, then, may reasonably be interpreted as characterizing the eternal procession of the Son from the Father.³⁰ It is the foundation for their distinction from one another.

Here I would like to note what I think are two interrelated problems with such a view. First, positing such obedience in God jeopardizes the

²⁶ This theological formulation has its origins in the Cappadocians, as well as Augustine. The simple, ineffable nature of God subsists in three persons distinguished uniquely by their “relations of origin.” Aquinas discusses the point in *ST* I, q. 29, a. 4; q. 30, a. 4; q. 31, a. 2. On the historical origins and structure of this way of thinking, see Gilles Emery, “Essentialism or Personalism in the Treatise on God in St. Thomas Aquinas?” *The Thomist* 64 (2000): 521–63.

²⁷ *ST* I, q. 29, a. 4.

²⁸ *ST* I, q. 39, a. 1.

²⁹ *ST* I, q. 42, a. 4.

³⁰ Paraphrasing this idea in Barth, Bruce McCormack writes (“Karl Barth’s Christology,” 249): “The eternal relation in which the Father ‘commands’ and the Son ‘obeys’ is the very relation by means by which the one God freely constitutes his own being in eternity.”

confession of the unity of the divine nature, power, and will of God. Second, it risks to undermine the intelligibility of Barth's own soteriological affirmation that God, in order to save us, must in no way be alienated from his own prerogatives of omnipotence in the Incarnation. To argue for these points, I will briefly consider some elements of classical Trinitarian thought as elaborated by a figure such as Athanasius. In turn, Barth's views can be contrasted profitably with these. As is well-known, fourth-century "Arian" or anti-Nicene theologians appealed to New Testament examples of the obedience of Christ in order to argue for a preexistent, ontological subordination of the Logos to the Father. In countering this claim, Athanasius develops three interrelated principles that relate in certain ways to our considerations.

Athanasius notes in the *Contra Arianos* that the Nicene affirmation of a unique being of God (the "homousios" formula) required the elaboration of an understanding of a *shared nature* common to the Father and Son. One of his central contributions in this text is to discuss meaningfully how this nature could be understood to *proceed* from the Father in the Son, and how such a filial generation could be constitutive of the very life of God. For this he appeals to the "analogy of the Word" of the Johannine prologue. St. John's doctrine of the *Logos asarkos* (according to Athanasius's reading) provides a revealed, theological analogy that allows one to perceive how God could exist in and as a procession of persons, even while being unique in nature and being. If this being is spiritual, then it can be transmitted (or engendered) after the analogy of spiritual processions in the human soul: The *Logos* is the Son eternally begotten of the Father as his *wisdom*, in and through whom he knows all things.³¹ This begotten wisdom contains in himself all that is proper to the divine essence. Consequently, if the Father gives the Son to possess in himself the plenitude of divine attributes (ineffable power, goodness, divine willing,

³¹ *C. Arianos* I, §16: "If the Offspring of the Father's essence be the Son, we must be certain, that the same is the Wisdom and Word of the Father, in and through whom He creates and makes all things" (in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ser. 2, vol. IV, ed. A. Richardson, trans. Atkinson [New York: Charles Scribner, 1903]). See also, *ibid.*, I, §§15; 24–9; II, §§2; 5; 36 ff. For an insightful discussion of these points, see Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 110–17. It is worth emphasizing that this Athanasian understanding of the *Logos asarkos* could in principle be held without in any way denying the "Barthian" principle that this same *Logos* is only known by means of the Incarnation. Athanasius does not deny that the "preexistence" or "ontological priority" of the *Logos asarkos* to the economy of the Incarnation was made known *in and through* that economy. Nor does the Evangelist himself deny this in the Gospel of John. See, for example, John 3:13.

etc.), this is not because the divine substance is divided. Rather, the Father communicates to the Son his very being as God, and he does so by virtue of his own identity, since he is himself eternally relative to the Son. This is why Athanasius emphasizes, against Arianism, that the Father does not choose to beget the Son by an act of will. Rather, the Father and the Son share in two different ways in the unique will of God, just as they share in the unique nature and being of God.³²

