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The obedience of the Son in the theology of Karl Barth and of Thomas F. Torrance

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Abstract

Both Thomas F. Torrance and Karl Barth speak of the obedience of the Son as a condescension of the Son to become incarnate for our sakes. Thus there is wide agreement between them with regard to both the doctrines of atonement and the Trinity. Yet, despite the fact that Barth never wavered in his rejection of subordinationism and modalism and always affirmed the freedom of God's love, he also claimed that there 'is in God Himself an above and a below, a *prius* and a *posterius*, a superiority and a subordination',[1] while Torrance unequivocally refused to read elements of the economy, such as the ideas of super and subordination and a before or after, back into the immanent Trinity. By comparing the thinking of Barth and Torrance on this issue, I hope to show why I think Barth illegitimately read back elements of the economy into the immanent Trinity, thus creating confusion where clarity would help us see that what God does for us in the economy is and remains an act of free grace which becomes obscured when any sort of hierarchy is introduced into the Trinity.

Both theologians thoroughly agree that what God is towards us in the economy, he is eternally in himself and what he is eternally in himself, he is towards us in the economy. But, there is a difference between them over how to interpret this insight, since Barth thinks super and subordination should be ascribed to the immanent Trinity. While Torrance, like Barth, will argue that the incarnation and Christ's mediatorial activity fall 'within the life of God', he also insists that the incarnation cannot in any way be confused with the generation of the Son from the Father in eternity. Barth would agree; yet this important distinction becomes fuzzy when he ascribes subordination and obedience to the eternal Son as a basis for his actions *ad extra*.

This article will develop in four sections. First, I will discuss the obedience of the Son as condescension for Torrance and Barth. Second, I will consider the implications of the *Extra Calvinisticum* for each theologian's view of the obedience of the

[1] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. in 13 pts. (hereafter *CD*). vol. IV, pt. 1, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1974), pp. 200–1.

Son and of the Trinity. Third, I will explore how each theologian attempts to avoid subordinationism and modalism indicating the problems which arise in Barth's thinking in connection with these views. Fourth, I will compare Torrance and Barth, showing that Torrance more consistently maintains God's freedom and love by not reading back elements of the economy into the life of the immanent Trinity.

Keywords: divine suffering, economic/immanent Trinity, obedience/condescension, processions/missions, reconciliation, subordination.

The Obedience of the Son as condescension for Barth and Torrance

Two powerful and important perceptions structure Barth's understanding of the incarnation and atonement in his doctrine of reconciliation. First, incarnation, as God's movement into the 'far country' is 'a divine condescension'.[2] God freely comes to us from above to have dealings with us (*CD*, IV/1, p. 158); God humiliates himself to do this because of our sin (pride). God himself 'is not proud. In His high majesty He is humble' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 159) because he exercises his Lordship in Jesus acting as servant. The God of the covenant, that is, 'The Father who is one with the man Jesus His Son (Jn. 10:30)' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 168), is not only the giver of grace as electing Creator, but its recipient as elected creature in this one Israelite. God's grace and revelation therefore involve the fact that Jesus 'is called and pledged to obedience' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 170). In the incarnation we are shown 'who and what is man – his unfaithfulness, his disobedience, his fall, his sin, his enmity against God' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 171). God elected and thus loved sinful creatures who were his enemies and endured the 'contradiction of sinners against Himself' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 172, Heb 12:31). As sinners, then, God's elect are negated by God's grace in an act of faithfulness towards those who are unfaithful. In this sense God's grace is concealed with this judgement. And that means that Jesus himself is the judge judged in our place (*CD*, IV/1, pp. 157, 211–83). That is the form of God's saving grace.

Second, Barth never separates Jesus' divine and human actions because in the incarnate Word we never encounter simply a divine or a human being. Hence, Jesus' sacrifice for us 'is, of course, a human action – but in and with the human action it is also a divine action, in which . . . the true and effective sacrifice is made' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 280). Barth repeatedly insists that 'The Son of God in his unity with this man exists in solidarity with the humanity of Israel under the mighty hand of God' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 175). In Christ we see that God was willing and able 'to condescend, to humble Himself in this way' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 177), that is, by willing himself 'to be rejected and therefore

[2] See *CD*, IV/1, 168ff.

perishing man' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 175). It is only through 'His becoming flesh and His existence in the flesh' that we know Jesus' divine nature and thus the true God (*CD*, IV/1, p. 177). Barth does not equate lowliness with divine being, claiming that humanity's limitations are one thing, but 'God's visitation of us' within those limitations is quite another. Hence, 'Salvation is not in those limits, but in the concrete event of this visitation, in what took place in the man Jesus' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 192). Our suffering and dying with Christ therefore can only follow what happened exclusively in him: 'Jesus Christ is the Son of God and as such, in conformity with the divine nature, the Most High who humbles Himself and in that way is exalted and very high' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 192).

