

The power of God in weakness and lowliness

The Self-Humiliating God: the Being of the Triune God in Modern Reformed Perspective

Projektbericht

I. Locating my project

The Christian understanding of God's "being" in the modern period of its history knows of several ways of seeking to overcome the elements of Greek metaphysical thinking which controlled the formation of the dogma of the Trinity in the fourth century: 1) the "consciousness" theology of Schleiermacher, which made "God" to be the "Whence" of the Christian's "religious self-consciousness"; the "speculative" theology of Hegel and his followers, which identified the "being" of God with the self-movement of an Absolute Spirit; and the personalist ontologies of Albrecht Ritschl and Karl Barth, which sought to remove every last vestige of the ancient attachment to an abstract (undefineable) divine "essence" by shifting the locus of divine "being" from the "essence" so defined to the personal *life* of God. All of these methodological proposals have had important results which need to be taken into consideration regardless of which of them one finally employs.

My own project stands in the stream of this last named development. With Barth, I would say that "...Godhead [*Gotttheit*] only exists in and with the existence of Father, Son and Holy Ghost, only as the common predicate of this triune Subject in its modes of existence. ... He, the divine Subject, carries and

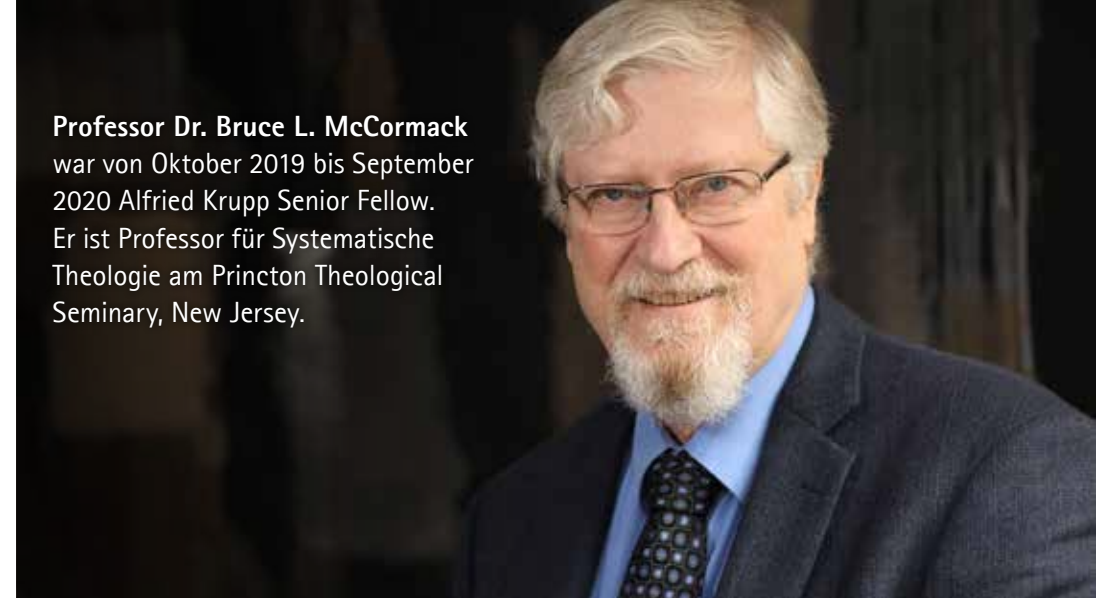
determines the divine essence, and not conversely" [*Church Dogmatics* IV/2, 65]. To speak of an act of Self-determination which extends to what God is essentially (cf. IV/2, pp.84-5) is to understand divine "essence" as itself in motion, as susceptible to an act of making essentially which gives to the concept of "essence" its material content. The only question is: *when* does this act occur? Depending on how that question is answered, we will immediately be confronted by another: is the act making essential rightly thought of as a "free decision" or is it a necessity of the "being" of a Self-reflexive Subject?

With Barth, secondly, I say that the triune Subject contains an *original relation* to the world in Jesus Christ - a relation that is *proper* to the triune Subject in his second way of being (the "Son"); a "personal property, in other words (IV/2, 42). Having taken these steps, I can now say that the eternal "being" of God is his being in the act of his Self-revelation. Expressed with greater precision: God's "being" is eternally constituted for and realized in the act of his Self-revelation in time. In this way, it is seen that the "immanent Trinity" is the "economic Trinity" and vice versa.

