

The Person and Work of Christ Revisited: In Conversation with Karl Barth

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The person of Christ is often equated with his saving work. The problem in immediately identifying Christ's person with his work, I argue, is that it shortchanges what the biblical testimony demands: an account of Jesus Christ as the underlying basis of his benefits. Rather than leading us to seek after a "Christ in himself," however, the immanent perfect being of Jesus Christ renders his salvation effective. Accordingly, what is at stake is the honoring of Christ's person not as something removed from his work but rather as what grounds his work as the revealer of God to humanity and the reconciler of humanity to God.

I

The basic theological issue at stake in this essay, namely a right accounting of the relationship between Christ's person and work, between who he is and what he does, can be best accessed by comparing two statements, one by Colin Gunton and the other by Donald MacKinnon. The former writes, "The person of Christ *is* his saving work, so that an adequately articulated Christology will also be a theology of salvation."¹ The latter states, "He [Jesus Christ] remains not simply the logical subject of this proposition: 'He was incarnate'; but ontologically he is the author of the act."² The thrust of this essay is to inhabit the latter as what enables a modified and more chastened affirmation of the former. Indeed, it is MacKinnon who identifies Jesus

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¹ Colin Gunton, "Salvation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 144.

² Donald M. MacKinnon, "Prolegomena to Christology," in *Themes in Theology: The Three-fold Cord: Essays in Philosophy, Politics, and Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987), 173.

Christ, specifically the very *being* of the person of Jesus Christ, as that which grounds—or better, underwrites—what he does: namely, become incarnate. MacKinnon’s intuition is salutary. Distinguishing the person and work of Christ is an important thing to do, MacKinnon reminds us, if each is to be given its proper due. But it is difficult to give each its due, as it might suggest that Christ’s person can be separated from his work. This would lead us to pursue a Christ in himself, a Christ who can be contemplated apart from who he is for us. Indeed, to champion such a vision of Christ’s person would be to supply, to use Karl Barth’s language, “an abstract doctrine of his ‘person.’”³ More specifically, it would suggest that an ontological gap lies between who Christ is and what Christ does. Accordingly, the “ontological co-inherence” of Christ’s person and work would no longer be “a fairly concise affair.”⁴ The unsettling development in all this—it is supposed—is that Christology involves description of One who transcends his history rather than a Christ whose very being is identified with his history.

It is the contention of this essay that the basic issues of Christology as Barth identifies them—for example, Jesus Christ’s Godhead and humanity, his work, and his state of humiliation and exaltation—can only be taken up well to the extent one gives “a proper place” to both Christ’s person and work.⁵ In other words, the task of this essay is to inhabit Barth’s aversion to the doctrine of Christ’s person being “absorbed and dissolved in that of his work, or vice versa,” so as “to give a proper place to them both,” especially with respect to his person, by which I mean his being as *the* anterior condition of his atoning work.⁶ Expressed exegetically, the essay asks who is the “*he*” “who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30)?⁷ I will unfold this contention with three points. As regards the first point, I will offer a reading of §58 (“The Doctrine of Reconciliation [Survey]”) of *Church Dogmatics* IV/1 with

³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957–1975), IV/1, 127. “Person” in the original is set within quotation marks. Note that I follow the original with respect to emphases. I have thus added them to the English translation which, unfortunately, excludes most of them. Where I alter the English translation, I indicate that I have done so by using the citation “rev.”

⁴ This is Paul D. Jones’s language. See *The Humanity of Christ: Christology in Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 90.

⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 128.

⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 128.

⁷ Scripture passages are from the English Standard Version.

the intention of indicating how for Barth articulation of a doctrine of Christ's person that is not "abstract" does not mean the positing of a Christ in himself—Gunton's fear—but rather a Christ who, even as he "exists in the totality of his mediating being and mediating work," even as he has his being *in* history, cannot be said to be one whose being dissolved into his history.⁸ To say that Jesus has his being—his person—*in* history is not to affirm that he has his being *with* history.⁹ To argue so would be to make his identity dependent on what he does. This cannot be, as it shortchanges the sense in which the economy of salvation is revelatory of his being. Indeed, the task in this first section is to consider how Barth seeks to give a proper place to both the person and the work of Christ, and to do so in a way that is sensitive to strengths and weaknesses of one recent reading of the same. As regards the second point: given the way in which Barth orders an account of the person and the work of Jesus Christ, might there be a place for a qualified affirmation of the *extra calvinisticum*, for endorsement of the notion that the Godhead—the divinity—of Jesus Christ is not exhausted by his flesh? Expressed otherwise, does Barth encourage us to say that the babe born in Bethlehem has the whole world in his hands? Might Jesus Christ in being for us remain *free* in relationship to us, and so negate our sinful attempts to reduce him to our possession? Pastorally speaking, the *extra calvinisticum* points to an important truth: Jesus Christ stands against our attempts—individual and corporate—to make him over in our image. It is because of who Jesus is that he forever graciously eludes our sinful attempts to domesticate him. As regards the third and last point, why does an account which gives a "proper place to them both" promote an account of salvation that "secures the fulfillment of creaturely being against self-destruction"?¹⁰ Why *must* the person of Christ be said to be the anterior condition of salvation?

