

The Obedience of the Eternal Son

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Abstract: According to Karl Barth, the obedience of the eternal Son in the economy of salvation is the proper mode whereby he enacts the undivided work of the Trinity 'for us and our salvation'. This thesis now enjoys rather wide acceptance among contemporary theologians. In many instances, adopting this viewpoint has resulted in significant revisions of traditional trinitarian metaphysics. The purpose of the present article is to demonstrate that adopting Barth's thesis does not require such revision and that this thesis can and should be appropriated within the orbit of traditional trinitarian theology. We will endeavor to establish our claim by considering the relationship between the Son's eternal generation and his economic obedience, and by addressing three major objections that might be raised against our claim.

I

One of the most interesting dogmatic theses to emerge from the twentieth century is the claim that the Son's obedience to the Father in accomplishing the work of salvation is not merely a consequence of the humble existence he assumed in the incarnation but rather constitutes his *opus proprium* within the *opera Trinitatis ad extra*, the Son's distinctive manner qua Son of executing God's undivided saving will. This thesis originates with Karl Barth, who gives it penetrating exposition in *Church Dogmatics* IV.1 § 59.1,¹ and enjoys wide acceptance, both among those who are self-consciously indebted to Barth's theological programme and among those who are not. In each instance, warrants for this *theologoumenon* are drawn from the broad New Testament witness to the one who declares: 'I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me' (Jn 6:38).²

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- 1 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. in 13pts., ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956–75) (hereafter *CD*) from page 3.
- 2 A survey of the New Testament witness to this theme may be found in Richard N. Longenecker, *Studies in Hermeneutics, Christology and Discipleship* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2004), ch. 6.

Affirming the obedience of the only-begotten Son has in many cases entailed significant revisions to classical trinitarian metaphysics. Whether in Barth's historicizing of the doctrine of God, the significance of which remains fiercely debated among his interpreters,³ or in von Balthasar's lavish metaphysics of trinitarian kenosis,⁴ identifying obedience as the Son's personal property has led theologians to reconfigure the nature of the Father–Son relation and to reformulate traditional understandings of the divine being. In evangelical circles, revision has often meant replacing eternal generation with obedience as the Son's distinguishing personal property (usually identified as the Son's 'role' in the Trinity), and adopting (a sometimes unreflective) social trinitarianism, which affirms three centers of self-consciousness and willing within the triune God.⁵ Such revisions seem inevitable in view of the history of trinitarian doctrine, where the Son's obedience is most commonly attributed to the *forma servi* that he assumed in the economy, as opposed to the *forma Dei* that he eternally shares with the Father or the personal *modus essendi* whereby he is and acts 'from the Father'.⁶ Thus Gregory of Nazianzus states: 'in his character of the Word he was neither obedient nor disobedient . . . But, in the character of the form of a servant, he condescends to his fellow servants, nay, to his servants, and takes upon him a strange form'.⁷ Similarly Augustine states: 'in the form of a servant, he did not come to do his own will, but the will of him who sent him'.⁸ If obedience can only qualify as a human attribute within the metaphysical

3 For an early assessment of Barth's historicized doctrine of God, see Eberhard Jüngel, *God's Being is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. John Webster (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). More recently, see the debate between Bruce McCormack, Paul Molnar, George Hunsinger and others, essays of which are collected in Michael T. Dempsey, ed., *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

4 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama*, vol. V (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), pp. 236–9.

5 Representative examples of these moves may be found in Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), ch. 14 and appendix 6; J. Scott Horrell, 'Toward a Biblical Model of the Social Trinity: Avoiding Equivocation of Nature and Order', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47 (2004), pp. 399–421; and Bruce Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005).

6 This threefold classification of biblical descriptions of Christ is found throughout patristic writings. For representative examples, see Athanasius, *Orations Against the Arians*, 3.29–36 in Richard A. Norris, Jr., ed., *The Christological Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), pp. 87–96; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration*, 29.18; 30.20 in Edward R. Hardy, ed., *Christology of the Later Fathers* (Louisville: Westminster Press 1954), pp. 172–3, 190–2; Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991), 2.2–4.

7 Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration*, 28.6 in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, p. 180.

8 Augustine, *The Trinity*, 1.22. Compare the above cited quotation, however, with Augustine's comments on Jn 5:19 in *The Trinity*, 2.5 and also with his treatment of Jn 5:19–30 in his *In Johannis evangelium tractatus*, helpfully discussed in Keith E. Johnson, 'Augustine's "Trinitarian" Reading of John 5: A Model for the Theological Interpretation of Scripture?', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 52 (2009), pp. 799–810.

complex of pro-Nicene trinitarianism, as a form that is ‘strange’ in relation to the *forma Dei*, then the apostolic witness to the Second Person’s obedient saving embassy seemingly demands that dogmatics develop a more thoroughly evangelized metaphysic than that on offer in the tradition. On the basis of the apostolic witness to Jesus’ divine filial obedience, we must conclude that obedience is proper to God’s being, with all the metaphysical revisions that this entails.⁹ Doctrinal development in this vein takes the form of sending the classical Catholic and Reformed trinitarian tradition packing.

The purpose of the present article is to question the seeming inevitability of this form of modern doctrinal development. Note well: we do not wish to challenge the claim that obedience constitutes the proper form of the Son’s divine work in the economy of salvation.¹⁰ We wish to challenge what is perceived to be the necessary *implication* of this claim, that is, that affirming the obedience of the eternal Son requires a revision of traditional trinitarian metaphysics in the classical Catholic and Reformed tradition.¹¹ Our strategy for issuing this challenge is not primarily critical but constructive. We do not intend to engage directly the various modifications of

9 Thus Barth, *CD* IV/1, pp. 192–210.

10 This is not to say, however, that we endorse the lush kenotic approaches to the Trinity *in se* as proposed by Balthasar and others; for helpful concerns on this front, see Bruce D. Marshall, ‘The Unity of the Triune God: Reviving an Ancient Question’, *The Thomist* 74 (2010), pp. 26–31. Marshall wisely suggests that a recovery of the distinction between divine processions and divine missions enables us to avoid the ‘unhappy results’ of Balthasar’s trinitarian maneuvers (p. 30). We would add that the distinction between the common and proper attributes of the divine persons must also be recovered, as well as the necessary redoubling that must mark any faithful characterization of the particular divine persons (see below).