Second, it follows from the biblical affirmations of God's spiritual (non-physical) manner of being, that his unique nature is wisdom (that is to say, that God is personal: intelligent and freely loving), and God's wisdom directs the decisions of his will. Consequently, because the Son is the only begotten Word of the Father, he is the principle through whom the Father wills all that he wills.³³ Because the Son receives from the Father's begetting the very nature of God, he "contains" in himself the plenitude of divinely ordered potency with regard to creatures. Consequently, the Son cannot obey the Father precisely because he enjoys in himself the same plenitude of divine life from all eternity. The Son could only be subordinate in some way to the Father were he to *not* fully share in the power and willing of the Father. Yet this would contradict the confession of a *unique spiritual will* in God, as suggested by the Johannine analogy of the Word (through whom all things were freely made), and would in turn be inconsistent with the Nicene affirmation of a *unique spiritual nature or essence* which exists in the one God.³⁴ In other words, for Athanasius such subordination would undermine the confession of a Trinitarian *monotheism*.

Finally, Athanasius saw that a soteriological concern of major proportions lay at the heart of his debate with the anti-Nicene theologians. If the Son of God is to save human beings by uniting God's own divine nature with the human flesh he has come to save, then the Arian denial of the divine nature of the Son will undermine the confession of the

³² C. Arianos II, §2: "God's creating is second to His begetting, for 'Son' implies something proper to Him [as God] and truly from that blessed and everlasting Essence, but what is from His will [i.e., created], comes into consistence from without, and is framed through His proper Offspring who is from It [the divine essence]."

³³ Ibid., §31: "For the Word of God is Framer and Maker, and He is the will of God."

³⁴ Ibid., §2: "If He has the power of will, and His will is effective, and suffices for the consistence of the things that come to be, and His Word is effective, and a Framer, that Word must surely be the living Will of the Father, and an essential [*enousios*] energy, and a real word, in whom all things both consist and are excellently governed."

saving character of the Incarnation of the *Logos*.³⁵ In other words, if we deny the divinity of Christ and the presence in him of the divine nature, then we irremediably render obscure the confession of Christ as an effective savior of human beings.

One can see immediately a logical connection between the three ideas: the *Logos* is the wisdom of God; the *Logos* possesses the plenitude of the divine nature, power, and will of God; and the *Logos* became flesh to save us by uniting us with him in his divine nature, power, and will. It follows that any attempt to attribute obedience to the *Logos* in his personal relation to the Father will undermine the second affirmation. Yet, the denial or questioning of the second principle will in turn undermine the intelligibility of the first, and the logical necessity of the third.

Barth's reflections on the errors of "semi-Arian" perspectives are both extensive and subtle, and he clearly eschews any form of subordinationism that would jeopardize the confession of the divinity of the Son. However, I would like to suggest that the doctrine of divine obedience in God contradicts the second principle established by Athanasius. It therefore creates potential problems with the other two theses, which Barth does wish in some way to maintain. The affirmation of a divine obedience between the persons makes it unclear how there can exist a unique divine nature and will in God, consistent with the Johannine "psychological analogy." It therefore renders problematic the confession of a divine agency (divinely ordered power, omnipotence) present in the person of the Son. This in turn affects the soteriological claim that the transcendent freedom of God is truly present in Christ as a necessary condition for our effective redemption.

The first problem can be considered by contrasting Barth's views with those of Aquinas. As noted above, St. Thomas will affirm that there is a unique nature and will in God, differentiated hypostatically in three distinct modes of being, as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. "The same essence is paternity in the Father, and filiation in the Son: so by the same power the Father begets, and the Son is begotten."³⁶ There is, in other words, a uniquely paternal mode of being of the power and will of God, as well as a filial mode of being of this same power and will. The former is eternally begetting while the latter is eternally begotten, such that the Son receives

³⁵ Ibid., §70: "For man had not been deified if joined to a creature, or unless the Son were very God; nor had man been brought into the Father's presence, unless He had been His natural and true Word who had put on the body." See also *ibid.*, I, §15; III, §11; and Ayres's comments on this theme in Athanasius (*Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 113–15).

³⁶ *ST* I, q. 42, a. 6, ad 3.

all that he is and wills from the Father. Yet, the two persons both possess in plenitude the same divine nature, power, and will of God. So while the Son is entirely relative to the Father, he is also omnipotent God.³⁷

This classical Trinitarian perspective rests upon a crucial axiom: Any notion of the one God as a multiplicity of divine persons can only be intelligibly construed by taking account of *both* the generation of the Word and the procession of the Spirit that “found” the relations of origin *and* the common nature which they share. To speak about the Father and Son as subsisting relations one must refer *both* to subsistence (the divine essence) and relations (the relationship to another that distinguishes). The uniqueness of the divine essence, therefore, enters into the very “definition” of the Son as a person distinct from the Father.³⁸ By a process of notional “duplication” the person must be thought of both in terms of relations and in terms of nature. Otherwise, the monotheistic character of the Trinitarian faith literally becomes inconceivable.

