What Modernity gets Wrong and the Classical Tradition got Right: A Critique of Bruce L. McCormack's Theology

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KEY WORDS

| Bruce L McCormack | Karl Barth | Kenosis | Metaphysics & Theology | Christology | Immanent & Economic Trinity |

ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes and critiques Bruce L. McCormack's post-metaphysical theology, including his development of a so-called Reformed doctrine of kenosis. This critique is then utilized as an opportunity to highlight some missteps that modern theology—represented by certain forms of kenoticism—tends to make. The essay concludes with an endorsement of an alternative paradigm for doctrines of kenosis, one commonly found implicit in the premodern tradition. It urges Christian thinkers to balance two values in their theology: on the one hand, the contingency of creation and redemption upon divine freedom, and on the other, the fittingness of the economy of salvation with the divine nature.

INTRODUCTION

Over a decade ago Bruce L. McCormack began to mount an uncompromising attack against the classical metaphysical tradition by way of a revisionist interpretation of Karl Barth.[1] In a nutshell, he proposed that we must no longer speak of God's being as ontologically prior to his gracious covenantal decision in Jesus Christ. Initially the discussion about McCormack's proposal remained confined to the domain of Barth aficionados, but it quickly spilled out into a plethora of lively debates—sometimes enriching, other times convoluting—among both theologians and philosophers of various denominational traditions. On the level of Barthian exegesis, it seems unlikely that any one position will emerge as the definitive interpretation in the near future, not least because Barth's thought appears multiform if not inconsistent.[2] For this reason I do not intend to enter the "Barth wars" proper, that is, to quarrel over whether McCormack offers a plausible exegesis of the *Church Dogmatics*.[3] Rather, I am interested in exploring the connections that McCormack's theology might have with other late modern theological trends, in particular the tendency to define God's being exclusively in relation to created history. This tendency manifests itself quite starkly in his so-called Reformed doctrine of kenosis (κένωσις), which sets forth the idea that the incarnation makes God to be the sort of God he is.[4]

1 The initial essay was McCormack's "Grace and being: the role of God's gracious election in Karl Barth's theological ontology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (ed. John Webster; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 92-110. A helpful collection of further contributions to the debate can be found in *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology* (ed. Michael T. Dempsey; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

2 I should note, however, that I find George Hunsinger's recent defence of the more traditional reading of Barth to be the most compelling interpretation to date (*Reading Barth with Charity: A Hermeneutical Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015)).

3 I borrow this phrase from Phillip Cary's recent article reviewing Hunsinger's latest monograph on Barth ("Barth Wars," *First Things* 252 (April 2015), 49-53).

4 The theological use of the term κένωσις derives from

In this article I will examine and critique Bruce McCormack's post-metaphysical theology in order to expose some problems with modern theology more generally. The clash between McCormack's Barthian "revisionism" and more traditional perspectives leaves the impression that there are only two serious options for contemporary theology: a return to pristine, premodern modes of thought or the development of a new, radically anti-metaphysical approach.[5] One of the problems with this dichotomy is that it alienates the majority of evangelical thinkers, for whom faithful scriptural reasoning leads somewhere in between. This essay aims to clear space for just such an excluded middle. It does so primarily by means of a critique of the latter extreme, the attempt to construct a Protestant theology that totally rejects the classical metaphysical distinctions that underlie historic orthodox dogma.

In part one I will trace some of the major themes of McCormack's project, including his critique of classical metaphysics, his theological ontology as it emerges in light of Barth's mature doctrine of election, his consequent theology of incarnation and Christology proper, and finally, his doctrine of kenosis. With this I intend to provide an accurate, succinct introduction to the modern revisionist form of Barthian theology as manifested in its chief representative. In the second part, I will critique McCormack's theology insofar as it raises questions about what I consider to be necessary Christian presuppositions concerning divine and created existence, the immanent Trinity, the nature of revelation and Jesus' divine identity. I seek to show that McCormack's proposals, as with other modern ideological trajectories, lead to intractable theological and Christological difficulties and thus do not coherently and compellingly supplant the Christian metaphysical tradition. In the final part, I will make a few suggestions regarding what an adequate doctrine of kenosis should entail. I propose that Christian thinkers ought to balance two values: on the one hand, the contingency of creation and redemption upon divine freedom, and on the other, the fittingness of the economy of salvation with the divine nature.

II. MCCORMACK'S POST-METAPHYSICAL THEOLOGY

From McCormack's perspective, the bane of classical theology concerns its habit of abstract speculation, thought and speech about some ultimate being-in-itself behind the God who encounters his people in history. Part of the problem is that the received tradition did not maintain a sufficiently Christian epistemology.[6] If God as such is transcendently free, then we cannot encapsulate him within our predefined categories. We can only look to what he has freely chosen to be and do in history, renouncing those aspects of our theological systems which rub against his self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Take the theology given in the Calvinistic decrees. In McCormack's view, this suggests that an unknowable, indeterminate God subsists behind his economic self-disclosure.[7] An

the self-emptying of Christ of which Philippians 2:7 speaks.

5 "Revisionism" is Hunsinger's term. It's meant to indicate that the new system includes notions that Barth never explicitly affirmed and sometimes explicitly denied, as McCormack and his followers admit (*Reading Barth with Charity*, xi).