11 Cf. Steven D. Boyer, ‘Articulating Order: Trinitarian Discourse in an Egalitarian Age’, *Pro Ecclesia* 18 (2009), pp. 255–72; and Thomas Joseph White, ‘Intra-Trinitarian Obedience and Nicene-Chalcedonian Christology’, *Nova et Vetera* 6 (2008), pp. 377–402. Boyer engages some of the issues raised in the present article and argues that certain (mainly) patristic precedents provide warrant for thinking about the obedience of the divine Son. Conversely, White engages Barth’s thesis and argues, from a Thomistic perspective, against the current thesis, though he does propose a reformulated version of pretemporal ‘obedience’ of the Son (construed as a statement about the mission, though not the procession of the Son). White has expanded his case in two more recent essays: Thomas Joseph White, ‘Classical Christology after Schleiermacher and Barth: A Thomist Perspective’, *Pro Ecclesia* 20 (2011), pp. 229–63; ‘On Christian Philosophy and Divine Obedience: A Reply to Keith L. Johnson’, *Pro Ecclesia* 20 (2011), pp. 283–9. The *Pro Ecclesia* exchange with Keith L. Johnson and Fritz Bauerschmidt does not really move the conversation regarding this topic forward, precisely because it ranges so widely over the terrain of modern theology after Schleiermacher and Barth. For a somewhat similar attempt to understand the theological implications of the Son’s economic obedience within a Thomistic metaphysics, see Michael Waldstein, ‘The Analogy of Mission and Obedience: A Central Point in the Relation between *Theologia* and *Oikonomia* in St. Thomas Aquinas’s *Commentary on John*’, in Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering, eds., *Reading John with St. Thomas Aquinas: Theological Exegesis and Speculative Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), pp. 92–112; cf. Keith L. Johnson, ‘When Nature Presupposes Grace: A Response

trinitarian theology that have emerged in the wake of our modern *theologoumenon* but to demonstrate how this *theologoumenon* fits – indeed, supremely so – within the orbit of traditional trinitarian metaphysics, and to address some of the most significant objections that might be posed against this claim in the current theological climate. In so doing, we will argue that the church’s tradition of trinitarian reflection, and specifically its Thomist representation, has resources which actually enable this development to proceed (e.g. the distinction between common and proper attributes of the triune persons, the distinction between the divine processions and divine missions). We envision this argument as an attempt at Catholic and Reformed *ressourcement* – neither mere rechristianization nor rejection of this classical tradition, but traditioned reasoning within this tradition in fresh and faithful form.

Our thesis, then, is as follows: The obedience of the eternal Son in the economy of salvation is the proper mode whereby he enacts the undivided work of the Trinity ‘for us and our salvation’. More fully, the obedience of the Son is the economic extension of his eternal generation to a Spirit-enabled, creaturely life of obedience unto death, and therefore the redemptive foundation for his bringing of ‘many sons to glory’ (Heb. 2:10). We will endeavor to establish this thesis in two steps. First, we will consider the relationship between the Son’s eternal generation and his economic obedience following the direction of the medieval dictum: *modus agendi sequitur modus essendi* (sections II–III). Second, we will attempt to address three major objections that might be raised against our proposal: two classical and one modern (section IV).

II

As the economic extension of his eternal generation, the Son’s obedience to the Father in the economy of salvation constitutes the proper filial mode whereby he executes the Trinity’s undivided work of salvation. The present claim is a particular application of the more general trinitarian rule: mode of acting follows mode of being (*modus agendi sequitur modus essendi*). Attempts to follow this rule – by grounding trinitarian missions in processions or by considering God’s inner-trinitarian depths prior to the economic acts which flow therefrom – are commonly regarded as excessively speculative, even ‘disastrous’ for trinitarian theology.¹² Such endeavors, it is argued, transgress the boundary of evangelical revelation within which alone God’s being may be known. Even among those who would affirm the aforementioned trinitarian rule regarding the ontological priority of the divine being

to Thomas Joseph White, O.P.’, *Pro Ecclesia* 20 (2011), pp. 264–82: ‘The obedience of Jesus of Nazareth on the cross cannot be held at a distance from God, as if it does not tell us something essential about God’s being as God; rather, this obedience reveals God’s innermost being’ (p. 268).

12 See Robert W. Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), pp. 125–31.

over the divine works, it is often assumed that the order of knowing (*ordo cognoscendi*) follows an order different to that of the order of being (*ordo essendi*): first, we come to know God's works; then, we infer the nature of God's being on the basis of those works.¹³ We wish to dispute both perspectives, and this on the basis of the apostolic order of teaching (*ordo docendi*).

That the Son's mode of acting follows from his mode of being is not merely a statement about the order of being. As strange as it may seem to Kantian sensibilities, it is also a statement about the order of knowing insofar as the order of knowing follows the scriptural order of teaching, which in many instances presents the *identity* of the Son as propaedeutic to understanding the *action* of the Son. As Thomas Aquinas observes, the apostle John's contemplation of the Word was 'full' because he was able to consider 'not only the essence of the cause, but also its power':

Since John the Evangelist was raised up to the contemplation of the nature of the divine Word and of his essence when he said, 'In the beginning was the Word; and the Word was with God,' he immediately tells us of the power of the Word as it extends to all things, saying, 'Through him all things came into being.' Thus his contemplation was full.¹⁴

In other words, the 'order'¹⁵ of the Fourth Evangelist's contemplative teaching is to reveal to us the *nature* of the divine Word in order that we may appreciate both the character and the consequence of his *action*. Because the Word is the Father's perfect self-communication (Jn 1:1), dwelling in eternal repose at the Father's side (Jn 1:18), his mission can result in the perfect revelation of the unseen God (Jn 1:18), and not simply the witness to a greater light (cf. Jn 1:6–8).

The Gospel of Mark also provides a key example of the scriptural *ordo docendi* in this regard. Though the nature of Jesus' messianic sonship remains a riddle to human characters within the narrative until the end of the second Gospel, the truth of his divine filiation is made known to Mark's readers from 'the beginning' (Mk 1:1, 11). At the beginning, middle, and end of his Gospel, Mark identifies Jesus the Messiah as 'the Son of God' (1:1, 11; 9:7; 15:39),¹⁶ as one whose filial way is 'the way of the Lord' (1:3).¹⁷ The structural location of these identifications within Mark's

13 Bruce McCormack discusses this strategy and its attending logic in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), p. 58; and more fully in *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 350–8.

14 Thomas Aquinas, 'Prologue to the Gospel of John', in *Commentary on the Gospel of John, Chapters 1–5*, trans. Fabian Larcher and James A. Weisheipl (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), p. 3.

15 Aquinas, 'Prologue to the Gospel of John', p. 3.

16 Joachim Gnilka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (Zürich/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Benziger/Neukirchener, 1979), vol. 2, p. 171.

17 On Jesus' identity as Israel's one Lord in Mark's Gospel, see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), ch. 8.

narrative lends support to Kingsbury's argument that the primary secret which Mark seeks to disclose to his readers is not so much the so-called '*messianic secret*' as it is the secret concerning Jesus' 'divine sonship'.¹⁸ This is the secret that God knows, that Jesus knows, and that the unclean spirits know as well (1:11; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7). It is, moreover, the secret that is not revealed to human characters in the Gospel until Jesus breathes his last on the cross. In his lordly self-offering as a ransom for many (cf. 10:45), wherein he fulfills the role scripturally patterned for the beloved son in the Binding of Isaac (the *Aqedah*),¹⁹ the Gentile centurion comes to see what Mark has made known to his readers from the beginning: 'Truly this was the Son of God!' (15:39). Mark's story of the wicked tenants thus summarizes in parabolic form the characteristic pattern of evangelical revelation: the Father *has* a beloved Son; the Father *sends* a beloved Son; and the ensuing rejection and vindication of the beloved Son constitute the *realization* of the divine counsel, a counsel graciously unveiled to us through the evangelical witness in order that we might understand that '*this was the Lord's doing*', and that this the Lord's doing might be 'marvelous in our eyes' (Mk 12:1–12).