II

Barth's description of Jesus Christ is one tethered to the economy of salvation. This is his way of avoiding an "abstract" Christ. To be

⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 123 (rev.).

⁹ Compare Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1: The Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 59.

¹⁰ John Webster, "It was the Will of the Lord to Bruise Him': Soteriology and the Doctrine of God," in *God of Salvation: Soteriology in Theological Perspective*, ed. Ivor J. Davidson and Murray A. Rae (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 19.

sure, there is a place for an account of “the metaphysics of Christ’s person.” However, the content, for Barth, of such an account must be oriented to Christ’s history. The creedal *homoousios* is a gloss on the gospel narratives—who is the One who acts thus? Hence, when Barth describes the atonement as “the middle point, the one thing from which neither the God who turns to man nor man converted to God can be abstracted, in which and by which both are what they are,” he is not suggesting that Jesus Christ has his being—his person—as a result of the economy of salvation.¹¹ Rather, Barth’s point is that Jesus Christ exists only *in* relationship to “the men of Israel and His disciples and the world, from what He is on their behalf.”¹² He cannot be conceived otherwise. But to say that he only ever exists *in* this relationship is not to say that he is *because of* this relationship. Jesus Christ does not “need” us in order to be who he is. Rather, he freely comes among us in a saving way because of who he is.

Christology is indeed a doctrine about the being and work of Christ—and in that order. Were one to say that Christology is merely about his being, one would be shortchanging the very real sense in which “He exists in the totality of his mediating being and mediating work—He alone as the Mediator, but living and active in His mediatorial office.”¹³ The subtle point that needs to be honored in all of this is the significance of the “He,” meaning that “what is said about Jesus Christ Himself, the christological propositions as such, are constitutive, essential, necessary and central in the Christian doctrine of reconciliation.”¹⁴ Reconciliation’s reality is undergirded by One who is God *in se*, One who is, in other words, *homoousios* with the Father and the Spirit. Reconciliation, in other words, demands that one say something about “Jesus Christ Himself.” What is said about “Jesus Christ Himself” is the task of Christology, and it is the task of this essay to attend to how and why Barth argues that talk of “Jesus Christ Himself” is intrinsic to the gospel. Just so, the challenge is to speak of “Jesus Christ Himself” in a way that ensures that the metaphysical statements—such as *homoousios*—demanded by his life, a life characterized by language that is “crudely anthropomorphic,”

¹¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 122.

¹² Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 124.

¹³ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 123 (rev.).

¹⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 125.

be “penetrated by the ontological styles, bent and twisted till the very concept of God as he is in himself is suffused by its emphases.”¹⁵

Barth emphasizes the location of God’s being as a being “in a history.” Although God’s being, the being of Jesus Christ “as God and man and God-man consists in the completed act of the reconciliation of man with God,”¹⁶ his act of reconciliation (his work) is not thereby understood to be identical with his being. To do so would be to dissolve his work into his being, which is precisely what Gunton risks doing and what Barth wants to avoid. Even so, Barth affirms that “His being as this One is His history, and His history is this His being.”¹⁷ Stated differently, Barth’s point is that Jesus Christ is to be identified in and by his history. More strongly, Jesus is humanly affected by events and circumstances, indeed is shaped by them to some degree. And yet, Jesus Christ does not come to be because of his saving history, something to which Gunton does not adequately draw our attention. His identity is *enacted* in his active and passive obedience. If such is the case, then, Jesus Christ exists in his history, and because of what he does, the reconciliation of God and humankind in him, is understood “as Christology.”¹⁸

What we see taking place, in Barth’s account, is the inseparability of Christ’s person with respect to his work, his reconciliation. Thus Barth can affirm that “God is historical even in Himself, and much more so in His relationship to the reality which is distinct from Himself. He is the Lord of His kingdom, . . . living in His will and acts.”¹⁹ God is not one who remains aloof; God does exist historically. The upshot of this as it relates to the Son’s office and role as mediator is that his office and role are not “external to his person, so that his real identity is somehow anterior to his function. For, like his humanity and divinity, Jesus’ ‘personal’ identity and his ‘official’ activity are inseparable.”²⁰ In other words, the church cannot go looking for a Jesus who lurks behind his work: he is what he does.

The being of Jesus Christ, his Godhead if you will, is revealed in the biblical narrative to be *his* own, together with his Father and the

¹⁵ MacKinnon, “Prolegomena,” in *Themes in Theology*, 185.

¹⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 127.

¹⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 128.

¹⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 128.