Barth describes the way of the Son into the far country as the 'way of obedience' and as 'the first and inner moment of the mystery of the deity of Christ'. This is offensive, because we learn here 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' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 192). We have to do here with 'God Himself in His true deity' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 193). Importantly, in the incarnation the divine nature is not altered or diminished, but actualised in our sinful history for the purpose of atonement (*CD*, IV/1, pp. 183, 193). Because God really was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, God did not have to choose to do this and God is true to himself acting in this way and never in contradiction with himself. When Barth argues that what God is towards us, he is eternally in himself, he stresses that this humility in which he reveals himself to us is a new mystery for us, but not for God. By this he could not mean that God was always incarnate. That would undermine his own understanding of God's transcendence. Barth seems to mean that God acts *ad extra* in accordance with his decision to be for us in his pre-temporal eternal existence. God's freedom as creator, reconciler and redeemer is 'not exhausted in the fact that in His revelation it consists throughout in this freedom from external compulsion . . . it is only manifested in all this. For He has it in Himself quite apart from His relation to another from whom He is free' (*CD*, II/1, p. 301). That is why Barth sees the atoning act of God for us as a 'sovereign act which God did not owe to Himself or the world or any man, on which no one could bank, yet which has in fact taken place and been made manifest' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 83). Hence, the 'grace of God' is 'exclusively His grace, His sovereign act, His free turning to man as new and strange every morning' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 84). This frequently repeated insight safeguards God's freedom in his love. And it is based within the Trinity itself: 'In the inner life of God, as the eternal essence of Father, Son and Holy Ghost, the divine essence does not, of course, need any actualisation . . . Even as the divine essence of the Son it did not need His incarnation . . . to become actual' (*CD*, IV/2, p. 113). Hence, God's will for us is 'unimpeded' by our sin and resistance.

Torrance often describes the Son's obedience as his descent into our sinful history in order to 'live out from within it a life of pure obedience, fulfilling the covenant will of God, and bringing humanity back from estrangement to communion with the Father'.[3] In the incarnation God experiences our alienation from within the person of the mediator. By living a life of perfect obedience, the Son bends our wills and converts our minds back towards God in his once for all actions of justification and sanctification.[4] For Torrance

> the involvement of the Son in our lowly condition is to be understood as an act of pure condescension on his part and not as an indication of an imperfection in him. He was not creaturely or space-conditioned in his own eternal Being, but he humbled himself to be one with us and to take our finite nature upon himself, *all for our sakes*.[5]
>
> In this 'economic condescension' . . . God chose out of transcendent freedom and grace to effect the salvation of mankind.[6]

As did Barth, Torrance held together Christ's person and work in revelation and atonement,[7] arguing that the eternal Son of God 'intervenes' in our sinful existence as it is alienated from God 'as our mediator, as true God and true man in one person who acts as judging God and judged man, as loving God and obedient man'. For Torrance, we 'must think of the work of Christ in terms of a mediation which fully represents both the divine and human side' (*Atonement*, p. 75). Hence, Christ

> does not act as man reconciling God or as man appeasing God. He acts as God who enters into the place of humanity, and brings himself into reconciliation with humanity and brings them into reconciliation with himself . . . even as man in atoning action, Christ is act of God . . . [and] even as God in atoning action, Christ is act of man . . . atonement is man's act of obedient self-offering to God. (*Atonement*, pp. 76–7)

[3] Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), p. 114.

[4] Thomas F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p. 70. See also Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 115.

[5] Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p. 344.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Thus, 'the significance of the cross . . . lies in the fact that the person of Christ is the one who sheds his blood for our sin – it lies in the identity of his person and work . . . The cross is the outworking of a divine decision that constitutes the person of the mediator himself in the incarnation.' Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 108.

In his obedience to God's will he lives humanly as we were intended by God to be: a reflection of God's own glory by being truly righteous and holy (*Incarnation*, p. 122). The Son of God came 'to live out . . . in the midst of our disobedience a life of obedience, and so to live the perfect life in communion with the perfect God' (*Incarnation*, p. 123).

But he was to live this 'not simply as Son of God but as Son of God become *man*, as Son of Man, that is to live it out from beginning to end within the limitations of our creaturely humanity . . . in the house of bondage'. In obedience he 'laid aside his glory in order that within our frailty and weakness, where we are assaulted by all the attacks and temptations of the evil one, he might perfectly fulfil the Father's will of love and holiness' (*Incarnation*, p. 123). Jesus chose to live out his mission which led to the cross; as the mediator, he increasingly exposed the evil in the human heart so that he came to be more and more despised simply for being there as saviour, helper and friend (*Incarnation*, pp. 235–56). In his perfect obedience and life of faith in relation to the Father as his beloved Son among sinners, 'he opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers' (*Incarnation*, p. 125).

Jesus' human life of obedience was not simply instrumental '*but an integral and essential part of that divine revelation and reconciliation*', in the sense that he was at one and the same time 'the complete revelation of God to man and the perfect correspondence on man's part to that revelation' (*Incarnation*, p. 126). For Torrance, God in Christ acts *as* man (*Atonement*, p. 123) and 'even as man in atoning action, Christ is *act of God*' (*Atonement*, p. 77). Hence, God justifies us in his act of re-establishing relations with us and reconciles in 'pure condescension' by living a life under judgement for us (*Atonement*, p. 145). Jesus' act

> in laying down his life is grounded upon the entire solidarity and mutuality between the Father and the Son, so that all that he does in his human life is identical with the act of God himself, but also so that nothing is done in his human life except what issues out of the love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father. (*Incarnation*, p. 127)

Because of that relation, Jesus' perfect human life is identical 'with the saving truth and love of God the Father' (*Incarnation*, p. 127). Since reconciliation is 'the great positive enactment of the divine love' (*Atonement*, p. 147), we may see that God's purpose in turning towards us in our sin was to reconcile himself to humanity 'in order to turn humanity to himself, in order to reconcile humanity to himself' (*Atonement*, p. 148).

