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God's self-specification: his being is his electing

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Abstract

The article considers the relationship between divine will and being as revealed in election, particularly according to Karl Barth's unique formulation of the doctrine. It comes at the salient features of this relationship by way of a public disagreement between Bruce McCormack and Paul Molnar. In agreement with McCormack, the author contends, on the basis of Barth's provocative claim that Jesus Christ is not just object but subject of election, that we cannot speak of God's being apart from his will for humanity, and this from all eternity, or in God's most intimate primordiality. Yet echoing Molnar, this observation does not entail the logical priority of grace to being. The author argues that a thoroughgoing commitment to conceiving of the being of God in the act of electing means affirming the eternal simultaneity and indeed reciprocity of will and being, as Jesus Christ is the full and total revelation of both. One cannot serve as ground for the other. As such, a preferable way of construing election is as the decisive statement of Godself – the primordial, eternal iteration of God for humanity – or the specification of divine being.

The significance of Karl Barth's formulation of election is appreciated in part by the depths to which it penetrates vis-à-vis reflection upon God's being, and by the intensity of disagreement it engenders relative to discourse about grace and being; in other words, by the extent of its ontological and theological provocation. The claims and debate it has provoked to date are substantive, and encapsulated in a collection of publications by Bruce McCormack and Paul Molnar.[1] Affirming the ongoing import of this discussion, I reconsider

[1] See Bruce McCormack, 'Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology', in John Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 92–110; Paul Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* (London and New York: T. & T. Clark, 2002), pp. 61–81. For further elucidation of McCormack's position, see also *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 371–4, 455–62. For further background on Molnar's position on the place of the doctrine of the immanent Trinity for preserving divine freedom, see also 'The Function of the

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here Barth's doctrine of election by attending to the constitutive claims made in these pieces, arguing finally that God's gracious act of electing represents the specification of divine being. I understand this position as a compulsory next step, basically in agreement with McCormack – the will of God in some sense participates in the constitutive nature of God's being, and this from all eternity – but appreciative of the corrective trajectory of Molnar's position – with God, there is no conceptual priority of will to being.

I argue this, first, by offering a brief exposition of the salient features of Barth's construal of election. Next, I summarise McCormack's and Molnar's positions, particularly as they relate to Barth's understanding of the *logos a/ensarkos*, and of time and eternity. I draw attention to the strengths of each argument, which when seen together highlight an apparent contradiction in Barth's thinking, or at least reliance upon two seemingly contradictory, ontological suppositions. Finally, as a way forward, I demonstrate the possibility of understanding Jesus Christ, the Subject and Object of election, as the statement (rather than realisation) of God's being for humankind, or the specification (rather than effective determination) of divine being. As electing and elected God, Jesus Christ is simultaneously God's will and being.[2]

Immanent Trinity in the Theology of Karl Barth: Implications for Today', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 42/3 (1989), pp. 367–99.

Several publications have directly and indirectly taken up the article's subject matter but most have not altered the discourse in any substantive fashion. An exception is an exchange between McCormack and Edwin Chr. van Driel; cf. van Driel, 'Karl Barth on the Eternal Existence of Jesus Christ', and McCormack, 'Seek God Where He May Be Found: A Response to Edwin Chr. van Driel', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60/1 (2007), pp. 45–61, 62–79, respectively. Van Driel appeals to classical christology in order to differentiate between the human identity of Christ and the eternal essence of God but the main gain, for me, is on McCormack's side, and it is twofold. First, McCormack thematically addresses the issue of time/eternity, as this bears on the ontology of God's *ad extra* activity (pp. 75–6), a matter I have raised with McCormack and Molnar, which I address below. Second, he concretely situates Barth's actualism relative to Hegelian history, allowing for God to be understood in terms of his temporal decision, not in general, but in the specific history of Jesus Christ.