6 "The Actuality of God: Karl Barth in Conversation with Open Theism," in *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives* (ed. Bruce L. McCormack; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 186-8.

7 On Barth's criticism of Calvin, see McCormack, "Grace and being," 95-101; "Christ and the Decree: An unsettled Question for the Reformed Churches Today," in *Reformed Theology in Contemporary Perspective: Westminster:*

adequate Christian epistemology, by contrast, must incessantly cling to the utter primacy of concrete divine action. But the problem does not concern epistemology alone, for the source of the tradition's abstracting tendency resides in the metaphysics which underlies it. Having inherited the substantialist presuppositions of Greek thought, the fathers and scholastics sharply distinguished God's inner essence from his external relations within created history. This distinction gave philosophy the authority to conceive of "God" abstractly as an immanent substance, a concept that tended to usurp the lively God revealed in Scripture.

According to McCormack, Barth's genius consists in his perception that a definitive solution to this problem requires more than a Christocentric epistemology.[8] It demands a post-metaphysical ontology, a way of conceiving divine being which breaks decisively not simply from modern deism but even from classical theism. Whereas classical theology remained captive to the category of static, ahistorical substance, McCormack argues that the mature Barth proposed an "actualist" alternative. God is not the *actus purus* ("pure act") in the abstract realm of infinite essence but a being who is determined in a free, particular act of an eternal decision vis-à-vis created history.[9] Therefore, "It is not simply that the being of God is *made known* to human beings in revelation; it is rather that the being of God is itself *established* in the act of revelation."[10] Whether Barth would have endorsed this radical theological actualism is what the "Barth wars" are all about. In any case, as we shall see, there is more at stake than the identity of the true Karl Barth.

The development of this new, non-substantialist ontology, according to McCormack, began with Barth's re-conception of election in actualistic, Christocentric terms.[11] God's absolute freedom consists in his freedom to become, to achieve his eternal identity precisely in the act of choosing. If God freely decides from eternity to be in one way rather than another—to be, for instance, the God who creates and redeems by way of covenantal love—then this is who God is. He constitutes his very being by this eternal act, the decision to be thus in relation to human beings in the person of Jesus Christ.[12] Put simply, God *is* his act of election, his eternal decision to be with us and for us.

McCormack repeatedly emphasizes the radicalism of this approach. It is not simply that the economy of salvation, as the proper epistemic ground of theology, must guide, control and refine our concept of the immanent Trinity, who, in contradistinction to modalism, truly condescends to reveal himself therein. One could argue that this is precisely what the best theologians of the pre-modern tradition affirmed. Rather, the radicalism consists in overcoming the very idea that there really exists an independent and self-sufficient Trinity, a God whose actual being is intrinsically unrelated to the created economy. If God is freely *constituted* by his eternal decision in relation to that which is not God, then the reason we cannot talk about an immanent Trinity—or, for that matter, a non-incarnate Son—is because none exists.

Yesterday, Today – and Tomorrow? (ed. Lynn Quigley; Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 2006), 126-41.

8 "Seek God where he may be found: a response to Edwin Chr. van Driel," *SJT* 60, no. 1 (2007): 71n23.

9 "The Actuality of God," 214-5.

10 *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 461-2, emphasis added.

11 For McCormack's arguments on the genetic history thereof, see *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 458-63, and "Seek God where he may be found," 63-5.

12 "The Actuality of God," 217.

God is who he freely chooses to be in relation to humanity, that is, the Trinity who covenants with us in Christ.

Against the received tradition, this leads to McCormack's most controversial proposal. The act of election logically precedes God's tri-unity. The Father's self-positing of himself as Son and Spirit occurs only as the consequence of the logically prior covenantal decision:

> The eternal act of Self-differentiation in which God is God 'a second time in a very different way'…and a third time as well, is *given in* the eternal act in which God elects himself for the human race. The *decision* for the covenant of grace is the ground of God's triunity…In other words, the works of God *ad intra* (the trinitarian processions) find their ground in the *first* works of God *ad extra* (viz. election).[13]

McCormack thus turns the classical understanding of the immanent Trinity on its head. The divine missions (the sending of Jesus and the Spirit) are no longer the grace-induced historical outcome of the eternally necessary and self-sufficient divine processions (the begetting and spirating of the Son and Spirit); rather, the processions stem from the decision to save humanity via the missions. Lest we misunderstand, McCormack clarifies that his position does not imply that there actually exists a pre-trinitarian God. The act of election "has never not taken place," and thus the only concretely subsisting God is he who constitutes himself by this eternal decision.[14] Since God *eternally* constitutes himself as triune, there is no God but the Father of Jesus Christ and the Spirit of both.