How does this differ from Barth’s presentation? In *Church Dogmatics*, IV, 1 and 2, Barth clearly affirms a doctrine of two natures in Christ. It

³⁷ ST I, q. 42, a. 4: “It belongs to the very nature of paternity and filiation that the Son by generation should attain to the possession of the perfection of the nature which is in the Father, in the same way as it is in the Father himself. . . . Therefore we must say that the Son was eternally equal to the Father in greatness.” ST I, q. 43, a. 6, c.: “The Son is necessarily equal to the Father in power. Power of action is a consequence of perfection of nature. Now it was shown above (a. 4) that *the very notion of the divine paternity and filiation requires that the Son should be the Father’s equal in greatness*—that is, in perfection of nature. Therefore, it follows that the Son is equal to the Father in power; and the same applies to the Holy Spirit in relation to both,” emphasis added. See the discussion of this point by Gilles Emery in “The Treatise on the Trinity in the Summa theologiae,” *Trinity in Aquinas* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2006), 132–34, 139–44.

³⁸ Gilles Emery (“Treatise on the Trinity,” *Trinity in Aquinas*, 144) comments: “The capacity of subsistence [implying reference to the divine essence] does not belong to the relation under the aspect of the relationship to another (*ratio*), but it belongs to the relation in so much as this relationship is divine (*esse*). St. Thomas explains, in similar terms, that the person designates ‘the distinct subsistent in the divine nature’, by specifying that this ‘distinct subsistent’ is the relation taken in the integrality of its constitution in God, in its *esse* (divine substance) and in its *ratio* (relationship *ad aliud* that distinguishes). It is therefore in the ‘subsisting relation,’ which guarantees a strict Trinitarian monotheism, that St. Thomas effects the synthesis of his doctrine on God the Trinity.” The passage makes reference to *De potentia Dei*, q. 10, a. 3 and q. 9, a. 4. It is interesting to note that in *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I/1, 366 n. 1, Barth expresses reserves about such notional “duplication” precisely with regard to Aquinas’s notion of “subsistent relations.” He intimates that the “persons” of the triune God should be understood by their “relations of origin” *without* reference to a commonly shared intellectual and voluntary “*res et natura*.”

might seem from this that the Son partakes as Son of the divine attributes we have spoken about previously (omnipresence, omnipotence, immutability, etc.). He possesses these attributes in his person as a “mode of being” eternally distinct from the Father. (In much earlier writings, such as *Church Dogmatics*, I, 1, Barth affirmed as much explicitly.) Yet, according to *Church Dogmatics*, IV, 1, this same Son also only exists eternally as *one who obeys* the Father. Obedience here characterizes the procession of the Son from the Father in his eternal generation. Because it determines the character of his eternal relation to the Father, obedience is *entirely constitutive of his person*. There is nothing in him that is not consent of will to another. But in this case, how should we understand the fact that the Son is characterized in all that he is by obedience, *and that he simultaneously possesses in himself eternally the unique omnipotent will of God*? Or, inversely, if God the Son is eternally omnipotent (possessing the plenitude of the divine nature, power, and will), how then is his eternal generation characterized hypostatically by consent to the will of another? It would seem that one must forfeit either the notion of a unity of will in the persons, or reinterpret Barth’s notion of a distinction of persons in God derived through obedience.

One might object that there is no substantial dilemma here. After all, it is true that for a thinker like Aquinas, the Son receives his being and omnipotence from the Father eternally. Therefore the Son must also eternally receive the Father’s will through generation, even while being eternally omnipotent.³⁹ But Aquinas also qualifies this affirmation by simultaneously insisting that the Son possesses the very will of the Father, which he receives from the Father. There is a strict *identity* of will, communicated from the Father to the Son and shared by them in two hypostatic modes.⁴⁰ In Barth’s view, by contrast, the generation of the Son simply

³⁹ In *ST* I, q. 42, a. 6, ad. 2, Aquinas interprets John 5:30 (“As I hear, so I judge”) as follows: “The Father’s *showing* and the Son’s *hearing* are to be taken in the sense that the Father communicates knowledge to the Son, as He communicates His essence. The command of the Father can be explained in the same sense, as giving Him from eternity knowledge and will to act, by begetting Him. Or better still, this may be referred to Christ in his human nature.”