To be sure, the knowledge of the Trinity rendered in the sacred writings is ectypal theology not archetypal theology, with all the limitations that this entails. However, the distinction between these two modes of knowledge is not to be understood as a distinction between epistemology and metaphysics, or as a distinction between phenomenal form and transcendental condition. No: God reveals *both* his triune being and action to us through his prophetic-apostolic Word. And this revelation – delivered by the divine rhetor in a form wisely suited to the needs of creaturely wayfarers²⁰ – enables an ectypal contemplation of the relation between trinitarian being and action as that relation obtains in its archetypal foundation. It is the Father's sovereign good pleasure to reveal unto babes both his unique knowledge of the Son, and his unique knowledge of the Son's status as one fully invested with all things requisite to our salvation (Mt. 11:25–7).

These assertions run contrary to contemporary assumptions about the nature of trinitarian revelation. Contrary to what is commonly supposed, Holy Scripture does not portray the economic Trinity as the more accessible starting point from which we may infer the more inaccessible depths of the immanent Trinity.²¹ According to

18 Jack Dean Kingsbury, *The Christology of Mark's Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. 14.

19 See Ernest Best, *The Temptation and the Passion: The Markan Soteriology*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 167–72. For other associations of the *Aqedah* with divine sonship, see *Testament of Levi* 18.6–7; Jn 3:16 and Rom. 8:32.

20 That is, a form which 'imparts to us wayfarers as much knowledge of the First Principle as we need to be saved'. Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, Works of Saint Bonaventure, vol. IX (Saint Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 2005), 1.1.2.

21 In emphasizing the present point, we do not wish to deny that when it comes to the knowledge of God available through general revelation there is a sense in which the 'things visible' are better known to us than the 'things invisible' (Rom. 1.20) and therefore that 'from the effect we proceed to the knowledge of the cause'. Thomas

scriptural testimony, neither God in himself (*theologia*) nor God's economy (*oeconomia*) are transparent to naked reason in its fallen state. Both are 'hidden' from the wise; and both are 'revealed' only to babes (Mt. 11:25; cf. 11:1–24).²² The meaning of Jesus' saving work is not so transparent that it can be 'read-off' the surface of that work in any straightforward manner. His enigmatic work repeatedly provokes *questions* – 'Who then is this . . . ?' (Mk 4:41). And answers are not easily found by either friend or foe in the evangelical narratives, or among auditors of the apostolic preaching (cf. 1 Cor. 1:23). An understanding of Christ's person, and the appreciation of his work which accompanies it, is a gift rendered by the Gospels' 'omniscient' narrators, who invite Spirit-illumined readers to understand the nature of Jesus' messianic action by unveiling to them the secret of his messianic identity.

Some will no doubt worry that the present line of thought threatens to saddle the biblical portrait of the drama of the divine persons (*dramatis Dei personae*) with an alien 'essentialism' or 'substance ontology'. We will address this worry in due course. The point to emphasize at present however is that the apostles, not Aristotle, direct theological reason to the conclusion that mode of operation follows mode of being.²³ T.F. Torrance well summarizes the canonical pointers in this regard:

What Jesus is toward us he is antecedently and eternally in himself, in God . . . Were that not so, the revelation we are given in Christ would not have eternal validity or ultimate reality. That is why the fourth Gospel begins with the wonderful prologue of the eternity of the Word in God, for it is from the eternal God that the Word proceeded, and all that follows in the Gospel – all that Jesus said and was in his dependence as the incarnate Son upon the Father – goes back to and is grounded in that eternal relation of Word to God within God. Similarly, the Epistle to the Hebrews begins its exposition of the high priestly work of Christ by teaching that the Son came forth from the Godhead, the Son by whose word all things were created. It is that Son who came and manifested himself, and now in the incarnation stands forth as the divine servant Son to fulfill his

Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 5 vols. (New York: Benziger, 1948), 1a.2.2. However, when it comes to the knowledge of the divine persons, and therefore to a knowledge that is not available to us through general revelation, Scripture's characteristic order of teaching is to instruct us concerning the identity of the divine persons in order that we may fully appreciate the action of the divine persons, which would otherwise remain shrouded in mystery. As Aquinas says, a revealed knowledge of the divine persons is necessary if we are to arrive at right ideas about the divine acts of creation and salvation (*Summa theologiae*, 1a.32.1).

22 In this (and only this) sense, we move from economy to theology, namely, that God's revelation of his own identity occurs within his works (and, thus, that revelation is a part of the divine economy). So the context of our knowledge is surely an economic form of knowledge – we did not exist or commune with God apart from this economy. But the shape of revelation within the economy – following the scriptural order of teaching – moves from his identity in himself (*theologia*) to his works (*oeconomia*).

23 For further exegetical argumentation along these lines (see, e.g. Jn 16:28; 17:8; 15:26; 13:14), see Gilles Emery, 'Theologia and Dispensatio: The Centrality of the Divine Missions in St. Thomas's Trinitarian Theology', *The Thomist* 74 (2010), pp. 543–4.

work of atonement in entire solidarity with man, eternal Son of God though he was. But all that Jesus did has reality and validity just because it rests upon that eternal relation of the Son with the Father, and therefore reaches out through and beyond the span of years in his earthly ministry into God. Again, what Christ is in all his life and action, in his love and compassion, he is antecedently and eternally in himself as the eternal Son of the Father.²⁴

It is this canonical directive that must be our guide for dogmatic reasoning, regardless of what metaphysical ancillaries might have proven or may yet prove serviceable to theological reason in bearing witness to the one who came to do his Father's will.²⁵

III

In light of the general rule that guides our discussion, it is time to focus our attention directly and specifically upon the relationship between the Son's eternal generation and his economic obedience.²⁶ As we will see, the Son's distinctive *modus essendi* as the Father's only-begotten determines his distinctive *modus agendi* as the Father's obedient emissary. In order to appreciate this link between the Son's eternal generation and his economic obedience, it will be helpful to turn a brief glance to John's initial characterization of the Word in his Prologue as the one 'through whom' all things were created. This brief glance, along with the important trinitarian concept that it provides, will serve us well as we then turn to consider one of the primary biblical texts that establishes our thesis, John 5:19–30.

