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From Divine Sovereignty to Divine Conversation: Karl Barth and Robert Jenson on God's Being and Analogy

Piotr J. Malysz

Tautologically speaking, God is that to which theology seeks to give expression. Contemporary Christian theology, no less and perhaps even more than the theology of ages past, appears by and large to be preoccupied with speaking of God as God, with letting God be God. It conceives of this task, however, in its own peculiar way. This should come as no surprise. Theology in general, regardless of what it considers its objectives specifically to consist in, can never afford to lose sight of its context without degenerating into sterility. Consequently, contemporary theology remains acutely aware of the post-Enlightenment criticism of the older metaphysics, especially the latter's naïve construal of humans' epistemological relation to their world. It likewise cannot ignore the sweeping socio-political and cultural changes that have radically altered the face of Western societies. Neither can it simply overlook the history of confessional divisiveness, which has accompanied, and not infrequently spurred, the theological enterprise since its inception—divisiveness often brought about by the elevation of theological constructs to the status of inviolable and absolute truth. Hence, contemporary theology's preoccupation with idols, as it seeks to prevent human concepts from taking the place of the divine. In today's world, theology seems to have taken it upon itself to assure that God is spoken of as *God*; theology sees its task as that of *letting* God be God. Inconsistently, in this task it presumes to know what or who God is, even as it denies that any such idolatrous hypostatization is possible.¹ This denial results from the fact that *being* has

¹ Interesting in this context is Jacques Derrida's statement, "Indeed it must have been possible to speak [about God] in order to allow the question 'How to avoid speaking?' to arise." A proponent of the radical silencing of God-talk and cessation of God-thought, Derrida criticises apophaticism for its inability to do justice to God: on the one hand, it pushes God beyond the boundary of thought, but on the other, seeking to do justice to the curious prevalence of the lexeme, it, nonetheless, feels compelled to speak about God. See "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 99. Cf. Eberhard Jüngel: "[W]e counter the obvious thesis, so frequently advanced today, of the origin of the question about God in the radical questionableness of human

become a suspect category; language has been exposed as inherently fallible, but silence is not an option. Eberhard Jüngel has diagnosed the contemporary situation pithily: "At the end of the history of metaphysics, God appears to have become unthinkable," while at the same time being "talked to death . . . silenced by the very words that seek to talk about him."²

Whatever it is that specifically drives the currently fashionable hypertrophic hyper-apophaticism,³ this study will not attempt to present the latter's genealogy. Rather, having set forth the broader context, the goal will be to analyze a much less trendy contemporary alternative. Keeping seriously in mind human proneness to idolatry, I hope to give an account of how God can, nevertheless, be thought without falling into the inconsistency of both presuming to know God and simultaneously denying his thinkability. In particular, this paper seeks briefly to compare Karl Barth's and Robert W. Jenson's doctrines of God, with special emphasis on their ascription of being to God, as well as human epistemic and linguistic capacity to give expression to this divine being.⁴ For all the far-reaching affinity between Barth and Jenson, it will be demonstrated that, while the former avoids the potential charge of idolatry by rigorously maintaining God's sovereign lordship over being, knowledge, and language, Jenson organically joins the three categories by exegeting the manner of God's being, as it is spoken of in the church's confession, in terms of divine narrativity and drama. He thus arrives at a more elegant understanding of the difference/distance between God and humanity in terms of conversational distance-nearness.

existence with the phenomenologically more obvious assertion: God can be asked about only because there has already been talk about him." *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute Between Theism and Atheism*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 248.

² Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, vii.

³ In the words of Karl Barth: "a stream of formless inundation." *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thomsson, 14 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936-1977), II/1, 232. Hereafter, abbreviated to CD, followed by the volume number/part number and page reference.

⁴ For an attempt to couch the doctrine of God with no recourse to the (idolatrous) concept of being altogether, see Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991). Marion's concerns do, to some degree, overlap with those expressed in this paper, even though, as will be seen, neither Barth nor Jenson seek a wholesale rejection of the category of being, but rather its theological reconstitution.

I. Sovereignty: Karl Barth

Spectatorship and the Idol of Being

A systematic theologian who was keenly aware of the paths trodden and blind alleys explored by his predecessors, Barth voices his deep suspicion of the concept of being, in particular when it is exalted into the "criterion of all things" (CD II/1, 243). On the one hand, it is undoubtedly correct that theology must let God be God by systematically giving expression to God's actuality and, in so doing, must also underscore the actuality of the world as the work of God, who actually is the world's creator. In other words, theology as speech about God must seriously take into consideration the reality of both God and the world. But therein lurks the danger. For, on the other hand, as *human* speech about God, theology always runs the risk of illicitly and simplistically concluding from divine and human actuality to "a being common to God and man which finally and properly establishes and upholds the fellowship between them" (CD II/1, 243). In Barth's opinion, this conclusion on the part of the theologian cannot but show itself to be arbitrary and self-absorbed. Proceeding chiefly and in the first place through the concept of being creates the illusion that God's actuality is being upheld, whereas, in fact, it is the human actuality that inevitably becomes the standard of all else. And knowledge of God which takes as its starting point the being of humanity can only be empty speculation rooted in deceitful self-autonomy: "Our supposed idea of God, the object of our most intimate feeling, will always be the idea of the world and in the last resort of man. It will always be our own reflection, the hypostatization of our thought and speech" (CD II/1, 228; cf. 63, 71-72). In short, epistemically to privilege the idea of shared being (however this sharing is envisioned) is to misunderstand both God and humanity.⁵ Let us look at the nature of this misunderstanding further.

Barth blames seventeenth-century Protestant Orthodoxy – both Lutheran and Reformed – for uncritically borrowing the concept of being from medieval scholasticism, thus unwittingly laying the foundation for the naturalistic and anthropomorphic reductionism to which the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment eras subjected the doctrine of God. In his discussion of Andreas Quenstedt's view of analogical speech about God,⁶ Barth notes that Quenstedt (1617-1688) – who otherwise

⁵ "God is not God if he is considered and conceived as one in a series of like objects" (CD II/1, 15); "Man cannot and must not know himself apart from God, but together with God as his 'opposite'" (CD II/1, 10). More examples appear below.

⁶ CD II/1, 237-243.

maintains a strong Lutheran emphasis on the theological centrality of the doctrine of the justification of *sinners* through *faith* in the *cross*—inadvertently and inconsistently makes not a single reference to God’s gracious self-disclosure in Christ as fundamentally constitutive of the knowledge of God. Instead, Quenstedt first rejects, and rightly so, the *analogia inequalitatis* and the *analogia proportionalitatis*, only, however, to affirm humans’ natural mode of knowing God on the basis of the *analogia attributionis* construed as an intrinsic property. The analogy of inequality is not a viable mode of predication because it assumes that the analogans and the analogatum are both species of the same genus, which can never be true of both God and humanity. Similarly, the analogy of proportionality, which consists in the similarity of two or more entities through the agreement of some of their determinations and the disagreement of others, is unacceptable as an expression of humans’ status vis-à-vis God and their knowledge of him. By contrast, the analogy of attribution expresses a similarity between two objects, whereby what they share in common is primarily and properly possessed by the one and is only derivatively, through dependence, *either* ascribed to or apprehended by the other (in the analogy’s extrinsic variety) *or* possessed by the other (i.e., intrinsically present). By opting for the intrinsic interpretation of the analogy of attribution, Quenstedt, according to Barth, posits a knowledge of God which the creature, in that it exists, possesses in itself apart from God’s revelation, despite the creature’s alleged sinfulness.⁷ Even when Quenstedt is led to distinguish, on the strength of his view of analogical predication, between humans’ relative being and God’s absolute being, this being is “without question identical in God and in us” (CD II/1, 241). Put differently, being has emerged as the fundamental and constant category in which both God and humans participate.⁸ The fact of this participation cannot but be known to humanity. As a result, the being of God is in fact knowable and accessible to human beings apart from God, through self-examination. Unfortunately, this situation not only presents the subsequent reality of God’s special revelation with an epistemic straightjacket but, at best, essentially falsifies the character and import of God’s revelation and, at worst, makes the latter redundant.

