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Obedience and Subordination in Karl Barth's Trinitarian Theology

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The year 1953 saw the publication of the first part-volume in Karl Barth's *Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Volume IV of *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*).¹ By this point in his career Barth was an internationally renowned figure, secure in his position in Basel now more than twenty years. His sharp criticisms of the liberal Protestant theology of the previous century, his aggressively theological approach to biblical exegesis, and his provocative revision of the doctrine of election had helped to inaugurate a widespread theological renaissance. It is Barth, along with his Catholic contemporary Karl Rahner, that we have most to thank for the contemporary revival of the doctrine of the Trinity, a project carried on in various forms by Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, John Zizioulas, and others.

As significant a piece of sustained theological reflection as it is, Volume IV of the *Church Dogmatics* is not without its controversies. Barth at times arrives at theological judgments that will strike the average reader as quite odd, and perhaps not in keeping with what he has said elsewhere. As one who believes that Barth still has a great deal to offer, my worry is that our misunderstanding of Barth stands in the way of receiving his theology in any full sense – including its sharp edges. And so here my agenda is to examine one of these controverted

¹ In English as *Church Dogmatics*, 4 volumes in 13 parts, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-75; hereafter: *CD*). This part-volume would appear in English three years later.

passages critically in the light of Barth's broader trinitarian theology, in order to cast some light upon why it is that Barth makes the claim that he does.

The particular passage in question concerns Barth's description of the Son's relationship to the Father as one of willing subordination: the way of the Son into the far country is the way of obedience, in which God takes up the cause of sinners as his common cause when he takes on human flesh. For Barth God is "both One who is obeyed and Another who obeys."² Within the Trinity itself it is in this relation – a relation of superiority and subordination – that the unity of the Father and Son consists.

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.³

It is by no means unusual, of course, for Christian theologians to make the claim that God the Son is obedient to the Father – an obedience that extends from his eternal sending even to death on a cross. Phil. 2:8 speaks of Christ humbling himself "by becoming obedient to the point of death." In John's gospel Jesus says to the crowd, "I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38; cf. 4:34, 5:30), and that it is the Father who has granted the Son "to have life in himself" as well as the authority to execute judgment (John 5:26-27). And so theologians have long been content to speak of the Son's obedience and submission to his Father – but strictly *kata sarx*, in the context of the incarnation. This

² CD IV/1, p. 201

³ CD IV/1, pp. 200-1

submission and subordination would seem to be a consequence of the Son's assumption of the *forma servi*.

What is therefore remarkable and “offensive” about Barth's words is that he does not restrict this relation to the economy, but suggests that the superiority and subordination (*Vor- und Nachordnung*) “belongs to the inner life of God.” Furthermore, Barth has made this claim in the context of an explicit disavowal of the ancient heresy of Subordinationism (*Subordinationismus*), which taught that the Son is ontologically inferior to the Father. This view was offered by pro-Arian theologians because it allowed them more easily to resolve a certain set of difficulties – namely the strict singularity and immutability of God in light of the human life and death of one who is confessed to be God's Son. It was rightly rejected by the church. The language of subordination, then, bears a great deal of unfortunate baggage in Christian theology. Can theologians have it both ways – some sort of subordination in the Trinity without heretical Subordinationism?⁴

This passage continues to vex Barth's interpreters. G. C. Berkouwer suggests that Barth's is “an unacceptable conclusion,” and “can only be characterized as speculation.”⁵ Rowan Williams calls the passage “a very long and tortuous treatment. ... What, if anything, this can possibly mean, neither Barth nor his interpreters have succeeded in telling us.”⁶ Kevin Giles can only conclude that Barth's rhetoric here finally reaches a “breaking point” and collapses into

⁴ As the differences in Barth's choice of vocabulary show above, Bromiley may bear some responsibility for this linguistic confusion in his English translation. “Vor- und Nachordnung” suggest that there is a proper *ordering* of the three divine persons, not a hierarchy or inferiority among them – “before and after,” rather than “superiority and subordination.”

⁵ G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (London: Paternoster, 1956), p. 304

⁶ Rowan Williams, “Barth on the triune God,” in Mike Higton (ed.), *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 129. Originally published in Stephen Sykes (ed.), *Karl Barth: Studies of His Theological Method* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), pp. 147-93. Williams can only conclude that in *CD IV* Barth has moved “towards a very much more ‘pluralist’ conception of the Trinity than is allowed for in I/1.”