Aquinas begins his commentary upon John 1:3 with a statement that recalls his earlier observation about the 'fullness' of John's contemplation of the Word: 'After the Evangelist has told of the existence and nature of the Divine Word, so far as it can be told by man, he then shows the might of his power.'²⁷ In other words, having considered the Word's subsistence in relation to God ('the Word was with God') as God ('the Word was God' [1:1]), John considers the Word's agency in creation: 'All things were made through him' (1:3). Aquinas immediately rules out a number of possible misinterpretations of this verse, including, for example, those which would take the Word as God's 'instrumental cause' for creating (as when a man makes a

24 T.F. Torrance, *The Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), pp. 176–7.

25 For further criticism of the strategy of deriving necessary transcendental arguments about God's being *in se* from God's actions *pro nobis*, see Nicholas M. Healy, 'Karl Barth, German-Language Theology, and the Catholic Tradition', in *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, pp. 240–3.

26 Space forbids a lengthy discussion and defense of the doctrine of eternal generation. For a fuller consideration of the doctrine, see John Webster, 'The Eternal Begetting of the Son', in *God Without Measure: Essays in Christian Doctrine* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2012), chap. 3.

27 Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, p. 30.

bench ‘through’ a hammer) or which would take the Word as God’s ‘efficient cause’ for creating (as when a man makes a bench ‘through’ the direction of a carpenter). He also surveys a number of orthodox alternatives by which the meaning of this verse might be illuminated. Among these, he mentions Augustine’s suggestion that texts like John 1:3 reflect a common pattern of trinitarian ‘appropriation’ whereby the undivided work of the Trinity *ad extra* is considered to flow ‘from’ the Father ‘through’ the Son ‘in’ the Spirit.²⁸ He concludes, however, that John’s statement in verse 3 should not be taken as mere appropriation but rather as referring to a mode of divine agency that is ‘proper to the Word’. Creation comes into being ‘through’ the Word because the Word performs the common trinitarian work of creation in a manner consistent with his distinctive mode of being: ‘the statement, “The Father does all things through the Son,” is not [mere] appropriation but proper to the Word, because the fact that he is a cause of creatures is had from someone else, namely the Father, from whom he has his being’.²⁹

Aquinas’s interpretation of the Word’s activity in John 1:3 invokes the theologically fundamental distinction between what is ‘common’ versus what is ‘proper’ to the persons of the Trinity. According to this distinction, whereas the Father, the Son and the Spirit hold in common one divine substance, wisdom, will and activity, they are distinguished from one another by the unique or proper way in which they hold the one divine substance, wisdom, will and activity in common. Each person’s unique or proper way of being God is indicated by the personal names themselves: i.e., Father, Son and Spirit. As Aquinas observes, the personal names ‘signify *processions*’,³⁰ or what we may characterize as ‘communicative relations’. It is proper to the Father to father/beget the Son and, with the Son, to spirare/breathe the Spirit. It is proper to the Son to be fathered/begotten of the Father and, with the Father, to spirare/breathe the Spirit. And so forth. These processions, it must be emphasized, do not involve the coming into being of a product by a producer (contra Arianism). Nor do they involve the transition of a cause into a new relationship with its effect (contra modalism). The processions of the divine persons are *internal* to the simple and indivisible being of God.³¹ They signify the unique ways in which the one divine being of God is eternally *communicated* to or by each person within the eternal fecundity that is the triune God.³² With reference to the Son, eternal generation thus refers to ‘a communication of essence from the Father (by which the

28 Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, pp. 30–4. Cf. also Gregory of Nyssa: ‘there is one motion and disposition of the good will which proceeds from the Father, through the Son, to the Spirit’. Gregory of Nyssa, *An Answer to Ablabius: That We Should Not Think of Saying There Are Three Gods*, in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, p. 262.

29 Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, p. 34. Cf. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1a.39.8: ‘the word *by* is not always appropriated to the Son, but belongs to the Son properly and strictly, according to the text, *All things were made by him* (Joh. i. 3); not that the Son is an instrument, but as *the principle from a principle*’.

30 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1a.27.1.

31 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1a.27.1.

32 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1a.27.5.

Son possesses indivisibly the same essence with him and is made perfectly like him'.³³ The Son's personal property – that which is 'proper' to him and to him alone within the Godhead – is finally nothing other than the *subsisting filial relation* in which he eternally stands to the Father *as a receptive communicant* in the undivided divine essence.³⁴

This discussion sheds light on the nature of a 'proper' act. For Aquinas, a proper act is one in which a divine person 'acts in the distinct mode of his relation with the other persons' in carrying out the undivided work of the Trinity.³⁵ This concept, found not only in the Dominican master but also in Reformed Orthodoxy, is a direct application of the principle, *modus agendi sequitur modus essendi*. When it comes to the external works of the Trinity, there can be no distinction *between* the works of the persons. Because they share one being, they also share one principle of action. Nevertheless, there can be – indeed must be – distinctions *within* the common work of the persons in their external operations.³⁶ Because they share one being in tripersonal modification, they also share one principle of action in tripersonal modification. Thus Zacharias Ursinus: 'The works of the Trinity are indivisible, but not in such a sense as to destroy the order and manner of working peculiar to each person of the Godhead'.³⁷ With respect to the Son, therefore, the concept of a 'proper' act requires us to confess that 'as the Son is from the Father, so he works from the Father'.³⁸ As the Son's proper mode of being God consists in the pure relation wherein he receives his being from the Father, so the Son's proper mode of acting as

33 Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992), vol. 1, p. 293. Cf. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1a.41.3.

34 Because it is intrinsic to God's eternal and wholly realized identity, the Son's 'receptive' stance in relation to the Father involves no passivity or possibility. The Son has 'by nature what he receives' (Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1a.33.4). Gilles Emery states:

The fact of being begotten does not imply any 'passivity' in the Son. To be begotten is an action. And when one says that the Son 'receives the divine nature from the Father,' this 'reception' refers to a pure relation of the Son to the Father; this is the relation of origin. (Gilles Emery, 'The Immutability of the God of Love and the Problem of Language Concerning the "Suffering of God"', in James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White, eds., *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 69 n. 139)

For further reflection, see Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.27.1–3.

35 Gilles Emery, *Trinity, Church, and the Human Person: Thomistic Essays* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2007), p. 129. In contrast to a 'proper' act, an 'appropriated' act or attribute is one that is common to all three persons but that, because of its affinity with a particular person, leads 'to a better understanding and knowledge of what is proper' (Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, 1.6.1).

36 Cf. Eugene F. Rogers, *After the Spirit: A Constructive Pneumatology from Resources Outside the Modern West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 11–16, 45–6.

37 Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G.W. Williard (repr. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, n.d. [1852]), p. 120.

38 Turretin, *Institutes*, vol. 1, p. 282. The principle upon which the above quoted statement rests: 'the order of operating follows the order of subsisting' (p. 281).

God consists in the pure relation wherein he receives his actions from the Father. ‘Receptive filiation’ is the Son’s proper mode of being and acting as the one true and living God.