⁴⁰ In *Ioan.*, V, lect. 5 (Marietti ed., §798): Aquinas here comments on John 5:30 (“I am not seeking my own will, but the will of him who sent me”). “But do not the Father and the Son have the same will? I answer that the Father and the Son do have the same will, but the Father does not have his will from another whereas the Son does have his will from another, i.e., from the Father. Thus the Son accomplishes his own will as from another, i.e., as having it from another; but the Father accomplishes his own will as his own, i.e., not having it from another” (in *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, trans. J. Weisheipl and P. Larcher [Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1980]). I have described this feature of Aquinas’s

cannot result in the Son's plenary possession of the *Father's* essence and will. Instead, the Son can only exist eternally as distinct from the Father and therefore be Son in and through his act of consent to the will of the Father. Reciprocity of will enters into the very notion of both the distinction of persons, and the nature of the Godhead.⁴¹ Taken literally, then, the language of divine obedience excludes an identity of will between the Father and Son. So while for Athanasius and Aquinas, the procession of the Son from the Father as his *Logos* allows one to see how the Son can both receive and have the one will of the Father, in Barth the viewpoint is inverted. The will to be receptive in the Son is the foundation for his procession and differentiation from the Father as Son and Word.⁴²

Here the potential difficulties become clearer. If God the Son proceeds from the Father *in and through* his act of obedience to the divine will of the Father, then whatever he receives from the Father (that is, omnipotence), he receives through an act of consent to the Father's will. May we say, then, that the Son proceeds from the Father through his consent in obedience to his being good, wise, immutable, and omnipotent? Yet in this case, it seems he must be eternally consenting to being invested with attributes of the divine nature. This in turn suggests that he could somehow act freely in all eternity "prior" to possessing the divine nature received from the Father, which is patently nonsensical.

Perhaps instead we might ask if God, who is omnipotent as Father, is obedient in his mode of being as Son, such that the Son is eternally "void" of such attributes. Barth's language in *Church Dogmatics*, IV, 1, at times certainly leans more in this direction when he speaks about the Son's obedience.⁴³ In this case, however, it would seem that God would

thought on Christ's obedience at more length in White, "The Voluntary Action of the Earthly Christ and the Necessity of the Beatific Vision," *The Thomist* 69 (2005): 497–534, esp. 522–26.

⁴¹ *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV/1, 209: "The Son is therefore the One who *in His obedience, as a divine and not a human work . . . shows Himself to be the One He is*—not another, a second God, but . . . *the one God in His mode of being as the Son.*" (Emphasis added.)

⁴² Again, to cite McCormack's paraphrasing of this idea ("Karl Barth's Christology," 249): "If the relation in which God 'commands' and 'obeys' is identical with the relation which constitutes the very being of God as triune, then it is very clear that what the Son does and therefore is in time finds its ground in what he does and therefore is in eternity. [This suggests] that 'humility' is not something added to God in his second mode of being at the point at which he assumes flesh; it *is* his second mode of being already in eternity."

⁴³ See the suggestive comments of *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV/1, 203: "In the work of the reconciliation of the world with God the inward divine relationship between the One who rules and commands in majesty and the One who obeys

empty himself of his omnipotence as a condition for being in his mode as the Son. His omnipotence would somehow have to be ceded by a kind of voluntary kenosis, occurring through all eternity. How, then, is there a unique will and power of God present in the two persons? And how is the transcendent freedom of the Son with respect to creation assured? Even more fundamentally, how can we affirm the eternity of the Son if he is not omnipotent with respect to creation?⁴⁴

While Barth's explicit proposals concerning divine obedience certainly rest far afield from our considerations here, a certain inward logic nested within them seems to push us toward either the affirmation of a filial consent to the possession of a divine nature or the idea of a kenosis of divine prerogatives *within* the life of God. Both are Trinitarian antinomies of a sort, and neither is consistent with the confession of a unity of will and power in the life of the Trinity. One can therefore plausibly suggest that either we must rethink the claim to eternal obedience in the Son, or else qualify in important ways any affirmation of his omnipotence.⁴⁵

in humility is identical with the very different relationship between God and one of His creatures, a man. . . . To do this he empties Himself . . . but as the strangely logical final continuation of the history in which He is God."