“convoluted, poetic language.”⁷ And Paul Molnar believes that Barth is guilty of illegitimately reading elements of the economy back into the immanent Trinity. Barth has made “a subtle mistake which places his thinking in conflict with itself.”⁸ Among other problems, Molnar concludes, this inadvertently introduces hierarchy into the immanent Trinity, blurs the distinction between processions and missions, and “could open the door both to subordinationism and to modalism in some form or another; it might even open the door to monism, dualism or tritheism.”⁹

The question of whether Christian theology rightly may speak of a strictly *functional* subordination in the Trinity certainly extends beyond Barth studies. This qualifier has recently generated a great deal of controversy in evangelical quarters. That debate concerns whether “eternal, functional subordination” in the Trinity ought to inform our understanding of human gender relations, and is only tangentially related to my task here.¹⁰ What I wish to do is to identify the place that Barth’s account of divine obedience has in his trinitarian theology, and whether it is fitting to describe it using the language of “functional” and “ontological” subordination – terms that belong to the contemporary conversation, and which to my knowledge were never employed by Barth. To do this I will subject Barth’s position to three lines of criticism: (1) Can Barth affirm that this subordination is *eternal*, yet still restrict it to function and so avoid the trap of heretical Subordinationism? (2) If Barth’s theological ontology bears an

⁷ Kevin Giles, “Barth and Subordinationism,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 64 no. 3 (2011), p. 346. An account of the debate over subordination in Barth that has taken place in Australia is given in Giles, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), pp. 275-305.

⁸ Paul D. Molnar, “The Obedience of the Son in the Theology of Karl Barth and of Thomas F. Torrance,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 67 no. 1 (2014), pp. 50-69 (quotation on p. 59). I am grateful to Professor Molnar for providing me with a pre-publication copy of this essay.

⁹ Molnar, “The Obedience of the Son,” pp. 65-6; cf. pp. 63-4

¹⁰ A collection of essays on the topic may be found in Dennis W. Jowers and H. Wayne House (eds.), *The New Evangelical Subordinationism?: Perspectives on the Equality of God the Father and God the Son* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012).

actualist character,¹¹ can he affirm that the subordination of the Son to the Father is strictly functional and not also ontological – since God’s being and God’s activity are always mutually implicated? (3) Does Barth’s location of obedience within the inner life of God not imply two divine wills, and therefore necessarily a social model of the Trinity?

These are questions that Barth himself did not ask – at least not in the ways in which I will press them. The method of this study is to attempt to describe Barth’s position by bringing his theological commitments to bear on these three challenges. I will begin with a summary of his case for the obedience of the Son of God in §59.1. The critiques will then occupy the bulk of what follows. I will conclude with some brief thoughts on the implications of Barth’s position for the current debate over subordination.

The Obedience of the Son of God: *Church Dogmatics* IV/1

Barth’s intention in the final pages of §59.1 is to understand the way in which Christ’s deity is *mystery* – since here true deity is affirmed of a human person.¹² He sharply critiques Modalism and Subordinationism for failing precisely at this point: both of these ancient heresies resolve the christological mystery “by juggling it away,” by circumventing the difficulty of predicating full divinity to the human Jesus, rather than engaging this difficulty “in frontal assault.”¹³ Subordinationism takes the mystery of Christ’s deity only in an improper sense, “trying to understand it as the designation of a second divine being or less divinity.”¹⁴ The

¹¹ This interpretation is not without its critics. Paul Molnar has argued at length that Barth’s actualistic impulse ought not be pressed into the sphere of divine ontology. See, for example, “Can Jesus’ Divinity be Recognized as ‘Definitive, Authentic and Essential’ if it is Grounded in Election? Just how far did the Later Barth Historicize Christology?”, *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 52 no. 1 (2010), pp. 40-81. For a collection of essays related to this debate see Michael T. Dempsey (ed.), *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

¹² My focus here is particularly on *CD* IV/1, pp. 192-210 – approximately the final third of §59.1.

¹³ *CD* IV/1, pp. 200, 197

¹⁴ *CD* IV/1, p. 196

humanity of the suffering Christ may then be affirmed without risk of implicating the being of the true and highest God. Modalism, on the other hand, makes the opposite mistake: it attempts to maintain the full deity of Christ but regards him as a mere mode of appearance or activity of the one true God – depriving him of “any true and proper being.”¹⁵ The Son’s divinity is affirmed, but his lowliness and obedience are restricted to a “forecourt of the divine being”¹⁶ which is not identical with God Himself. Both the Modalist and the Subordinationist solution refuse to predicate the Son’s humility properly to God himself, and so evade the cross of Christ.