II. The Nature of the Project

The pay-off of these moves lies in their conse-

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Kurzvita

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I say that "...Godhead [*Gotttheit*] only exists in and with the existence of Father, Son and Holy Ghost... He, the divine Subject, carries and determines the divine essence, and not conversely" [*Church Dogmatics* IV/2, 65]. With Barth, secondly, I say that the triune Subject contains an *original [essential] relation* to the world in Jesus Christ - a relation that is *proper* to the triune Subject in his second way of being (the "Son"). Having taken these steps, I can now say that the eternal "being" of God is his being in the act of his Self-revelation. In this way, it is seen that the "immanent Trinity" is the "economic Trinity" and vice versa. The pay-off of these moves lies in their consequence: that all terms rightly ascribed to God's being (personhood, aseity and freedom, love and mercy, constancy of will, etc.) are to be defined on the basis of *this* being-in-act and on no other basis.

Fellow-Projekt



Abb. 1: Professor Dr. h. c. Bruce L. McCormack, Ph.D. wurde zum Abschlusskolloquiums der Fellows am 17. und 18. September 2020 digital zugeschaltet, da er sich bereits aufgrund des früheren Semesterbeginns wieder in den USA aufhielt.

quences. I will name three here. First, to treat the doctrine of the Trinity before treating the so-called "being" and attributes of God is an ontological necessity, not merely an epistemological preference. If it is the triune *life* of God which defines God's "essence", then it will also be seen that the answer to the *who* question (who God is as the triune Person) simply is the answer to the *what* question (the question of "essence"). Anything that is said subsequently about the being and attributes of God can consist in nothing other than a further explanation from a different angle of what was already said about Trinity.

Second, if God is what God is in the act of his Self-revelation, then all terms which are rightly ascribed to God's being (personhood, aseity and freedom, love and mercy, constancy of will, etc.) are to be defined on the basis of *this* being-in-act and on no other basis. Put another way, it is God's being which defines

these terms. They do not – as terms having acquired a meaning in advance from some other source – define him. This means that every candidate "attribute" of God has to be carefully reflected upon in the light of God's being in the act of his Self-revelation. This reflection is bound to have both a negative side (excluding elements drawn from other sources) and a positive side (consisting in a more disciplined reflection on the "one-ness" of the divine Subject and his attributes than has heretofore been the case).

Third, if it is true to say that God is what God is in his act of Self-revelation, then Self-revealing belongs to God essentially. This observation does not, in and of itself, answer the "when" question but it does steer our thinking in the direction of seeing the "when" as eternal, as contained in the original and originating life-act of God. The reason is this: if "what" God is in his act of Self-rev-

elation were understood to be the consequence of a "free decision" (a decision which might have been made differently or not at all), then "what" God is would have first to be understood as contained absolutely "in himself" and the result of that "free decision" would have to then be understood as the result of an essential change in God's being as God. This is certainly possible, based on the observation that God is "what" he is in the act of his Self-revelation. But it would also lead inevitably to the conclusion that the divine "essence" is not simply in motion but that it undergoes change, becoming something other than what it is originally. And if that were the case, then we would have to ask whether the Self-revelation of God is as full and complete (objectively) as the equation of the immanent Trinity with the economic Trinity would lead us to think. It is, therefore, preferable to see election as rooted in a necessity of divine being, so that the "determination" of the divine "essence" is given in the eternal life act of God and not in a subsequent "decision." Triunity and election are thus *equally primordial*; they are two equally valid ways of speaking of the eternal life-act of God.

Those familiar with the dogmatic theology of Schleiermacher and the philosophical theology of Hegel will recognize that I have incorporated insights from each of them into a frame of reference reflecting the methodological decisions of Ritschl and Barth. With Hegel, I can say that divine "Self-determination" is not something added to what God is but is already contained in what God is. With Schleiermacher, I can say that God's turning towards the human race redemptively is already contained in what God is. Against both, however, I am making the lived existence of the divine Person in eternity to provide the ontological unity of Trinity and election rather than an impersonal principle (Hegel) or the divine causality (Schleiermacher).