In virtue of this divine condescension, 'Jesus Christ is in himself the hypostatic union of the judge and the man judged' (*Atonement*, pp. 148,

124–5, 145), both God the judge and the 'sin-bearer who bore our judgment and the penalty for our sin in his own life and death' (*Atonement*, p. 148). Christ was so at one with God that 'what he did, God did, for he was none other than God himself acting thus in our humanity. And therefore there is no other God for us than this God, and no other action of God toward us than this action' (*Atonement*, p. 152, also pp. 76–7). But since he was also one with us,

> when he died we died, for he did not die for himself but for us, and he did not die alone, but we died in him as those whom he had bound to himself inseparably by his incarnation. Therefore when he rose again we rose in him and with him . . . we are already accepted of God in him once and for all. (*Atonement*, p. 152)

For Torrance, as for Barth, God in no way was transformed in the incarnation but rather exercised his majesty in the form of an 'incredible act of condescension' which not only meant that the Son of God assumed the form of a servant, but that the incarnation was an 'utter act of self-abasement and humiliation in which he assumed our abject servile condition'.[8] Hence, *kenosis* was not to be understood 'in any metaphysical way as involving a contraction, diminution or self-limitation of God's infinite being'. Rather it was to be understood as God's 'self-abnegating love in the inexpressible mystery of the *tapeinosis* . . . impoverishment or abasement, which he freely took upon himself in what he became and did in Christ entirely for our sake' (*Trinitarian Faith*, p. 153).

Incarnation as condescension means that, for God to relate with us who are at enmity with him because of sin which is our self-centredness, he humbled himself to take the form of a servant, to exercise his judgement by being the judge judged in our place (see *Atonement*, pp. 184–5). In this act of grace and love the gulf which separates God and humanity is overcome and we are enabled not only to know the meaning of sin and salvation, but God himself in his own inner relations.[9] The resurrection was the apex of Christ's active obedience in the form of his Amen to the Father by raising himself from the dead.[10] The divine Logos revealed himself 'within our humanity' and enabled 'our humanity to receive his revelation personally,

[8] Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), p. 153.

[9] In *Space, Time, and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998) Torrance insists that apart from the resurrection we could not say that we truly know God the Father in his own ultimate being and reality (pp. 71–3).

[10] See e.g. *Space, Time and Resurrection*, pp. 53, 32, and Paul D. Molnar, *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 230–1.

in love and faith and understanding' (*Atonement*, p. 162); this, however, was 'the condescension of the Word, to enter into our humanity and within our humanity to accommodate himself to us in reconciling revelation. Thus the eternal Word or Son of God veiled his effulgence of glory' that we might see this in the lowliness of Jesus' human activity. In the incarnation he 'stooped down to enter our flesh' and thus 'brought divine omnipotence within the compass of our littleness, frailty and weakness . . . the eternal Word and truth of God entered into the darkness of our ignorance in order to redeem us from the power of darkness and ignorance' (*Atonement*, pp. 162–3; also *Trinitarian Faith*, pp. 186–7).[11]

Extra Calvinisticum and the doctrine of the Trinity

How does Barth's understanding of the Son's obedience relate to his view of the immanent Trinity? As Barth's interpretation of the Son's obedience reaches its climax, he does not just present the incarnate Son as obedient to the Father by humbling himself for us as the judge judged in our place. He goes further and claims that the basis for what the incarnate Son does for us is found in the obedience of the Son within the immanent Trinity. As a free divine action, the incarnation informs Barth's understanding of the inner trinitarian relations here: 'God is always God even in this humiliation' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 179). As does Torrance, Barth maintains that there is no change, diminution or transformation of the divine being into something else. Understanding Philippians 2:7 as its own commentary, Barth maintains that it was not a necessity that the Son must exist 'only in that form of God, only to be God . . . only to be the eternal Word and not flesh . . . In addition to His form in the likeness of God He could also . . . take the form of a servant' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 180). This incarnation (condescension) is his movement into the far country. Nonetheless, for Barth, 'An absolute *inclusio* of the Logos in the creature, the man Jesus, would mean a . . . limitation and therefore an alteration of His divine nature, and therefore of God Himself' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 180).[12]

[11] Hence, 'Redemption was not accomplished just by a downright *fiat* of God, nor by a mere divine "nod", but by an intimate, personal movement of the Son of God himself into the heart of our creaturely being and into the inner recesses of the human mind, in order to save us from within and from below . . .' Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, pp. 187–8. See also Torrance, *Atonement*, pp. 440–7ff. In Christ our minds were healed so that we could know God and obey God in freedom.

[12] This harmonises with Barth's earlier statement that 'the Godhead is not so immanent in Christ's humanity that it does not also remain transcendent to it, that its immanence ceases to be an event in the Old Testament sense, always a new thing, something that God actually brings into being in specific circumstances' (*CD*, I/1, 323).

This assertion came to be called the *Extra Calvinisticum*, since Calvinists and not Lutherans affirmed this insight and were suspected by the Lutherans of Nestorian tendencies because of it. It is extremely important to see exactly what Barth means when he both affirms this *Extra Calvinisticum* and claims there is something unsatisfactory about it. This could help explain why Barth both affirms the *logos asarkos*, in the limited sense that it points to the fact that God has his own proper life (*CD*, IV/1, p. 52), but also rejects it as something we cannot return to in an attempt to understand the atoning work of the incarnate Word. The problem with the *Extra Calvinisticum* is that it could lead and has in fact led 'to fatal speculation about the being and work of the λόγος ἄσαρκος, or a God whom we think we can know elsewhere, and whose divine being we can define from elsewhere than in and from the contemplation of His presence and activity as the Word made flesh' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 181). So when Barth rejected Brunner's *logos asarkos* during a conversation,[13] he was not overturning his other statements which affirm its necessity for recognising the freedom of God in the doctrines of the Trinity and christology; rather he was rejecting any sort of natural theology – any attempt to subject Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word and the reconciler, to a criterion other than himself. Therefore it is crucial to see that Barth does not deny this form of the Logos' existence, but emphatically rejects any idea that the Logos can be detached from the form of revelation and still be known as the true Son who humbled himself for us (*CD*, IV/1, p. 52).