⁷ “[R]evelation is not necessary to make us participants of the truth of God. We are so already, to the extent that we are, if only relatively, what God is absolutely” (CD II/1, 241).

⁸ “[T]he criterion of all truth . . . is not God at all, but the being in which God and man—the former absolutely, the latter relatively—participate” (CD II/1, 241).

Thus, for Barth, Quenstedt's doctrine of analogy is, in fact, coextensive with the Roman Catholic doctrine of the analogy of being, to which—because of its seeming Christological indifference—Barth refers in no uncertain terms as “the invention of Antichrist” (CD I/1, x; II/1, 82). In that, by proceeding from human being, it posits being as the overarching category, the *analogia entis* necessarily raises a host of speculative issues that then must lead to other questions concerning the transition from possibility to actuality. Put differently, the *analogia entis* must first deal with abstract considerations before it can be applied.⁹ Abstract resolutions, however, can be little more than arbitrary. Thus Barth recognizes that the general question of God's knowability can be posed. But such a question can have only a human point of departure: “a preconceived idea about the transcendence and supramundanity of God” (CD II/1, 15), “even [about] God as the incomparably real being” —preconceived, because this idea is grounded in the claim that, “[a]s himself a being, man is able to know a being as such . . . [and thus] all being” (CD II/1, 84). In the end, therefore, the question whether God is knowable will likewise have only a human answer, or rather will lack an answer altogether. Any decision concerning the knowability of God, rooted in general epistemological considerations, leads to doubt, for as such it necessarily arises as only one possibility among many. This situation is hardly remedied by radically separating God and humans within the conceptually delineated spectrum of being through qualifying their respective being as absolute and relative, or through ascribing to God transcendence, supramundanity, or incomparable reality.¹⁰ When all is said and done, the product of human

⁹ Cf. CD II/1, 84.

¹⁰ Jüngel points out that the *late* Barth's suspicion of the *analogia entis* did not consist in the analogy's seeming relativization of the qualitatively infinite difference between God and humans. Rather, Barth feared that the *analogia entis* “would not do justice to the difference between God and man by overlooking the nearness of God.” *God as the Mystery of the Word*, 282. If my interpretation of Barth's understanding of the *analogia entis* is correct, then what Jüngel seems to overlook is that Barth's fear had an even deeper motivation. Its source was not so much the analogy's inability to account for God's nearness, but rather the analogy's arbitrary radicalization of the separation between God and humans in an attempt to save God from the multiple possibilities, the ambiguity and the abstraction inherent in the analogy's speculative structure.

This renders a part of the Roman Catholic defense of the *analogia entis* simply misdirected. For example, the allegation that “Aquinas' analogy does not rest on a preconceived epistemology, but remains valid both in a natural and in a revealed epistemology” misses the point that it is rather the epistemology's arbitrariness, abstraction and revelation-neutral character that Barth finds objectionable. Barth's own epistemology is, in a sense, very much a pre-conceived one—more on this below. Likewise, to say that “Aquinas' analogy does not destroy the infinite qualitative

questioning after the possibility of knowing God is a certainty always and everywhere riddled with uncertainty, a knowledge which knows God—even in his lordship, even in his creatorship—only as ambiguous and so as ultimately unthinkable.¹¹ When the question whether God is known is asked, there can be no actual answer but a persistent question mark that leads to self-deception or despair.¹²

In keeping with his criticism of Quenstedt, Barth's denial of the natural knowledge of God through the concept of being appears to be largely hamartiological in character. To ask after the possibility of knowing God cannot but be self-serving: "the attempt of man to answer the riddle of his own existence and of that of the world, and in that way to master himself and the world" (CD II/1, 85).¹³ Barth is emphatic: in knowing God, we can never be mere "spectators . . . on neutral ground" (CD II/1, 26, 81), seeking to assure God's Godhood, seeking to know God as the god whose definition we have already arrived at on the basis of, and from within, our existence, regardless of how different, even infinitely different, from us we might have made him. Neither can we act interestedly, in "the attempt to preserve and affirm [ourselves—which] is not only the possibility but the deepest reality of [human] existence" (CD II/1, 135). In brief, to ask *whether* God exists is to misconstrue God and to render him arbitrary; at bottom it is to misinterpret oneself, to distort one's being, and so, by departing from the wrong place, to arrive at a vacuum, an idol,¹⁴ characterized by being and transcendence.

The Lord Who Knows Himself and Gives Himself to Be Known

What then is Barth's alternative? According to the Swiss theologian, in coming to know God, we do not proceed from the establishment of a

difference between God and man, because it simply asserts the priority of God over man with respect to the perfections of both God and man" is to overlook the fact that it is the positing of this "infinite qualitative difference" and of the "priority of God over man" as a defense against indeterminacy that leads Barth to reject the *analogia entis*. For the Roman Catholic citations, see Battista Mondin, *The Principle of Analogy in Protestant and Catholic Theology*, 2nd ed. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968), 169-170. The question whether or not Barth really understood *Aquinas* is beyond the scope of this article.

¹¹ Cf. CD II/1, 70, 80.

¹² Cf. CD II/1, 91.

¹³ Our analogies (e.g., of lordship) "do not point us to God, but to ourselves, to our God-alienated souls, to our threatened life on this side of death, to a merely possible lordship set in the sphere of our choosing" (CD II/1, 76).

¹⁴ Cf. CD II/1, 86.

possibility to the identification of an actuality—an enterprise which is necessarily arbitrary and open to questioning. Rather, “[k]nowledge of God can always proceed only from the knowledge of his existence in the twofold sense that we always have this knowledge and that we must have it from God Himself in order consequently to know him” (CD II/1, 39). It is the actuality of God—more specifically, of God’s self-disclosure—that unambiguously determines its own possibility.¹⁵ This proposition underlies not only Barth’s entire ontology,¹⁶ but is also of fundamental epistemological significance. It asserts that “[t]he knowability of God can be known only in the real knowledge of God” (CD II/1, 65). Consequently, we do not ask whether God is known, but only *in what manner* and *how far* he is known.¹⁷ We shall now look at these questions in light of Barth’s criticism of the concept of being and of the doctrine of analogy as it was elaborated by Roman Catholic and Protestant scholasticism.

Because it is rooted in God’s revelation, “[t]he knowledge of God,” holds Barth, “takes place, not in a free choice, but with a very definite constraint . . . the constraint of God’s Word” (CD II/1, 7). Therefore, only where this word is proclaimed in faithfulness to the biblical witness does the possibility of knowing God present itself. And there is only one such place: the church of Jesus Christ. “The Gospel of the Church of God is . . . of necessity a defined, circumscribed and limited message . . . It explains, *not an idea of God*, but His name revealed in His deeds” (CD II/1, 20, emphasis added). The actuality of the church is itself a revelatory deed of God, the work of his Word—the church exists solely through the proclamation of Jesus Christ. Thus, the actuality of the church is itself a witness to the actuality of God’s revelation and the corresponding possibility of knowing God. In short, for Barth, true knowledge of God arises from the church and serves the church.¹⁸

Now, because the church exists thanks to the gospel and by proclaiming the gospel (even though the gospel, and within it God himself, is that which the church makes available), God in his revelation remains the Lord of the Church. Put differently, in the church’s confession, God gives himself as an object to be known by humans: “Biblical faith lives upon the

¹⁵ “Where the actuality exists there is also the corresponding possibility” (CD II/1, 5).

