

*Retrieving the Tradition*

GIVING TIME:  
THE TRINITARIAN ORIGIN OF  
CREATED SPATIO-TEMPORALITY

FERDINAND ULRICH

“In the midst of the empty present of the lost son,  
the Father is the liberating ‘today’ of the  
ever-greater future of love.”



The father, who does not misuse the son as his own “future,” just as he does not regressively assert himself through his son, manifests his power in lovingly and faithfully letting the son go, in a releasing Yes to the other’s freedom.<sup>1</sup> He does not make the son into a false god for himself, to whom he is present so that, in him, he can survive his own death. He does not idolize the son. He has let go of every possible form of “grasping” onto “*his own*”

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1. The book from which this text is taken is an extended metaphysical reflection that takes its bearings from Lk 15:11–32, which the author prefers to call “The Parable of the Forgiving Father and His Two Lost Sons.”

Significantly, Ulrich rarely distinguishes between the human father of the parable and the divine Father, and intends this simultaneous reference to both. For the sake of clarity in English, and bearing in mind the relationship between divine and human paternity that Ulrich envisions, “Father” has been capitalized only when the context seems to demand it.—Trans.

future in the figure of his son; indeed, he has relinquished these possibilities *into* the other's freedom to let-be. He does this without having to overcome himself first in a way that contradicts his own purpose, for he himself is creative love. He leaves the means he has handed over to the will of him who goes away, and reveals thereby the power of his generative, paternal Yes, to which alone the son owes his existence, and out of which the son lives. The father does not consume himself in pensive brooding over the son's path. He does not collapse into a petty anxiousness that cannot entrust to the other his own life, that is therefore constantly already ahead of him (grasping him, as it were; anti-cipating him), coming to meet him in advance as the old (foregone) future of a father who wants to perpetuate himself in his son. The father does not displace the son's own future through a preemptive worry. In this case the son would always only encounter on his path the in-different past of his provenance, which cannot grant him his unique, personal future. He would therefore have no actual future at all, but would be forestalled, banished to what has been. No, the Father's waiting precedes the son in a different way. He waits hidden in the "sign-language" of the experiences that the son lives through and suffers in the foreign land, a sign-language that is pervaded by the breath of the Pneuma of love. The Father waits in the form of love's purer poverty, which wants to be freely discovered. He waits *in advance* of the son *from behind* the son, *at his back*—that is, as the one who moves him through mercy towards his turning, towards a return [*Kehre*], towards conversion [*Um-kehr*]. Conversion is the place where the one who waits and the one who is awaited are present.

Since the power of the Father is not a function of the son's conduct, since the Father acts rather in freedom, in voluntary and gratuitous love for the beloved other and in the beloved other, he is always already situated with and in him who has gone away. He is present to him. He goes out in the person who tells us the parable and therein expresses his own mystery; he goes with him into the extremes of desolate loneliness. In the midst of the empty present of the lost son, the Father is the liberating "today" of the ever-greater future of love, which does not let itself become embittered, does not begrudge, does not seek its own, but descends to the point of standing under the lost, the damned, the dead. The Father's abiding is his living search for

the lost. His seeking-in-person is the one Son, who out of his loving unity with the Father, as the one who is separated from the Father out of obedience, goes forth into the foreign land and seeks out what is lost.<sup>2</sup>

The source is creatively present because he does not grasp himself in the son's future, because he will not egoistically use this future for himself. This is the mystery of his loving poverty in abiding and in renunciation: "I will that you desire me in perfect freedom and that you thereby be yourself. I expose myself to the possibility of your unwillingness. I hope in poverty that I, who have given away all my substance into you, come to myself through your voluntary obedience, in the uniqueness of your freedom, in the spontaneity of your 'Yes, Father.'" Therein, the defenselessness of the Father opens up, the exposed vulnerability of his heart,<sup>3</sup> which patiently hopes for the son's free conversion, and which, out of this very patience, gives time. Given time is the epiphany of this patience of mercy. Not empty, arbitrary time, but the time of love, the time of the son's freedom, the time of his loving self-yielding [*Sichzeitigens*], the time of return. This poverty is no passive waiting, but is the tacit inspiration, the Spirit of the Father, his living breath, which surrounds and invigorates the son. It is the power of divine impotence, the binding of the Origin, who in and through the Son voluntarily binds himself because he loves perfectly, reserves nothing for himself, and is, thus, absolute freedom. This poverty is super-abounding love *in* its binding; *in* being-nailed, *in* the wounds of death, it is the glory of the Risen One.

If the Father hopes for gratuitous love from the son, then in this lies God's absolutely timeless power (*sit venia verbo*) to "become." This power is *not* a passage out of potency into act, *not* the awaiting of a future that he would not yet be, *not* dialect-

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2. The one Son's seeking also takes place in an "abiding": nailed to the wood of the Cross, immobile in the flesh, "the way, the truth, the life" seeks after the lost. He abides—just as the Father abides. "Quaerens me, *sedisti lassus*" ["In search of me, you *sat down* weary"].

3. Beyond all "patripassianism." This is only to say: *the same* Spirit of love, in which the Son (accepting the form of a slave; being made into sin for us) took upon himself the martyrdom of the Incarnation ("the whole life of Christ was a cross and martyrdom"), is also the Spirit of the Father's love, the Spirit in whom the Father begets and christens his beloved Son.

tical self-mediation on the path of finitization (“the becoming God”). Rather, this is the revelation of God’s being-given-away *in himself*, his eternal poverty of love, which is likewise his eternal wealth of love. That is, it is the eternal *Future* the unoriginate Father has from the Son,<sup>4</sup> the Son who *has been* born from the Father. It is the eternal *Future* (birth) which the Son has from the unoriginate Father, the Father who himself knows no procession, neither from the Son nor from the Spirit, but out of whom the Son proceeds. The Father *has been* given away into the Son, as his own begotten, in the absolute present of the personal We of the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from both as the life-breath of their embrace, their eternally fruitful unity, their eternal glorification. Within this eternal, timeless abyss of love—which gives itself and has been given in the super-spatial “Space” of the one divine essence—rests the mystery of created spatio-temporality.

The Father lets the son go. God does not refuse freedom to him who does not want it, just as he also does not refuse grace, the gratuity of love, to him who is willing. The Father also lives, therefore, in the one who closes himself off to him. He is *more interior* to *each* creature than the creature is to itself. This “*interior intimis meis*” of the Creator in his creature is heaven for the creature who loves, and hell for the creature who finally refuses God.

God gives freedom to man. God does not draw this gift out of a foreign material principle that lies at hand outside of himself, but draws it out of the abundance of his life, his ever-greater love. Created being as gift is the likeness of his love; but, in the midst of its finitized givenness, through which it is the *actuality* and the *life* of its recipient, this gift remains archetypically one with its Giver.—*Translated by Erik van Versendaal*.<sup>\*</sup> □

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4. “But when it says, ‘All things are put in subjection under him,’ it is plain that he is excepted who put all things under him. When all things *are subjected to him*, then *the Son himself will also be subjected* to him who put all things under him, so that God may be all in all (τὰ πάντα ἐν ᾧσιν)” (1 Cor 15:27–28). The Father’s “eternal future” from the Son is not, however, meant as though the Father were *pater de filio* or *ex filio*.

\* This text is from *Gabe und Vergebung: Ein Beitrag zur Biblischen Ontologie* (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 2006), 458–61. Printed with permission.