Modern *kenoticism*, which espoused the idea that the divine Son had to renounce his attributes of majesty for those of humility, also suggested that Jesus' Godhead no longer remained 'intact and unaltered'. And that, Barth says, is a clear departure from all earlier tradition because it eliminated the fact that 'God was in Christ' in favour of a historical understanding of the incarnation. Barth insists that the identity of the man Jesus with God 'tells us that 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' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 183).

In answer to the question *how* God became man, Barth unequivocally rejects any idea that in humbling himself for our salvation God comes into conflict with himself. If God were thought of as setting himself in self-contradiction, then noetically and logically what happened in the incarnation would be an absolute paradox and a completely new mystery – new in the sense there would be a rift in God between his being and essence or his being and activity such that what God is in himself would differ from what he is

[13] See John D. Godsey (ed.), *Karl Barth's Table Talk* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1962), p. 49.

in the economy. Both Barth and Torrance firmly reject any sort of dualistic understanding of the relation of the immanent and economic Trinity by affirming that what God is towards us in the economy, he is eternally in himself. Any such dualistic split would leave us only with a God who could not in fact be tempted or be truly present among us in our sinful condition; such a God could not in reality be omnipresent, eternal and glorious but only lowly and open to attack (*CD*, IV/1, p. 184). In assuming the form of a servant God did not give up being God, as he would have done had he come into conflict with himself. In the incarnation, God comes into conflict with sin and death for our benefit by living as the judge judged in our place; but God himself never sins since that would place him in opposition to himself and miss the point of the incarnation. Hence, in subjecting himself to God-forsakenness, God does not make common cause with us as sinners but exercises his Lordship over this contradiction. While God in Christ mingles with sinners 'He does not sin' and when he dies in his unity with the man Jesus, 'death does not gain any power over him. He exists as God in the righteousness and the life, the obedience and the resurrection of this man' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 185). In other words, God is true to himself in this condescension. And it is the risen Lord who discloses this.

While Barth insists that God is not 'at disunity with Himself' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 186), he is also very careful not to deny God's immutability and argues that what God did in the incarnation 'corresponds to His divine nature' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 187). Hence, God 'is absolute, infinite, exalted, active, impassible, transcendent, but in all this He is the One who loves in freedom'. Consequently, God is free to be *both* infinite and finite, divine and human, exalted and lowly 'without giving up His own form, the *forma Dei*, and His own glory'. Therefore it corresponds to the divine nature and is grounded in it when in free grace God sacrifices himself in his Son for us. God is 'not His own prisoner' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 187) and thus God can be temporal and can suffer and die without ceasing to be eternal and without having suffering and death gain control over him (*CD*, IV/1, p. 188). Digging deeper to understand the connection between God's inner being and what God does for us in the economy, Barth reaches the conclusion that Christ's human acts of obedience and humility must imply that 'there is a humility grounded in the being of God' so that 'something else is grounded in the being of God Himself' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 193). Barth wants to say that Christ's obedience cannot be a 'capricious choice of lowliness, suffering and dying' because it is 'a free choice made in recognition of an appointed order . . . which was intended to be obeyed'. Accordingly, if 'God is in Christ' that must mean that 'what the man Jesus does is God's own work' so that his act of 'self-emptying and self-humbling . . . cannot be alien to God' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 193). Again, Barth

turns to Philippians 2:8 and other texts to refer to Christ's learning obedience and notes that through obedience we are made righteous according to Paul (Rom 5:19). Unless what we say here about the man Jesus is also said about God, Barth believes that his atoning life, suffering and death would only be seen as 'accidental events of nature or destiny' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 194). But Barth's whole argument rests on the fact that Jesus cannot do anything other than what he does because here he acts with the freedom of God himself 'making use of a possibility grounded in the being of God'. God's freedom to be God in hidden and lowly form and also in himself 'and known only to Himself' is not arbitrary; it is not something God might or might not do. Rather 'if "the Father's Son, by nature God, A guest this world of ours He trod" (Luther), if God made use of his freedom in this sense' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 194) then God is not a victim of circumstances so to speak but the one who freely acted in obedience for us.

Here, God chose to make use of his freedom to fulfil his own decision to be our God in Christ. Therefore it does not take place 'in the play of a sovereign *liberum arbitrium*' because 'There is no possibility of something quite different happening'; it is not the result of 'one of the throws in a game of chance which takes place in the divine being' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 195). Rather, we have to do here with the foundation of a divine decision which is fulfilled in this event as we have it and not otherwise. This itself is a decision of obedience and for that reason it can demand our obedience. Otherwise, as an arbitrary act, we could not have confidence in it. Once again we are confronted with the mystery of Christ's deity. His human obedience is grounded in 'His divine nature and therefore in God Himself'. Wondering if this leads to an impenetrable mystery or to 'knowledge of it as an open secret', Barth makes the move from the economic to the immanent Trinity again. Only now he maintains that there must be an 'obedience which takes place in God Himself'. Noting that this is both a 'difficult' and an 'elusive [tricky]' thing to speak about, Barth argues that 'obedience implies an above and a below, a *prius* [before] and a *posterius* [after], a superior and a junior and subordinate'. Barth asks whether or not these ideas compromise the unity and equality of the divine being wondering how God can be one and also 'above and below, the superior and the subordinate' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 195). Would this not suggest two divine beings, one only improperly divine because he exists on the created side of reality and is thus not really God in the true sense?