How does this concept illumine the matter under discussion? We may gather an answer to this question by looking at John 5:19–30, a text devoted to vindicating Jesus’ right to perform his Father’s works. The occasion for this defense is a Sabbath healing described earlier in chapter 5, which has provoked the ire of ‘the Jews’, and which Jesus defends as a work performed in imitation of his Father: ‘My Father is working until now, and I am working’ (5:17). To the minds of his accusers, Jesus’ defense amounts to claiming that God is ‘his own/proper Father [πατέρα ἴδιον]’, and therefore that he is ‘equal with God’ (5:18). The *topos* of this passage, then, concerns the way in which Jesus’ *manner of working* follows from the fact that God is his *proper Father*.

In expanding upon this theme, Jesus juxtaposes two claims that, taken together, present a perennial challenge to Johannine interpreters. The first claim is that Jesus does *nothing* on his own initiative, but *only* what he sees the Father doing. The second claim is that Jesus, in following his Father’s lead, does *everything* that his Father does. ‘The Son can do nothing of himself, unless it is something he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner’ (5:19). The problem facing interpreters is not that the Fourth Gospel would make a claim implying the Son’s inferiority to the Father. Nor is it that the Fourth Gospel would make a claim implying the Son’s equality with the Father. Taken in isolation, these claims could be understood as evidence of different redactional layers or of authorial inconsistency. The problem facing interpreters is that the Fourth Gospel makes these seemingly contradictory claims *within the same context*.³⁹ Indeed, John 5:19 insists that the former claim is the basis for the latter claim: *because* the Son always only follows the Father’s initiative, he always performs all of the Father’s works. The remainder of the passage focuses upon one particular divine work that Jesus performs with his Father at his Father’s behest, a work that far outstrips any Sabbath healing (5:20) and whose power to perform lies uniquely with the one true God of Israel: the power to kill and to make alive (5:21–9).⁴⁰ John 5:19–30 concludes by recapitulating the principle that explains Jesus’ *modus operandi*: ‘I can do nothing

39 C.K. Barrett summarizes the interpretive challenge thusly:

those notable Johannine passages that seem at first sight to proclaim most unambiguously the unity and equality of the Son with the Father are often set in contexts which if they do not deny at least qualify this theme, and place alongside it the theme of dependence, and indeed of subordination. (C. K. Barrett, *Essays on John* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), p. 23)

40 See Deut. 32:39; Isa. 26; with Marianne Meyne Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 118–19; and Andrew Lincoln, *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), p. 210.

on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me' (5:30).

Some interpreters take our text's description of the Son's manner of working as solely indicative of his humble mediatorial state. John Calvin provides a rather forthright example of this interpretive stance. Calvin regards both the Arian and the orthodox exegesis of John 5:19–30 as misguided. According to Calvin, the Arians were wrong to conclude that this text revealed the Son's inferiority to the Father, while the orthodox Fathers were wrong to conclude that this text revealed the Son's distinctive personhood as one who is simultaneously 'from the Father' and yet 'not deprived of intrinsic power to act'. Indeed, the Genevan Reformer considers a properly trinitarian exegesis of this passage as 'harsh and far-fetched'. In his judgement, the proper subject matter of John 5:19–30 is the Son of God only 'so far as he is manifested in the flesh'.⁴¹

Although our text makes undoubted reference to the Son's mediatorial office – he executes judgement 'because he is the Son of Man' (5:27), the eschatological agent of God and representative of God's people (cf. Dan. 7:13–14), an interpretation such as Calvin's seems too modest, and that for at least three reasons. First, the language used in the present passage to describe the manner in which the Son follows the Father's initiative, thereby performing the Father's works, is exactly the same as the language used in later passages to describe the manner in which the Spirit follows the initiative of the Father and the Son, thereby performing their works. As the Son can do nothing ὡφ' ἔσωτοῦ, but only what he sees the Father doing (5:19), so the Spirit will not speak ὡφ' ἔσωτοῦ, but only what he hears: drawing forth the truth from the common wellspring of the Father and the Son and distributing it to Jesus' disciples (16:13–15). Because this language cannot be reduced to the Spirit's *forma servi* – he has no *forma servi* (!), so it should not be reduced to the Son's *forma servi*.⁴² Second, part of the rationale provided in this passage for the Son's manner of working is that the Son is doing the bidding of the one who 'sent' him (5:30; cf. 4:34; 5:36–7; 6:38–9; etc.). And, as Augustine long ago observed, the Son's sending *precedes* his incarnation.⁴³ The Son is 'consecrated and sent *into* the world' (10:36). Thus, the manner in which the Son works in obedience to his Father's commission is not simply indicative of the state in which he assumed the *forma servi* but of his own proper filial relation to the Father, which precedes his assumption of the *forma servi*. Third, and most telling for the present discussion, John 5:19–30 follows the pattern of contemplative reflection exhibited in John's Prologue which, as we have seen, grounds the might of the Word's power (1:3) in the

41 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, trans. William Pringle (repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), vol. 1, pp. 198–207. On Calvin's general reticence toward trinitarian reflection in his exegesis of classical trinitarian proof-texts, see Arie Baars, *Om Gods verhevenheid en Zijn nabijheid: De Drie-eenheid bij Calvijn* (Kampen: Kok, 2004), pp. 291–308.

42 Augustine, *The Trinity*, 2.5.

43 Augustine, *The Trinity*, 4.27.

Word's existence and nature (1:1). The Son shares the Father's unique and sovereign power to *give life* to those he will (5:21) because he shares the Father's unique and sovereign power to *live*: he has 'life in himself'. Moreover, both of these powers that the Son shares with the Father are powers that he has received from the Father: 'as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself' (5:26; cf. 10:18). And therefore: just as it is the Son's proper *modus essendi* to have life in himself and to have it from the Father who begets him, so it is the Son's proper *modus agendi* to raise the dead and to have this power from the Father who sends him.

In light of the preceding discussion, we are in a position to appreciate how the concept of a 'proper' act illuminates the topic at hand. The fact that the Son does not pursue his own initiative but that of the Father who sends him is not merely a consequence of the human form he assumed in the incarnation. The fact that the Son does not do his own will but the will of the Father who sent him is a consequence of his distinctive *modus agendi*, which follows from his distinctive *modus essendi*. More briefly stated: "“to send” implies authority, and “to be sent” implies subordination to authority [*subauctoritatis*] in the order of eternal production in the Godhead".⁴⁴ In this sense, the obedience of the Son to the Father who sends him constitutes the Son's *opus proprium* within the undivided *opera Trinitatis ad extra*.⁴⁵

IV

The present interpretation raises at least three questions, two that would have animated classical theologians (and that continue to animate contemporary theologians working faithfully within the Thomist tradition), the other which animates modern theologians. The first question is: does such an assertion threaten to divide the common will of the Father and the Son into two separate wills? Thomas

44 Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, 1.5.5 (our emphasis).