Barth’s approach must therefore follow a different form. What he calls the first and inner moment of the mystery of the deity of Christ is that “the way of the Son of God into the far country is the way of obedience.”¹⁷ This is the mystery of Jesus’ life as it is evident from the gospel narrative: God has sent his Son into the world to walk the road to Golgotha, to die for sin, and in so doing to reconcile wayward creatures to their Creator. Now Barth turns to the second and outer moment of the mystery: that walking this path, in all of the humility and the humiliation that it entails, can belong to the inner life of God – and, indeed, it does belong to the inner life of God. If we will set aside our preconceptions about what the divine being is, and what God can and cannot do or be, the event of Jesus Christ will teach us that “for God it is just as natural to be lowly as it is to be high, to be near as it is to be far, to be little as it is to be great, to be abroad as to be at home.”¹⁸

The humanity of the Son is therefore not alien to God – not a form that is donned only to be set aside at the ascension or the eschaton – but indeed is proper to God. If this were not the case, Barth concludes, our atonement would not be accomplished and the world would not be

¹⁵ *CD IV/1*, p. 197

¹⁶ *CD IV/1*, p. 196

¹⁷ *CD IV/1*, p. 192

¹⁸ *CD IV/1*, p. 192

reconciled to God.¹⁹ Indeed, God is high and majestic, exalted and praiseworthy, *precisely in that God does this* – precisely in that God is low and humble, that in the Son he enters into the condition of men and women and dies their death. This humiliation and obedience are the very expression of his deity.

Next Barth turns to three presuppositions which, at all costs, we must accept and affirm.²⁰ The first is that the acting subject of the reconciliation of the world with God is Jesus Christ. It is he alone who bears the judgment that is upon the world, in order to bear it away. If we follow the New Testament, we see further that “when we have to do with Jesus Christ we have to do with God. What He does is a work which can only be God’s own work, and not the work of another.”²¹ Second, the act of atonement is an event which takes place not only for the world but in the world, not only touching creation from without but affecting it from within in converting it to God. The economy with which we have to do in the existence of Jesus Christ, then, is not “the kind of economy in which His true and proper being remains behind an improper being, a being ‘as if.’”²²

Connecting these two – the acting subject who is the true God, and the world as the sphere in which God himself is truly acting – is the New Testament’s affirmation that God’s “presence and action as the Reconciler of the world coincide and are indeed identical with the existence of the humiliated and lowly and obedient man Jesus of Nazareth.”²³ This is the vital step: the locus of the divine activity in the world is the obedient teacher who was arrested and put on trial by men who had no right to judge him, humiliated, and tortured until he was dead. This,

¹⁹ *CD IV/1*, p. 193

²⁰ For what follows see *CD IV/1*, pp. 197-99.

²¹ *CD IV/1*, p. 198

²² *CD IV/1*, p. 198

²³ *CD IV/1*, p. 199

and nowhere else, is where God's authentic presence and God's act of reconciliation take place. Everything depends upon our accepting this proposition – that “the proper being of the one true God [is] in Jesus Christ the Crucified.”²⁴ God does not dwell in an infinite, neutral repose but has a history.²⁵ Where we exclude the activity of humility and obedience from God's proper being we have not the God of the New Testament but only a false God, a “pure and empty Godhead.”²⁶

It is from these three presuppositions that Barth concludes that we can, and indeed we must, affirm and understand “the offensive fact that there is in God Himself an above and a below, a *prius* and a *posterius*, a superiority and a subordination”²⁷ – and that this is essential to the being of God. Two qualifications are immediately called for: this ordering in the Trinity does not equate to quantities of “more” and “less” in God's being as God, nor does it signal inequality or division.²⁸ In the one equal and united Godhead, “God is both One and also Another, His own counterpart, co-existent with Himself.”²⁹

To be able to affirm this differentiation in God, Barth argues, we must free ourselves from two arbitrary ways of thinking. The first is “the idea that unity is necessarily equivalent with being in and for oneself, with being enclosed and imprisoned in one's own being, with singleness and solitariness.”³⁰ The unity of God is not like this, Barth says: it is a unity that is

²⁴ *CD IV/1*, p. 199. This is in contradiction not with His divine nature, but with “all human ideas about the divine nature.”

²⁵ “He is God in their concrete relationships [Father, Son, Holy Spirit] the one to the other, in the history which takes place between them. He is God only in these relationships and therefore not in a Godhead which does not take part in this history” (*CD IV/1*, p. 203).

²⁶ *CD IV/1*, p. 203

²⁷ *CD IV/1*, pp. 200-1

²⁸ *CD I/1*, p. 381; *CD IV/1*, p. 201

²⁹ *CD IV/1*, p. 201

³⁰ *CD IV/1*, p. 202; cf. *CD III/2*, pp. 323-4, *CD I/1*, p. 354

“open and free,” that is outwardly moving, existing not in solitude but in solidarity with the objects of God’s love.

If we correct this misconception, we are still blocked by a second arbitrary way of thinking. This is the idea that “there is necessarily something unworthy of God and incompatible with His being as God” in supposing that there is an “above” and a “below” in God. It is the idea that such an ordering entails “a gradation, a degradation and an inferiority in God” – which would certainly preclude the Nicene *homoousia*.³¹ But this is an all too human way of thinking, which stands in need of correction according to the ontological equality of the divine persons. For God, subordination entails no inferiority, no deprivation or lack, but is a way of being which possesses its own dignity. This is why the way of humility, the way of the Son of God into the far country, is at the same time his glory.