¹⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 112.

²⁰ Webster, “Soteriology and the Doctrine of God,” in Davidson and Rae, *God of Salvation*, 33.

Spirit. He is God “as the Son of God the Father and with God the Father the source of the Holy Spirit, united in one essence [*Wesen*] with the Father by the Holy Spirit. That is how He is God.”²¹ The “how” question is thus answered with respect to his relationship to the Father and the Spirit. How is God said to be God? Barth’s answer is through these relations. How is Jesus Christ said to be God? The answer is his eternal begottenness with respect to the one he calls Father. A crucial albeit quite technical point is being made: the processions of the persons ground their missions. Thus the creed: the *homoousios* precedes and underlies the “for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven.” “Hence the rule: the divine missions follow the divine processions. This means, first, that the works of God repeat the immanent being of God.”²² The language of repetition or reiteration makes a very important point: when it comes to the two “states” of Jesus Christ, namely his humiliated and exalted state, his incarnation and resurrection, we are really rather being encountered by events or actions or a history. Accordingly, the language of “states” is too staid. “The twofold action of Jesus Christ,” in terms of his coming low and his being lifted high, is one work, which fills out and constitutes His existence in this twofold form.”²³ But even his twofold action as the humiliated and exalted One may be said, by Barth, to be constitutive of his existence without adding anything to his existence. Jesus Christ remains the same: the One who for us and our salvation became incarnate “is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8). Accordingly, his twofold action in terms of his humiliated and exalted state is not something incidental to his being: “It is the actuality [*Actualität*] of the being of Jesus Christ as very God and very man.”²⁴ But, his actual being as the humiliated and exalted One remains intact: his Godhead is, to be sure, “humiliated Godhead” and his humanity “exalted humanity”; nonetheless, he (the Son of God) is the foundation (together with the Father and the Spirit) of this twofold action. Such action fills out and constitutes, indeed; however, it does not *add* anything to him. His mission repeats his immanent perfect being. Or,

²¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 129.

²² Webster, “Soteriology and the Doctrine of God,” in Davidson and Rae, *God of Salvation*, 26.

²³ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 133.

²⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 133.

he acts in creaturely time in such a way as to always correspond to who he eternally is.

Nothing Jesus Christ does as very God and very man, as the God-man, makes him *other* than the God-man. Barth is at pains to point out that our Savior remains the same. The divine and human natures of his one person govern what is said about his states—his humiliation and exaltation—in such a way that his states can never be said to add anything to his person, even as his states, his twofold action, are not incidental to his person. You could put it this way: the Son of God became and is also the Son of Man while remaining the Son of God. Biblical testimony requires that we recoil from the notion that the Son of God changed himself into a man. The immanent perfect being of Jesus Christ and also of the Father and Spirit, who is constituted by the inner trinitarian processions and is made known to all the world by the missions, is self-sufficient. The venerable term used to describe this is “aseity.” God does not need the creation in order to be God. So, out of the very fullness of who Christ is, his twofold action as the humiliated and exalted One is said to have its foundation, its surety, and its efficacy.²⁵

III

If this be a faithful hearing of Barth’s attempt “to give a proper place to them both,” then what may be said of Paul Jones’s recent reading of Barth’s Christology, one of the points of which is that “decision functions as an ontological category”?²⁶ What Jones means is that God’s decision to be God for us in Jesus Christ has ontological consequences. Indeed, Jones describes Barth’s drive to “‘actualize’ the entire christological realm” in such a way that “the incarnate life of Christ . . . [is] definitive of the identity of God qua Son.”²⁷ This leads him to the point where he can say of Barth’s account that “the Son is eternally transformed by Jesus Christ: the contingent history of this individual, to put it somewhat paradoxically, supplies the unchanging content of God’s life qua Son.”²⁸ In the person of the Son, God

²⁵ See Webster, “Soteriology and the Doctrine of God,” in Davidson and Rae, *God of Salvation*, 25.

²⁶ Jones, *Humanity of Christ*, 109.

²⁷ Jones, *Humanity of Christ*, 131, 127.

²⁸ Jones, *Humanity of Christ*, 150.

freely allows himself to be transformed by what Christ does. There is a salutary intuition at work here, and it is similar to what John Webster perceives to be at work in Robert W. Jenson, which is that of ensuring that the economy of God's works is not folded "back into pre-temporality, in such a way that the divine economy lacks any *constitutive* significance, as if we were saved by a divine plan rather than its enactment."²⁹ In other words, Jesus' obedience to the will of his Father even unto death attests his relation of origin with respect to the Father as One eternally begotten by him for obedience unto him. Put simply, what Jones, following Jenson's lead, resists is the idea that salvation is a fact accomplished in eternity.