45 Based upon his eternal procession from the Father and the Son, should we also speak of the Spirit's 'obedience' to the Father and the Son in the economy of salvation? One might take our methodological approach and say that the sending of the Spirit implies that his 'proper' identity ought to be spoken of as enacting obedience in the economy or as receptive filiation within the immanent life of the Godhead (the latter effectively introducing two sons within the Godhead). In other words, one might take our approach as potentially undermining our ability to differentiate the proper characteristics of the second and third persons of the Trinity. But this is precisely why the *filioque* is important: the Spirit's movement in both the missions and the processions is similar to the Son's movement, yet the Spirit is sent by and proceeds from the Father and the Son whereas the Son is sent by and proceeds from the Father *alone*. Even if one took the proposal that this double procession occurred from the Father through the Son, there would still be a distinction in terms of proper relational characterizations. We do not claim to be expressing everything there is to say about the Son's properties (or for that matter the Spirit's), which exceed his receptive relation to the Father, but we do believe that our approach in no way nullifies the theologian's ability to distinguish Son from Spirit.

Joseph White suggests that this is the primary problem with the obedience of the eternal Son: ‘It would seem that one must forfeit either the notion of a unity of will in the persons, or reinterpret Barth’s notion of a distinction of persons in God derived through obedience.’⁴⁶ White suggests that the Son’s identity as Wisdom – his unique personal nature – manifests his possession of a ‘unique spiritual Will’ that is shared with the Father; indeed, he argues that this is part and parcel with Athanasius’s polemics against those ‘fourth century “Arian” or anti-Nicene theologians [who] appealed to New Testament examples of the obedience of Christ in order to argue for a preexistent, ontological subordination of the Logos to the Father’.⁴⁷ In light of White’s concern, then, we must ask: does the obedience of the eternal Son undermine the shared divine will? Aquinas asks and answers this question in his commentary on John 5:30:

But do not the Father and the Son have the same will? I answer that the Father and the Son do have the same will, but the Father does not have his will from another, whereas the Son does have his will from another, i.e., from the Father. Thus the Son accomplishes his own will as from another, i.e., as having it from another; but the Father accomplishes his will as his own, i.e., not having it from another. Thus he says: I am not seeking my own will, that is, such as would be mine if it originated from myself, but my will, as being from another, that is from the Father.⁴⁸

In other words, the Son’s obedience to the Father in the work of salvation is not indicative of a *second will* alongside that of the Father but of the *proper mode whereby Jesus shares the Father’s will as the only-begotten Son of the Father*.⁴⁹

The second question is similar, though it involves a worry about divine omnipotence rather than the divine will. White suggests that the obedience of the eternal Son ‘risks to undermine the intelligibility of Barth’s own soteriological affirmation that God, in order to save us, must in no way be alienated from his own prerogatives of omnipotence in the Incarnation’.⁵⁰ White argues that obedience necessitates a lack of power – so that ‘One can therefore plausibly suggest that either we must rethink the claim to eternal obedience in the Son, or else qualify in

46 White, ‘Intra-Trinitarian Obedience and Nicene-Chalcedonian Christology’, p. 393.

47 White, ‘Intra-Trinitarian Obedience and Nicene-Chalcedonian Christology’, p. 389.

48 Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, pp. 294–5; cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.42.6, *ad 3*. For analysis of Aquinas’s exegesis of Jn 5:30, see Thomas Joseph White, ‘The Voluntary Action of the Earthly Christ and the Necessity of a Beatific Vision’, *The Thomist* 69 (2005), pp. 497–534.

49 This is not to deny dyothelitism, but to suggest that the Son’s obedient human will is determined by and expressive of his obedient divine will, i.e., the proper filial manner in which he executes the undivided divine will *ad extra*. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a.48.6.

50 White, ‘Intra-Trinitarian Obedience and Nicene-Chalcedonian Christology’, p. 389.

important ways any affirmation of his omnipotence.⁵¹ Are these the only options or is there an excluded middle? It seems at this point that the answer is to go deeper into the Thomist tradition rather than further from it. Indeed, the notion of redoubling/reduplication (*redoublement*) provides the conceptual framework for finding our way to the middle excluded by White's question. The eternal Son exists receptively as one whose self-existence (*autotheos*) and almighty are granted to him by the Father.

As noted above, trinitarian theology requires the use of two forms of attribution: essential characteristics (common terms) and personal characteristics (proper terms). Gilles Emery has employed the term 'reduplication' or 'redoubling' (*redoublement*) to describe this linguistic rule impelled by the very nature of a trinitarian metaphysics: 'To express the Triune mystery, one must use two words, two formulas, in a reflection that joins the aspect of the unity of the divine substance to that of the distinction of the persons.'⁵² The Son is divine, yes, but he is also generated eternally from the Father. The first characteristic is common and can be attributed to the Father and Spirit as well; the second trait, however, is proper to the Son and can be attributed to him alone. It is crucial, though, to see that, while different proper terms can be applied only to one or another divine person, some terms must be applied to every divine person. In other words, there is no genuine knowledge of a divine person unless the common (what it means to be the one God) is matched by the proper (what it means to be the one God in this distinctive relation).⁵³

Aquinas argues that this redoubling is impelled by biblical language such as John 5:

Hilary calls our attention to the remarkable relationship of the passages so that the errors concerning eternal generation can be refuted. Two heresies have arisen concerning this eternal generation. One was that of Arius, who said that the Son is less than the Father; and this is contrary to their equality and unity. The other was that of Sabellius, who said that there is no distinction of persons in the divinity; and this is contrary to their origin.

So, whenever he mentions the unity and equality, he immediately also adds their distinction as persons according to origin, and conversely. Thus, because he mentions the origin of the persons when he says, 'the Son cannot do anything of himself, but only what he sees the Father doing' (5:19), then, so we do not think this involves inequality, he at once adds: 'for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise.' Conversely, when he states their equality by saying: 'For just as

51 White, 'Intra-Trinitarian Obedience and Nicene-Chalcedonian Christology', p. 395.

52 Gilles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Francesca Aran Murphy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 46.

53 Denial of this point necessarily leads to the view that the divine essence is a fourth person behind the three divine persons, in as much as it requires the divine essence be viewed in an abstract and discrete manner. The divine essence is abstract, if that means shared by the three, but it is always concrete in the person of Father, Son or Spirit, and never existent in any other way.

the Father raises the dead and grants life, so the Son grants life to those to whom he wishes,' then, so that we do not deny that the Son has an origin and is begotten, he adds, 'the Father himself judges no one, but he has given all judgment to the Son.'⁵⁴

Again, exegesis pressures Aquinas to speak in redoubled language about God: witness about the common life of the Trinity matched by testimony to the proper characteristics of each divine person.