With these two misconceptions removed, we are able to see that obedience and humility are not only possible for a God who exists in outward movement but are entirely fitting for a God who is glorified in his gracious condescension. The history of Jesus Christ – his kenosis, his humiliation, his unity with creaturely existence, and the way to his death – is from first to last a divine activity. More than this, though, God does all this in supreme continuity and correspondence with who he already is as God.³² This, finally, is the real mystery of the deity of Christ – not that there is in him a suspension of deity, but that it is as Jesus of Nazareth that God is what he is as God.

What Barth has offered is an understanding of subordination that still affirms the full equality of the Father and the Son, against ancient Subordinationism and Modalism. In this

³¹ CD IV/1, p. 202

³² CD IV/1, pp. 203-4. And so “He does not change in giving Himself. He simply activates and reveals Himself *ad extra*, in the world. He is in and for the world what He is in and for Himself” – One who commands, and Another who obeys (CD IV/1, p. 204).

sense we might tentatively label his view “functional.” With Barth’s larger argument now in view, we can move on to consider three avenues of potential critique.

Critique #1: Eternity and the Triune Being

The first critique attends to the fact that Barth describes the obedience of the Son of God as eternal. But if his view of subordination is strictly *functional*, it would seem that in fact it cannot be eternal. After all, Barth agrees with the classical tradition that to speak of eternity is to speak of God himself: eternity is neither a thing nor a condition that exists apart from God, but is uncreated. And so eternity simply *is* the divine essence: as Thomas Aquinas puts it, “[God] is His own eternity.”³³ Therefore an *eternal* subordination would speak directly to God’s essential nature apart from creation.

The distinction between ontological and functional subordination finally rests upon a metaphysical division between God’s being and act. As Scott Swain and Michael Allen put it in a recent essay on this topic: “mode of acting follows mode of being (*modus agenda sequitur modus essendi*).”³⁴ Therefore the divine being has (by definition) ontological priority over the divine works. God’s triune life *ad intra* and in eternity precedes and grounds God’s activity *ad extra* of command and obedience; there is no basis for speaking of “function” or “activity” in the eternal repose of the divine Trinity. In this context, subordination therefore cannot be eternal without also being ontological.

³³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne) I, q.10, a.2; cf. *CD* II/1, pp. 638-9

³⁴ Scott Swain and Michael Allen, “The Obedience of the Eternal Son,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 15 no. 2 (2013), p. 117. Swain and Allen are committed to this ordering as a “guide for dogmatic reasoning” (p. 121), and this forces them to restrict the Son’s obedience to the economy – though it is grounded in his eternal procession: “the obedience of the Son is the economic extension of his eternal generation to a Spirit-enabled, creaturely life of obedience unto death” (p. 117). What is thus offered as a constructive defense of Barth (on Thomist soil) unfortunately ends up having very little to do with Barth’s material argument.

That Barth's theological ontology shares this point in common with the classical tradition should not mislead us. Barth rejected the division between God's being and act. His ontology is actualistic, suggesting that God's being is in his eternal decision, actualized in the history that God has elected for himself. Being does not precede act, but the two are mutually grounding: "The whole being and life of God is an activity, both in eternity and in worldly time, both in Himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and in His relation to man and all creation."³⁵ God is free to specify God's own being, and he does so according to the event of Jesus Christ – an event in which God the Son is obedient to the Father. Thus, "eternity" does not describe God's being *apart from* the history that God is, since there is no moment at which God is not the Son who obeys and the Father who is obeyed.

Here the Thomist account of the Son as a "subsisting relation" has been received but also actualized: the nature of the relation of the Son to the Father results from God's self-committing orientation toward creation. This is the covenant. This eternal act of gracious relating, in turn, is not to be restricted to a so-called "economic Trinity."³⁶ No, if God is his own executed decision then what Barth calls his self-determination (*Bestimmtheit*) also determines the subsisting relations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is clear, therefore, why Barth locates his doctrine of election within the doctrine of God and grounds it in Christology: outside of the relationship of covenant, which the Son mediates in his obedience, "God no longer wills to be and no longer is God."³⁷

³⁵ CD IV/1, p. 7. For an early appreciation of Barth's actualistic impulse in the English language, see Robert W. Jenson, *Alpha and Omega: A Study in the Theology of Karl Barth* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1963).

³⁶ In this same passage, to be clear, Barth does acknowledge that God has a "being in and for Himself" which stands distinct from God's being in this relationship. But, vitally, he qualifies this distinction by insisting that "we cannot speak correctly of God in His being in and for Himself without considering Him always in this attitude," that is, in the work of God which "belongs to God Himself, and cannot in any way be isolated from Him." See CD II/2, pp. 6-7.

³⁷ CD II/2, p. 7

Thus, it is *only* because Barth has an actualist ontology that he can extend the Son's subordination into eternity without compromising the Trinity's equality and unity of essence. God is his own eternity, yet he does not will to be this without the covenant to which God has committed his very life as Father, Son, and Spirit.