⁴⁴ McCormack, ("Karl Barth's Christology," 249, note 6) suggests that these problems can be resolved by (1) understanding that it is Jesus Christ and not "merely" the *Logos asarkos* who is the active *subject* (not object!) of divine election from all eternity, and that (2) "the Spirit is, first and foremost, the mode of being in which the self-posting God empowers the self-positing God, Jesus Christ, to live a human life and to live it *humanly*." With Paul Molnar ("The Trinity, Election and God's Ontological Freedom: A Response to Kevin W. Hector," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8 [2006]: 294–300) it seems to me that this would amount to a kind of identification between the Triune God and the act of election, in such a way that God and creation are ontologically distinct, but eternally indissociable. Inevitably creation and election thus become a necessity for God and in turn must constitute a dimension of his identity. Barth himself clearly advocates against any idea that election is a "necessity" for God in his *Church Dogmatics*, vol. II/2, 309, 313, and elsewhere. It is possible, however, as McCormack suggests, that the later work of Barth stands in fundamental tension with his earlier affirmations on this point. See the relevant remarks (and theological defense of his own position on these matters) by McCormack in "Seek God Where He May Be Found: A Response to Edwin Chr. Van Driel," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60 (2007): 62–79.

⁴⁵ I am in sympathy with Bruce McCormack on this point: There exists a potential tension or antinomy between the affirmation of classical divine attributes such as immutability, omnipresence, and omnipotence (which Barth here and elsewhere ascribes in unqualified fashion to the Son incarnate), and Barth's relativization of the classical "psychological analogy" in his rendering of divine obedience. However, I do not think (contrary to what McCormack suggests, "Karl Barth's Christology," 250) that the idea of an eternal, intra-divine kenosis

A second issue this raises concerns the coherence of Barth's claim that the incarnate Son does not cede his divine attributes in the Incarnation. As stated above, this insistence on Barth's part is of fundamental importance soteriologically, and in this respect his thought parallels the reflection of Athanasius. God cannot save us if he is in fact alienated from himself in the act of living among us as a man in history. A dimension of this soteriological principle concerns divine freedom: God, because of who he is, is free as God to become man and act in obedience without ceding or altering his divine being. It is because he is not alienated from his omnipotence that he remains free to redeem us with authority in Christ, and to exalt our humanity into the life of God through the incarnate Son.⁴⁶

Yet, it is unclear how this affirmation is itself entirely consistent with the concept of a divine obedience, if that obedience characterizes the procession of the Son from the Father. Is it in fact the case that the Son himself as Son retains the freedom of divine transcendence in his person even during his historical life as man? Presumably, God the Son was eternally free in his unity of will shared with God the Father to choose (contingently) whether or not to create us, to become incarnate for our salvation. But if the Son receives *in obedience* the entirety of his being as Son, does this not include his reception of his eventual mission and existence as the Son incarnate? In other words, does the Son of God eternally will our salvation with the Father by a free decision of the Triune God, or does he eternally consent to the Father in everything he is, including his consent to the commandment to save us? If the latter is the case (and it seems it must be), then the Father is free to choose to save us but the Son is not (since he can only exist as one who receives this command from the Father). Or, the Father is only Father in generating the Son as obedient to him, and since this obedience includes our elec-

of omnipotence by the Son in view of his human mission is compatible with the continued possession by the Son of the subsistent omnipotence of God. McCormack suggests that this is possible due to the agency of the omnipotent Spirit in the historical existence of the man Jesus. Against this, one can argue that to be very God, the Son incarnate must partake of the very being of the Father and the Spirit, and yet this implies in turn the hidden presence in Christ of the Father's and the Spirit's unique will and power as *his own filial* will and power. Jesus Christ, therefore, must be understood as omnipotent God in the proper sense of the term, even when he is obedient in his historical existence.