While I think it would be careless to say that Jones's reading of Barth minimizes Barth's attempt to give a proper place to both the person and the work of Jesus Christ, it is questionable whether it is possible to say the Son's assumption of humanity "complicates" in an ontological sense God's being. Just so, it is not quite possible to argue that "the divine decision [namely, the act of willed obedience] which sets in motion the economy of salvation is the act which *constitutes* God as God," a decision indicative of the eternal processions, is *the same as* arguing, as Webster does, that "these relations [processions and missions] are what God is," and that "the processions are the infinitely mobile, wholly achieved life of God."³⁰ I say "not quite possible" because there is an extremely subtle but not insignificant point of emphasis—or accent—at stake. It comes to the fore around the language of "achieved." That the life of God is a "wholly achieved life" (Webster) bespeaks a more fulsome reading of Barth in that, together with Barth, Webster aims to honor "the sovereignty of the Son acting in free grace in the incarnation."³¹

Barth makes it exceedingly clear that God's "being as God and man and God-man consists in the completed act of the reconciliation of man with God."³² The key word to note in this quotation is the preposition "in." Barth would have us attend to *how* God is for us; that is, to where God has his being, which is *in* the completed act of

²⁹ Webster, "Soteriology and the Doctrine of God," in Davidson and Rae, *God of Salvation*, 22. Note that I have removed the question mark from the quote. See further Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1: The Triune God*, 189.

³⁰ Webster, "Soteriology and the Doctrine of God," in Davidson and Rae, *God of Salvation*, 22, 26.

³¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 68.

³² Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 127.

reconciliation. Yet the preposition “in” does not attest in the case of the Lord Jesus—the Word who became flesh—a relation of simple “identity” between his being and his acts. As Webster explains with relation to this rather technical point, “‘becoming’ indicates a relation of Word to flesh which is not simply identity, and this particular mode of relation (in which the Word is not exhausted in his act of self-identification in the historical activity of Jesus of Nazareth) is fundamental to the Saviour’s temporal identity.”³³ Put differently, Webster’s point is that the Word is not changed into the flesh but rather becomes flesh. The Word remains the Word even as it becomes flesh. Exegetically speaking, this is attested in the declarations on the part of the Savior of his preexistence, as indicated in John’s Gospel. For example, commenting on John 8:58—“Before Abraham was, I am”—E. C. Hoskyns writes:

The contrast is between an existence initiated by birth and an absolute existence. . . . The Son of God is not merely antecedent in time to Abraham; if so, the Saying would have been, *Before Abraham came into being, I was*. The Being of the Son is continuous, irrespective of all time (Chrysostom). As Cyril of Alexandria comments, “He therefore is not rivaling Abraham’s times; but since He is above all time and o’erpasseth the number of every age, He says that He is before Abraham.”³⁴

“The Being of the Son is continuous,” notes Chrysostom, and the force of that continuity is what Webster’s point about the inexhaustibility of the Word—the basic affirmation underlying the *extra calvinisticum*—honors. The Son’s existence is absolute: he always is. In Barth’s words, “In his Godhead [*Gottheit*], as the eternal Son of the Father, as the eternal Word, Jesus Christ never ceased to be transcendent, free, and sovereign.”³⁵ Put again, the eternal Word who became flesh never ceases to be himself: the Son of God became and is also man *while* remaining God. The Savior’s “temporal identity” reiterates his immanent perfect being, who he always is; this is the function of the “also” in the sentence above. In this regard, Barth writes, “It was a zeal for the sovereignty of the Subject acting in free grace in the incarnation, of the

³³ Webster, “Soteriology and the Doctrine of God,” in Davidson and Rae, *God of Salvation*, 32.

³⁴ E. C. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel*, vol. 2 (London: Faber & Faber, 1940), 401.

³⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 135.

living God in the person and existence of His Son, who ought to be kept in view even in His taking flesh [*Fleischwerdung*], and not allowed to be merged and dissolved in the humanity which He assumed, or the nature [*Natur*] which He blessed.”³⁶ Indeed, the Word who became and is flesh continues to uphold the world he created. MacKinnon speaks of this as “the unfathomable actuality of his presence to, and not just over against, the world he has brought into being, is sustaining, is bringing into fulfillment.”³⁷ Thus, technical christological terms like the *extra calvinisticum* undertake important theological work by reminding us that the Word we proclaim in word and deed is sovereign. Even as he in unfathomable humility takes flesh, he remains the Lord of the world he sustains and fulfills.

The issue with the *extra calvinisticum* is that of rightly describing a mystery. The mystery is that in his Godhead—his divine person—Jesus Christ never ceases to be free and sovereign. What does such an emphasis on the mystery thus understood secure? The truth that Paul points to in 1 Corinthians 1:30: the “he” is a Subject who “became for us wisdom from God” and so forth, the Subject who by virtue of his Godhead is able to author these “benefit[s],” as Calvin calls them.³⁸ If Godhead were not proper to him, he could not be, for example, our righteousness. This is not to shortchange, of course, his humanity. Nonetheless, it is to say that “Christ has life to give because of his divinity, but he can give it in a form accommodated to our weakness because of his humanity.”³⁹ Jesus Christ in his Godhead, in his very divinity, is, ontologically speaking, the author of the acts by which he gives life to the creature in so desperate need of it. That we receive his life is because he gives it to us in a way that we can receive it: he communicates it to us fallen humans as the true human.

