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The Spatiality of God

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A striking feature of the biblical story of God and of God's relation to the world is the prevalence in that story of spatial language. Even at the dawn of creation when the earth was without form, there is, according to Genesis 1:2, a spatial relation between it and the *ruach* of God that hovers or sweeps over the face of the deep. Again and again, thereafter, the relation between God and creation is portrayed in spatial terms. "Why O Lord do you stand far off?" the Psalmist cries, "Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (Ps 10:1), while elsewhere the Psalmist confesses. "The Lord is in his holy temple; the Lord's throne is in heaven" (Ps 11:4). Later still the Psalmist testifies that there is no place where God is not:

> Where can I go from your spirit?
> Or where can I flee from your presence?
> If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
> if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
> If I take the wings of the morning
> and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
> even there your hand shall lead me,
> and your right hand shall hold me fast. (Ps 139:7–10)

Then in the New Testament "the Word who was in the beginning *with* God . . . became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:2, 14). This Word, the Son is also "*close* to the Father's heart" (John 1:18), and on account of his mediation, "you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Eph 2:13). Jesus, in his discourse with the disciples, tells them that he is "going to him who sent me" (John 16:5), but he has assured them earlier that in his Father's house "there are many dwelling

places" and that he will "go to prepare a place for them." He promises further that "if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, you may be also" (John 14:2–3). Following his death and resurrection Christ *ascends* into heaven (Acts 1:6–11) where he sits "at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb 12:2; cf. Eph 1:20), and from where, at the sound of God's trumpet, he "will descend," once more to be with his people for ever (1 Thess 4:16). Both in the Bible and in the subsequent theological tradition, many more examples may be found of spatial language employed to speak of God and of God's relation to the world.

It is to be noted that the spatial language refers not only to the economic being of God—God's relation to the world—but also to the immanent being of God, to God's being in himself. "In the beginning, the Word was with God," and, "the Son sits at the right hand of the throne of God," for instance. These affirmations have enormous importance for God's relation to the world of course, but they propose also a spatial relation between the persons of the Trinity themselves. Spatial language of this kind occurs frequently in biblical and in subsequent theological speech. What is more, it would seem very difficult to do without it. Central concepts in the theological vocabulary have spatial roots and retain spatial overtones still. The most important cluster of Hebrew words for salvation have the root ישׁע (*yasa*) which has the fundamental meaning to become spacious, to enlarge. Cognates of this root, translated into English as "salvation," refer to God's deliverance of his people from confinement. Salvation is said to be necessary on account of humanity being *separated* from God, or on account of its *fallenness*, a state of affairs recorded in the primal history of Genesis 3 as leading to their *exile* from the garden of Eden, spatial language again being used to testify to the distancing of the creature from its place with God. And so on.

The question I wish to explore in this essay is this: in what way does the spatial expression of the conceptual reality with which theology is concerned correspond to the being of God? Does the spatial language commonly used in theology have some purchase on the reality of God beyond what we might call the *merely* metaphorical? I do not intend to cast aspersions on the value of metaphorical speech at this point. Such language is indispensable in theology as the means by which we

may tell the truth. The question before us, however, is whether spatial language used of God can have a legitimate non-metaphorical sense.

The Dangerous Idea that God is Non-Spatial.

The tradition has largely followed Augustine in this matter, or at least, it has extrapolated from Augustine's thesis that the world was created with time rather than in time (*non est mundus factus in tempore, sed cum tempore*) to the parallel thesis that the world was created with space rather than in space.[1] Just as God is eternal, that is to say, non-temporal, so also God is immense, that is, non-spatial.[2] Space and time are thereby identified as predicates of the created order and may be applied to God, who is *increatus*, only figuratively or metaphorically. God's immensity is to be understood, accordingly, as his qualitative distinction from created, spatial reality.[3] The absolute, qualitative distinction between divine and creaturely reality was a principle affirmed of course by Karl Barth who had learned the principle from Søren Kierkegaard. It then became, by Barth's own admission, the nearest thing, in his early years at least, to the systematic core of his theological thought:

> If I have a system, it is limited to a recognition of what Kierkegaard called the "infinite qualitative distinction" between time and eternity, and to my regarding this as possessing negative as well as positive significance: "God is in heaven, and thou art on earth." The relation between such a God and such a man, and the relation between such a man and such a God, is for me the theme of the Bible and the essence of philosophy.[4]

Barth thus upholds the infinite, qualitative distinction between God and the creaturely realm. But that does not preclude him from applying spatial predicates not only to the creaturely reality, but also to the divine: "God is in heaven, and thou art on earth." He says this precisely

1. See for contemporary instance, Küng, *Beginning of All Things*, 120–21. In *Civitas Dei*, 11.5, Augustine himself dismissed the idea of there being space antecedent to the creation.