The radicalism of McCormack's ontology re-emerges in his theology of incarnation. Inheriting the patristic tradition's distinction between the pre-existing subject of incarnation and the contingent act of incarnation itself, Reformed orthodoxy had distinguished the subject of election, the λόγος ἄσαρκος (unenfleshed Word) along with the Father and Spirit, from the object, the *Logos incarnandus* (the Word as eternally chosen to become incarnate).[15] From this perspective, while Jesus Christ is the *noetic* ground of the electing God, the only means by which we know the Son as *incarnandus*, he does not determine the Son's hypostatic identity. According to McCormack, Barth's novelty consists in his claim that Jesus Christ, "the God-human in his divine-human unity," is not merely the object of election but its *subject*.[16] Insofar as the eternal decision for the Son to become incarnate for our salvation constitutes the very being of the Trinity, it no longer makes sense to distinguish the independent subject as λόγος ἄσαρκος from the eternally chosen object as *incarnandus*. On the contrary, since the Son's very subsistence is determined in the elective act, "the *Logos* is the *incarnandus* in and for himself, in eternity."[17] As McCormack points out, this historicized ontology absolutely precludes speculation based on epistemic grounds besides revelation: "The second 'person' of the Trinity has a name and his name is Jesus Christ."[18] Moreover, it

13 "Grace and being,"103; cf. "Seek God where he may be found," 66-7. Kevin W. Hector thinks that McCormack goes too far here. But his alternative seems to me to be incoherent. He claims that tri-unity and self-determination are "each logically prerequisite" for the other. But what could this mean? Either the triune God makes the decision, in which case his identity logically precedes it, or the triune God is constituted in it, in which case McCormack's position follows ("God's Triunity and Self-Determination: A Conversation with Karl Barth, Bruce McCormack and Paul Molnar," in *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology* (ed. Michael T. Dempsey; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 43).

14 "Grace and Being," 101.

15 Ibid., 92-5.

16 Ibid., 94.

17 Ibid., 95.

18 Ibid., 100.

illumines how God can "become" in Christ and yet remain ontologically constant, since the incarnate life of the Son is simply God enacting in time his eternally self-constituted identity: "he is not changed on an ontological level by this experience for the simple reason that his being, from eternity, is determined as a being-for this event."[19]

Lest we confuse such historicism with full-blown Hegelianism, McCormack clarifies that there remains a distinction between God's being-in-act in eternity and the same being-in-act in time.[20] The Trinity "is complete" apart from creation, which is the consequence of God's free, pre-historical act, not the result of a historical process. This is true because "God is already in pre-temporal eternity – *by way of anticipation* – that which he would become in time."[21] The second person of the Trinity is "constituted by the anticipation of union with the humanity of Christ."[22] In other words, on the one hand, it is the eternal decision rather than the temporal execution of that decision that determines God's being. On the other hand, this self-constitutive act of election regards what "will" happen in time, and thus the *Logos incarnandus* is simply the eternal form of what is, in temporal translation, Jesus Christ. The Son's eternal identity-in-act proceeds to his becoming flesh as one continuous motion, from anticipation to fulfillment.

McCormack elaborates on this theme in his exposition of Barth's doctrine of reconciliation. Seeking "to bring the obedience of the Son in time and his obedience in eternity into the closest possible relationship," Barth had spoken of the Son's outer and inner "moments" of obedience, which concern "human comprehension of a single moment in the divine life."[23] Within this perspective, the Son as eternally self-constituted is "already" what he "will" be in his enfleshment. Since he is constituted by the eternal decision for his incarnate mission, "the "mystery" of the incarnation is finally the mystery of God's own deity."[24] The Son's temporal human existence emerges as "the outworking of an eternal humility that is truly *essential* to God," and thus "the Son in time perfectly "corresponds" to the Son in eternity." [25] The purchase of this approach consists in its capacity to show that the incarnation neither alienates nor mythologizes the divine nature. In light of a commitment to impassibility and immutability, the fathers tended to view the incarnation as strange, new and ineffable. Cyril of Alexandria, for example, affirmed the Son's eternal unchangeability and his appropriation of mutable human life as sheer paradox. Barth's theological ontology, according to McCormack, charts another course in that majesty and humility, command and obedience, become intrinsic to the trinitarian life.

The eternal humility of the Son has consequences for how McCormack deals with Christ's ontological and psychological constitution. Although Barth maintains an Alexandrian commitment to Christ's single-subjectivity, McCormack stresses that he eschews the Docetic tendency to conceive the Word as using the human flesh as a mere

19 Ibid., 98.

20 Ibid., 99-100.

21 Ibid., 100.

22 Ibid., 104.

23 "Divine Impassibility or Simply Divine Constancy? Implications of Karl Barth's Later Christology for Debates over Impassibility," in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering* (ed. James F. Keating & Thomas Joseph White; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 162. Compare "The Actuality of God," 219-22, and *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 219-29.

24 "Divine Impassibility or Simply Divine Constancy?," 163.

25 "Divine Impassibility or Simply Divine Constancy?," 170-1, 173. Compare "The Actuality of God," 233.

instrument. He thus treats the *man* Jesus as "a thinking, willing, "performative agent" who has an independent *power of action*."[26] According to McCormack there are three reasons why this need not compromise Christ's divine identity.[27] First, Barth construes the hypostatic union in historicist terms without denying the ontological priority of the Son. The union is a process in which the Son continually gives Jesus "being and existence in his own being and existence" "in the form of a history." Second, in light of the first clarification, McCormack communicates a Barthian doctrine of *genus tapeinoticum* (or kenosis): "The only act of the Son of God in relation to his humanity is the act in which he gives it existence…All subsequent acts of the God-man made possible by *this singular act* are acts performed by the man Jesus." Again, while "the man Jesus" becomes "the performative agent" of the "divine-human unity," the pre-temporal Son remains the initial subject, the author of the "*singular act*." Third and finally, since the Son's free and eternal constitution bears the character of humility, this kenotic act is precisely what accords with his pre-temporal being. Insofar as "the modality of receptivity" constitutes God's eternity, "the historical enfleshment is simply the actualization in history of that which God has determined for himself from eternity and which, therefore, is already in him." In sum, although his formulations are "a complex way of describing a *single* subject," McCormack insists that his Christology remains Alexandrian in that it affirms one performative agent who is both human and divine.