⁴⁶ For clear evidence of this view in Barth's writings at least as late as in *Church Dogmatics*, vol. II/2, see Molnar, "The Trinity, Election and God's Ontological Freedom," 296–301.

tion in Christ, the election of Jesus Christ as the God-man enters into the very differentiation of the eternal persons.⁴⁷

In either of these cases, however, does Christ still have the power and freedom to choose as God to redeem us? It would seem not. Presumably, he must depend for these attributes on the interventions of the Father and the Holy Spirit. Consequently, if obedience characterizes the eternal procession of the Son from the Father, have we really avoided the problems of “traditional” nineteenth-century kenosis theory, or have we merely displaced them from time into eternity? God no longer “empties himself” of his divine prerogatives while he is incarnate, but does so, rather, from all eternity in his mode of being as Son, in view of the Incarnation in time. In addition to the problem of its metaphysical incoherence, any inversion of the Son’s mission into the life of God poses serious soteriological risks. A God who is eternally on a mission to save humanity through suffering and death seems to be himself immersed inextricably in the problem of moral and natural evil as a constitutive dimension of his identity. Can such a God truly be expected to save us?

The Pretemporal “Obedience” of the Son Reconsidered

Barth’s central intuition is that there needs to be an eternal foundation in the life of God for all that transpires between the persons of God in the economic mission of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Were there not such a transcendent corollary in the life of God, the temporal obedience of the incarnate Son would not effectively reveal his eternal relation to the Father. Therefore, while the direct application of obedience to the life of the persons of the immanent Trinity raises difficulties, a more benign interpretation of this “eternal foundation” would seem necessary.

One possibility is to consider the Son’s being originate from the Father *alone as a sufficient condition* for the filial character of his economic mission.⁴⁸ In this case, God the Son receives and possesses from the Father the unique divine nature, power, and will of God from all eternity. This divine receptivity in turn acts as the transcendent ontological foundation for the temporal mission of Christ. The Son wills with the Father that he become incarnate, while simultaneously receiving this will from the Father. This filial receptivity in turn is reflected in all the actions of the incarnate Son in his

⁴⁷ One can find an interpretation of Barth that resembles this description in Bruce McCormack’s “Grace and Being: The Role of God’s Gracious Election in Karl Barth’s Theological Ontology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 92–110.

⁴⁸ In framing the issue in these terms, I am influenced by various insightful suggestions of Bruce Marshall.

temporal history as man. Because the Son becomes the obedient servant Jesus, his voluntary human obedience reveals his personal relativity toward the Father, as well as the receptive character of his divine mode of being.

In this second interpretation of divine obedience, the person of the Son is revealed in and through the obedience of God in history. Yet this obedience pertains to his human nature and does not characterize the eternal life of the Son as deity. It does not stand at the origin of his procession from the Father. Rather, the inverse is true. The procession of the Son from the Father is the eternal basis for his relation to the Father in his temporal mission.⁴⁹ The latter in turn is the basis for his filial way of being a man, that is to say, as the Word made flesh who proceeds from the Father. In this case, then, the eternal Son is also omnipotent throughout his history as an obedient man. This viewpoint can be examined through a threefold series of interrelated claims, each of which helps us further clarify this position.

As we have noted above, the eternal *relativity* of the Son to the Father has its fundamental basis in his *procession* from the Father. The Son proceeds eternally from the Father as his Word, and receives in this generation the totality of the divine life, power, and will. The same is true of the Holy Spirit through eternal spiration. Therefore, while the nature of God is one, this ineffable nature exists in the three hypostases of the triune God in irreducibly different ways. "The same essence, which in the Father is paternity, in the Son is filiation."⁵⁰ Likewise, for the power and will of God: "The Son has the same omnipotence as the Father, but with another relation; the Father possessing power as *giving*, signified when we say that he is able to beget, while the Son possesses the power of *receiving*, signified by saying that He can be begotten."⁵¹ This means that the hypostatic character of the person utterly characterizes the *way in which* the divine essence subsists in that person.⁵² Because this relationality is

⁴⁹ ST I, q. 43, a. 2, ad 3: "Mission signifies not only procession from the principle, but also determines the temporal term of the procession. Hence mission is only temporal. Or we may say that it includes the eternal procession, with the addition of a temporal effect. For the relation of a divine person to His principle must be eternal. Hence the procession may be called a twin procession, eternal and temporal, not that there is a double relation to the principle, but a double term, temporal and eternal."

⁵⁰ ST I, q. 42, a. 4, ad 2.

⁵¹ ST I, q. 42, a. 6, ad 3.