2. As an aside here, Augustine's deliberations reveal, contra Rudolf Bultmann, that theologians did not need to learn from Copernicus that we do not live in a three-decker universe.

3. See Webster, "Immensity and Ubiquity of God," 94.

4. Barth, *Epistle to the Romans,* 10.

to uphold the qualitative distinction, so whatever the distinction means for Barth, it does not preclude him from applying to God predicates that have been regarded traditionally as properly belonging only to the creature. Indeed, in his discussion of 'the unity and omnipresence of God' in *Church Dogmatics* II/1 Barth argues that "God has his own space." Barth writes,

> God is spatial as the One who loves in freedom, and therefore as Himself. . . . He is spatial always and everywhere in such a way that His spatiality means the manifestation and confirmation of His deity. God possesses His space. He is in Himself as in a space. He creates space. He is and does this so that, in virtue of His own spatiality, He can be Himself even in this created space without this limiting Him or causing Him to have something outside Himself, a space apart from Himself, a space which is not His space too in virtue of His spatiality, the space of His divine presence. Or, to express it positively, God possesses space in Himself and in all other spaces.[5]

The notion of the absolute non-spatiality of God is, Barth claims, "a more than dangerous idea" both because it collapses the infinite, qualitative distinction between the divine and the creaturely, and because it threatens the triune differentiation of God as Father, Son, and Spirit. The personal differentiation of God means, Barth contends, that there is both remoteness and proximity in God. The Son is not the Father and the Father is not the Son. Neither is the Spirit identical with either the Father or the Son. The distinction between the persons entails, Barth contends, that there is distance between them. They have space from and for one another and, just so, they exist in the triune communion of love. The divine omnipresence is in the first instance the particular and unbounded presence of the triune persons one to another in the eternal communion of love.[6]

"The Christian conception of God at least is shattered and dissolved," Barth writes, "if God is described as absolute non-spatiality. Non-spatiality means existence without distance, which means identity."[7] Barth is concerned here with maintaining the distance and thus also the

5. *CD* II/1, 470.

6. Omnipresence is treated by Barth under the heading of "The Perfections of the Divine Freedom." See §31 of *CD* II/1.

7. Ibid., 468.

distinction between God and the world, but, as we have seen, he is concerned also with the proper distinction and thus the distance between the persons of the Godhead. Barth again:

> God's omnipresence, to speak in general terms, is the perfection in which he is present, and in which He, the One, who is distinct from and pre-eminent over everything else, possesses a place, His own place, which is distinct from all other places and also pre-eminent over them all. God is the One in such a way that he is present: present to Himself in the triunity of His One essence; present to everything else as the Lord of everything else. In the one case as in the other, inwards as well as outwards, presence does not mean identity, but togetherness at a distance. In the one case, inwards, it is the togetherness of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at the distance posited by the distinction that exists in the one essence of God. In the other case, outwards, it is the togetherness at a distance of the Creator and the creature. . . . Presence as togetherness (as distinct from identity) includes distance. But where there is distance there is necessarily one place and another place. To this extent God's presence necessarily means that He possesses a place, His own place, or, we may say safely, His own space.[8]

Barth sets himself here in deliberate opposition to the mainstream Augustinian tradition that proposes, as we have seen, that God is utterly transcendent of space and so non-spatial in himself. The extent to which Barth goes out on a limb here, so to speak, is confirmed perhaps by theologians after Barth who have been willing to follow him in many respects but not in this. I take for notable instance John Webster and also Ian MacKenzie.