Critique #2: Actualism and Subordination

A second line of critique suggests itself as an immediate consequence of Barth's revised ontology. By mutually implicating God's being and act, Barth would seem to frustrate any attempt to distinguish between the ontological and the merely functional. Would not God have his being in this activity of subordination, too? Certainly so, according to Barth: God's being is not grounded in "activity" or "history" generally speaking (as in Hegel's World-Spirit) but in a particular history, the history in which God has freely chosen to make himself known – the event of Jesus Christ.³⁸ If this event includes the Son's humility, his way into the far country, then it includes his obedience to God the Father. It would seem that Barth cannot avoid a subordinationism that is characteristically ontological.

This critique makes it clear that we must differentiate two uses of the term "ontological" with respect to subordination. In one sense, ontological subordinationism is the sort suggested by the ancient heresy: the deity of the Son is lesser than the deity of the Father. Barth clearly wishes to avoid this. In a second sense, the term "ontological" may simply refer to the fact that the obedience of the Son *pertains to* God's being. For Barth, obedience indicates not a subordination *of* being, but a subordination *within* the one, undivided and undiminished being of the triune God. It is vital to Barth's presentation that the Son's submission is not the necessary and therefore passive consequence of his being (e.g., by virtue of his eternal procession), but the

³⁸ CD II/1, p. 264

active consequence of his willing. The Son *chooses* the way of obedience (cf. Heb. 5:8); he does not have it thrust upon him.

Subordination is therefore “ontological” in the sense that it pertains to the actual existence of the Trinity. What we have in Barth is a so-called “functional” subordination that is ontologically grounded. The real distinction between “functional” and “ontological” has been relativized – though it is clear that Barth’s version of subordination is wholly unlike that which the church rejected in the fourth century.

Critique #3: Divine Willing and God’s Single Subjectivity

The third critique to bring against Barth’s understanding of divine obedience is perhaps the most serious. Barth’s location of obedience within the inner life of God would seem to imply two divine wills, and therefore necessarily a social model of the Trinity – regardless of his underlying ontology. This is because obedience itself, by virtue of the sort of act that it is, involves two discrete agents who stand over-against one another – one who commands and another who obeys (though he might will otherwise). The real merit of obedience, we might say further, is predicated on the possibility of disobedience. Thomas Joseph White states this challenge most incisively: There is but one divine will, and though the Son obeys the Father *secundum quod homo* (by virtue of his humanity), “the Son cannot obey the Father *as God* because his will is the same as the Father’s will. But divine obedience in the Son would entail this kind of qualitative differentiation of persons, and therefore would endanger the very unity of God.”³⁹ In order to obey the Father *secundum quod Dei* the Son must be *other than* the Father even in His deity.

³⁹ Thomas Joseph White, “On Christian Philosophy and Divine Obedience: A Response to Keith L. Johnson,” *Pro Ecclesia* 20 no. 3 (2011), p. 288

For many who advocate eternal, functional subordination today, the way out of this dilemma is indeed to embrace a social model of the Trinity – three persons in the Godhead each with his own will and distinct center of consciousness, perichoretically indwelling one another in a model of fellowship. But Barth rejects social trinitarianism.⁴⁰ Without appeal to multiple wills in the Trinity, then, how can Barth answer this challenge? He must find another way to locate otherness in God’s willing and acting. We may respond with three observations.⁴¹

First: Barth’s account of the Son’s obedience in *CD IV/1* continues to operate under his critique of the term “person” in *CD I/1*.⁴² God self-differentiates as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit by positing within himself a fellowship of I and Thou, “confronting Himself and yet always one and the same.”⁴³ God is one and also another – not God over-against God but the one God in threefold repetition, the “repetition of eternity in eternity.”⁴⁴ God is one who wills and acts three times, in three ways, and therefore in potentially diverse ways: “This one God is God three times in different ways, so different that it is only in this threefold difference that He is God, so different that this difference, this being in these three modes of being, is absolutely essential to Him, so different, then, that this difference is irremovable.”⁴⁵ Though distinct, these activities always remain unified by virtue of the one divine essence and God’s single subjectivity. (There

⁴⁰ While he does not give it the full nuances of contemporary social trinitarianism, Barth dismissed the notion of “three different personalities” in God, each with its own will and self-consciousness, as “obviously ... three gods.” See *CD IV/1*, pp. 204-5; cf. “tritheism,” *CD I/1*, p. 351. It is the multiplication of “self-consciousness” in God that he found particularly disquieting (see n. 42, below). J. Scott Horrell is mistaken when he suggests to the contrary that “Barth in various ways pointed the way toward social trinitarianism.” See Horrell, “The Eternal Son of God in the Social Trinity,” in Fred Sanders and Klaus Issler (eds.), *Jesus In Trinitarian Perspective* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2007), p. 54.