Where then does this leave us with respect to the concerns represented by Jones on the one hand and Webster on the other? Well, it does not leave us in the position where one has to take sides. What Jones honors, insofar as I understand him, is an accent that Barth sounds, as expressed by the very question Barth asks: “Does He [Jesus

³⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 68.

³⁷ MacKinnon, “Prolegomena,” in *Themes in Theology*, 182.

³⁸ John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1960), 45.

³⁹ Stephen Edmondson, *Calvin’s Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 127.

Christ] exist except in this relationship?”⁴⁰ What Webster honors is a note also expressed by Barth in the same section of §58: “What is said about Jesus Christ Himself, the christological propositions as such, are constitutive, essential, necessary and central in the Christian doctrine of reconciliation.”⁴¹ Accordingly, one does not speak of Jesus Christ himself so as to suggest “that his real identity is somehow anterior to his function,” but rather to suggest that his “temporal identity” does not exhaust his being, his Godhead, his very self as the *Word* who became and is also flesh. In other words, he does not act as other than he is, whereas we who are in Christ God’s beloved covenant children do so very often contradict who we are. If such is the case, however, we must not say with Jones that “God’s action *ad extra* has ramifications for God’s immanent being.”⁴² This is because such a notion “obscure[s] the antecedent conditions of that economy [the divine economy of salvation] in the life of God *in se*.”⁴³ Otherwise, it obscures the fact that the immanent “relations between Father, Son and Spirit which constitute God’s eternal life in himself are the spring of his relations with the creatures whom he elects as his companions in the covenant of grace.”⁴⁴ The eternal relations of the persons—for example, the Son as One eternally begotten by the Father—are the underlying basis of their relations with creatures. In view of all this, I am not convinced that one can maintain that the actions of God *ad extra* have ramifications for God’s being without lessening attention to God’s ontological self-sufficiency and without muddying the sense in which the immanent relations of the Godhead constitute the “spring” as it were of the covenant of grace. Expressed exegetically, what becomes of the sovereignty of the “he” who is described as, for example, becoming “redemption”?

IV

Giving the person and work of Christ each its proper due is no mean feat. To summarize the identity of the person who is present in

⁴⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 124.

⁴¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 125.

⁴² Jones, *Humanity of Christ*, 126.

⁴³ Webster, “Soteriology and the Doctrine of God,” in Davidson and Rae, *God of Salvation*, 21.

⁴⁴ Webster, “Soteriology and the Doctrine of God,” in Davidson and Rae, *God of Salvation*, 25.

the work of salvation is one of the most important and salutary tasks of Christology. This is because we are considering a person who even in his humiliation—in his assumption of “adamic human nature”—never ceases “to be who He is.”⁴⁵ Because he does not cease to be who he is even as he descends to the deep, he can and does lift humanity up high. His lifting up of humanity is a function of his being true God and true man, the God-man. One of the many corollaries of this is that “He who is ‘by nature God’ with the Father and the Holy Ghost took human essence [*Wesen*] to Himself and united it with His divine origin [*Art*].”⁴⁶ The “He” of course is the Son of God. He is the acting Subject of the hypostatic union of divine and human essence in his person, the One who unites adamic existence to his divine essence. “Again, He [the Son of God] gives to the human essence [*Wesen*] of Jesus of Nazareth a part in His own divine essence as the eternal Son who is co-equal with the Father and the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁷ That our lives are “hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3) is parallel to how the man Jesus Christ has his existence—just like us—in another. That Barth uses “Son of God” and not “Jesus Christ” is itself significant. Consider: “Only the Son of God counts, He who adds human essence to His divine essence, thus giving it existence and uniting both in Himself.”⁴⁸ The Son of God is the active agent with respect to the union of divine and human essence in his person. Because of who he is, he unites human and divine essence in his one person. The hypostatic union has a very particular shape insofar as “in Him [the Son of God] divine essence imparts itself to human, and human essence receives the impartation of the divine.”⁴⁹ Here we have the logic of the old formula “very God, very man, very God-man.”

I think that it is only here that we can begin to see the extent to which an account of the person and work distinction, rightly understood, informs soteriology. Barth’s account of “The Humiliation of the Son of God” in §59 and “The Homecoming of the Son of Man” in §64.2 make clear that we are to interpret the humanity of Jesus

⁴⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 25, 23.