With respect to the issue at hand, the obedience of the eternal Son is not contrasted with his omnipotence; rather, the two exist at one and the same time.⁵⁵ Steven Boyer shows that this approach was followed by Athanasius in his opposition to the Arians and anti-Nicenes:

The Son eternally comes from and is eternally dependent upon the Father, yet in a manner that in no way entails the Son's being less than or inferior to the Father. To connect dependence to inferiority is in fact to accept an axiom of Neoplatonism that the fourth-century Fathers who knew Neoplatonism best went out of their way to reject . . . And by rejecting this tenet of Platonism, the Fathers paved the way for a full-blooded Trinitarian tradition that speaks over and over not of equality *or* order, but of equality *and* order.⁵⁶

As possessor of the divine nature, the Son is equal in power to the Father; as receptive to the Father's gift of life in himself, the Son is ordered to the Father. There is a personal order in the one true God. Almighty power is possessed by all three divine persons, though it is not possessed in the same way. The Son possesses almighty (omnipotence) in a filial way, whereas the Father possesses this same attribute in a paternal manner. Equality cannot be reduced to the opposite of order; rather, equality is the setting for a triune order. So the Son's obedience cannot be construed as a reason to jettison the traditional

54 Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, p. 282.

55 For further analysis of how 'redoubling' language of the Trinity affects theological reflection on the economy of salvation, see Gilles Emery, 'The Personal Mode of Trinitarian Action in St. Thomas Aquinas', *The Thomist* 69 (2005), pp. 31–77. For reflection on how an eternally generated person can share the one divine essence, see John Duns Scotus, *Lectura I*, d.2, p. 2, q. 3 (no. 148) in *Opera omnia*, vol. XVI, ed. C. Babić *et al.* (Città del Vaticano: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1960).

56 Boyer, 'Articulating Order', p. 260. While affirming Boyer's substantive point, we will not follow him in employing the terminology of 'dependence' to describe the obedience of the eternal Son. We will use the term 'receptivity' to remain closer to the biblical language of receiving life in himself as a gift from the Father and, thus, to avoid adding terminology that may unduly distort. Given its widespread usage in psychological and therapeutic contexts, and cognizant of the influence of therapeutic conceptualities in the wider contemporary scene, 'dependence' likely brings unhealthy conceptual baggage to the analogical task, baggage not present in use of the less frequently employed term 'receptivity'.

Christian claim that the Son is omnipotent.⁵⁷ Indeed, the wind and the waves hearken to his almighty power, even as his power is exercised to do the will of the one who sent him.

Briefly it should be noted that the two questions raised by Thomas Joseph White are joined together in a single Johannine text, where the will and power of Christ are yoked with his obedience to his heavenly Father:

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father. (Jn 10:17–18)

Jesus here notes that his cruciform obedience flows from his own will and authority. First, he affirms that he surrenders himself to the forces of death ‘of my own accord’ and not because something ‘takes it from me’. Second, he reminds the disciples that he has authority to lay down his life and then to take it up again. The term employed here, *ἐξουσία*, refers to authority or power. Jesus reiterates that his willed submission to the forces of death is not powerlessness – it is the very exercise of authoritative power. Aquinas comments:

in Christ, his own nature and every other nature are subject to his will, just like artifacts are subject to the will of the artisan. Thus, according to the pleasure of his will, he could lay down his life when he willed, and he could take it up again; no mere human being can do this . . . This explains why the centurion, seeing that Christ did not die by a natural necessity, but by his own [will] – since ‘Jesus cried again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit’ (Matt. 27:50) – recognized a divine power in him, and said: ‘Truly, this was the Son of God’ (Matt. 27:54).⁵⁸

Yet the concluding line pairs the will and power of the incarnate Son with the charge (*ἐντολή*) received from his Father. The Father commands the Son – there is an economic receptivity here. But the charge and command of the Father does not negate the will and power of the Son – in trinitarian fashion, they are both not only valid affirmations but necessary aspects of the gospel proclamation. Jesus wills to do this, and he exercises real authoritative power in so doing, and yet his action in this regard is according to his Father’s charge.⁵⁹ There is a noncompetitive relationship between

57 A related worry would be whether or not the obedient Son and his commanding Father can share in the divine simplicity given those distinct personal properties. It is crucial to see that the patristic use of the doctrine of divine simplicity took the form of nuancing its pagan employment to fit this kind of trinitarian grammar, on which see Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Transformation of Divine Simplicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

58 Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John, Chapters 6–12*, trans. Fabian Lacher and James Weisheipl (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), p. 203.

59 See Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John, 1–40*, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2009), 31.6 (pp. 508–9).

his powerful will and his submission to the paternal will.⁶⁰ Karl Barth will say of the incarnate Son: ‘This man wills only to be obedient – obedient to the will of the Father, which is to be done on earth for the redemption of man as it is done in heaven.’⁶¹

The third question, mentioned already in section II, ranges over wider formal territory than the previous two and can be stated thus: does not all this smack too much of a ‘substance ontology’ or an unevangelized ‘essentialism’? Once again, we may address this question with the aid of the Fourth Gospel. John’s Prologue distinguishes the being of the Word who ‘was [ἦν]’ and ‘is [ὢν]’⁶² with the Father (1:1–2, 18) from the becoming that characterizes the economy of creation and redemption (1:3, 6, 10, 14, 17 [ἐγένετο throughout]).⁶³ In so doing, the Prologue exhibits ‘the doctrine of Jews and Christians which preserves the unchangeable and unalterable nature of God’ over against the changeable nature of the creature (cf. Ps. 102:25–7).⁶⁴ This being of the Word, however, is not that of Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover, who remains forever locked in self-enclosed contemplation over against all worldly becoming. This is the being of the Word who lives in eternal active relation to his Father and who temporally extends his active relation to others⁶⁵ through his obedient execution of the Father’s will: the only-begotten Son ‘who is at the Father’s side’ (1:18) came into the world in order to extend to his creatures ‘the right to become children of God’ (1:12).

The distinction between the divine procession (in this case, the eternal generation of the Son) and the divine mission (the obedient journey of the Son) is crucial if the doctrine of the obedience of the eternal Son is to be affirmed within a classical Catholic and Reformed trinitarian metaphysics. However, the purpose for distinguishing the unchanging being of the Word *ad intra* from his temporal work *ad extra* is not to separate the only-begotten Son from those who become his brothers and sisters but to indicate both the character and the consequence of the mission whereby his Father becomes their Father, and his God becomes their God (cf. 20:17).

60 Paul N. Anderson refers to John’s ‘dialectical reflection’ regarding a number of ‘Christological tensions’ in his ‘On Guessing Points and Naming Stars: Epistemological Origins of John’s Christological Tensions’, in Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser, eds., *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 311–45.

61 Barth, *CD* IV/1, p. 164; cf. Matthew Levering, ‘Augustine and Aquinas on the Good Shepherd: The Value of an Exegetical Tradition’, in Michael Dauphinais *et al.*, eds., *Aquinas the Augustinian* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), p. 237.

62 Jn 1:18 is possibly an allusion to Ex. 3:14 [LXX]. Cf. Rev. 1:8, 4:8 etc., which certainly are.

63 See Barth’s exegetical comments on John’s Prologue in *CD* I/2, pp. 159–60.

64 Origen, *Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 1.21.

65 In a mode suitable to their creaturely natures and which does not elide his singular identity as the Father’s μονογενῆς.