⁴¹ It should be noted that here I am attempting to tease out the implications of Barth’s Christology for the question of the possibility of God obeying Godself. This is not a question that Barth himself engaged directly.

⁴² *CD I/1*, pp. 351-63; cf. *CD IV/1*, pp. 204-5. Barth’s primary reason for avoiding the language of “person” in favor of *Seinsweise* – “way of being” – is that from the nineteenth century “person” has received the added sense of personality, i.e. a discrete center of self-consciousness. Thus the linguistic presuppositions upon which the term was accepted by the ancient church no longer obtain today.

⁴³ *CD III/2*, p. 324

⁴⁴ *CD I/1*, p. 350

⁴⁵ *CD I/1*, p. 360

is little appreciable difference here between the distinct activities of Barth's *Seinsweisen* and the classical doctrine of appropriations.)

And yet, in this personal self-differentiation, God remains indissolubly one knowing, willing, and acting Subject – a Subject behind which one cannot get.⁴⁶ The persons of the Trinity thus *act* in diversity – including command and obedience, sending and being sent – despite the fact that their subjectivity, and therefore their will, is one. The Father and Son act differently; but their activities are always in harmony with one another. If these external works of the Trinity are undivided, then, what the Son does ought to look very much like obedience.

Second: Barth, I think, would not be quick to grant the presumption that the act of obedience necessarily entails two willing agents. If God can differentiate an I and a Thou within the one divine life, God has it within himself to “command” and to “obey” within the structure of that relation. (This is particularly evident when we recognize that the relation is not abstract, but concretized in God's history.) Such is the tenor of *CD IV/1*, in particular: God is free to be this sort of God. God is able to be the same one who speaks and who hears, who sends and is sent, and who commands and obeys, despite the fact that this runs counter to human intuition. The creature's theological language must be accommodated to the reality of God's activity, rather than *vice versa*.⁴⁷

Third: While there are two natures and two wills in Jesus Christ, Barth insists that each of these is determined (or “commonly actualized”) according to their personal union.⁴⁸ The human essence is drawn into obedient conformity to the divine, while the divine essence is given a new determination that, without the incarnation and the *unio hypostatica*, it would not otherwise

⁴⁶ *CD I/1*, p. 381

⁴⁷ *CD IV/1*, p. 186; cf. p. 202

⁴⁸ See Darren O. Sumner, “Common Actualization: Karl Barth's Recovery and Reappropriation of the Communication of Natures,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 53 no. 4 (2011), pp. 465-479.

have.⁴⁹ What Jesus does in his divine essence he does not only in conjunction with his humanity but in the “strictest relationship” with it.⁵⁰ If the divine essence is determined by its union with humanity, then Barth is able to say further that God’s willing in his second way of being is not *necessarily* identical with God’s willing in his first way of being. While there is one divine will, in God’s second way of being that will is in relation to a particular human will, as well – a relation of openness and receptivity to the humanity of Christ. In its common actualization the will of the Son may thus be differentiated from the will of the Father – who does not possess a human will.

Barth’s doctrine of the communication of operations as “common actualization” might be described as a sort of *radical theandricism*. What is materially decisive here is not the distinction of the operations of the two natures but rather their concurrence. Barth’s concern, after all, is not with the metaphysics of natures and energies but with the common activity of the God-human seen in the New Testament.

To that end, it is worth stepping back a bit to find our footing in the way in which Barth actually talks about Jesus Christ. According to Barth, Christ’s work of redemption ought to be regarded in two important ways. From the divine side, what takes place in the atonement is the accomplishment of “the original and basic will of God.”⁵¹ When the Son obeys the Father, he is executing the one divine will. And yet Barth insists that this obedience is a genuinely human decision, rendered by one who in humility does what Adam did not. In his exegesis of the story of Gethsemane Barth is in fact utterly disinterested in the competitive influence of a divine will in Jesus’ prayer (“not my will but yours be done,” Luke 22:42). Instead he is concerned to show

⁴⁹ *CD IV/2*, pp. 113-14

⁵⁰ *CD IV/2*, p. 115

⁵¹ “... The will of God is done in Jesus Christ, in God’s own being and acting and speaking as man” (*CD IV/1*, p. 36).

how this prayer shows that Jesus' obedience is "a genuinely human decision" and "a decision of obedience. He chooses, but He chooses that apart from which, being who He is, He could not choose anything else."⁵² The obedience of the divine Son is therefore *also* a human obedience; his activity is commonly actualized.