In his account of the immensity and ubiquity of God, John Webster insists that we must "empty our thinking about God of the connotations of spatiality, positive and negative."[9] Failure to do so is indicative, Webster contends, of the mistaken tendency to talk of the divine perfections "by maximizing a creaturely conception of immeasurability, or infinite extension."[10] In other words, talk of divine spatiality involves a naïve projection from the creaturely to the divine, an extrapolation

8. *CD* II/1, 468.

9. Webster, "Immensity and Ubiquity of God," 94.

10. Ibid. Webster does not direct this criticism explicitly at Barth but neither does he defend Barth against MacKenzie's direct allegation.

from creaturely being to the being of God. Although Wester himself does not do so, Ian MacKenzie directs this criticism explicitly at Barth. "If [Barth] means that there is a direct analogy within the Trinity to created remoteness and proximity . . . then he is guilty of a simplistic application of an *analogia entis*."[11] The use of the terms remoteness and proximity, MacKenzie continues, "suggests that we have not rid ourselves of secretly transferring created values of measurements and dimensions into God."[12]

It is important to note here that in spite of the qualitative distinction between the divine and the creaturely, and despite the fact that we have no language or concepts available to us other than creaturely language and concepts, neither MacKenzie nor Webster dispute the appropriateness in principle of using creaturely language and concepts to speak of God's immanent being and of distinguishing conceptually the immanent from the economic being of God. Indeed their critique of the Barthian approach depends upon this distinction being upheld. The point of difference concerns, rather, the appropriateness or otherwise of spatial language in particular. It is also undisputed among them that in the divine economy God locates himself in creaturely space. In the womb of Mary, in Bethlehem, in Galilee and its environs, the divine Son is spatially located. The omnipresence of God and the divine promise to dwell with his people are realized in the person of Jesus in specific, identifiable locations that are accessible to us. The dispute concerns more specifically, then, the question whether the omnipresence of God is to be regarded as an absolute attribute of God referring to God's being *in se*, apart from his relation to creation, or a relative attribute of God referring only to God's unbounded presence with and for the creature. Barth contends that the omnipresence of God belongs to God's being *in se*, as well as to God's being *pro nobis*. God "possesses and He is in Himself space," Barth writes. "We have no right to limit this statement to God's being in and with creation. God's spatiality cannot therefore, be related to created space alone, while as He is in Himself He is conceived and described as non-spatial."[13] Webster, on the other hand, prefers to say that omnipresence is a relative attribute pertaining only to the economy. That God is omnipresent with respect to creaturely re-

11. MacKenzie, *Dynamism of Space*, 85.

12. Ibid., 86.

13. *CD* II/1, 472.

ality enables us, however, to refer to the *immensity* of God in himself, where immensity means God's qualitative distinction from and utter transcendence of space. Webster does offer important qualifications however: "the conceptual mapping of God's identity in terms of the distinction between absolute and relative may have a certain formal or heuristic justification (parallel to the distinction between God *in se* and God *pro nobis,* of which it is a corollary). But these distinctions must not be pressed in such a way that the 'absolute' acquires greater weight than the 'economic' in determining the *essentia dei*."[14]

Webster is also careful to insist that the immensity of God, an absolute attribute, cannot be expounded without immediate reference to omnipresence, a relative attribute. He notes further that "talk of divine immensity is wholly referred to the enacted identity of God in his sovereign self-presence as Father, Son, and Spirit. Accordingly dogmatics must give precedence to *definition by description* over *definition by analysis*; its account of the being of God and of God's perfections is to be determined at every point by attention to God's given self-identification."[15] Webster has learned that principle from Barth, so the point of difference between the two is narrowed to the question of *what* may be said on the basis of the divine economy concerning the spatiality or the non-spatiality of God in and for himself.