[2] Another voice ought to be acknowledged here. In 'God's Triunity and Self-Determination', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7/3 (July 2005), pp. 246–61, Kevin Hector argues a negative thesis that places him between McCormack and Molnar: contra McCormack, God's triunity logically precedes his gracious determination for the human, yet contra Molnar this does not entail the possibility of an unknown God or a species of freedom in which God remains apart from humankind. Both positions fail to grasp sufficiently the simultaneity of God's election and triunity. Inasmuch as we appreciate something of the respective cases at hand, and affirm the need for further emphasis on the simultaneity of God's essence and act, Hector and I work on parallel

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Barth's doctrine of election[3]

Barth's contribution to the Reformed doctrine of predestination, that is to say, the insight that distinguishes his thought from the classic Calvinist position as well as from that of the larger Christian tradition (save a few perceptive individuals), is that the principal referent of God's elective grace is Jesus Christ.[4] His departure from the traditional position is twofold. In the first place, Barth rejects the teaching that in a moment of abstract decision-making the Creator predetermined the fate of his creatures according to an unfathomable will. In the second place, he disallows the possibility that the immediate object of God's elective decision was indistinct humankind (divided into two camps of elect and reprobate). Against both these notions Barth asserts the specificity of Jesus Christ:

tracks, but there are two defining matters on which we disagree. First, in this initial offering Hector does not recognise the difference between McCormack's and Molnar's conceptions of *time* and *eternity*. Indeed, he critiques Molnar (p. 253 *passim*) for denying the eternality of God's self-determination. In fact Molnar does not do so if, as I show below, we acknowledge that he (with Barth) takes 'eternity' to connote 'divine sphere of existence' and not, like McCormack, 'infinite time'. This distinction bears directly upon our understanding of key components of Barth's Trinitarianism. Second, Hector adjudicates between our two expositors by way of their fidelity to Barth. Materially, I think he errs by suggesting that 'Barth's theology points mostly in McCormack's direction' (p. 260). Ultimately this is accurate only insofar as McCormack is truer to Barth's intentions than Barth himself, which I think he is. Nevertheless, in terms of his *stated* position it is Molnar who holds the 'party line' and McCormack who offers the 'critical correction'. Formally, then, a preferable aim (to judging McCormack and Molnar in light of Barth) would be to reconsider Barth in light of McCormack's suggestion and Molnar's critique. In this way, the merits and demerits of each position are seen clearly in their own right.

[3] Barth treats election in §§ 32–5 of *Church Dogmatics* (II. 2, pp. 3–506). My concern being principally with the person of Christ, I focus here on § 33, 'The Election of Jesus Christ'; *CD* II. 2, pp. 94–194. § 32 introduces the discussion of election, including its importance to dogmatics broadly and its centrality to the doctrine of God. §§ 34 and 35 consider the second (but simultaneous) moment in election: God elects not only Jesus Christ but also in him humanity, as the community of God (§ 34), and as individual members of that community (§ 35). Citations are from Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, J. C. Campbell *et al.*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (London and New York: T. & T. Clark, 2004). For a helpful summary of Barth's doctrine of election and its place in his larger theological programme, see Colin Gunton, 'Karl Barth's Doctrine of Election as Part of his Doctrine of God', *Journal of Theological Studies* NS 25 (1974), pp. 381–92.

[4] Those 'few perceptive individuals' include, specifically, Augustine and Coccejus (*CD* II.2, pp. 106–16). For a helpful review of how Barth himself came to this position, see McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, pp. 456–7.

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> Our thesis is that God's eternal will is the election of Jesus Christ. At this point we part company with all previous interpretations of the doctrine of predestination. In these the Subject and object of predestination (the electing God and elected man) are determined ultimately by the fact that both are treated as unknown. We may say that the electing God is a supreme being who disposes freely according to His own omnipotence, righteousness and mercy. . . . But when we say that, then ultimately and fundamentally the electing God is an unknown quantity. On the other hand, we may say that the elected man is the man who has come under the eternal good-pleasure of God. . . . But when we say that, then ultimately and fundamentally elected man is also an unknown quantity. . . . In the sharpest contrast to this view our thesis that the eternal will of God is the election of Jesus Christ means that we deny the existence of any such twofold mystery.[5]

God's will for his creation is mysterious, but it is a *known* will. His elective grace is no hidden disposition, no volitional card yet to be played. It is a *disclosed* truth. It is Jesus Christ. God's decision is not the judgement of a remote Supreme Being, who in this act remains in obscurity as someone about whom and about whose character the judged can only conjecture. Nor is the elect nondescript humanity, unspecified 'man' who for reasons to be known only on the far side of glory receives this Being's favour. Rather, on both sides – electing and elected – stands the specific person Jesus Christ.