Things now start to get interesting. It is here that I believe Barth makes a subtle mistake which places his thinking in conflict with itself.[14] He is absolutely correct to argue that God can be one and also 'above and below,

[14] The tensions in evidence in *CD*, IV/1 remain in IV/2, pp. 343–51.

superior and subordinate' in the incarnation and the mission of the Son of God obeying God for us. But why does Barth think he must ascribe superiority and subordination to God's inner life in order to make this assertion? Why does he embrace a concept which he himself once stoutly rejected when he wrote: 'If revelation is to be taken seriously as God's presence, if there is to be a valid belief in revelation, then *in no sense can Christ and the Spirit be subordinate hypostases*' (*CD*, I/1, p. 353; emphasis mine)? Torrance also believes that what God is towards us, he is in himself, but never once does he attempt to ground this assertion in a superiority and subordination within the immanent Trinity; nor does he claim there is a *prius* or a *posterius* in God's inner being.[15] In fact, following Calvin, he writes:

> the *principium* of the Father does not import an ontological priority, or some *prius aut posterius* in God, but has to do only with a 'form of order' (*ratio ordinis*) or 'arrangement' (*dispositio*) of inner trinitarian relations governed by the Father/Son relationship, which in the nature of the case is irreversible, together with the relationship of the Father and the Son to the Spirit who is the Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of the Son.[16]

Consequently, Torrance firmly argues that 'the subordination of Christ to the Father in his incarnate and saving economy cannot be read back into the eternal personal relations and distinctions subsisting in the Holy Trinity' (*Trinitarian Perspectives*, p. 67). What is going on here?

Subordinationism and modalism

When Barth rejects subordinationism and modalism in *CD*, IV/1 he opposes on the one hand the idea that Christ is a being of lesser dignity than the Father, since that would destroy the doctrine of atonement, and on the other hand he rejects modalism, because it only sees commanding and obedience as 'worldly forms or appearances of true Godhead' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 196) leaving God's real being somewhere behind his economic activity. Modalism incorrectly makes a 'distinction between a proper and an improper being of God, an immanent and a *purely* economic' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 197; emphasis mine). Barth is not here abandoning the distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity for which he argued in *CD*, I/1, II/1 and elsewhere,

[15] In the rare instance where Torrance speaks of 'a "before" and an "after" in the life of God' he attempts to make sense of the fact that the incarnation was something new even for God. See Thomas F. Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today: The Gospel and Scientific Thinking* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 69 and Molnar, *Thomas F. Torrance*, pp. 253–9.

[16] Thomas F. Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), p. 66; cf. also pp. 28–36, 118–20 and 133.

since he never espoused a purely economic doctrine of the Trinity. He always held God's being and act together, insisting that God's actions in the economy were grounded in his antecedent being and actions and then maintained that God is who he is in his works *ad extra* but *not only* in his works (*CD*, II/1, p. 260).

The problem which surfaces here was already evident in Barth's view of grace in *CD*, II/1 when he held that grace is God's seeking and creating fellowship with us in *condescension* and that it is part of God's eternal being (*CD*, II/1, pp. 354, 357).[17] Barth saw the problem here, namely, that this could imply that God could not be gracious without us and responded saying that in God's inner life we do not know the form that grace has (*CD*, II/1, p. 357). While Barth was no subordinationist or modalist, and rightly argued that God is who he is when acting for us as the one who loves, since that is the form God's grace takes in relation to us, and that his obedient act of *kenosis* is grounded in the Son's eternal love for the Father and its receptivity, he also conceptually introduces a hierarchy into the divine being here, even though he explicitly rejected such thinking as Origenistic earlier in the *Church Dogmatics*.[18] It is this very idea of an eternal subordination within the Trinity which has led some contemporary theologians to confuse the missions and the processions and thus to argue in various ways that Jesus' divine Sonship will not be fully what it is until salvation history is complete.[19] While Barth certainly does not espouse such a view, his thinking makes it difficult to affirm an important point which Torrance more consistently affirmed, namely, that the incarnation is something new even for God.[20] And this leads to ambiguities in his thought, such as when he speaks of God's pre-temporal election in relation to Jesus' human existence by saying that 'In this free act of the election of grace the Son of the Father is no longer just the eternal Logos, but as such, as very God from all eternity He is also the very God and very man He will become in time' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 66). How can God already be God and man before he becomes man in time?

Barth's positive intention of course is to avoid having a God behind the back of Jesus Christ. But his thinking here unfortunately opens the door

[17] I am grateful to George Hunsinger for helping me see this point with clarity.

[18] See *CD*, I/1, p. 352. Barth's intention here was to stress that the gift (grace) was identical with the giver (God), an important insight which Torrance regularly stressed as well. See Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, pp. 24, 138, 140–1 and Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), pp. 21, 63 and 100.

[19] See e.g. Ted Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), pp. 81–145.

[20] See e.g. Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 108, and *Trinitarian Faith*, p. 155.

to the confusing idea that Jesus Christ humanly existed before he actually came into existence by the power of the Spirit from the Virgin Mary. It is clear from the context that Barth meant to distinguish what in reality is God's predestination of himself to be born of the Virgin for us and for our salvation and what occurs in the fullness of time. But unfortunately he has been read here as collapsing the inner trinitarian relations once more into the missions.[21] He has not of course. He simply wanted to say, against those whose thinking pushed Jesus Christ as the incarnate Word to the side when they thought of predestination as a pact between the Father and the Son, that God is one as Father, Son and Spirit and, as the one God, decided to be for us in Jesus Christ who himself was 'the beginning of all the ways of God' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 66). To add to the complexity of this issue Barth also makes other statements which suggest greater precision and nuance, as when he asserts: 'Jesus Christ was at the beginning. He was not at the beginning of God, for God has indeed no beginning. But He was at the beginning of all things, at the beginning of God's dealings with the reality which is distinct from Himself . . . He was the election of God's grace as directed towards man' (*CD*, II/2, p. 102).[22]

Barth's goal here is the same as Torrance's, as when Torrance consistently maintains that there is no God behind the back of Jesus.[23] Both theologians wanted to affirm that Christ's obedience, subordination and lowliness for us were acts of God himself (*CD*, IV/1, pp. 198–9). Both theologians think that it would be a mistake to hold that Jesus could suffer, die and live out his life of obedience only as a creature. This is the modalism Barth here rejects, and Torrance himself linked such thinking to Nestorianism, insisting that those who held that Christ only suffered in his humanity and not in his divinity were guilty of separating his human from his divine acts thereby undermining the meaning of atonement.[24] Torrance does not ascribe suffering and death directly to God's nature but because, with Barth, he believes that Christ's incarnate life as mediator 'falls within the life of God',

[21] See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 368, and Bruce L. McCormack, 'Divine Impassibility or Simply Divine Constancy? Implications of Karl Barth's Later Christology for Debates over Impassibility', in James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White (eds), *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 178.