The Triune Spaciousness of God

We have noted Barth's insistence that the confession of God's spaciousness cannot be applied only to the economy while conceiving God in himself as non-spatial. "A distinction of this kind," Barth writes, "would inevitably mean that in the way in which God exists in and with creation (or to put it concretely, in His revelation), God deceives us as to His true being. . . . If in and with His creation God is the same as He is in Himself, revealing Himself to us in His revelation as not less or other than Himself, then it is characteristic of Him to be here and there and everywhere, and therefore to be always somewhere and not nowhere, to be spatial in His divine essence."[16]

14. Webster, "Immensity and Ubiquity of God," 93.
15. Ibid., emphasis in the original.
16. *CD* II/1, 472.

Barth strives to safeguard here the principle that God reveals himself to us as the one he is. It may be argued, however, that in emptying himself, in taking the form of a creature, the Son of God accommodates himself to the conditions of creaturely reality; accepts limitations, that is, that do not belong to his own eternal being, including the limitations of spatial existence. Jesus of Nazareth was not found to be in two places at once, for instance, and when he moved from one place to another he took time to get there. These features of the Word's incarnate life do not entail that God is in himself subject to such limitations, although they do reveal that the divine freedom and love may be exercised in just this way. There are attributes of the incarnate Word, therefore, brought about through the Word's assumption of human nature, that do not pertain to the being of God in himself.

One would have to be careful in following this line of argument to avoid the Nestorian heresy of dividing the divine from the human nature of Christ, but something like this argument seems necessary and defensible in order to uphold the contention of Webster and of MacKenzie that talk of divine spaciousness pertains only to the economy. One could do this, I think, without threat to the principle that God reveals himself as the one he is by arguing that the divine accommodation to creaturely reality reveals truly and reliably God's capacity and his will to be for us in this way. The accommodation to creaturely reality reveals, in other words, the infinite capacity of divine freedom and love but does not license the projection of creaturely reality onto God. The character of God is revealed through his accommodation to creaturely reality but is not determined by it. The attributes of God *in se* would thus be understood as the antecedent conditions of God's being *pro nobis*. In the case of the divine presence in space—through the life of the incarnate Word—we could say that the immensity of God, rather than divine spaciousness *in se*, is the antecedent condition of the Word's incarnate spaciousness. The attribute of immensity is, in Webster's words, "the free, gratuitous, non-necessary character of God's relation to space."[17] Immensity is not itself a spatial concept; it does not signify God's vastness or infinite spaciousness as though God were dispersed through space, but rather God's total freedom from spatial constraint.

Clearly an argument of this kind can be constructed without falling prey to the perils of Nestorianism. But is the Barthian alternative

17. Webster, "Immensity and Ubiquity of God," 94.

legitimate? Can one conclude on the basis of the economy that God has his own space without being guilty, as MacKenzie and Webster allege, of a naïve projection onto God of the conditions of creaturely existence?

The charge against Barth can be refuted, I suggest, by attending once more to the way in which Barth's argument is constructed. He clearly does not proceed from the observation that Jesus exists in creaturely space to the conclusion that there must be some analogy of creaturely spaciousness that belongs to the being of God in himself. There is no *analogia entis* here. The basis upon which Barth speaks of God having his own space is the differentiation of the persons of the Trinity, revealed in the economy as belonging to the being of God in himself. The triune differentiation of God as Father, Son, and Spirit is not an accommodation of God to the demands of revelation, but belongs to the character of the eternal God who is before all things. God is not triune only for the sake of the creature any more than he is love only for the sake of the creature. God is triune and God is love *simpliciter*. Out of the freedom, sufficiency, and fullness of divine love, God determines that there shall be a creature, one who is other than himself. The triune communion of love between Father, Son, and Spirit exists in advance of the creature, therefore, and it is precisely that antecedence that distinguishes the creature from God.

We have noted above Barth's refusal to regard omnipresence as a relative attribute of God, as pertaining that is, only to his relation to creation. "All that God is in His relationship to His creation, and therefore His omnipresence too, is simply an outward manifestation and realisation of what He is previously in Himself apart from this relationship and therefore apart from His creation."[18] Let us recall further, and explore in more detail now, the implications of Barth's contention that God has his own place, or, as Barth also puts it, his own space.[19] Barth's claim rests upon the disclosure in the economy of the dynamism of the divine being. God is not an undifferentiated unity but the dynamic communion in love of the three persons of the Trinity who exist for one another, are present to one another, and who are therefore distinct from one another. This unity in distinction, we have heard, involves both proximity and distance. "Presence does not mean identity, but togetherness at a distance. . . . Where there is distance," Barth, further contends, "there is

18. *CD* II/1, 462.