⁵² Aquinas is influenced in making this distinction between the essence and its personal mode by the Greek Christological and Trinitarian distinction between the *logos* (nature) and the *tropos* (mode), found in Maximus the Confessor and John Damascene. See on this point Jean Miguel Garrigues, "L'instrumentalité

absolutely fundamental within the very life of God, it characterizes in some way not only God's immanent activity of knowledge and love, but also all action of God *ad extra* in creating and redeeming.⁵³

Second, then, God is in no way compelled to create or redeem the world and human beings, but rather acts freely in creation *by his omnipotence* with respect to a radically dependent creation. Nevertheless, based upon the first point discussed above, this *same divine freedom* exists *within* the immanent life of God in three subsistent modes.⁵⁴ Thus while the contingent, economic decisions of the Father and Son occur through the unique act of both persons with respect to creatures, such action is possessed within the Trinitarian life in two distinct ways. The eternal decree that the Son assume flesh and die for us exists in the Father as in its unoriginate source, and in the Son as the begotten wisdom through whom this action is willed. The Son wills as omnipotent God to become incarnate as man, but he also necessarily receives this will eternally from the Father.⁵⁵ In all

rédemptrice du libre arbitre du Christ chez Maxime le Confesseur," *Revue Thomiste* 104 (2004): 531–50. Barth advances compatible views, no doubt informed indirectly by this tradition, throughout his reflection on the essence and threefold modes of God's being in *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I/1, sec. 9.

⁵³ On this, see *ST* I, q. 43, a. 2, ad 3, and the remarks of Emery, "The Personal Mode of Trinitarian Action in Saint Thomas Aquinas," 67. Barth himself emphasizes both these points together in *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I/1, 371–74.

⁵⁴ Emery has studied this concept in Aquinas at length in his "The Personal Mode of Trinitarian Action in Saint Thomas Aquinas." See page 52: "The Son exists from the Father and, accordingly, acts by receiving his being and his power of action from the Father: the Son acts as the 'principle from the principle.' This means no subordination but only the relation of origin by which the Son is referred to the Father. This distinction does not divide the action of the Trinity, or its power, or the principle of action, which are common to the three persons by reason of their one nature. It also does not concern the effects of the action: these effects come forth from the three persons in virtue of their one action. One could also, indeed, show this by the doctrine of perichoresis: the Father is in the Son, the Son is in the Father, the Holy Spirit is in the Father and in the Son, and reciprocally. For this reason, the action of the three persons is inseparable. Thomas Aquinas explains, for example: 'The Son acts by reason of the Father who dwells in him by a unity of nature' [*In Ioan.* 14:12 (§1898)]. The profundity of the perichoresis is such that, in the act of the Son, the Father himself acts, and the Holy Spirit acts in them, inseparably. The action of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is not therefore different from that of the Father, since the persons act in indwelling the one in the other, according to their mutual immanence and thus by one and the same operation."

⁵⁵ Commenting on John 3:16 ("For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son"), Aquinas writes (*In Ioan.* 3:16, §478): "But did God give his Son with the intention that he should die on the cross? He did indeed give him for the death of the cross inasmuch as he gave him the will to suffer on it. And he did this in two ways. First, because as the Son of God he willed from eternity to

that occurs in his temporal mission, therefore, the incarnate Son “naturally” expresses through human actions *both* his divine being and willing, *and* the fact that this being and willing are received from the Father.

Finally, the voluntary human obedience of the Son in temporal history implies a dynamic subordination of his human will to the agency of his transcendent will, which he shares with the Father. It thus implies a duality of wills (and natures), human and divine, in the God-man who is Christ. Yet this subordination also transpires in a unique historical person, in accordance with his aforementioned filial mode of being. Thus while the operations of the two natures and wills of Christ are distinct, they do have *the same identical* mode of being. This mode of being in turn informs all the operations of divine and human life in Christ. Both operations subsist in him and cooperate in such a way as to express Jesus’ *unique filial relation* to the Father. Consequently, the human thoughts, desires, emotions, words, and gestures of Jesus manifest and conceal the hidden presence of an ineffable divine nature working in Jesus, *and* this same divine nature as received from the Father. God’s actions of obedient subordination to the Father’s will transpire historically in the incarnate Son, and can only occur because of his human agency. Yet these human actions are always and everywhere theandric: They manifest and conceal his *filial* relation to the Father, *and* the presence in Jesus of a divine *will* received from the Father. This is true on the one hand when Christ performs miracles by the power he shares with the Father, and receives from him. But it is also true when he accepts to submit himself to passive torment and physical execution in obedience to the Father for our sake. Both his passive historical submission and his self-determined human actions find their perfect, transcendent exemplar in his filial manner of being as the Son, at once eternally receptive of the divine life he receives from the Father, and active (in this same divine life) in all things.