¹⁶ So Eberhard Jüngel, *God’s Being is in Becoming*, trans. John Webster (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 33.

¹⁷ Cf. CD II/1, 4–5, 63. Hence, Barth notes, the doctrine of the knowledge of God cannot be considered as an independent prolegomenon to the systematic-theological task; rather, it is an intrinsic part of the doctrine of God itself (cf. CD II/1, 32).

¹⁸ Cf. CD II/1, 63, 180.

objectivity of God" (CD II/1, 15). But he remains, at the same time, the subject and the sole initiator of this knowledge of himself: "Biblical knowledge of God is always based on encounters . . . in which God exercises in one way or another His Lordship over man" (CD II/1, 23). This manner of God's being known by humans as the subject of his own objectivity is of tremendous significance for the interpretation not only of Barth's understanding of the divine-human relationship, but also of God himself. As the subject of his knowledge, "God is known by God, and what is more, by God alone" (CD II/1, 233; cf. 65-66, 183), Barth avers. But as the object of his knowledge, God gives himself to be known by humans, who in his objectivity come to know him as the subject. This is the content of God's revelation; this is the church's proclamation—beyond it there is no God but an ambiguous and endless string of impossible possibilities. To show how easy it is to relapse into this abstraction in interpreting Barth's principle "God is known only by God," we may take as an example one of Barth's Roman Catholic critics who maintains that the principle necessarily breaks down. "If it is false, somebody else besides God knows Him. If it is true, there is at least another being besides God, namely Karl Barth, that knows something about God."¹⁹ Against such a one-sided construal of God's self-knowledge and human knowledge of God, Barth holds, in keeping with his emphasis on actuality, that God's "revelation is characterised as revelation of the *truth* beside which there is no other and above which there is none higher" (CD II/1, 51, emphasis added). How is one then specifically to unpack the principle that God alone knows himself and, at the same time, believe that God can himself be truly known in what the church witnesses to?

To answer this question, we must continually remind ourselves to keep God's actuality as our premise. The church's witness is to Jesus Christ as the man in whom God has become a human being. Now, if the man Jesus is God and in him God truly knows himself, this actuality means that such self-knowledge is possible for God, and therefore must exist as an actuality already in God himself. It means, therefore, that God simply *is* the Father, whom Jesus, as the Father's eternal Son, proclaimed. In short, God corresponds to himself—is himself—in his revelation. To express this correspondence, Barth distinguishes, therefore, between God's primary and secondary objectivity: "God is objectively immediate to himself [primary objectivity], but to us He is objectively mediate . . . clothed under the sign and veil of other objects different from Himself. His secondary

¹⁹ Mondin, *The Principle of Analogy in Protestant and Catholic Theology*, 162 n. 3.

objectivity is fully true for it has its correspondence and basis in His primary objectivity" (CD II/1, 16). It must be noted at this point that the distinction between God's primary and secondary objectivity does not mean that they can ever be separated, that the subjectivity and objectivity of God can ever be considered, let alone exist, apart from each other. Rather, both are a fact of God's revelation.²⁰ Their togetherness is inseparably enclosed within one proposition: *God reveals himself* (that is, gives himself to be known), *as the Lord* (that is, as none other than God), who, as God, alone knows himself, and so can give himself to be known. In this way, the humanity of Christ is not accidental or external to God's very being and self-knowledge.

To press further the issue of the inseparability of God's secondary and primary objectivity, one must place Barth's assertion, "God is known by God," side by side with his affirmation of divine sovereignty, "God ultimately wills Himself," he wills his glory. This "willing is primarily a determination of the love of the Father and the Son in the fellowship of the Holy Ghost" (CD II/2, 169). In this apparent self-seeking, the seeking of his glory,²¹ God desires, however, to find himself together with a particular man, identifiable by a name and a story. Only as this theanthropic totality does God's willing constitute God's primal decision: "[i]n this primal decision God did not remain satisfied with His own being in Himself" but rather "has caught up man into the sovereign presupposing of Himself" (CD II/2, 168, 176). So much so that the Logos, the second mode of divine subsistence, is and remains a stopgap if "it" is considered without the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth. What this means is that God's being is decision (CD II/2, 175), a decision for otherness, for creatureliness made in the loving freedom of God. Consequently, just as God's self-willing is not a self-seeking, neither does God's self-knowledge have the form of closed unknowability. On the contrary, both will and knowledge represent and implement God's openness to the creature, the permanence of which is underwritten by God's (and therefore no one else's) free (and therefore committed) initiative. For it is in willing himself that God eternally comes to know himself. And so, on account of his loving decision, God does not know himself without humanity: "the only begotten Son of God and

²⁰ So Jüngel: "precisely in order to understand the objectivity of God *in his revelation*, Barth infers from this objectivity a 'primary objectivity' of God in God's innertrinitarian being, differentiated from God's objectivity in revelation. [But] Barth understands this 'innertrinitarian inference' . . . as *itself knowledge of revelation* (and not metaphysical speculation!)." *God's Being is in Becoming*, 63; emphasis added.

²¹ Cf. CD II/2, 142, 178.

therefore God Himself . . . has become the bearer of our flesh, and does not exist as God's Son from eternity to eternity except in our flesh. Our flesh is therefore present when He knows God as the Son the Father, when God knows Himself. In our flesh God knows Himself" (CD II/1, 151). In short, the being-in-willing of God is the foundation of the historical *existence of humanity*; at the same time the self-knowledge of God underlies the possibility of *our knowledge of God* as the one who loves us in his freedom. There is in Barth an "*intrinsically* divine basis of God's revelation" (CD II/2, 97, emphasis added).

Because, in God's knowledge of himself in our flesh, God's being and his revelation—if they are truly to be God's being in the actuality of his revelation—are inseparably conjoined, these two must be explicated further and explicitly through the lens of the Son's assumption of the flesh into his divinity.

Since we have been implicitly following the order of coming to the knowledge of God, let us begin with revelation. According to Barth, "[r]evelation means the giving of signs . . . revelation means sacrament" (CD II/1, 52). Now, since God reveals himself uniquely in the humanity of Jesus by knowing himself in it, "[t]he humanity of Jesus Christ as such is the first sacrament, the foundation of everything that God instituted and used in His revelation as a secondary objectivity both before and after the epiphany of Jesus Christ" (CD II/1, 54).²² Briefly put, the humanity of Jesus determines the general incarnational pattern of God's self-disclosure, both in the history of Israel and of the church. This pattern is one of veiling and unveiling. God veils himself in what is "foreign and improper to Himself . . . the conceal[ing] of His objectivity by the quite different objectivity of the creature" (CD II/1, 55). Yet even in this concealment "the knowledge of God is unlike all other knowledge in that its object is the living Lord of the knowing man" (CD II/1, 21). The reason God thus lowers and veils himself is that in his good-pleasure God desires "to be known by us according to the measure of our own human cognition . . . in a temporal way" (CD II/1, 61). Consequently, revelation is never identical with God himself.²³ It discloses God himself as a mystery.²⁴ Nonetheless, because God actually desires to be known and, on account of his good-pleasure, discloses

²² On the construal of the pre-incarnate Logos as a 'stop-gap' for Jesus' humanity, see CD II/2, 96. See also Jüngel's comments in *God's Being is in Becoming*, 95, and 78–80 for a discussion of Barth's concept of God's immanent being as "ours in advance," self-consistent and self-corresponding.