⁴⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 47 (rev.). The translators translate “*Art*” with “nature.” I think “origin” is better as it suggests the oneness of being shared by the Father, Son, and Spirit, with the Son being the person whose origin is as one eternally begotten from the being of the Father.

⁴⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 62.

⁴⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 66.

⁴⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 74.

Christ in the light of his origin: “The existence [*Dasein*] of the man Jesus Christ is an event [*Ereignis*] by and in the existence [*Dasein*] of the Son of God, i.e., by and in the happening [*Geschehen*] of the divine act of reconciliation, by and in the electing grace of God.”⁵⁰ Here we have, I think, the most straightforward statement in §64.2 as to why a proper asymmetry needs to be maintained between the person and work of Jesus Christ, this asymmetry being the only way in which each is given its due. The man Jesus Christ who is true God and true man exists *by* and *in* the Son of God: “by” in the sense that the man Jesus exists as he does precisely because he happens to be *by* Another—that is, the Son of God eternally begotten of the Father. Were it not for the eternally preexistent Son of God, this man would not be. The man Jesus exists “in” the Son of God in the sense that the Son of God’s assumption of adamic human nature is an event, a happening that takes place *in* Christ.

The burden of Barth’s account is to help us to see that Jesus’ life, his incarnation, ministry, cross, resurrection, and ascension, is entirely opaque unless it be undergirded by a serious account of his origin, his *homoousios* with the Father. This is not to suggest that one accounts for his origin apart from the concrete particularities of his life, but it is to say that his existence demands that one account for his origin as the basis and grounds for his existence’s intelligibility: being precedes knowing. Accordingly, Barth’s liberal use of the language of “event” as he describes the identity of the One who is true God and true man functions so as to secure an appreciation of the Son as the Subject of the union. The hypostatic union is an event, a history, *not* a state. It is indeed the event of the humiliated and exalted One. And it is this precisely because of the One who is said to be its Subject—the divine Son. The divine Son is the Subject of Jesus’ humanity, and because he is the Subject he can and does exalt human essence by virtue of his very assumption of it. “We are directed to the fact that when we speak of the one Jesus Christ we speak of that which in Him is an event for us and to us.”⁵¹ The divine Son’s exaltation of humanity in the human essence of Jesus Christ is reality, is actual. There is one Subject at work here who is the God-man, he whose natures are predicates of himself. Thus, one only learns what “divinity and humanity” is by turning to his enactment of it. These are not concepts that float freely,

⁵⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 90 (rev.).

⁵¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 104.

ones to which we assign whatever content we will. Rather, they have their intelligibility in relationship to one Subject—one person. The Son unites human essence to his divine essence in the man Jesus as the humiliated and exalted One.

The work of Jesus Christ—his atoning, saving work—is to be interpreted in the light of his person, his being as that which “is at one and the same time, but distinctly, both divine and human.”⁵² The work of salvation is the work of Christ’s person. That the divine and the human character of his work ought not to be blurred, that the divine and the human are not interchangeable sheds, I think, further light on how one may be said to give the person and work their due.⁵³ That the existence of Jesus Christ, “the way of man upward to God” is, is because, and only because, “as very God He became and is also very man.”⁵⁴ Because the Son of God is very God, light from light, begotten not made, *homoousios* with the Father, he *is* the “way of man upward to God.” His being—more specifically—his being as this divine Subject, sets in motion his humiliation which is as such also our exaltation. But it is by virtue of the person of this One that humanity is able to exist in his exaltation.

V

In this penultimate section, I take up some of Barth’s account of some classical christological themes, namely (1) *anhypostasis/enhypostasis*, (2) *unio hypostatica* (which includes *communio naturum*), and (3) the *communio idiomatum*, with a view to how his treatment of them illuminates the character of the distinction—not separation—that needs be drawn with respect to Christ’s person and work. These technical concerns illuminate the extent to which salvation is the work of a person who, while not remaining at once removed from his work, must nonetheless be appropriately distinguished from it. And so my intention in this section is to isolate aspects of Barth’s treatment of themes that illuminate why the relationship between the person and

⁵² Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 116.

⁵³ Regin Prenter misreads Barth on just this point with the result being that Barth’s Christology is said to be Nestorian. See Prenter, “Karl Barths Umbildung der traditionellen Zweinaturlehre in lutherischer Beleuchtung,” in *Studia Theologica-Nordic Journal of Theology* 11, no. 1 (1957): 20, 24, 30.

⁵⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 118.

work of Christ is irreversible, indeed why his person is understood as the very ground and possibility of his work.