At this point we can finally appreciate the manner in which McCormack perceives Barth's thought as a resource for a uniquely Reformed concept of kenosis.[28] When Barth rejected the doctrine of kenosis, he reacted against the nineteenth century German kenoticism which implied that God's becoming and human life were alien to the divine nature. In view of his mature theological ontology and Christology, however, Barth provides grounds for retrieval. As McCormack explains,

> it would be in complete accord with the eternal humility of the Son which characterizes his eternal relation to the Father to express itself through a sovereignly willed receptivity vis-à-vis the human nature to be assumed. Complete and total receptivity towards everything that comes to him in and through his human nature – that, I want to suggest, is the meaning of *kenosis*, and that is why *kenosis* entails no divestment of anything proper to deity.[29]

The primordial receptivity of the Son grounds the incarnation, the initial act of receiving a human nature, as well as the "willed non-use of certain attributes *in relation to* the human nature," which allows the man Jesus to be the one performative agent of the divine-human being. Therefore, when the God who is essentially kenotic by virtue of his eternal covenantal decree executes his kenotic plan in the incarnate life of the Son, he does not negate or displace his divine nature. On the contrary, he simply enacts in time his true, self-actualized being. Moreover, since this concrete revelation occurs in the life of the divine-*human* one, Jesus Christ not only redeems us as our representative but manifests the truth of our human being: "insofar as true humanity is realized only in the *act* of faith and obedience, 'covenantal ontology'

26 Ibid., 169.

27 Ibid., 174-8.

28 "Karl Barth's Christology as a Resource for a Reformed Version of Kenoticism," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8, no. 3 (July 2006): 248ff.

29 Ibid., 250.

is actualistic on the human side as well."[30] In this sense, McCormack affirms, Barth advocates a Christocentric form of the analogy of being. For as God determines himself in the act of kenotic love, so we constitute our true selves in the act of kenotic response.

III. PROBLEMS WITH THE POST-METAPHYSICAL PROJECT

McCormack considers the philosophical substructures of traditional Christian theology to be epistemologically and metaphysically inadequate. In his estimation, the notion of God as infinite being and pure act is an abstraction that cannot account for how God actually is as we encounter him in his self-revelation in Jesus Christ. To a certain extent, McCormack's project is an admirable one. He prioritizes the economy of salvation to which Scripture witnesses, and with much of the Protestant tradition stemming back to Luther, he discerns that philosophical preconceptions can thwart attentive engagement with this economy. But can McCormack's post-metaphysical theology and kenoticism serve as a cogent alternative? I will now proceed to point out what I view as serious problems with McCormack's approach, seeking to establish that it does not coherently and compellingly transcend the presuppositions of the received tradition of Christian theology. First, I will address various issues relating to his theological ontology and Christology. Second, I will situate McCormack's project within the unfortunate trajectories characteristic of late modern theology more generally.

The first problem concerns the relation between divine being and contingent existence. McCormack seeks to overcome the substantialist paradigm by asserting that God's being is the result of a decision that is free and contingent yet truly self-constituting. But can he avoid positing an abstract distinction between the *necessary* God as free elector and the triune God of love as the *contingent* consequence of free decision? McCormack argues that this distinction need not constitute a concrete separation, since election is eternal and thus contingently necessary:

> God may indeed be said to exist necessarily, but *how* he exists, how his being is structured, is (I am suggesting) a function of his will and decision…The only thing that is absolutely necessary for God is existence itself but such a consideration may not be abstracted from the decision in which God gives to himself his own being – and then played off against that which is contingently necessary for him. To think in this way is to snap back into the logic of a pre-critical metaphysics of 'pure being'[31]

Has McCormack really overcome abstraction here? What could it possibility mean to affirm that God's "existence itself" is necessary, other than to contrast it with the posterior, freely chosen *how*, the "contingently necessary" mode of such existence? On the assumption that the necessity of divine being means nothing if we cannot distinguish it from the form which proceeds from a decision that might not have been, it seems to me that logically speaking McCormack replaces a metaphysic of infinite triune being with an absolute theological voluntarism. Consider his concession that "A statement which takes the form '*God* would be God without us' is a true statement and one whose truth must be upheld at all costs."[32] While he denies that we can say anything specific about what this God would actually be without us (for example, the Trinity), how could McCormack

30 "Grace and being," 108-9.

31 "Seek God where he may be found," 67.

32 Ibid., 76.

logically avoid the distinction between God's necessary existence as such and his contingent existence constituted in a free act? Herein lays the problem with his post-metaphysical approach: by reducing God as we know him to the realm of the "contingently necessary," all that remains of divine being, in the sense of what constitutes his necessary, could-not-have-been-otherwise existence, is pure, indeterminate will.[33] Perhaps the agnostic voluntarism that McCormack associates with Calvin's doctrine of double predestination lurks in the background of his own system. And perhaps this is inevitable whenever one attempts to propound an account of divine being as constituted in a contingent act.