²³ Cf. CD II/1, 211.

²⁴ Cf. CD II/1, 40.

himself in earthly temporality, God is “who He is even in the sphere of our apprehension” (*CD II/1*, 244), he “is who He is in His works” (*CD II/1*, 260). Thus we can cleave to God only by cleaving to his work that takes place in the creaturely sphere.²⁵ It ought to be obvious at this point that divine veiling and unveiling are not equally balanced: “the relationship between veiling and unveiling is not symmetrical equivocal, vacillating or obscure, nor is it a reversal and alternation dependent on the arbitrariness of God and man,” rather, both concepts refer to the grace of the revelation of God (*CD II/1*, 236; cf. 199, 215). For Barth the simultaneity of God’s veiling in unveiling constitutes a teleologically ordered dialectic of incomprehensibility amidst definiteness.²⁶ What all this amounts to is that, because God’s self-disclosure happens in the manner of divine condescension and accommodation, it can be apprehended but not understood. Moreover, on account of both its manner and its object, the knowledge of God arising out of his self-disclosure can never exhaust the depth of God’s being. Only God knows himself. Yet, despite the inexhaustibility of God’s being, in his revelation God shows himself to be self-same: “The fact that God gives to us only a share in the truth of His knowledge of Himself cannot mean that He does not give Himself to be known by us as the One He is” (*CD II/1*, 52). Barth does not deny that “a further knowledge of God” is possible, but it can only be intensive in nature and so “will only lead us deeper into just this entirety of His being” (*CD II/1*, 52). In short, because God unveils himself by veiling himself, he discloses himself as God, the Lord whom the knowing humans can never objectify or possess, but who in all his self-possession gives himself to be known by them as an object.

We now move on to God’s being and the way it is to be understood, as a fact of revelation, through God’s secondary objectivity. God reveals his divine lordship in his being “the Father of His own eternal Son and with Him the source of the Holy Spirit” (*CD II/1*, 48). These three modes of God’s actuality are disclosed in his knowledge of himself in the man Jesus, and so, in that in Christ God corresponds to himself, God is likewise actually triune in his eternal self. Trinity is an occurrence in God himself which gives strength to our knowledge of God. Consequently, in knowing God, humans can never bypass his triune being:

The illegitimate encroachment on our part is to resist the divine encroachment when we have to do with the truth of the truth itself, and

²⁵ Cf. *CD II/1*, 53.

²⁶ Cf. *CD II/1*, 232–233.

to ask after a truth which is superior to the openness between the Father and the Son by the Holy Spirit, as if this openness were not the original and real openness, the source and norm of all others, and as if there were a higher criterion than the fact that God is God and that in His revelation is also God among us and for us. (CD II/1, 68).

As Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, God is thus determinate, even though the possibility corresponding to the actuality of his being Father, Son, and Holy Spirit must remain hidden and inexhaustible.²⁷ Therefore, in this definiteness, albeit full of hiddenness and inexhaustibility, these names for the modes of God's being must not be regarded as illustrative but interpretative in nature.²⁸ As the words of God's self-demonstration, they give authoritative (on the authority of God's use of them) expression in human language to God's revelatory self-correspondence. In this function they thus gain a new meaning, a revelatory meaning, that can now inform their subsequent use. In sum, by so construing the doctrine of the Trinity, Barth does not reject the concept of being as a determinative, and so also constraining, category. Recall that he criticized the application of this concept to God in his discussion of the *analogia entis*, but he did so not because the concept was inherently idolatrous, as contemporary theology appears to think, but because in its application it was arbitrarily elevated to the status of an overarching category whose anthropocentric abstraction could never form the foundation of the divine-human fellowship. Here, however, Barth reclaims being in reference to God, showing its determinateness to be one of God's self-knowledge in the mutual objectivity of the Father, the Son, in whom the Father knows himself in the flesh, and their Spirit. Proceeding from God's revelation, Barth shows God's being to be one of determinate, though incomprehensible, revelation-oriented becoming.²⁹

Displaced Knowers

We began our discussion of Barth's alternative to the ambiguity and arbitrariness that characterizes the knowledge of God arrived at through the *analogia entis* by pointing to the actuality of the church as the witness to the actuality of God's revelation. The existence of the church, however,

²⁷ "The hiddenness of God is the inconceivability of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; of the one true God, our Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer, who as such is known only to Himself, and is therefore viewable and conceivable only to Himself, and alone capable of speaking of Himself aright, i.e., in truth" (CD II/1, 197).

²⁸ Cf. Jüngel, *God's Being is in Becoming*, 24.

²⁹ To this, see Jüngel's paraphrase of Barth's doctrine of God.

implies not only the revelatory presence of its Lord, but also the presence of the people of God, who, in him that offers himself as the object of their knowledge, know and glorify their Lord.³⁰ Barth's harsh rejection of the analogy of being was aimed at demonstrating that "[w]e possess no analogy on the basis of which the nature and being of God as the Lord can be accessible to us" (CD II/1, 75). It is so because God cannot "be added to give content and substance to what is supposed to be analogous to Him" (CD II/1, 76). Yet, in that the Father knows himself in the humanity of the Son, "we do not stand outside but inside [Jesus Christ] . . . In Him the fact that God is knowable is true not only for God Himself, not only between the Father and Son, but for man, for us" (CD II/1, 151). Thus "God's revelation breaks through the emptiness of the movement of thought which we call our knowledge of God" (CD II/1, 74). In this revelation "our knowing receives the character of a very definite permission" (CD II/1, 243).

This permission, however, does not leave human beings indifferent. God does not allow humans to be mere spectators of his revelation, but rather discloses to them his re-creative, reconciliatory, and redemptive lordship in which they can be truly human in the truth of God himself.³¹ God's revelation, as it touches sinners, brings about the sinners' displacement, moving them into a position from which they cannot only truly interpret, but also truly be, themselves: "Man in the cosmos, who is confronted with God's revelation . . . becomes, as the man confronted by God's revelation, objectively another man . . . namely one who in the whole compass of his existence can now know and has to acknowledge the might and glory of this God," who in his self-understanding no longer really exists as such or "exists only in one monstrous misunderstanding" (CD II/1, 110, 112; cf. 27). In God's revelation, "[m]an exists in Jesus Christ and in Him alone" (CD II/1, 149).

Now, because sinners are so displaced, all the prior knowledge of God they might think they had must come to naught as self-serving and idolatrous. It cannot be built on. This may initially seem strange,³² given

³⁰ Cf. CD II/1, 180.

³¹ "Knowledge of God is not the relationship of an already existing subject to an object that enters into his sphere and is therefore obedient to the laws of his sphere. On the contrary, this knowledge first of all creates the subject of its knowledge by coming into the picture" (CD II/1, 21; cf. 39).

³² So Mondin: "I may, for instance, examine the same star with the naked eye and with a telescope. Certainly with the telescope I shall see the star much more clearly and completely, but the star always remains the same. Similarly, one may know that God

that Barth claims elsewhere that our true knowledge of God is never exhausted, that God alone truly knows himself. Note, however, that in the case of revelation, our knowledge is always correct, having God as its object—it simply may not be intensive enough. By contrast, the sinner's own knowledge, established through the analogy of being, has the wrong point of departure, because it is prior to the displacement of faith. It is extensively wrong, in that it is grounded on arbitrary and abstract determination. The sinner's knowledge is an objectless knowledge.