With respect to the character of his mission: distinguishing the Son's eternal generation, which is natural and necessary to his identity, from his saving mission, which is contingent to his identity, preserves the free and gracious character of his mission.⁶⁶ Only because the economy 'was not motivated by any need of completion' in the being of the Word can it be an act of 'incomparable generosity'.⁶⁷ 'The Word became flesh,' according to Athanasius, 'not for the sake of any addition to the Godhead' – or as he elsewhere states, 'not for the Word's own improvement' – 'but so that the flesh might rise again'.⁶⁸ Furthermore, the distinction between eternal generation and economic action preserves not only the free and gracious character of the Son's economic action but also its distinctive filial shape. The counsel to collapse eternal filiation into temporal mission,⁶⁹ a counsel designed to secure the real presence of the second hypostasis in history, ironically threatens to rob that history of that which makes it distinctive as the history of the only-begotten. Apart from Jesus' metaphysically prevenient identity as God's beloved Son, we are unable to appreciate that which distinguishes his embassy from the embassy of the Father's other servants (Mk 12:1–12). Apart from his metaphysically prevenient identity as God's own/proper Son, we are unable to appreciate that which distinguishes his gift from the Father's other gifts (Rom. 8:32). To put the point positively, Jesus' identity as God's beloved Son is what characterizes his actions as properly divine filial actions and not simply as actions of an unspecified historical agent.

With respect to the consequence of the Son's mission: distinguishing eternal generation from economic mission not only preserves the free and gracious character of the economy as an economy of the Father's only-begotten Son, it also helps us appreciate the final cause of the Son's economic mission, which is to communicate to creatures a distinctly creaturely fellowship in the Son's eternal relation to Father through union with him who is the head and firstborn of many brothers and sisters.

66 Space forbids unpacking the metaphysical distinction between 'natural/necessary' and 'contingent'. For the sense which we assume, a sense common among Reformed Orthodoxy, see Andreas J. Beck, 'Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676): Basic Features of His Doctrine of God', in W.J. van Asselt and Eef Dekker, eds., *Reformation and Scholasticism: An Ecumenical Enterprise* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), pp. 205–22; and more extensively J. Martin Bac, *Perfect Will Theology: Divine Agency in Reformed Scholasticism as against Suárez, Episcopius, Descartes, and Spinoza* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

67 Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), p. 34.

68 Athanasius, 'Letter to Epictetus', 9, in John McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), p. 387. Cf. McGuckin's comments (p. 184) on Cyril of Alexandria's understanding of the incarnational economy: 'The Logos had no need whatsoever to appear as man. Two deductions thus followed inevitably about the incarnation: firstly that it was an entirely free act of divine power, a Charis, or gracious act, of God. Secondly, that it was not for God's benefit but for mankind's.'

69 Thus recently Robert Jenson: 'The Father's sending and Jesus' obedience are the second hypostasis in God', in 'Once more the *Logos asarkos*', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13 (2011), p. 133.

The fact that the Son's relation to the Father is always fully realized and that our filial relation to the Father is a matter of temporal realization, 'an economy for the fullness of time' (Eph. 1:10; cf. 1:5), does not mean that the divine and the human offspring of the Father are related to one another as Platonic form to temporal shadow. Rather, the Son's economic obedience is the means whereby other sons and daughters come to share as creatures in his filial relationship to the Father. Economic obedience, the free and gracious overflow of the Son's natural and necessary generation, is the means whereby the Son's prayer is answered: 'I desire that they may be with me where I am' (Jn 17:24; cf. 17:5; 1:1, 18). 'He put on our flesh,' says Calvin, 'in order that having become Son of Man he might make us sons of God with him.'⁷⁰ This 'with him' is the final cause of the Son's economic embassy, and the manner in which his perfect filiation comes to perfect ours.

V

We have seen that a trinitarian account of divine agency must speak by means of redoubling or reduplication. This is not the same as speech by means of appropriation, which tethers particular actions to specific divine persons (normally for reason of emphasis). Rather, this is to say that the external works of the Trinity are indivisible (*opera ad extra trinitatis indivisa sunt*), though they are performed by all the persons in their own person-specific, 'proper' ways. Dogmatic reasoning aids exegetical reflection in noting the common and proper engagement of each triune person in the various acts of the divine economy. Only in such a context does the obedience of the eternal Son fit within a classical Catholic and Reformed trinitarian metaphysics – such a setting, however, is surely in need of this doctrinal development if it is to remain attentive to the ever-fresh prompting of the living Word.

We have seen that the divine missions do extend the divine processions: the mode of being shapes the mode of acting. The relationship between processions and missions indicates that the divine freedom and self-sufficiency is not to be misinterpreted as divine aloofness; quite the contrary, as Dorner says, 'God is not merely distinct from the world, but also distinguishes Himself from it and it from Himself . . . and by means of this absolute inalienable Self-mastery of God, this doctrine opens the prospect that God can communicate Himself to the world without detriment'.⁷¹ God is not aloof, and the shape of his communicative communion with

70 I. John Hesselink, *Calvin's First Catechism: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1997), p. 23.

71 Isaak A. Dorner, *A System of Christian Doctrine*, trans. Alfred Cave (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1885), vol. 1, p. 338. Cf. the exposition of Richard Sibbes:

God's goodness is a communicative, spreading goodness. . . . If God had not a communicative, spreading goodness, he would never have created the world. The Father, Son and Holy Ghost were happy in themselves and enjoyed one another before the world was. But that God delights to communicate and spread his

us is not arbitrary. The three persons act in union with one another – indivisibly – though this union is a harmony of activity drawing on the active manner proper to each person. Thus, the divine missions flow forth and manifest the temporal extension of the divine processions; the relations of origin within the triune life, then, shape the form of external works performed by the three persons together. One such extension has been considered here: the eternal Son's receptivity in relation to his Father – expressed poignantly in the doctrine of eternal generation – provides the metaphysical and relational grounds for his free enactment of his proper activity in the divine economy, which is time and again characterized as obedience. T.F. Torrance is surely right: 'The perfect human life of Jesus in all his words and acts reposes entirely upon the mutual relation of the Son to the Father and the Father to the Son.'⁷² Yet this 'mutual relation' must be clarified in ways appropriate to the canonical witness, which identifies that relation as one of receptivity and obedience on the part of the incarnate Son. Making use of distinctions deep within the classical trinitarian tradition – hammered out by Thomists and drawn upon by classical Reformed thinkers – we have shown that the obedience of the eternal Son is not only exegetically necessary, but dogmatically coherent with the classical trinitarian metaphysics of this Catholic and Reformed tradition.

goodness, there had never been a creation nor a redemption. ('The Successful Seeker', in *Works of Richard Sibbes*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1983), vol. VI, p. 113)

72 Torrance, *The Incarnation*, p. 127.

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