A second problem concerns the relation of God to the created order. While McCormack claims to "preserve the ontological distinction between God and the human,"[34] he does not appear to address the extent to which his approach undermines the transcendence of the immanent Trinity and, by direct consequence, the utter gratuity of creation and redemption. If God is eternally constituted in relation to created history, does God not depend on such history for his very being? And would this not undermine the basic biblical notion that creation and redemption are pure gifts? McCormack seems to think that once we distinguish the divine decision from its temporal outworking, we safeguard post-metaphysical theology from radical historicism. God "will" enact such a decision in the economy, but the event of self-constitution occurs eternally as logically prior, and thus the Only Begotten precedes his human existence as the *Son-whose-identity-is-constituted-eternally-as-the-one-to-become-flesh-for-our-sake*. The problem with this qualification is that God's self-constituting decision is still bound up with the contingent, mutable order, for the God we know in Jesus Christ is who he is only by virtue of his chosen orientation toward fallen created beings.[35] As long as this remains the case, then the God whom we worship—the eternally self-actualized God—cannot logically be the author of the economy by sheer grace.[36] If that which truly renders God to be the sort of God we know him to be requires a historical enactment, or even an eternal anticipation thereof, then our history, with all of its contingencies, is necessary for the being of the Trinity as the historical condition in which God determines himself. Created history, in that case, cannot be the result of the Trinity's utterly gratuitous act.

It seems to me that McCormack's rejection of traditional accounts of divine being vis-à-vis contingent, created history presupposes that the very concept of divine revelation demands that God's identity be determined in the act of revealing. But this creates an unjustified dichotomy. For instance, McCormack claims that if God's identity is already established prior to the eternal act of election, then Jesus as Redeemer "tells us nothing about who or

33 Compare Paul D. Molnar, "Can the Electing God Be God Without Us? Some Implications of Bruce McCormack's Understanding of Barth's Doctrine of Election for the Doctrine of the Trinity," in *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology* (ed. Michael T. Dempsey; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 63-90.

34 *Orthodox and Modern*, 260.

35 McCormack responds to this objection by stating, "Only that is 'essential' to God, and therefore 'constitutive' of the divine being, which God has determined *himself* to be, not what he has determined the world to be – as the 'space' in which he becomes what he chose to be" ("Seek God where he may be found," 68-70). Here I think he misses the point of his critics. If God's identity emerges in relation to the created order, even only as the "space" within which he freely determines himself, his being as we know it remains inextricably dependent upon our world. Kevin Hector comes closer to admitting this when he calls creation "contingently necessary" for God's being ("God's Triunity and Self-Determination," 46).

36 Compare. David Bentely Hart's argument in *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003), 155ff.

what the Logos is in and for himself," and this undermines our confession of Jesus' deity.[37] I would suggest, however, that this line of reasoning follows only on McCormack's own voluntaristic premise. If divine freedom is prior to divine essence, as is logically the case for McCormack, then only the choices of God that are self-constituting can be seen as revelatory. Otherwise God-in-himself recedes into the agnostic abyss of arbitrary will. But if one accepts the classical position that the infinite triune God is fully what he is and ever will be *ad intra*, then the contingent quality of the *ad extra* by no means undermines its character as true divine revelation. On the contrary, the freedom of the immanent Trinity is his freedom to be himself, both immanently and (contingently) economically.[38] As Joseph L. Mangina points out, one can affirm that "God is who he is in his act of revelation, in his covenant relation to the world," without affirming that "God becomes who he is *through* this relation."[39]

The problems with McCormack's theological ontology spill over into his Christology. The Alexandrian-Chalcedonian tradition affirmed that the primal and continuous single-subject, the one who is intrinsically divine and contingently human, is the divine ὑπόστασις (hypostasis or person in the sense of concrete instance of being) who eternally proceeds from the Father. This remained non-negotiable despite ongoing confusion over the implications of the one divine ὑπόστασις being fully human and thus having two natures, energies, wills, and so on. Hence, although Cyril of Alexandria employed imprecise, conflicting language which Chalcedon sought to rectify, in retrospect he still emerged as a champion of Christological orthodoxy because he grasped that it is the divine *who* in contrast to the *what*, the consubstantial *someone*, not the principle *by which*, who is the object of Christian devotion. If the continuous singular subject or ὑπόστασις was other than the ὑπόστασις of the Word, then the Church's thought and practice, its habit of treating the man Jesus himself as consubstantial with the Father, would no longer make sense.

While McCormack appreciates the basic single-subjective impulse safeguarded by Alexandrian Christology, he lambasts the *de facto* Docetism that he thinks continually crops up in the tradition. McCormack does maintain that Christ is one subject, but for him this subject is not the eternal Word. Besides the initial kenotic act, the independent performative agent "of the divine-human unity" is the man Jesus. But this raises a question that McCormack never coherently answers: If we ascribe performative agency to the man, and this is meant to contrast the ongoing subjectivity of the eternal Word, how does this not entail that the ὑπόστασις, the *someone* of Christ throughout his mission, is a human rather than a divine ὑπόστασις? In creating ambiguity on this point, McCormack undermines the most basic conviction of pro-Alexandrian and indeed pro-Chalcedonian Christology. When read in context, even the most minimalistic reading of Chalcedon's Definition excludes the possibility of identifying the continuous "one and the same" Lord Jesus Christ as a human ὑπόστασις.

Of course, McCormack's express goal is a noble one: to affirm that the incarnate Son leads an authentically human life. But

37 "Grace and being," 97, cf. 99.