This, however, does not mean that believers' knowledge of God is something that becomes theirs to do with as they please. Rather, knowledge of God always happens in the humility of faith, namely, in the recognition of the lordship of the Father, who, by knowing himself in the flesh of the Son, lovingly knows the creature. Knowledge of God happens in the recognition of one's creatureliness. Now, because this knowledge is by God's gracious permission and because it is a knowledge of the Lord by the creature, it is never possessed.³³ "The knowledge of God is wholly and utterly His own readiness to be known by us, grounded in His being and activity" (CD II/1, 66). What this means is that "readiness on the side of man . . . can have only a borrowed, mediated and subsequent independence. It can be communicated to man only as a capacity for gratitude and obedience" (CD II/1, 66). Yet, because this "obedience is not that of a slave but of a child" (CD II/1, 36), thus, even though the knowledge of God is not possessed, it is lovingly and "continually renewed and re-established by its object" (CD II/1, 24). This is true gain, for—in the displacement to a position in which we can be ourselves and from which we can see ourselves in the true light of God's revelation as the revelation of our maker—we are freed from ourselves. In short, because we do not begin with ourselves, we, therefore, are not doomed to end with our puny capacity.³⁴ In knowing God "we are not lost in that ascending and descending movement but held—held as by the mercy of God but for that reason really held" (CD II/1, 75), as "God allows us our time in order that He may always have time for us, revelation time" (CD II/1, 62).

To summarize, in their sinfulness humans cannot know God at all because they are displaced from themselves. Nonetheless, as believers, they can know God only because he brings them, as they are in their

exists without knowing that He is triune, yet it is truly God one knows." *The Principle of Analogy in Protestant and Catholic Theology*, 160-161.

³³ Cf. CD II/1, 182, 188.

³⁴ Cf. CD II/1, 43.

creatureliness, to the discernment of his relational and revelatory activity. Redeemed creation is God's creation, not a godless one. Therefore, rather than annul the distance between God and itself, on account of God's constant relating to the world, it humbly upholds the infinite ontological distance between the creator and the creature.

To express this relationship of distance in nearness, Barth's alternative to the *analogia entis* as the basis of human knowledge of God is the analogy of faith (*analogia fidei*).³⁵ God is knowable only because he actually relates to humanity, but he is known in this relationship only through faith. Faith discerns his presence in the objects of the world and in human language—but, because it never possesses its knowledge of God, it does so only "looking back from God's revelation" (CD II/1, 229). This is an important qualification, for it constitutes the reason why Barth does not in principle reject the concept of the analogy of being, provided it should signify participation in being through God's gracious revelation apprehended in faith.³⁶ Consequently, in the first place, if being is understood as following upon the works of God,³⁷ then, through faith, which recognizes God's relationship to humanity, humans become extrinsic analogues of God.³⁸ Further, as a re-creative and redemptive displacement of the sinner, faith confesses that, just as God displaces the sinner into his divine being in order that the latter might know him as Lord, he likewise sacramentally and incarnationally claims earthly objects as vehicles of his unique objectivity. Finally, in the same manner, God lays hold of human language as the analogical medium of his revelation.³⁹

Before concluding this discussion of Karl Barth, let us briefly consider this linguistic aspect of God's self-disclosure. Despite his reservations, Barth does not discard the concept of analogy because, although human words correspond to and agree with the being of God, they are never on a par with that being—"that would mean the annulment either of the deity of God or of the manhood of man" (CD II/1, 233). In order to preserve this revelatory distinction, Barth therefore rejects univocality, as obliterating the distinction altogether (veiling), and equivocality, as doing away with

³⁵ Cf. CD II/1, 82; "the analogy of grace and faith . . . which is made accessible to us in incomprehensible reality" (CD II/1, 85).

³⁶ Cf. CD II/1, 82.

³⁷ Cf. CD II/1, 83.

³⁸ "What converts the creature into an analogue of God lies only in the veracity of the object known analogously in the knowledge of God, and therefore in the veracity of God himself" (CD II/1, 239).

³⁹ Cf. CD II/1, 224–5, 229–230.

God's self-same determinateness (unveiling) in his revelation.⁴⁰ He states: "In distinction to both likeness and unlikeness 'analogy' means similarity, i.e., a partial correspondence and agreement (and, therefore, one which limits both parity and disparity between two or more different entities)" (CD II/1, 225).

Barth's adoption of the traditional category is, however, also an adaptation, as ought to be obvious from our discussion so far. First of all, he emphasizes that analogy as a concept is insufficient, in that, while God gives himself as an object, he is not an object among other objects to be subjected to the prior rules of analogy.⁴¹ Analogy is further insufficient because "[t]o designate the positivity and truth of the relationship between [God and humanity] we use the concept of similarity and therefore of a partial correspondence and agreement" (CD II/1, 234). Yet neither "the one, entire and indivisible being of God, who has unreservedly made Himself accessible and imparted Himself to us in His revelation without reservation," nor the human being, entire and indivisible in its creatureliness and sinfulness, is calculable (CD II/1, 234). "For in this relationship man is confronted by God" (CD II/1, 234; cf. 235-236). Second, instead of the "static" doctrine of analogy based on the concept of being (nature), Barth puts forth a dynamic concept of analogy⁴² revolving around God's veiling and unveiling in his revelatory relating to the world (grace). In his understanding, Barth emphasizes the fact that God, by disclosing himself through claiming worldly objects and human language and through displacing sinners, reveals that the world belongs to him as its creator and that it is rightly his own. Thus, in the same way that God's revelation discloses our creaturely inability to know God and yet makes him known to us, God's revelation also discloses our inability to speak of God and simultaneously opens up our lips. God claims and justifies human thinking and speaking, as well as upholding those who think and speak of him in humility before him. In short, God justifies the entirety of human existence in Christ.⁴³

In conclusion, Barth maintains the distinction between God and humans by construing God's revelatory nearness as the actual establishment of his

⁴⁰ "We are forced to decide against the *univoce* because it conflicts with the confession of God's veiling in His revelation, and against the *aequivoce* because it contradicts the confession of His unveiling; against the one as against the other because it cannot be united with the confession of God's grace in his revelation" (CD II/1, 240).

⁴¹ Cf. CD II/1, 226.

⁴² Cf. CD II/1, 231.

⁴³ Cf. CD II/1, 193, 214.

lordship. As such it can never leave us indifferent. "We cannot speak of the knowability of God as an abstract possibility. For it is concretely realised by God Himself, in the Father and in the Son by the Holy Spirit" (CD II/1, 68). God's lordship is that of the Father, who knows himself in the human flesh of his divine Son by the Spirit that proceeds from both. It is a re-creative and redemptive lordship, whose nature is becoming and through which humans, with the totality of their existence, also become what they truly are. Specifically, God manifests his triune lordship by displacing humanity from its sinful self-deception and into participation in his grace. In this Barth shows that being is not an inherently idolatrous category, provided that its content is determined by the actuality of God's revelation. Further, God manifests his lordship by offering and upholding true knowledge of himself. Finally, he reclaims human language and endows it with the capacity to express him. In all this, the overarching principle remains that "Christology is and must remain the life-centre of theology" (CD II/1, 242).