19. Ibid., 468.

necessarily one place and another place. If God does not possess space, he can certainly be conceived as that which is one in itself and in all. But he cannot be conceived as the One who is triune."[20]

Barth's account of divine spatiality presses us, I suggest, to a new conception of what space is—the opposite procedure, be it noted, from a projection onto God of what we already hold space to be. Space is, on Barth's account, a condition by which one person is differentiated from another—in God first! But then also for the creature, space is a condition by which persons and also things are differentiated from one another. (It is not the only condition, but it is the one we are concerned with here.) Space, accordingly, is, in the first instance, the outcome of God's determination of his own being as Father, Son, and Spirit. It is the outcome and freely chosen condition of God's self-determination as the perichoretic communion of love that God is. The unity of God does not consist in a monistic, undifferentiated identity, requiring us to conclude in respect of the economy that the names Father, Son, and Spirit identify only the forms of God's appearance and operation, rather than distinct hypostatic identities constitutive of the being of God in himself. It is on account of that Sabellian conception of divine unity that Barth calls the abstract non-spatiality of God a more than dangerous idea.[21]

Because it is the central point of this paper, let me reiterate the procedural move that Barth has made here. Barth's contention that God has his own space, that God is spatial in himself, is not based upon considerations of space in general but upon the particular divine action in space by which God reveals himself as Father, Son, and Spirit. On this basis we may develop a relational and differential account of what space is in accordance with God's disclosure in space and time of his eternal being as Father, Son, and Spirit. Between Father, Son, and Spirit, and constitutive of the being of God, there is both communion (proximity) and distinction (distance). This proximity and distance are essential to the distinction of and the communion between the divine persons.

Although we cannot go along very far with Immanuel Kant's account of what space is, he is right at least in his recognition that space is the condition of our locating objects of experience outside ourselves and of distinguishing them both from ourselves and from one another. Using Robert Jenson's phrase we may push Kant to say that space is

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

"the a priori of otherness."[22] Jenson further points out, however, that "when Kant then claims that space simply *is not* 'a determination . . . that pertains to objects themselves,' we cannot but turn and sympathize with thinkers who have wondered what Kant can then mean by 'objects.'"[23] Transferring the observation to the theological case we may say, if proximity and distance, and thereby differentiation and relation, are not determinations that pertain to the persons of the Godhead themselves then we must wonder what is meant by persons.

That the nature of persons is at stake in this discussion of the spatiality of God is apparent in Colin Gunton's treatment of the matter in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*. Gunton lends support to the spatial conception of the being of God and follows Barth in linking it both to the hypostatic distinction between Father, Son, and Spirit and also to the freedom of God.

> Freedom is to be found in the space in which persons can be themselves in relation with other persons. That is the lesson of the doctrine of the Trinity. Father, Son, and Spirit constitute each other as free persons by virtue of the shape their interrelationship takes in the Trinitarian perichoresis. Otherness is an essential feature of the trinitarian freedom, because without otherness the distinctness, particularity, of a person is lost. . . . We should say, then, that the essence *of* the being in relation that is the Trinity is the *personal space* that is received and conferred.[24]

This coheres with the principle observed above that space is the freely chosen condition in God of the differentiation of one person from another. As we develop the argument of this paper further, it is this conception of space that we must bear in mind whenever the term "space" now occurs.

Creaturely Space

The next step then is to recognize that divine spaciousness, rather than being a projection of creaturely spatiality, is the presupposition and antecedent condition of the space given to the creature. Barth writes,

22. Jenson, *Systematic Theology,* vol. 2, 46.
23. Ibid., 47.
24. Gunton, *Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 128.