38 Compare Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2002), and Molnar, "The Trinity, Election, and God's Ontological Freedom: A Response to Kevin Hector," in *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology* (ed. Michael T. Dempsey; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 47-62.

39 Joseph L. Mangina, *Karl Barth: Theologian of the Christian Witness* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 138.

within Alexandrian-Chalcedonian rationality, an insistence that the Word is the singular ὑπόστασις need not *ipso facto* negate Jesus human particularity. On the contrary, for Cyril and the Chalcedonians the miracle of the incarnation was precisely the event in which the Word became a particular instance of human nature through himself, that is, not by joining himself with an already concretely personalized human being but by "in-personalizing" human nature within his divine ὑπόστασις.[40] On this view, the man Jesus indeed has performative agency, but that very performative agency belongs to the singular ὑπόστασις of the divine Word. Where, then, does this leave McCormack's opposition? It is difficult to understand how McCormack and other revisionists think they can accuse the tradition of Docetism, radically revise its basic premise, and then insist that they have maintained orthodox values.[41] Perhaps there lurks an underlying dualism, the characteristically modern supposition that God and humanity are ontological antagonists, which prevents theologians from appreciating the miracle in which the Word, without setting aside his primal hypostatic identity, became the subject of an authentic human existence.

It appears to me, then, that McCormack's Christology is just one more variation of the less-than-compelling kenoticisms of modernity past.[42] To pursue the point, it may be helpful to situate McCormack within two general trends in late modern kenoticism. As S.W. Sykes summarizes, on the one hand, there is an "old-style kenosis" beginning with the nineteenth century Germans, which "felt obliged to speak of a limiting of the divinity so that the humanity of Christ might be the more genuine."[43] Insofar as McCormack speaks of the "willed non-use of certain attributes *in relation to* the human nature," he embraces an "old-style kenosis." He may differ from the Germans in that no attributes are abrogated, but still he appears to maintain the dualistic premise: something of God must be suspended or unused in order that the man Jesus can have authentic "performative agency." How is one to understand such a theory except as a sort of reverse Eutychianism whereby the concrete humanity of Jesus swallows up the subjective continuity of the eternal Word? Like other forms of old-style kenoticism,

40 The origin of the post-Chalcedonian doctrine of ἀνυπόστασις/ἐνυπόστασις (anhypostasis/enhypostasis) is complicated. But when one reads the writings of Cyril and other documents that contextualize the Chalcedonian Definition, there is no question that the judgment internal to this doctrine is logically integral to premodern dogmatic Christology. On the one hand, the humanity that the Son took on cannot be spoken of as a concrete personal reality, which would lead to the Nestorian notion of union as a conjoining of two concrete agents. On the other, this by no means negates the "personality" of Christ's humanity in the sense that he exists as a concrete human being with a capacity for human action and passion. The point is that Christ's human personality was never seen as its own individualized instance of human nature (ἀνυπόστασις) but a nature miraculously personalized through (ἐνυπόστασις) the person (ὑπόστασις) of the Word.

41 To take another example, evangelical theologian Roger Olson defends certain kenoticists (e.g. Clark Pinnock and Stanley Grenz) who emphasize the integrity of Christ as a human person. Against critics worried about how this might undermine the divinity, Olson claims that such proposals merely supplement rather than oppose Chalcedonian orthodoxy, (Olson, "Christology," in *The Westminster Handbook to Evangelical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 156-8. But as is obvious to those immersed in the Alexandrian and pro-Chalcedonian texts, a failure to affirm unequivocally that the Word is the singular ὑπόστασις of Christ is clearly to undermine the basic insights of premodern Christological orthodoxy.

42 The following critical discussion does not necessarily pertain to the myriad of theologies that employ "kenosis" language. Recent philosophical reappropriations of kenotic Christology, for example, lay outside the scope of this article (see, for example, C. Stephen Evans, ed. *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), and Oliver Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity: The Incarnation Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 118-153). While I do have reservations, many analytic theological approaches are more cautious and sophisticated than the German and English systematic trajectories at which I aim my critique.

43 S.W. Sykes, "The Strange Persistence of Kenotic Christology," in *Being and Truth: Essays in Honour of John Macquarrie* (ed. Alistair Kee & Eugene T. Long; London: SCM, 1986), 359. See pages 351-60 for a history of development of modern kenoticism.

McCormack's theory seems to teeter between outright unorthodoxy and incoherence. On the other hand, as Sykes notes, there is a "new-style kenosis" that remains popular among both German and English-speaking theologians, which "speaks of Christ as the revelation and affirmation of God's nature."[44] McCormack recapitulates this form of kenoticism in his own Barthian revisionist way. The Son can "empty out" his divine agency in the initial act of incarnation without self-alienation because, from eternity, he is constituted in humility, in the decision to be for us in this kenotic act and the subsequent shape of Jesus' human life. This kind of kenoticism is surely a more promising direction, and as I will argue below, Scripture warrants that some form of it ought to be retained. Like many other new-style kenoticisms, however, McCormack's version tends to compromise the transcendent nature of the immanent Trinity.[45]

The basic problem with McCormack's doctrine of kenosis is the problem of late modern Christology in general: it tends toward a Christological reductionism whereby a combined focus on unity and humanity excludes the primacy and continuity of Christ's divine ὑπόστασις. The irony is that, at the most basic level, such approaches remain indebted to the Docetic paradigm, the very thing they set out to supplant. For beneath both ancient Docetisms which undermine the human and the modern christologies which truncate God lay a Nestorian-like dualism that cannot apprehend the relation of God and human being without curtailing one or the other. In light of an insufficient account of the relation between infinite Being and finite beings, neither the Docetists nor the modernists hold together the mystery of Christ, the eternal ὑπόστασις of the Son taking on and living his own, concrete human life for us and our salvation.