Yet, despite this unparalleled christological (and hamartiological) emphasis, one is left wondering whether Barth's reinterpretation of the concepts of being and analogy through the lens of God's objective lordship has not inadvertently retained too much of the arbitrariness of the scholastic doctrine. In his attempt to conjoin God's actual knowability with the fact that it is God's knowability, does Barth not juxtapose objectivity and lordship to such a degree that conceptually they become the outermost limits of the infinite spectrum in-between? Is not lordship then simply a substitute for transcendence?⁴⁴ It is hard to escape the impression that even in the actuality of Christ, God for Barth is above all the agent of an infinite intensively-progressing withdrawal, an actuality whose nature it is to elude human grasp. If it is so, perhaps the concept of lordship merits a more thorough purging of the analogical vestiges than Barth offers, so that the Lord who gives himself, and in so doing appears to take humanity seriously, may actually be received, and also so that the displacement of humans may be true displacement across the humanly unbridgeable ontological divide. With these questions in mind, we now turn to Robert Jenson.

II. Conversation: Robert W. Jenson

Robert Jenson praises Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* for its "parade of trinitarian solutions to questions that modern theology had answered in

⁴⁴ In his treatment of the doctrine of reconciliation, Barth seems to have recognized some of this danger; cf. CD IV/1, 186 and IV/2, 224.

unitarian fashion."⁴⁵ At the same time, as a Lutheran more inclined to espouse the Catholic (and catholic!), rather than Protestant, answers to divisive theological questions,⁴⁶ Jenson is less interested in upholding God's revelatory lordship as an expression of the ontic and epistemic distance, even if it be only a distance in nearness, between God and humanity. It appears that for Jenson sovereignty ought not to be maintained in as rigid a fashion if one really wants to do justice to the dynamic of God's self-disclosure. Now, since God's self-disclosure is that of the Trinity, the notion of God being God over all and over everything must be given a more explicitly trinitarian form. Jenson thus differs from Barth in the way he triunely construes God's being and hiddenness, and with those the human capacity to know and speak of God. This will now be explored in more detail.

The Hidden Identity of God's Being and Work

As with Barth, the actuality of church's confessing proclamation, according to Jenson, presents humans with the possibility of knowing of God. It is so because the church not only is itself founded on Christ's work, or because in its existence Christ's original incarnational sacramentality is variously replicated. More than that, the church in its entirety is the presence of Christ himself in such a way that the *totus Christus* is Christ, as the second identity of God, together with his church.⁴⁷ The history of the church, of the entire people of God, thus serves not merely as a framework within which God can be located in a determinate way, but this history is itself God's identity: "the phrase 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit' is simultaneously a very compressed telling of the total narrative by which Scripture identifies God and a personal name for the God so specified" (I:46). In fact, the name and the narrative are identical (I:46).⁴⁸ In them God conveys himself in such a way that there is no other or higher God beyond these "temporal and 'limiting' modes of experience" (I:46). Consequently, "we are stuck with the names and descriptions the biblical narrative contingently enforces, which seem designed always to offend

⁴⁵ Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I: *The Triune God*, Vol. II: *The Works of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997 & 1999), I:154. Hereafter, abbreviated to Jenson, followed by volume number and page reference.

⁴⁶ Jenson I:viii.

⁴⁷ Cf. Jenson II:167.

⁴⁸ Cf. Robert W. Jenson, "The Hidden and Triune God," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 2 (2000): 9.

somebody."⁴⁹ We are stuck with them because, even though we cannot go as far as dissolving God in his narrative identity, the syntax of these descriptions, God's eternal decision to be God in this narrative, triune way and in no other, is hidden from us. We can neither identify synonyms, nor make translations. To do so would be to depart from the actuality of divine self-disclosure into abstract speculation, from God into man-made fiction. Jenson could not be more emphatic: "God does not traffic in fiction" (I:120).

Jenson bemoans contemporary theology's preoccupation with this sort of fiction in the name of human agendas: "It can only be an occasion of bitter amusement that recent demands to bypass the name and the biblical habits of discourse and imagining and form more ideologically acceptable language directly on the abstract formulas are made, of all things, in the name of experience and concretion" (I:93). We must recall in this context Barth's frequent references to God as creator, reconciler, and redeemer. For Barth, however, these are not synonyms for God's triune name and, therefore, are not on a par with God's three modes of being. Rather, they refer to the totality of God's work, which does not exhaust the nature and being of God, despite his selfsameness in his revelation.⁵⁰ In other words, God is Father, Son, and Spirit—self-same in his primary and secondary objectivity—and only then, in the totality of his triune being, is he creator, reconciler, and redeemer, but these aspects of God's work cannot as such do justice to the depth of God's self-same triune being, to "His name revealed in His deeds" (CD II/1, 20). Note, in addition, that Barth conjoins the three action-designations with that of Lord, which likewise describes God in his total being.⁵¹ The modification that Jenson introduces into this interpretation, as will be further explained below, is his emphasis that Father, Son, and Spirit are exhaustively descriptive of both God's being and work, because the two are the same. Hence, in revealing himself, God does not traffic in fiction or even the possibility thereof.

Such a strong statement of God's actuality leads Jenson to part ways with Karl Barth in regard to both God's hiddenness and the way God's being ought to be construed in relation to human being. We begin with God's hiddenness. "It is vital," Jenson underscores,

⁴⁹ Jenson, "The Hidden and Triune God," 6. See also Robert W. Jenson, "The Father, He . . .," in *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism*, ed. Alvin F. Kimel, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992), 95–109.

⁵⁰ Cf. CD II/1, 75.

⁵¹ Cf. CD II/1, 75–78.

to avoid the great contemporary denial of Nicea: the supposition that God's hiddenness is quantitative, constituted in the metaphysical distance from us. . . . God is not hidden because we can see only some of him through the metaphysical distances. He is hidden because his very presence is such as at one altogether to reveal and altogether to hide him. (II:161)

Thus far this is in accord with Barth: God's hiddenness is a correlate of his presence.⁵² Jenson goes on to assert, *contra* Barth, that "[t]he scriptural hiddenness of God is not primarily a matter of our epistemic weakness or God's ontological uniqueness."⁵³ Jenson criticizes Barth for separating God's being and nature from his "encroachment." Barth does this by appropriating hiddenness primarily to the Father, who, in the humanity of the Son, unveils himself as the one who cannot be unveiled. For Barth the innertrinitarian possibility related to the actuality of God's self-disclosure in Christ means the existence of the Trinity. Nonetheless, in that the asymmetry the dialectic of divine veiling and unveiling corresponds directly to God's modes of being, Barth's doctrine, Jenson is led to conclude, "is ironically afflicted by a subtle subordinationism."⁵⁴ To avoid this, Jenson appeals to the biblical narrative in claiming that God is hidden precisely by his narratively understood triunity; specifically, "the locus of God's hiddenness is his reality as a moral agent involved with other agents, his history with us."⁵⁵ The persons of the Trinity are each both veiled and unveiled in the particular manner of each.

What this means specifically is that, in the Father's case, his Fatherhood is the ultimate fact, and because it is ultimate, there is God. The Father, as the origin of the Trinity, terminates all searching behind himself for reasons and other explanations. He is the source of all being, even of God himself. "And that God is thus in God a source of God is the [ultimately incomprehensible] possibility of God being also the source of things other than himself, of creatures, and the impossibility of there being anything other than God that is not created by him . . . because there is the Father, theodicy is finally impossible."⁵⁶ The unsearchableness of the Father also

⁵² Jenson, "The Hidden and Triune God," 6.