Evidently, obedience, suffering, and death are ways in which the human being inevitably experiences a greater dependence or relativity with regard to others, and particularly toward God. Such events *in human nature* speak more profoundly of “relativity” than any other conceivable kinds of human activity or passivity, since they connote for each person a unique and last recourse to God alone as regards the destiny of his or her own being. It was only fitting (and very beautiful) that these human forms of *extreme dependency* should be assumed by the incarnate God as ways to denote to us in and through our contingent state of being his own inner life of fundamental receptivity constituted by the subsistent

assume flesh and to suffer for us; and this will he had from the Father. Secondly, because the will to suffer was infused into the soul of Christ by God.”

relations. God the Son reveals himself through his obedience, humiliation, and suffering as one who is utterly relative to another in his very existence. This can occur because the historical human actions of Jesus exist and subsist in his personal mode of being as the Son of God in his dynamic relation to the Father. Yet this also occurs without the Son ceding in any way the omnipotence and omnipresence that he possesses as God, by virtue of his deity received from the Father. Rather, the deity is hidden in Christ, even as he is mocked, scourged, beaten, and killed for our sake. It is operative with the Father and the Holy Spirit, in the action of the resurrection.

In this sense, the obedience of Christ is to be understood in light of three distinct but interrelated “levels” of reflection. It implicates the processions of the persons in one respect, their common will to undertake the mission of our salvation in another respect, and the human actions and words of Christ in a third respect. The latter reveals the first two (procession and mission) without collapsing these three dimensions of the divine obedience into one another. Clearly, this perspective does not allow us to attribute obedience to God the Son in his eternal procession as God. Therefore, it seems improper to say (as Barth does at times) that this obedience characterizes Christ in his deity and divine nature. But this perspective does safeguard the reality of the transcendent freedom of the persons vis-à-vis the creation and temporal mission of Christ, and distinguishes clearly the two natures of Christ, as human and divine. It does so while still indicating something about *how* the human, temporal obedience of Christ could reveal the eternal relativity of the Son to the Father. This revelation occurs by virtue of the hypostatic union: The obedience of the Son made man not only exists in God, but also subsists *hypostatically* so as to reveal that Jesus is *personally* relative to the Father.

Conclusion

It is clear that Karl Barth’s theory of divine obedience contains a multitude of rich intuitions. His understanding of the way God exists in Christ as one who is both omnipotent and obedient is profound, and can be profitably compared with the principles of Christology that are characteristic of classical Chalcedonian thought. Nevertheless, Barth’s claim that the generation of the Son from the Father is itself characterized essentially by obedience is an affirmation latent with difficulties. One central question Barth’s theory raises concerns the unity of God’s will. If obedience characterizes the very procession of the Son from the Father, how are we to avoid the conclusion of a kenotic dimension in the life of God that ruptures his unique nature? In this case, can the will of the Father in

fact be possessed in plenary fashion by the person of the Son? And if the Son is omnipotent, how is it that his procession from the Father, and therefore his entire person, is characterized by consent to another's will?

Second, there is a problem that results concerning the presence of the effective saving will of God in the person of Christ. Christ is the savior because he bears within himself the action of God who reconciles us with himself effectively, through the event of Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection. Does the Son, however, possess the plenitude of the divine action in himself if his person is characterized hypostatically by obedience? It would seem that he cannot, and that he would therefore depend upon the Father and the Holy Spirit in order to act in himself to save us. If the latter is the case, then the soteriological principle enunciated above cannot continue to hold true.

A fruitful counterproposal is to consider the obedience of the Son as a figurative expression of his eternal reception of the divine will from the Father. In this case, however, three levels of reflection need to be carefully distinguished. The Son proceeds eternally from the Father and therefore possesses his divine will from the Father. This eternal relativity of being permits him to receive from the Father his omnipotent will to become man for our salvation. The existence of the Son as a human being in temporal history reflects this relativity toward the Father in all that the incarnate *Logos* does as man. In this way the obedience of God the Son in his human nature reveals something of his relation to the Father in his divine nature. It reveals that this nature is eternally relative to the Father in the person of the Son. It does not, however, teach us that there is an obedience in the divine nature itself. Nor does it oblige us to posit a relation of commandment and obedience as constitutive of the immanent life of the Trinitarian persons. N·V