III. Further Illuminations

All of this has been rather densely stated. It is, however, possible to shed more light on the significance of each of the "consequences" just described with some comparisons and (in one case) an illustration. The significance of the claim that the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity and vice versa can be seen in a brief comparison with a powerful alternative conception. David Bentley Hart (an Orthodox theologian with a considerable "following" in the Anglo-American world) has argued that there exists an "analogical interval" between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity (Hart, "The Lively God of Robert Jenson," *First Things*, October 2005). "Analogy," of course, entails dissimilarity as well as similarity. Indeed, there are those who would argue (and I suspect Hart is one) that dissimilarity in this case is greater than similarity. In any event, an "metaphysical gap" exists between *what* God is in and for God's self and *what* God is for us in the economy; perhaps even a metaphysical chasm with no bottom. It is hard, on this account, to understand how the earliest Christians could have become convinced that "Jesus is Lord" (Phil.2:9-11) – that the Nazarene who lived in time was somehow proper to the eternal identity of the God of Israel. So much hangs on this difference of opinion, not least the coherence of Christian affirmation of the deity of Jesus Christ.

Second, Karl Barth has demonstrated profound insight in translating the concept of *immutabilitas* into *Beständigkeit* (perseverance, persistence, constancy). The first is an absolute concept ("changelessness") which describe as abstractly-conceived divine "essence": the second is the description of a Person-in-relation, of a God who is what he is in a history (the history of the covenant of grace) with human beings, culminating in the incarnation. Here, in the case of "immutability" as a candidate term for a divine "attribute,"

Barth has stayed consistently focused upon the being of God in the act of his Self-revelation. That is not the case, most notably, with the concept of divine "freedom." In relation to that term, Barth has two definitions - one derived from a strict focus on God's being in the act of revealing himself and the other inherited from the older Reformed orthodoxy. The latter definition understands "freedom" as a capacity for making unconditional choices of ends that might not have been chosen; which sees God as "free" in his (allegedly) absolute independence from the world God has made. That such a definition collides sharply with the understanding that God has an original relation to the world in Jesus Christ should be obvious. For it is equivalent to saying: God could have been otherwise than what God is essentially - an idea which can only be described as nonsense. One of the goals of this project is to carry out Barth's program of restricting the ground for all attribute-definition to the act of God's Self-revelation more consistently than he himself did. That will have an impact on all the terms used to describe the being of the Christian God (aseity, omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, love, etc.).

Third, that triunity in God and "election" should be equally primordial is a thesis that requires the elevation of election-language "up" into the eternal event of God's self-knowledge and self-willing; the act of willing the kind of God that God is "essentially" (the self-giving, self-emptying love that is proper to the triune Subject in his second way of being). All that God does in time will be seen to be the unfolding of the contents of that original act, directed towards an "end" that God simply is: the God of covenant grace who, in knowing and willing himself, longs for covenant relatedness with the human race in Christ. Such an understanding stands in decided contrast to the classical view which makes God's relation to the world in Christ to

be the result of a "free" decision. And it even transcends what we find in Karl Barth and the "post-Barthians" - though it remains within hailing distance of Eberhard Jüngel and Robert Jenson. This "consequence" too triggers a division of the house between those wed to ancient forms of thought and those who believe that "modernity" (as it came to expression in philosophy and the natural sciences) has made fundamental changes in Christian theology a necessity.

IV. The State of the Project at Year's End

My project has three major sections: history, biblical exegesis, and construction. The history section sets forth a selection. It begins with analysis of the formation of "classical theism" and its greatest synthesis in Thomas Aquinas. It then moves to a selection of modern thinkers who attempt to make the same sort of corrections I am seeking to make. Schleiermacher will be considered with Hegel in an attempt to understand the uses made of them in late nineteenth century theology. The mediating theologians (exemplified here in I.A. Dorner and J.C.K. von Hofmann) will receive a chapter of their own, as will Albrecht Ritschl and Karl Barth. Process and liberation theologies will also receive an independent treatment. The research for all of this is largely done. Chapters on patristic theology and Karl Barth are written, as is the material on Thomas and Schleiermacher. Only von Hofmann, the process theologians and the liberationists will require fresh research. I may conclude this section with David Bentley Hart.

The biblical material remains to be researched and written. The sources I will need have been gathered, however.

And, finally, as will be clear from the descrip-

tion above, the method and goals for the constructive section are already in place. Much of this material has been "written" (in my head) and should not take too long. I am hoping to finish by the end of summer 2021 - though should that goal prove unrealistic, the end of summer 2022 is a sure thing. I will be back in

Greifswald for an international conference on Christology (the volume preceding the present project) in June 2021. I should add that I have a reduced teaching load in the summer semesters of both 2021 and 2022, which will give me more time for completing the work on my project.