[22] George Hunsinger, 'Election and the Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth', *Modern Theology* 24/2, (2008), pp. 181–3, explains perfectly that when Barth says that Jesus Christ is the subject of election he is not speaking without qualification.

[23] Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), p. 201, and *Christian Doctrine of God*, pp. 199, 243.

[24] See Torrance, *Atonement*, pp. 184–7.

he also holds that 'his passion belongs to the very Being of God' (*Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 246).[25]

When Barth introduces subordination into the immanent Trinity, even though he claims he has avoided any idea that there is inequality among the persons (modes) of the Trinity, he not only causes conceptual confusion, but inadvertently introduces some sort of hierarchy into the immanent Trinity: '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' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 209).[26] Here Barth is unclear about the fact that what the Son fulfils in the incarnation and the events which follow is the eternal divine decree to be God for us in humility and in obedience and thus to reconcile the world through his cross and resurrection. To say simply that the Son fulfils his subordination and the Father his superiority, without clearly and consistently stating that what is fulfilled is God's salvific purpose and activity *for us*, implies a need on the part of God for fulfilment. And that is something Barth always theoretically rejected.[27]

But why does Barth think he must speak of subordination as part of God's eternal being? The answer seems to be that he intends to say that the obedience of the incarnate Son acting for us is an act of God himself; therefore he claims that 'a below, a *posterius*, a subordination . . . belongs to the inner life of God' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 201). Hence, there is also obedience within God's inner life. Consequently, God's unity 'consists in the fact that in Himself He is both One who is obeyed and Another who obeys' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 201). God's unity, which cannot be equated 'with being in and for oneself' as though God were a prisoner of his own solitariness, is active and includes 'a unity of the One with Another, of a first with a second, an above with a below, an origin and its consequences' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 202). And this

[25] Following Athanasius with respect to Jesus' pain, agitation and distress Torrance thinks 'one cannot say that these things are natural to Godhead, but *they came to belong to God by nature*, when it pleased the Word to undergo human birth and to reconstitute in himself, as in a new image, that what he himself had made', *Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 248.

[26] While I think much of Rowan Williams' critique of Barth is off the mark, his observation about this remark is interesting: 'What, if anything, this can possibly mean, neither Barth nor his interpreters have succeded [*sic*] in telling us' ('Barth on the Triune God', in S. W. Sykes (ed.), *Karl Barth: Studies of his Theological Method* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 175). Here Barth was inconsistent in distinguishing, without separating the processions and missions, the immanent and economic Trinity.

[27] See *CD*, II/1, pp. 306ff. and his statement that the Son's eternal begetting is a perpetual becoming which 'rules out every need of this being for completion. Indeed this becoming simply confirms the perfection of this being' (*CD*, I/1, p. 427 and IV/1, p. 113). Torrance agrees with this (*Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 242).

does not imply, Barth says, 'a gradation, a degradation and an inferiority in God' which would disrupt the *homoousia* of the different modes of being. Barth thinks there is an 'inner order' with a 'direction downwards' which maintains God's equality and unity and, to illustrate this, he explicitly uses the imagery of wives being second and subordinate to husbands, saying that our way of thinking could imply 'lesser dignity and significance' and should be corrected in light of the *homoousia* (*CD*, IV/1, p. 202).

Comparison of Torrance and Barth

Here then we reach the heart of the matter. As mentioned, Torrance too speaks of an order within the immanent Trinity but excludes any sort of subordination because of his stress on *perichoresis*, which is virtually missing at this point in Barth's analysis. While the incarnate Son subordinates himself to the Father *for us* in obedience, one cannot read this back indiscriminately into the immanent Trinity without causing problems. In Torrance's words:

> The subjection of Christ to the Father in his incarnate economy as the suffering and obedient Servant cannot be read back into the eternal hypostatic relations and distinctions subsisting in the Holy Trinity. The mediatorial office of Christ, as Calvin once expressed it, does not detract from his divine Majesty. (*Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 180)[28]

What difference does it make that Barth seems to confuse the order of the inner trinitarian relations with the being of the persons of the Trinity? I think this leads to several problems, some of which I have already noted. First, it blurs the distinction between processions and missions by ascribing obedience to the eternal Son when, as Torrance more consistently indicates, that obedience is something he freely undertakes in his mission as the incarnate reconciler and redeemer. While Torrance certainly affirmed that the incarnation and Christ's mediatorial activity fall 'within the life of God' (*Christian Doctrine of God*, pp. 246, 144) and that Christ's suffering and dereliction were 'suffered by God in his innermost Being for our sake' (*Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 249), he also insisted that 'the incarnation was not a timeless event like the generation of the Son from the Being of the Father' (*Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 144). Second, it does not sustain Barth's persistent wish to distinguish without separating the immanent and economic Trinity which Barth continued to uphold, as when he wrote: 'In order to not be alone, single, enclosed within Himself, God did not need co-existence with the creature . . . . Without the creature He has all this originally in

[28] Importantly, Torrance here claims 'This is surely part of the significance of 1 Cor 15:24ff.' and also refers to Phil 2:7–10.