A second facet of our third critique is implicit here. White also suggests that Barth's doctrine of obedience renders problematic the attribution of *any* divine agency at all to the Son – since the Son is constituted by his consent of will to another.⁵³ If there is but one divine agency, in other words, does obedience indicate that the Son does not actually possess it? Either the Son *shares* the will of the Father, or the Son *consents* to the will of the Father – the two appear to be incompatible. Since command and obedience require some basis of duality, White suggests that the better solution is to locate the Son's obedience where the tradition already finds duality – in the economy of the incarnation, and not in the divine willing. It is *only* by virtue of the Son's human agency that theologians have any place to speak of God obeying God.⁵⁴

This is not all that far from where I want to suggest Barth ends up. He criticized Thomas Aquinas for having overlooked a vital aspect of the doctrine of election – namely, that Jesus Christ in his humanity is not merely the passive recipient of an oath sworn by God, but is himself "in the beginning with God." Jesus, the God-human, is the electing God. And by virtue of his unity with the Father "the Son, too, is an active Subject of the *aeterna Dei praedestinatio*" – and he is this *as the Son of Man*.⁵⁵ God the Son can obey the Father because he is eternally the God-

⁵² CD IV/1, p. 166. See further Paul D. Jones, *The Humanity of Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2008), pp. 229-42.

⁵³ Thomas Joseph White, "Intra-Trinitarian Obedience and Nicene-Chalcedonian Christology," *Nova et Vetera* 6 (2008, English edition), p. 391. White's goal seems to be less one of deconstruction and more one of constructive rehabilitation. He concludes that Barth's theory "contains a multitude of rich intuitions," despite being "latent with difficulties" (p. 401).

⁵⁴ White, "Intra-Trinitarian Obedience," p. 400

⁵⁵ CD II/2, p. 108. Barth's charge is that Thomas makes the decision of God a "hidden decree" that has as its ground and basis something quite different from Jesus Christ, thus reducing Jesus to a mere mechanism for the outworking

human, with two natures and two wills. “He shows Himself the One He is by the obedience which He renders as man.”⁵⁶ White is thus correct to suggest that the differentiation of “One who is obeyed” and “Another who obeys” is located in the two natures of the incarnation. What he has not accounted for is the fact that, for Barth, this diversity of natures in Jesus Christ is true of the eternal Son.

Barth is therefore able to make three moves that the Thomist tradition cannot. First, he can extend the relation of obedience from the Son’s temporal mission into eternity – since (proleptically speaking) the Son has never been without His humanity. Second, Barth suggests that this eternally anticipated relation of divinity and humanity in God’s second way of being is a mutually conditioning relation: just as the human essence of the Son receives its determination from the divine, so also the divine essence of the Son receives a special determination in and for His humanity.⁵⁷ Here in §59, however, Barth is clear that he is speaking of obedience according to Christ’s *divinity*, not merely an anticipation of his humanity – obedience is the “inner moment” of the mystery of Christ’s deity. Third, then, comes a welcome insight also from Thomas Joseph White: that, for Barth, the mode in which God exists in God’s second way of being is a mode of *receptivity* to his humanity.⁵⁸ The Son receives from his humanity a humble

of God’s decision (p. 109) and failing to see him as the very content of God’s Word that is given to creatures in their predestination.

⁵⁶ CD IV/1, p. 208

⁵⁷ CD IV/2, pp. 113-16. In this relation the divine essence remains superordinate; Christ’s divinity is not conditioned *by* humanity, strictly speaking, but by its divinely appointed relation with humanity – by God’s openness to the humanity of Christ.

⁵⁸ See White, “Intra-Trinitarian Obedience,” pp. 378-9, 397-401. The widespread embrace of the notion of the Son’s “receptivity” – applied variously to the Father’s communication of divine essence, to the will and command of the Father, or to the humility of his assumed humanity, etc. – suggests that this concept may provide fruitful common ground in the debate over the Son’s obedience. Bruce McCormack, for example, has characterized the receptivity of the Son to his humanity in terms of the Protestant scholastic idea of the “genus of humility” – a communication of the attributes of humanity directly to the divine nature of Christ. See McCormack, “Karl Barth’s Christology as a Resource for a Reformed Version of Kenoticism,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8 no. 3 (2006), pp. 243-51. And Swain and Allen follow White in making use of the principle of the Son’s “receptive filiation” in a Thomist sense. See Swain and Allen, “The Obedience of the Eternal Son,” pp. 123n34, 129n56 and *passim*.

submission to the divine will. Contra White, however, an actualist ontology means that Barth need not predicate obedience to the pre-incarnate Son in a strictly figurative sense – for here it has become proper to God the Son.