⁵³ Jenson, "The Hidden and Triune God," 9.

⁵⁴ Jenson, "The Hidden and Triune God," 8.

⁵⁵ Jenson, "The Hidden and Triune God," 9.

⁵⁶ Jenson, "The Hidden and Triune God," 9. Addressing himself to Luther's understanding of God's hiddenness, Jenson elaborates: "We cannot make God's providence morally comprehensible. We cannot justify his ways. Our praise of God will always falter if hard pressed, not because he is not good but because we cannot say so

accounts for why it makes no sense to ask about an “otherwise” in God, namely, about whether God could have revealed himself in any other way than the Father of his Son, the Suffering Servant, from whom the Spirit, as from the Father, proceeds. Now, the hiddenness of God in the Son is the hiddenness of God in human flesh: the flesh of the people of Israel and the flesh of one Israelite, Jesus.⁵⁷ Jesus Christ reveals in a determinate way the triune being of God. To acknowledge any other being, or non-being, of God is thus idolatry, but it is not idolatry to confess the being of God in the Son is of the Father. “For it is as we seek to evade the Exile and the cross that we create idols.”⁵⁸ Finally, there is the Spirit, who, Jenson notes, is hiddenness almost by definition, blowing where he wills. The Spirit is God’s freedom and openness to the future, in that, as the third identity of God, by his “self-giving [he] frees the Father and the Son for each other, frees the Father to find himself in the other of the Suffering Servant and frees the Son to be the Father’s servant, cost what it may.”⁵⁹ In sum, God’s revelatory hiddenness is properly and uniquely ascribed to each of the identities of God’s self-disclosure. It is a morally oriented hiddenness in the midst of which God reveals himself precisely as God.

God—The Movement of Conversation

Because for Jenson trinitarian teaching at its very core is the proper locus of God’s hiddenness, the movement of God’s self-disclosure as *revealing his hiddenness*, and so his Godhood, is his very identity: God reveals himself as Father, Son, and Spirit, and so he remains hidden, and in that he remains hidden, he truly is Father, Son, and Spirit—God. To understand God in any other way is for Jenson idolatrous. This is a slight change of accent vis-à-vis Barth’s subtle privileging of God’s unveiling (even though ultimately, through his construal of lordship, the emphasis seems to get reversed). Nonetheless, in the same way as Barth, Jenson is, therefore, led to reject any ascription of “sheer being” to God (I:211), as necessarily something over and above God’s tri-personhood. At the same time, like Barth, he does

without stuttering. Atheism, or sheer anger, are in fact reasonable responses to God’s governance of his creation. The church’s theology should say all that, in public. That God is the good Creator can only be affirmed following an anguished ‘Nevertheless!’” Robert W. Jenson, “Luther’s Contemporary Theological Significance,” in Donald K. McKim, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther* (Cambridge: University Press, 2003), 279.

⁵⁷ “Identification by the Resurrection neither replaces nor is simply added to identification by the Exodus; the new identifying description *verifies* its paradigmatic predecessor.” Jenson I:44.

⁵⁸ Jenson, “The Hidden and Triune God,” 10.

⁵⁹ Jenson, “The Hidden and Triune God,” 11.

not consider the concept of being as inherently idolatrous. With its potential for determinateness, being may be profitably utilized, once it has been reinterpreted in order to accommodate the gospel.⁶⁰ Now, what the gospel exhibits are "three identities of one being" (I:106). These, as ought to be evident from Jenson's rejection of "sheer being" as an underlying identity-less *ousia*, are not to be understood in a modalist sense, but rather in terms of a dramatic movement from a point of origin to a goal. Accordingly, Jenson defines a divine identity as "a *persona dramatis dei* who can be repeatedly picked out by a name or identifying description or by pronouns, always by relation to the other two" (I:106). What this means is that the Trinity is not an identity: "the triune God is always identified by reference to one or several of the three identities" (I:119). This is not to say, however, that the Trinity could not be regarded as a complex personality — after all, there is only one God. To express this interpenetrating oneness of the triune *personae*, Jenson appeals to contemporary construals of personhood as self-transcending, social openness. "God is not personal in that he is triunely self-sufficient; he is personal in that he triunely opens himself" (I:124). In sum, as Trinity God remains his own unsearchable ground, exhibiting self-sameness of being and a coherence of action, that is, a self-consistent personal history, but at the same time this self-consistent personal history can be interpreted determinately and specifically only through its *dramatis personae*.

Let us look further at how Jenson understands this perichoretic personality of God. In fact, it is from Hans Urs von Balthasar that Jenson borrows the idea of dramatic coherence as the foundation of God's triuneness.⁶¹ What he means by it is that God's self-identity is, like his personhood, an openness, because it is necessarily established from the end, from its outcome. "The biblical God is not eternally himself in that he persistently instantiates a beginning in which he already is all he ever will be; he is eternally himself in that he unrestrictedly anticipates an end in which he will be all he ever could be" (I:66). As a dramatically coherent movement, God's being is, therefore, characterized by his own space and his own time.⁶² In this space and time, the *personae dramatis*, as self-transcendent, social agents, keep on communicating, and so are constituted as persons. For Jenson being is conversation;⁶³ the Trinity is

⁶⁰ Jenson I:212.

⁶¹ Jenson I:55.

⁶² Cf. Jenson I:95–96; II:45–46.

⁶³ Jenson II:49.

conversation.⁶⁴ Language, however, is not merely a neutral exchange of some information. Rather, language consists of words that are themselves events and so makes possible both the recognition, and thus constitution, of others as persons, as well as the dramatic movement itself.⁶⁵

Now, in that God's being is conversation, it means that others can also be invited to take part in it. The existence of the world, therefore, presupposes God's trinity. According to Jenson, "for God to create is for him to *make accommodation* in his triune life for other persons and things than the three whose mutual life he is. In himself, he *opens room*, and that act is the event of creation" (II:25). Creation happens through speech, because it is anticipated by the word of inner command in God.⁶⁶ And so, "to be, as a creature, is to be mentioned in the triune moral conversation, as something other than those who conduct it" (II:35). Briefly put, "there is other reality than God because he speaks" (II:6); he speaks already within himself and, more importantly, speaks from what is and will be the common divine-human future. Given, therefore, God's nature, it is no surprise that God creates not a thing but history (II:14, 47)—a reality that is temporal and spatial. This construal of creation as a divine making room for truly other conversation partners thus raises questions of language and being in general. Having discussed the being of God, we now move on to Jenson's view of the creatures' capacity for participating in and expressing that being.

Univocity through God's Address

We have already noted that God's being is not "sheer being" but rather dramatic conversation that allows for other partners. Jenson explains this further in a trinitarian fashion: "the Son mediates the Father's originating and the Spirit's liberating, thereby to *hold open* the creatures' space in

⁶⁴ "The trinity is . . . a conversation . . . that can never collapse into dialogue and monologue, because the three who make its poles *are* the conversation." Jenson II:26.

⁶⁵ Cf. Jenson I:171. Louis-Marie Chauvet's treatment of the "symbolic" aspect of language may be helpful in understanding the implications of this conversational emphasis. The "efficacy of speech" makes it a vehicle of recognition, in that what is communicated is very often secondary to the fact that in communication one recognizes one's interlocutor as a subject, a conversation partner. The *gratuitousness* of this conversational recognition and the concomitant closeness are at the same time prevented from being overwhelming by a gracious difference in which recognition of genuine otherness can take place. So used, language assigns positions; it maintains difference in nearness. See *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body*, trans. Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001), especially 110-125.