Himself' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 201). Third, it introduces a problematic analogy for explaining subordination within God's being, namely, the subordination of wives to husbands, claiming one can speak of a 'downward direction' in God without obviating the full equality of the divine modes of being – yet with this analogy Barth is compelled to introduce subordination into his idea of obedience. Fourth, this leads Barth to attempt to explain the *how* of the trinitarian relations (which he previously insisted could not be explained since it remained a mystery) by comparing the Father/Son relation to the relation of wives and husbands and in that way introduces hierarchy into the immanent Trinity.

It would have been better if Barth had simply argued that God can experience super and subordination, suffering and obedience *as God for us* because he loves in freedom in himself in a way which transcends all superiority and subordination as well as all suffering and need for obedience.[29] Blurring the distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity comes to a head when Barth explains that this action, like creation, has a 'basis in His own being, in His own inner life'. God 'does not do it without any correspondence to, but as the *strangely logical final continuation* of, the history in which He is God' (*CD*, IV/1, p. 203; emphasis mine). But if God's actions for us are in any sense a logical 'continuation' of God's inner history, then, to that extent, it becomes impossible to distinguish God's inner trinitarian being and actions from his actions for us. Moreover, when Barth speaks of the divine majesty in this context, sometimes he applies this to the Son. But at other times he applies this to the one who commands in majesty and the one who obeys in humility in a way which clearly refers to the first and second persons of the Trinity.

I believe Torrance's thinking on this issue, while indebted to Barth in many ways, is more consistent than Barth's and points us to at least three extremely important insights which can help us see our way beyond the conceptual confusion Barth has introduced. First, Torrance is absolutely clear that one cannot confuse the order of the persons of the Trinity with their being without also falling into the trap of reading elements of the economy back into the immanent Trinity, thus undermining the true power of grace to overcome suffering, sin, evil and death. To confuse the order of the Trinity with the being of the persons of the Trinity could open the door both to

[29] He did this with respect to God and suffering, arguing that 'God finds no suffering in Himself. And no cause outside God can cause Him suffering if He does not will it so. But it is, in fact, a question of sympathy with the suffering of another in the full scope of God's own personal freedom' (*CD*, II/1, 370). In *CD*, IV/2, p. 357, he says that it is *our* suffering that God takes to himself in his Son for us.

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subordinationism and to modalism in some form or another; it might even open the door to monism, dualism or tritheism. In Torrance's estimation there was an element of subordinationism in Barth's doctrine of the Trinity earlier in the *Church Dogmatics*,[30] and dualism threatened his later view of the sacrament and caused problems for his view of Christ's ascended humanity, as will be noted below. Second, Torrance insists that the incarnation (like creation) is something new, new even for God:

> the Father/Son relation subsists eternally within the being and life of God. This means that we cannot but think of the incarnation of the Son as *falling within the being and life of God* – although . . . the incarnation must be regarded as something 'new' even for God, for the Son was not eternally man any more than the Father was eternally Creator.[31]

Unless this statement is forcefully made and conceptually maintained by not reversing the actions of God for us with who God is in eternity, there will always be serious confusion regarding the Trinity and election and between time and eternity because it will be thought that in some sense God constitutes his eternal triunity by and through deciding to and then relating with us. Torrance was consistent, insisting that the incarnation, like creation, was a new act, new even for God. Barth also believed this. But Barth is not as consistent in this as Torrance because he inadvertently introduces a logical necessity into the discussion which leads him to think that the Father needs to fulfil his superiority, the Son needs to fulfil his subordination and God's actions for us can be described as a logical continuation of his inner history. It could then be surmised that there is no longer any Son of God in himself and that God can no longer be said to be impassible as well as passible.[32]

Torrance maintains both insights on soteriological grounds, claiming that in the incarnation Jesus Christ experiences our suffering, alienation and death itself vicariously in order to remove them as threats to us. But he does so without ceasing to be impassible (not in any philosophical sense but in the sense that he never loses his eternal transcendent power as creator

[30] Torrance, *Karl Barth*, p. 131. See e.g. *CD*, I/1, pp. 412–15, where Barth thinks of the distinction between God's Fatherhood and Sonship in terms of 'super- and subordination' (p. 414), while claiming that there was 'no distinction of being' implied (p. 413).

[31] Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, p. 155.

[32] It could also lead to thinking which denies that the hypostatic union is the uniting of the divine Word with the human nature of Jesus Christ in the incarnation. Thus, 'The second "person" of the Trinity is the God-man. So even in the act of hypostatic *uniting*, the "subject" who performs that action is the God-man, Jesus Christ in his divine-human unity.' McCormack, 'Divine Impassibility', p. 178.

which is not subject to the passions of human existence); thus in Jesus Christ the Son is both passible and impassible because God wills to embrace and overcome our suffering in mercy and love without ceasing to be God.[33] Torrance does not accept any sort of static idea that God cannot suffer without ceasing to be God and both Barth and Torrance could see an element of truth in Patripassianism, while rejecting Patripassianism itself as a form of modalism.[34] Third, Torrance seems to be more consistent than Barth in applying the *enhypostasis* and *anhypostasis* in his thinking about the person of the Son in his vicarious acts of obedience for us. He can thus clearly state that all of Jesus' human actions are actions of the Son. As we have seen, Barth also maintains this in his christology. But when Barth ascribes subordination to the obedience of the eternal Son, he seems to have blurred a distinction which he elsewhere stressed and maintained, a distinction which Torrance consistently maintains. For Torrance we must

> think of the economic Trinity as the freely predetermined manifestation in the history of salvation of the eternal Trinity which God himself was before the foundation of the world, and eternally is. Hence, when we rightly speak of the oneness between the ontological Trinity and the economic Trinity, we may not speak of that oneness without distinguishing and delimiting it from the ontological Trinity – there are in any case . . . elements in the incarnate economy such as the time pattern of human life in this world which we may not read back into the eternal Life of God. (*Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 109)[35]

That distinction enables Torrance to emphasise Jesus' eternal high-priestly mediation between us and the Father in connection with every aspect of our lives, so that he can say Jesus' human activities fall within the life of the immanent Trinity. But that is a far cry from ascribing super and subordination to the inner life of God as the basis for his condescension to be humble for us and our salvation.