> . . . there exists a divine proximity and remoteness, real in Him from all eternity, as the basis and presupposition of the essence and existence of creation, and therefore of created proximity and remoteness. God can be present to another. This is His freedom. For He is present to Himself. This is His love in its internal and its external range. God in Himself is not only existent. He is co-existent. And so He can co-exist with another also. To grant co-existence with Himself to another is no contradiction of His essence. On the contrary, it corresponds to it.[25]

And further: "God is present to other things, and is able to create and give them space, because He Himself possesses space apart from everything else. The space everything else possesses is the space which is given it out of the fullness of God. The fact is that first of all God has space for Himself and that subsequently, because He is God and is able to create, He has it for everything else as well."[26]

If we follow the argument through and draw on the principles established above, we see that what is given to the creature in the act of creation is distinct being, that is, being in distinction from God. Among the entities that exist in consequence of creation are things and persons other than God, persons who have their own space and their own freedom. It is true only in one sense, therefore, that God creates *ex nihilo.* The sense in which that principle is *true* is that no thing other than God exists prior to creation. There is no energy or matter lying about which God takes to hand in order to fashion the world. Nor is their any power other than God that contributes to creation or against which God has to contend. Other than God, prior to creation, there is simply no thing. That is the truth of the claim that God creates *ex nihilo*. But the claim can mislead. For it is not strictly true that God creates out of nothing. He creates, in fact, out of the fullness of his own being. That is to say, out of the fullness of his freedom and love, God gives to the creature that which is his own, namely, the capacity, the space, and the time for free, loving relationships between persons, including above all, the capacity, the space and the time, for free, loving relationships between created persons and the tri-personal being that he is.

It has sometimes been said in the tradition that in the act of creation God makes room for the creature. There is something to be said

25. *CD* II/1, 463.

26. Ibid.

for this formulation so long as we do not follow the kabbalistic idea of *tzimtzum* by which it is asserted that God's making room for the creature involves a contraction of his own being. Such a conception rescinds the relational and differential account of space that we have been concerned with here in favor of a receptacle notion of space, a notion that, as Thomas F. Torrance has shown, is both out of touch with contemporary physics and yields numerous problems for theology.[27] The correct meaning of the claim that God in the act of creation makes room for the creature is that the creature really is other than God. The creature does not occupy God's space; it has its own space and therefore is not identical with God. That the creature is given its own space means that the creature is differentiated both from God and from other creatures and in such a manner as to be able to exist in free, loving relations with them. It is as important here to say that God has his own space as it is to say that the creature has its own space. Colin Gunton again, provides the reason.

> The personal otherness, the self-sufficiency, of God is the basis on which freedom depends because it is the ground for the otherness of the human in relation to God. That freedom derives from the gift in both creation and redemption of the God who has and is personal space, and so can be the creator of such space. If God is not and has not personal space "in advance," in eternity, the danger remains that human freedom will be overwhelmed by a sovereignty of immanence. Our freedom is based in, derives from, God's sovereignty. But unless it is at least in part a sovereignty of transcendence, of personal space, it threatens to overwhelm us.[28]

The creature is given space by God, space that enables it to live freely in relationship with that which is other than itself. It is distinctly our space but—and this too is crucial—what we have and know as our space does not exist apart from the space of the other and, especially, it does not exist apart from God's space.[29] The creature exists in proximity to God. The space of creation is, as Barth puts it, the external basis of the covenant. It is given to the creature precisely so that there may be

27. See Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation*.

28. Gunton, *Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 135.

29. The point is taken from *CD* II/1, 476.

a covenant relationship between the creature and God. Creation, is as Barth again puts it, "the realisation of the *divine* intention of love."[30]

In defiance of God's intention, however, there develops in the space given to the creature the tragic history of humanity's attempt to distance itself from God, where distance, in this case no longer means differentiation but separation—distance without proximity, without relationship. Humanity distances itself from the presence of God, or, more accurately, it presumes to do so, for, as the Psalmist confesses, there is no place we can flee from God's presence (Ps 139:7). If it were possible to flee, we would be without a place; we would surely die, for the divine omnipresence means that there is nowhere to go beyond the presence of God. Death is in that respect simply the resumption of the nothingness that obtains apart from the creative, life-giving *ruach* of God. Tragically, that is the destiny humanity chooses for itself, and would succeed in achieving were it not for the fact that God places himself in the way of humanity's deathly determination. The Son of God, takes humanity's place, exposes himself to the reality of godforsakeness and, by defeating death, makes it true that nothing in all creation is able to separate us from the love of God.