At this point it may be helpful to locate McCormack's theology within the trajectory of late modern theological thought conceived even more broadly. The theologians of the received Christian tradition, and arguably Barth himself, consistently maintained two things with regards to the immanent Trinity's relation to created history. First, in light of the biblical witness to God's otherness and creation's non-necessity, creation and redemption are wholly contingent upon the triune God's freedom. Since there is absolutely no necessity intrinsic to the created order, even the incarnation and human life of Jesus cannot determine God's immutable triune identity. Second, although creation and redemption are wholly contingent and gratuitous, the Holy Trinity fittingly creates and redeems. He is the sort of God who is able to do what Scripture says he has in fact done, that is, to speak a finite other into being by participation in himself, and to redeem and elevate such participation by way of the missions of the incarnate Son and outpoured Spirit. The triune love subsisting apart from us appropriately expresses such love in free covenantal love for us, and God does so precisely as the infinite God who remains immutable and impassible. In other words, God's freedom includes his freedom to reveal himself in, to, and for the other precisely as the God who eternally is.

Late modern theology has not remained satisfied with these two affirmations. If God's acts *ad extra* are only fitting, that is, truly self-revealing but absolutely contingent and thus by

44 This turn to theology proper is by no means novel. Indeed, Gottfried Thomasius himself had already tried to root kenosis in a re-thought doctrine of the Trinity (Sykes, "The Strange Persistence of Kenotic Christology,"353-6).

45 For a penetrating critique of new-style kenoticism, see Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 22-5. Compare Sykes, "The Strange Persistence of Kenotic Christology," 59-60.

no means self-constituting, then it seems that God is not bound to us as many would like him to be. The scandal of transcendence prompts an attempt to bring God down to earth, defining his existence in terms of a delimitation of his very being in relation to created history. In McCormack's case the justification for such a path proceeds from the fear of "abstraction," a fear concomitant with an utter rejection of classical theism's analogy of being. But whenever one conceives divine transcendence in a manner that denies created beings' graced participation in the Infinite, one inevitably begins to view metaphysics in any form as necessarily obscuring God's economic self-disclosure and thus as an exercise in intellectual idolatry. This is perhaps why Barthian revisionists have difficulty distinguishing between deistic modern natural religion and premodern Christian philosophy. As I have sought to show, however, one cannot avoid abstractions while coherently speaking of divine being and grace in relation to creation. Indeed, if McCormack wants to be consistent, he would have to collapse the immanent God into our economic encounter. This is the logical consequence of post-metaphysical thinking, which some trinitarian theologians have admitted and embraced.[46] Of course, McCormack is not willing to go this far. He attempts to salvage the immanent Trinity by locating the self-determining act in the eternal, to-be-temporally-enacted realm. As we have seen, this does not neutralize the problems but compromises divine transcendence and freedom just the same.

In sum, perhaps post-metaphysical theology too readily appropriates the characteristic values of late modernity. Perhaps the drive to think beyond the metaphysical formulations of the past have sprung forth from a coveting of the profane rather than from their inadequacy vis-à-vis Scripture. Too many modern theological quests concern the search for a figure who is with us on earth such that he is no longer above us in heaven, a ὑπόστασις who is identified with his earthly individuality such that his eternal procession has no logical priority, a Trinity whose covenantal boundedness means the abnegation of eternally self-sufficient love. But the vast majority of Christian thinkers have aimed to resist historicism just as rigorously as they seek to transcend dualism; the gospel revels in the scandal of transcendence just as that of particularity. Too many late modern theologies seek to overcome the dualists while insufficiently safeguarding the faith from modern historicist mythology. In this way they do not advance Christian discourse ahead of the premodern tradition, a tradition which maintained a proper place for ineffable paradox and thus navigated through inadequate dualisms and monisms, neither of which did justice to the miracle of the kenosis of the superabundant Word.

IV. THE PROSPECT OF CHRISTIAN KENOTICISM

If McCormack's modern kenoticism lacks scriptural intelligibility, then what should we do with the language of kenosis? At this point I would like to clarify that I am not arguing that there is no need for creative expansion of the received tradition. Exploring biblical and doctrinal resources in order to develop a more robust theology that includes a doctrine of kenosis may indeed result in a more adequate grasp and communication of the second of the tradition's two major recognitions: that creation and incarnation, precisely in their kenotic depths, are fitting for a God of infinite triune

46 For example, see Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991).

love. Evangelical theologians should continue to build upon the tradition by creatively showing how the kenotic shape of incarnation constitutes a fitting and true manifestation of God.[47] The fathers and scholastics were not always clear that God does not merely hide himself in humility in order to reveal his glorious self in resurrection, ascension and triumphal second coming. I would suggest, however, that when we seek to construct a doctrine of kenosis, we must expound the fittingness of the incarnation while properly distinguishing the eternal Creator and created history. For all forms of kenoticism which obscure the conceptual difference between God and the economy of salvation end up making the gratuitous character of the Trinity's creative, covenantal love incoherent.