[33] Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, pp. 252ff. and *Trinitarian Faith*, pp. 184–5.

[34] Thus, 'primarily it is God the Father who suffers in the offering and sending of His Son, in His abasement. The suffering is not His own, but the alien suffering of the creature, of man, which He takes to Himself in Him' (CD, IV/2, p. 357). See also Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 249.

[35] Understanding election as *prothesis*, Torrance maintains that Jesus' humanity is not eternal in the sense that it was pre-existent; his person is eternal and 'his person is not human but divine' (*Incarnation*, p. 177). Barth also argued for a distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity for similar reasons (CD, I/1, p. 172, IV/1, pp. 125ff., 212–13).

What difference does this make? In Torrance's view, Barth's failure to give due emphasis to Christ's high-priestly mediation led him to revert to a form of dualistic thinking which he previously rejected when he presented his view of the sacrament of baptism.[36] It led to a number of other difficulties which cannot be discussed here, such as Barth's references in *CD*, IV/3 to 'the humanity of God' instead of to the specific humanity of the risen, ascended and advent Jesus Christ. Speaking only generally of the humanity of God undermines the need for a properly conceived eschatology which respects the fact that Jesus' humanity as the ascended and advent Lord is his own and that he unites us to that humanity through his Spirit and thus 'to partake of divine nature'.[37] Exercising a proper 'eschatological reserve' Torrance would never argue, for instance, that the risen Jesus needs no other body than sacrament and church because he sees the *unity* in *distinction* between the ascended Lord in his true humanity and divinity and the church as his body between the time of his first and second coming. In the interim, therefore, Jesus continues his high-priestly mediation through the church's preaching and the sacraments precisely by uniting us to his new humanity through the Holy Spirit and in faith as we await his return.[38]

In summary then, the question is this. In the incarnation, did the eternal Son of God enter time and space 'in such a way that he left the bosom of the Father or left the throne of the universe?' Put another way, even in subjecting himself to the conditions of our existence in space and time, did the Son of God continue 'to rule the universe as the creator *Logos* by whom all things are made?' (*Atonement*, p. 282). Torrance believes both patristic and Reformed theology held that the eternal Logos did enter time and space 'not merely as creator but as himself made creature' and lived his life within those limits. And yet he 'did not cease to be what he was eternally in himself, the creator Word in whom and through whom all things consist and by whom all things derive' (*Atonement*, p. 282). But Torrance could hold together Christ's divinity and humanity without falling into monophysitism or Apollinarianism precisely because he rejected the container or receptacle notion of space which always leads both to false forms of kenoticism and to demythologising.[39] Torrance thus maintained *both* that 'the Word of God

[36] Torrance, *Karl Barth*, pp. 134–5.

[37] Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, p. 135.

[38] See e.g. Thomas F. Torrance, *Royal Priesthood: A Theology of Ordained Ministry*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), ch. 2, 'The Function of the Body of Christ', and ch. 3, 'The Time of the Church'.

[39] Torrance thinks that, while Thomas Aquinas modified the receptacle notion of space when thinking of the incarnation in patristic terms, Luther failed to do so and so allowed monophysitism in by the back door by extending the ubiquity of Christ (the

is nowhere to be found except in inseparable union with Jesus, the babe of Bethlehem, the real and proper man' *and* that 'if we press that to mean that in the incarnation the Word was resolved into this Jesus without remainder, so to speak, then insuperable difficulties arise' (*Atonement*, p. 284). For Torrance, 'we cannot say that the eternal *Logos* became flesh in such a way that part of the *Logos* was excluded . . . for the *Logos* was totally incarnate'. Nonetheless, 'he remained wholly himself, the creator and ruler and preserver of the universe of all creaturely reality. He became man without ceasing to be God, and so entered space and time without leaving the throne of God' (*Atonement*, p. 284, also *Incarnation*, p. 218). So Torrance and Barth can readily say that, once the incarnation has occurred, we cannot think of the Word apart from Jesus. But we must do so without eliminating the pre-existent Word and the Word in its continued transcendence either.[40] We must then affirm two realities in a complementary way: (1) 'The Word cannot be subordinated to the flesh it assumes', as would happen if the Word was thought of as 'limited by the creaturely reality with which it is united', because then it would have to have been 'altered in its transcendent and divine nature' (*Incarnation*, p. 220); and (2) all monophysitism would have to be rejected; that is, any idea that Christ's human nature was 'absorbed in his divine nature' via the incarnation (*Incarnation*, p. 220). As we have seen, each thread of their thinking immediately leads to another complete fabric of ideas. I hope that I have demonstrated some of the inner workings and interrelatedness of the doctrines treated here.

human receptacle) to contain his omnipresence with a strong form of the *communicatio idiomatum*. *Space, Time and Incarnation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), p. 62.

[40] Barth's continued reference to the *logos asarkos* as necessary even in *CD*, IV/1, p. 52, then could be seen as an attempt to maintain the 'Calvinist extra' and would make sense as long as it was not understood using a receptacle or container view of space which might lead to the false conclusion that there is indeed a God behind the back of Jesus Christ.