First and most briefly, the theme of *anhypostasis*: namely, that the Son of God took upon himself impersonal human nature in the incarnation, not the humanity of a specific person—"us" rather than the individual named "Chris" or "Ellen." *Anhypostasis* indicates "the *impersonalitas* of the human nature of Christ. . . . Jesus Christ exists as a man because and as this One [the Son] exists, because and as He makes human essence His own, adopting and exalting it into unity [*Einheit*] with Himself."⁵⁵ The point that the *anhypostasis* secures, insofar as Barth understands it, is that of the aseity and freedom of the Son, meaning "we do not have to do with a man into whom God has changed Himself, but unchanged and directly with God Himself."⁵⁶ In Christ one is confronted by a man who is because of Another—the Son of God. That other's identity remains intact even as he unites adamic existence—human essence—to himself in the man Jesus Christ. However, in so doing he does not become another: here we see again the force of Barth's often used refrain, "while remaining God."⁵⁷ Stated differently, in the incarnation we have to do with the God-man. That we have to do with the God-man, indeed "directly with God Himself," is precisely because the Son of God who is by nature God remains God "in the human nature assumed by Him, in Jesus Christ, existing as man."⁵⁸ The doctrine of the *anhypostasis* underwrites the claim that the incarnation's efficacy—past and present—is dependent upon the nature of the person who "took human essence to Himself and united it with His divine nature [*Art*]."⁵⁹ This being so, one cannot begin to give the benefits that this union effects—for example, justification and sanctification—their due without first acknowledging the identity and nature of the acting Subject who not only founds the union from which these benefits flow but also sustains the union. In so doing, he continues to claim adamic humanity by the power of the Word and Spirit as the one who became "wisdom from God" (1 Cor. 1:30).

⁵⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 49.

⁵⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 49.

⁵⁷ Prenter is unhelpfully critical of such a point because it bespeaks to him a "subjective doctrine of reconciliation." See "Karl Barths Umbildung," in *Studia Theologica*, 47.

⁵⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 48.

⁵⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 47.

The implications of Barth's account of the *anhypostasis* for an account of the humanity of Jesus Christ are significant. In a telling statement, Barth writes, "But as this creature—because this is what God sees and wills—he is before all things, *even before the dawn of his own time*. . . . But He was and is there first, the One whom God has elected and willed, the One who truly exists [*wahrhaft Seiende*]." ⁶⁰ The man Jesus is before all things, "even before the dawn of his own time," because he exists *anhypostatically*, that is, in the person of the eternal Son. But the eternal Son does not bespeak an abstraction. In other words, to think the eternal Son is not to think of him in abstraction from the Son of Man but rather to take seriously the "also": the Son of God became and is also Son of Man. Description of the eternal Son is therefore also description of the Son of Man who exists in time. ⁶¹ On what basis can one affirm such? It is by virtue of the being, the person of the Son of Man that he is said to exist "even before the dawn of his own time." The ground of the Son's humanity, the humanity of Jesus Christ, is "the divine act of majesty which is the ground of His [the Son's] being in the cosmos." ⁶² As the ground of his being it—the divine act of majesty—is also "His ground of knowledge [*Erkenntnisgrund*], and shows itself to be such." ⁶³ Once again we see how knowledge of Christ follows from his being. Note again the "also": Barth does not collapse the ground of knowledge into being; rather, he argues that his ground of being grounds knowledge of him. Refracted along the lines of the language of person and work distinction, one may say, following Barth, that the Son's person—his "who," his immanent identity—establishes understanding, indeed promotes understanding of who he truly is: the Son who is true God by nature "is *also* true man." ⁶⁴ Thus, it is not enough to say that the Son becomes true man: no, one must add "that He became and is *also* true man." ⁶⁵ Only the "also" can honor the fact that the Son does not cease to be the One he is by nature: God. In Barth's words, "God in Jesus

⁶⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 33 (rev., emphasis mine).

⁶¹ Prenter misinterprets Barth here as well. On Prenter's view, the human Jesus illustrates (for Barth) an idea read back into the immanent Trinity. "Karl Barths Um-bildung," in *Studia Theologica*, 40.

⁶² Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 38–39.

⁶³ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 39.

⁶⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 41.

⁶⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 41 (rev.).

Christ founded and created this ‘also,’ His being as the One who is both very God and very man.”⁶⁶ There is a one-sidedness that is to be honored. The unity of the person and work of Christ is analogous to the kind of unity expressed in the *hypostatic union*: the unity achieved is always from the side of the Son, the One who is by nature God, the One who as God gives Christ’s humanity a crucial role in salvation’s accomplishment.

The Son of God—not his divine essence per se—is the acting Subject of the hypostatic union. The Son of God lives humanly because he—the Son—freely determines himself to exist humanly. If it is indeed the case that the Lord’s human nature has as its indispensable presupposition his being, his divine nature as the eternal Son, something similar can also be said of the Lord’s person in relation to his work. His work is precisely because he lives and wills to freely have himself *in* what he does. Understood along the lines of the *unio hypostatica*, there is a complete participation of his person in his work: he is his acts, and his acts are himself. Nonetheless, the complete participation of his person in his work and his work in his person does not compromise their indissoluble distinction. Just as the *unio hypostatica* is accomplished by the divine Subject in and with his divine essence, so too does his person make possible his work. Because of Jesus’ person, his work can be said to be united to him, but they are not one and the same. Chalcedonian logic clearly applies here: in the *unio hypostatica* there is a genuine *communio naturarum*, and thus a mutual participation of the human in the divine and the divine in the human, but it is real in a profoundly one-sided way: namely, from the side of the Son. Just so, Christ’s work is really his: it comes from him and he exists in it. His humanity has a material role—“he who became for us.”