If it is true that nothing separates us from the love of God, if it is true that God is present, then we may well ask where the living and loving God is to be found? We may say, first, that God is omnipresent; God is present in all places. "There is no absence, no non-presence, of God in His creation. But," says Barth, "this does not form any obstacle to a whole series of special presences, of concrete cases of God being here or there,"[31] with Jacob at Bethel, with Moses on Mt. Sinai, with Isaiah in the Temple, for example. Barth continues, "[T]hese special cases take place in the context of what God does as He reveals Himself and reconciles the world with Himself. Indeed, we are forced to say that according to the order of biblical thinking and speech it is this special presence of God which always comes first and is estimated and valued as the real and decisive presence."[32]

The living and loving God is especially to be found, is "properly" present, as Barth puts it, in Jesus Christ. Christ is in person the intersection of divine and creaturely space, the locus and actualization of the covenant relationality between God and the creature. It is there,

30. *CD* III/1, 96.

31. *CD* II/1, 477.

32. Ibid.

in Christ, that God makes room for us; it is there that God fulfills his promise to dwell with his people. It is there, in Christ, that the wayward creature is redemptively gathered up from its self-imposed exile and restored to the presence of God.

The question then becomes, where is Christ to be found? How is the place of God's proper presence rendered accessible to us? We know of his birth in Bethlehem, his ministry in Galilee, his death in Jerusalem, but these are places and events remote from us in space and time. Did those who were contemporary with him then enjoy a proximity to the Son of God that is now unavailable to us? The truth is that then, as now, people are united with him through the Spirit. It is through the Spirit that we may know, and love and dwell with him. And the Spirit is at work, most especially, though not exclusively, in the church. The presence of the risen Christ is especially to be found where people are gathered for worship, where the Word of God is heard and preached, and where the sacraments are rightly celebrated. The Lord is especially to be found there on account of his promise that where two or three are gathered in my name I will be in the midst of them (Matt 18:20).

Eschatology

The availability of Christ in Word and Sacrament describes humanity's present reality. In Christ, with whom we are united by the Spirit in baptism, human persons are liberated from their self-imposed confinement and are given space once more to live in communion with God. Yet there is a further reality toward which the church looks forward in hope. We shall let John of Patmos describe it for us: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them'" (Rev 21:1–3).

What are we to make of this? Is it "merely" figurative language—a way of conceptualizing spiritual realities having little to do with the creaturely realities of space and time? Or is this a vision of redeemed spatiality, a spatiality in which the proximity between God and his

creatures is realized in ways yet unimaginable? It is difficult to make any sense of the creedal statement of belief in the resurrection of the body if there is not in God's presence somewhere for bodies to be. The promise that there are many rooms in my father's house, need not be taken literally as a description of heavenly architecture, in order to accept its assurance that, eschatologically speaking, there will be space for us with God.

Nor is it easy to sustain belief in the bodily resurrection of Christ, towards which the New Testament witness clearly points, if there is now no place for the risen and ascended Christ to be. He sits at the right hand of God, it is said, where he sustains all things by his powerful word (Heb 1:3). That location is not somewhere that we can point to, for it is not to be found in our space but in God's. But his presence there, his having a place there, a place he occupies eternally, must be said, on the basis of the divine economy, to be the antecedent condition of our having space at all.

Conclusion

I began this paper with the question, in what way does the spatial expression of the conceptual reality with which theology is concerned correspond to the being of God? Does the spatial language commonly used in theology have some purchase on the reality of God beyond what we might call the *merely* metaphorical? Barth, I think, helps us to see that space is only secondarily a determination of the creature. It is, in the first place, the freely chosen condition of God's threefold differentiation as Father, Son, and Spirit, the condition under which there is both proximity and distance in the being of God and thus personal distinction and communion. Barth says, therefore, that God has his own space. Indeed here it is revealed what space truly is. It is possible then to say that spatial language used in theology need not always be a figure of speech. As God has space for himself, for the triune communion that constitutes his own life, so he creates space for us. Our space, distinct from God, is nevertheless the space in which God makes himself present, generally throughout creation, but most especially in Christ. We ought to take this literally. In Christ, as the letter to the Colossians puts it, "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col 2:9). God is wholly present *there*. On account of his presence there for us, we are assured that God has

space for us eternally, even when our earthly lives have come to an end. The details of that eschatological reality are largely unimaginable, but we can affirm with confidence one of its central features, namely, that we will be with God.

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