Here we might take Thomas Aquinas as our guide. In the first article of the initial question in his Treatise on the Incarnation, he illuminates the appropriateness of the incarnation in both theological and anthropological terms, all the while maintaining the infinite disproportion between Creator and creature.[48] Without denying that "the mystery of the Incarnation was not completed through God being changed in any way," Thomas provides at least two reasons why the incarnate life of the Son befits God. First, insofar as goodness bears an intrinsically diffusive character, God fittingly communicates his infinite goodness in the highest manner in the Word's assumption of human life for man's salvation. Second, on the side of human being, "it is fitting that a creature which by nature is mutable, should not always be in one way." For "as the creature began to be, although it had not been before, so likewise, not having been previously united to God in Person, it was afterwards united to Him."

In this passage Thomas does what many kenoticists seek to do, only without supplanting the metaphysical tradition that safeguards divine transcendence and creation's gratuity. On the one hand, the incarnation is "new" as a contingent act of sheer grace, adding nothing to the divine being per se but rather a salvific effect for creation. On the other, there is something intrinsic to God and human being that renders the hypostatic union fitting. While Thomas employs neither trinitarian nor kenotic language, one could rather easily exploit the same paradigm of thought by rooting the self-emptying of the Son in the self-giving nature of the Trinity and giftedness of created being.[49] But as Thomas would have known well, one can only avoid the pitfalls of modern theology by making clear that the act's fitness does not do away with its contingent, mysterious quality. If the immutable divine Son lives humanly as a consequence of a free, miraculous act, and if the concrete reality of his human life, therefore, does not determine or change his eternal identity, then whatever we predicate of the Son *ad extra*, we cannot escape the conceptual distinction between the immanent Trinity, including the λόγος ἄσαρκος, and how God freely yet fittingly and truly manifests himself in the economy of salvation. The subject matter of the kenosis hymn in Philippians 2, therefore, does not permit us to conflate the immanent and economic order such that one term and concept could univocally encompass what it means to be the eternal Trinity, the Son incarnate, and the body of Christ.[50] On the contrary, kenosis

47 Two non-evangelical theologians who I think have done this more or less successfully, repudiating both Gnostic and Hegelian solutions, are Hans Urs Von Balthasar (*Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter* (trans. Aidan Nicholas; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), 23-35, and David Bentley Hart (*The Beauty of the Infinite*, 155ff., 357ff.).

48 *Summa Theologica* (trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province; London: Burns Oates & Washborne, 1911), III.1.1.

49 For example, see Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 357-8.

50 Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 29.

can function as a useful metaphor for the triune God's transcendently self-giving life, the free expression thereof in Christ, and the Church's kenotic participation therein, *only insofar as* it does not undermine the infinite disproportion between Creator and creature, the utter self-sufficiency of the former and the utter giftedness of the latter in accordance with the whole of Scripture's testimony.

This becomes even more necessary in view of the lingering effects of sin. Whatever "self-emptying" might signify in the Godhead, we must beware a kind of "first-Adam" anthropomorphism. What in eternity might best be spoken of as an infinite excess of hypostatic self-gift manifests itself in rather different terms within the sin-stained economy. Theological kenosis, in this sense, differs from kenosis in its salvific trajectory, with all the self-sacrifice, humiliation, suffering and death that it entails. Theologians should recognize, against the various anthropomorphic trinitarianisms, that eternal relations of origination constitute a unity that is wholly other than the "otherness" of alienation that fallen humanity experiences within created history. We must resist a theology which consists of, as Barth put it, "the image of our own unreconciled humanity projected onto deity."[51]

V. CONCLUSION

If we are to continue to employ the language of kenosis while avoiding the pitfalls of modern theology, I would suggest that we pay closer attention to the paradoxical Christological phrases that the Fathers and ancient laity held dear. As Cyril of Alexandria once doxologically proclaimed:

> He who was above all creation was in our human condition; the invisible one was made visible in the flesh; he who is from the heavens…was in the likeness of earthly things; the immaterial one could be touched; he who is free in his own nature came in the form of a slave; he who blesses all creation became accursed; he who is all righteousness was numbered among the transgressors; life itself came in the appearance of death.[52]

Insofar as the incarnation and hypostatic union are utterly unique, a contingent miracle that resists transposition into a human principle, perhaps we ought not hurry past this paradoxical mode of thought for the sake of conforming to more general criteria of rationality. Perhaps we ought to think of kenosis primarily as a metaphor signaling the ineffable mystery of an apocalyptic, salvifically-oriented miracle, the mystery in which the infinitely proceeding Son freely pours himself into his economic mission, while simultaneously remaining transcendently full, for the Church and her salvation. In this sense God's kenosis is the human form that the immutable Son's superabundant life takes when he freely chooses to share redemptively his infinitely self-giving life with impoverished creatures. To quote Cyril once more, it concerns the "mystical, profound, and truly wonderful" work in and through the person of Jesus Christ.[53]

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51 *Church Dogmatics* (trans. Geoffrey William Bromiley & Thomas F. Torrance; New York: T & T Clark, 2009), IV/1, 186.

52 *On the Unity of Christ* (trans. McGuckin; Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 61.

53 Ibid., 105.