With such an understanding of the *unio hypostatica* and the *communio naturarum* in place, we are in a position to say a few words about the *communicatio idiomatum* with a view to whether Barth’s account of the latter permits us to say that the work of Christ does actually impart something to his person. At first glance, the answer might be yes: in the one Jesus Christ we see “everything that belongs to the divine and everything that belongs to the human essence [*Wesen*].”⁶⁷ There is, in other words, a real participation of the Son of God in

⁶⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 41.

⁶⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 74.

human essence and a direct participation of Christ's human nature "in the majesty of God" in the light of the *unio hypostatica*.⁶⁸ However, this is not to suggest that Barth endorses in any genuine sense the *communicatio idiomatum*, to say nothing of the *genus majesticum* that it sponsors. This is because Barth does not think for a moment that the Subject of the communication of properties—the Son—communicates what is properly his to the human essence united to himself so as to compromise—or worse, negate—the creaturely integrity of the latter. In short, for Barth, as for the Reformed orthodox, one cannot conceive of the communion of natures apart from their personal union in the Son of God who became and is also the Son of Man. The union of natures happens at the level of Christ's person and not of his natures, as Barth argues is the case with the Lutheran orthodox. There is an important instinct at work here: we can and must say that Barth, as a Reformed theologian, resists the Lutheran orthodox account of the *communicatio idiomatum* and the *genus majesticum* as one of its *genera*, because it represents a moment of abstraction: "abstracted, that is, from the history [*Geschichte*] to which we cannot for a moment cease to cling if we are to see and confess and think 'Jesus Christ.'"⁶⁹ What matters, for Barth, is "that their union [*Vereinigung*] is the *apotelesma* of the person of the one Jesus Christ active in and through both natures."⁷⁰ Indeed, it is not their union, he notes, which matters but the actuality of the one person who unites in himself and is active "through both natures." The history of the active subject Jesus Christ, he whose history atones, is that to which the Christian community must always cling as it seeks to speak of this One, the revelation of whom is reconciliation.

VI

To conclude, this essay has argued that rightly distinguishing Christ's person and work does assist with the christological and soteriological task. While Barth never divides the person of Christ from his work, he clearly does think that rightly differentiating them is of importance if Jesus Christ is to be faithfully described. While I concur with Jones on one level that "the person/work division forgets

⁶⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 77.

⁶⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 80.

⁷⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 105.

that an acclamation of Christ's person is an acclamation of his work, and *vice versa*," insofar as this reinforces the sense in which "this history [*Geschichte*] itself [the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus Christ] . . . [is] the sacrament of the being [*Sein*] of Jesus Christ. . . . The Subject Jesus Christ is this history," we must not forget, on another level, that Barth, while never championing any *division*, does surely insist on rightly *distinguishing* them so as to give each their due.⁷¹ Thus, I do not think that Gunton and Jones quite adequately preserve the sense in which Barth, while wholeheartedly affirming the history of the atonement in terms of "the sacrament of the being of Jesus Christ," nonetheless continually strives in his account of the *unio hypostatica* to speak of the Son who is by nature God as the One who posits himself "in this being [the life] of Jesus Christ."⁷² The Son of God makes the union possible; he is active in and through both natures in Jesus Christ. While not wanting to divide the person from the work, Barth certainly does want to differentiate the two, but only for the sake of reminding us that Jesus Christ exists "only in the act of God. . . . But, at root, what is the life of Jesus Christ but the act in which God becomes very God and very man, positing Himself in this being [*Sein*]"⁷³ Just so, an account of salvation, of the work of Jesus Christ and its immeasurable benefits, must, if Barth is correct, be an account of an act. But this act "saves" and makes all things new because and only because it is the act of *God*, the God who becomes very God and very man, the God-man Jesus Christ. This is salvation's basis and the very anterior condition of its possibility. Accounts of salvation will only edify to the extent that they begin with first things, and so with the God who is eternally free to posit himself in such a way as to undo our sin and death and thereby re-make us for life in covenant fellowship with himself. This is God's will, the will of a God who elected humankind for himself and himself for humankind "giving this concrete determination [*Bestimmung*] to His own divine essence [*Wesen*]."⁷⁴

⁷¹ Jones, *Humanity of Christ*, 191; Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 107.

⁷² Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 109.

⁷³ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 109.

⁷⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 114 (rev.).