⁶⁶ Cf. Jenson II:8.

being" (II:27). Creation is God's self-communication (II:7), and so the communication of God's being. Thus, in that, room is made by God in himself for others. Humans not only are participants in being; more than that, "creaturely being . . . answers to the simple occurrence of the triune being" (II:38). The implications of this can hardly be overstated. When God says, "Let there be . . ." (Genesis 1),

whatever God means by 'be' is exactly what it means for a creature to be; in deed the utterance 'Let there be . . .' is itself the positive relation of creature to Creator, is itself the comparability of the fact that God is and that others than God are. Therefore insofar as 'being' says something about God or creatures, 'being' must after all be univocal rather than analogues. (II:38)

This may look like a willful plunge into the ambiguity of the *analogia entis* on Jenson's part. However, nothing is farther from the truth. His construal of the being of God and humans as univocal is only an application of the principle that God does not traffic in fiction. As such, it need not mean that the difference between creator and creature has been obscured or obliterated.

Jenson, in seeing creation as originated by God's speech and, consequently, in regarding being as univocal, is able to maintain the difference between God and humans by introducing a disparity on the level of language. In creation God speaks the world into being and then addresses the creature. To begin with, Jenson's exposition challenges Barth's claim that human words can only correspond to and agree with the being of God but are never on a par with that being, since, as Barth fears, that would annul the deity of God or the manhood of man. On the contrary, as one and the same language, human and divine words have the same meaning. Then, however, having stated the sameness of divine and human language, Jenson returns to his earlier point that language does not merely communicate. When God speaks humans into being and then addresses them, his words have the character of a "personal speech of commission" conversation (II:15-16). Thus, divine language is performative and commanding speech *par excellence*. God's words are word-events. Human language can likewise be performative, even commanding, but in a different way:

When we say "God is" . . . we acknowledge our entire dependence on a primary cause and reason of our being. . . . When God says, "God is" . . . in the infinite perichoresis of the triune life, he declares himself both as the one who is sufficient reason for his own being and as the one who has that reason. Or again, when we say, "Creatures are," we give thanks,

but when God says, "Creatures are," he creates. It is such propositions that state the incomparability between the fact that God is and the fact that we are. (II:38)

Hence the disparity enters in at the illocutionary level, rather than the general locutionary one, namely, not in terms of what is meant by certain words, but in terms of what is done (event) with those words. Note again the moral dimension that such conversational address and recognition create.

In all, there is thus an actual distance between God and humans. It is "not merely because of the limitations of our finitude that we inevitably imagine God as 'beyond' or 'above' us, using what we are likely misleadingly to call 'metaphors' or 'mere' pictures; it is simply the reverse of the fact that we are beyond for God" (II:47). Yet it is not the distance of the *analogia entis*, arbitrarily established for its own sake or by us for God's sake. Nor is it the ontological and epistemological distance necessitated by God's hiddenness for the sake of his lordship. Rather, it is a distance of address in which performative communication between God and humans is truly possible. This distance is thus true nearness: the presence of God with his people, as well as the presence of God's people in his history.

Like Barth, Jenson is critical of the *analogia entis*. It is not only rooted in Greek thought, which posits the world's being as somewhat divine (I:209; cf. II:47), but is also based on the neoplatonic principle that "[e]very agent produces effects that are similar to itself in that respect in which it acts as agent" (II:36). The fact of the analogousness, let alone univocality, of human being to God's being can never form the premise of human thinking about God. Only the actuality of God's history in the world, recognized for what it is, can be this premise. That human thinking and human language, in and of themselves, will prove futile seems to be guaranteed by the fact that without God addressing humans in Christ they are bent on idolatrous self-possession. In this they undermine their self-transcending, social personhood, and with it their own speech, which, as originally divine, thrives only in mutual conversational acknowledgement. By contrast, "if we exist because we are addressed by God and if we have our specific identity as those who respond to God, then we do not possess ourselves" (II:63); we are thus free to respond and so to be ourselves: persons, by God's grace his conversational partners. Freedom becomes our share, because as believers we have our lives hidden in the freedom of God's Spirit, who, nonetheless, is the guarantee of a good ending to our

story.⁶⁷ This is reminiscent of Barth's principle of "looking back from God's revelation." Where Jenson appears to differ from Barth, however, is that in Barth it is not only sinfulness, displaced self-deception, that prevents humans from knowing God from the fact that they exist; it is their very creatureliness that stands in the way of such knowledge.⁶⁸ In contrast, Jenson's views seem to be a cautious affirmation of a natural theology that, however, remains only a possibility cut short entirely by the impossible possibility of sin. Now, because it makes no sense for us to deal with an "otherwise" in God, this possibility appears to be likewise undercut by the very being of God. Consider that for Jenson creation and redemption are parts of one and the same story of God's speech reaching out beyond himself. Since God is who he is in the openness of his own future, in the conclusion of his eternal history he can be known only from the message of the eschaton. Moreover, the identification of the eschaton takes place only through the narrative of Jesus,⁶⁹ and never in the unsearchableness of the Father, as if the Father were without the Son. Apart from Christ there is no knowledge of God.

In conclusion, Jenson espouses a stronger view of God's actuality in contrast to Barth, which determines God's identity through the history of Israel, Christ, and the church. God's being is, for Jenson, constituted and revealed in its very identity, in a more specific kind of becoming, namely, a thorough-goingly trinitarian movement of God's revelatory hiddenness. In this trinitarian movement, God's being emerges as a history and conversation which makes directly possible other histories and other conversation partners. Creation is thus taken to share univocally in God's being and language. This, according to Jenson, is not the annulment of God's divinity and the creatureliness of creation, so feared by Barth, because conversation itself implies not only distance, and so makes incomparably concrete the notions of both distance and nearness, but also different modes of language use. Thus God emerges as God without the necessity to appeal to his ontological and epistemological hiddenness to assure the sovereignty of his lordship.

III. Conclusion

This study had as its goal the presentation of an alternative to the way much of contemporary theology conceives of, and attempts to avoid,

⁶⁷ Cf. Jenson, "The Hidden and Triune God," 11-12.

⁶⁸ Barth describes man as "doubly hidden . . . (by our creatureliness and our sin)." *CD* II/1, 229.

⁶⁹ Cf. Jenson I:170.

idolatry. In these attempts, it shies away from such concepts as being and even from thinking and speaking of God, for fear of imposing an illicit constraint on God. Inconsistently, in this speculative exercise, it cannot avoid thinking of God and speaking of him. It thus lapses in its own way into use of the analogy of being. It thinks God from the premise of human fear of idolatry, and then, in an attempt to avoid the consequences, it removes him to the end of the spectrum of human thought, and, as it seems to believe, even beyond. The alternative that this paper took up was found in the theologies of Karl Barth and Robert W. Jenson, both of whom place a strong emphasis on the actuality of God's self-disclosure and the corresponding engendering of faith which must take place in those that seek to speak and think God aright, if God is not only to be God, but also *their* God, and only so *God*. I have demonstrated that whereas Barth seeks to give expression to God's Godhood by asserting his sovereign lordship over all real and potential sources of idolatry, such as being, knowledge, and language, Jenson subsumes all those under a dramatically dynamic doctrine of God's triunity. In so doing, the latter theologian establishes a knowability of God, based on the reliability of his revelation in determinate distance-nearness. Both Barth and Jenson are at pains to let God be God, but, whereas Barth seems to be more focused on letting God be *God*, Jenson, through ironic jibes at contemporary theology, simply lets *God* be God.