Conclusions: The God Who Commands and Obeys

Barth's doctrine of the obedience of the Son of God calls into question the terms of the debate over eternal, functional subordination. He undermines the judgment that God's self-distinction cannot accommodate command and obedience, "an above and a below," without a multiplication of divine wills and centers of consciousness. He rejects such multiplication in favor of the unity of God's subjectivity and action. On the other hand, he also opposes the position that the Son's obedience is a strictly economic phenomenon. In understanding God as being-in-act Barth has relativized the very distinction being made today between "functional" and "ontological" subordination. He categorically rejects the latter insofar as it is taken to mean the Son's having a lesser deity, a being unequal to God the Father. But he does ground subordination in theological ontology: the Son's obedience to the Father is proper to God, and not sealed off in the foreignness of the assumed flesh. In his being as God, the Son obeys the Father *humanly*.⁵⁹

To identify Barth's version of divine subordination as "functional" and not "ontological" is a concession to the contemporary conversation, and it is worth reminding ourselves that Barth does not use these categories. Whatever term we use to describe Barth's view, it is clear that he does not fall neatly under either one. Therefore, with respect to the debate currently taking place in evangelical circles, he cannot readily be appropriated by either side.

⁵⁹ This point is emphasized by Bruce L. McCormack, "The Doctrine of the Trinity after Barth: An Attempt to Reconstruct Barth's Doctrine in the Light of His Later Christology," in Myk Habets and Phillip Tolliday (eds.), *Trinitarian Theology after Barth* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), pp. 107-8.

One question remains for us, and that regards the usefulness of Barth's views on eternal subordination for this debate. I conclude with three observations.

First: Barth's trinitarian theology challenges the way in which central concepts are used in the debate – including *essence* and *equality*, *appropriation* and *distinction*, and especially the notion of *necessity* (including conflation of *eternity* with necessity). Barth's contribution suggests that the strongest affirmation of the Son's exaltation and authority is precisely in his self-humiliation and servitude; and, in turn, that his submission to God the Father is precisely that which demonstrates his co-equality. It also prompts theologians to rethink whether Christ's kenotic submission may properly be limited to the sphere of creation.

Second: Were the evangelical theologian to appeal to Karl Barth as a potential ally in arguing for eternal, functional subordination,⁶⁰ she must be willing to bring on board the whole of Barth's actualist commitments – including an ontology that challenges the conviction that God's being precedes God's act, a material identification of the immanent and economic Trinity, and a rejection of the notion that the Son's assumed humanity is an instrument isolated from the divine life. Without these commitments Barth's theology is not comprehensible. The obedience of the Son to the Father relies upon God's self-determination in election.

Now, I believe there is much in this to commend for evangelical theology. But I suspect that, at present, taking on Barth's broader theological commitments is not something many conservative, North American evangelicals are willing to do. If I am right about that, then Barth can be no happy ally; his account of the obedience of the Son, of God's submission to God, is simply not compatible with the evangelical case for trinitarian subordination.

⁶⁰ Such appeals to Barth's advocacy of divine subordination are not common, but have been made. See, for example: Bruce A. Ware, "Equal in Essence, Distinct in Roles: Eternal Functional Authority and Submission among the Essentially Equal Divine Persons of the Godhead," in Jowers and House (eds.), *The New Evangelical Subordinationism?*, p. 35; Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, pp. 275-305.

Finally, Karl Barth was not known as a great champion of gender equality.⁶¹ But I believe he would be mystified by the transplantation of this debate from the sphere of trinitarian doctrine into that of gender roles in marriage and in the churches. Why is that? Why not pattern human relationships on the relations of the divine persons? For at least two reasons. First, without a social model of the Trinity there is insufficient correspondence for such an analogy. God the Father and the Son do not exist as two subjects, and trinitarian distinctions are utterly unlike human gender distinctions. If the one God exists in subordination to the one God, no space remains for insisting upon a corresponding subordination of wives to husbands.

There is an analogy of *relation* here (and not of being), Barth says, in that God created men and women for fellowship just as God himself exists in fellowship. The likeness of creatures to God is not in their ordering of super- and subordination but in their fellowship, their being in relation.⁶²

This more basic analogy notwithstanding, we should understand further that the patterning of human relationships upon the relations of divine persons is dogmatically disordered: the proper model for human existence and human relationships is not to be found in the doctrine of the Trinity but in Christology. Jesus Christ reveals true humanity to us, Jesus Christ is the bridegroom of the church, and Jesus Christ is given to all human creatures as an example of their own obedience and submission to God. Men and women participate in the triune life of God as they are united with Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, as together they

⁶¹ For an introduction to Barth's complicated views on gender see Katherine Sonderegger, "Barth and feminism," in John Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 258-73.

⁶² See *CD III/2*, p. 324. Ware's use of analogy, in contrast to this, is self-referential: he takes a human phenomenon (the ordinary submission of sons to their fathers) and reads it into the divine economy in order to then read it back out again and apply it to human gender relations. In other words, Ware attempts to overcome the lack of sufficient correspondence through the artificial imposition of an *analogia entis*. See Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), pp. 71-87.

are the “body of Christ” – a body that is in need of him as its head. They are not “heads” and “bodies” of one another. Dogmatically speaking, then, anthropology properly follows Christology and not the doctrine of God. There is no creaturely access to the triune life that does not pass through the person of the Mediator, the one who “did not consider equality with God something to be exploited,” and who demonstrates true humanity in his humility and servitude.