Revelation is integral to Barth's formulation of election vis-à-vis the agency of Christ: the doctrine ought to be explicated in a way that erases the mystery of the dual 'whom'. Historically, conceptions of predestination laboured without this accent and were thus characterised by darkness and obscurity, states that effectively became ends in themselves:

> The history of the dogma is shot through with a great struggle for the affirmation of the fact that in the mystery of election we have to do with light and not darkness. . . . But this affirmation could not and cannot be made . . . as long as it is not admitted that in the eternal predestination of God we have to do on both sides with only one name and one person, the same name and the same person, Jesus Christ. Unless this is done . . . the assertion of the obscurity itself becomes the last and decisive word on the whole subject.[6]

[5] *CD* II.2, p. 146.
[6] Ibid.

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The doctrine of election is intended to be at least moderately illuminating, to make plain the divide between saved and condemned and to show how that divide honours a benevolent and just deity. But the record of this dogma, so far as Barth sees it, presents a contrasting picture. Without being clear as to whom it is that judges and is judged, the most decisive statement of the doctrine is one of ignorance, darkness. Failing to recognise the centrality of Jesus Christ to this dogma, we are left with an incomprehensible God, a God behind or above his works, and with no objective identification of the elect; with no option, therefore, but to make obscurity the defining mode of elective reflection.

The cause of historical obfuscation is hermeneutical. The hidden deity of traditional expositions of election derives from an exegetical willingness to predicate things of God not explicitly revealed in Jesus Christ. 'When [older theologians] came across passages in the Bible which treat expressly of the electing God', Barth observes, 'there in some inexplicable way seemed to open up before them the vista of heights and depths beyond and behind the Word'.[7] Traditional construals interpreted passages like Romans 8 and Ephesians 1 without immediate recourse to Jesus Christ. They all-too-readily spoke of concepts like foreknowledge and foreordination in terms of pre-temporal reality, as the decrees of a God who 'before all time' purposed this particular world-structure. But when considering the who of such decreeing, this move left them only with the Almighty, the transcendent one, the God whose ways are not our own, the God *behind* Romans and Ephesians, but not the God *of* these passages.[8]

[7] Ibid., p. 151.

[8] Barth suggests the 'older theologians' may have deviated from an exegetical procedure they themselves taught and otherwise practised because of the decisive nature of the question asked in the sphere of predestination. 'The question was not merely an incidental question, as the older theologians knew only too well. It was the question of the beginning of all things. . . . It was the question of the specific order of the kingdom or rule of God, with all that that means for the existence, the preservation, the history and the destiny of man. The question was in fact the actual and burning question: What is to become of us at the hand of God?' (ibid., pp. 151–2). In light of the ultimacy of the question of divine determination, it may seem natural to appeal to ultimate mystery, an unsearchable corner of divine existence reserved for the particularly weighty and difficult matters of the God–world relation. But this is not a path open to the exegetically responsible theologian, the one who takes seriously the fact that 'the Word of God [Jesus Christ] is the content of the whole Bible' (ibid., p. 152). If we keep our hermeneutical lens correctly focused and understand that there is no God of scripture independent of Jesus Christ, then we must begin and end our discussion of even this most decisive issue with him.

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For Barth, by contrast, if scripture says that God elects, then it is Jesus Christ that elects, for he is the God of scripture, the only God we know. In a formulation that encapsulates so much of Barth's thinking he writes of election:

> In [the Word] is the fulness of all the information that we either need or desire concerning God and man, and the relationship between them, and the ordering of that relationship. At no point then, and on no pretext, can we afford either to dispense with, or to be turned aside from, the knowledge of Jesus Christ.[9]

If theology is to speak of God's elective grace, it must do so as it speaks of all other doctrines, in terms of Jesus Christ. It must recognise that all the information the Bible gives concerning God, humanity and their relationship it gives in Jesus Christ. Making his own hermeneutical suppositions plain, Barth rhetorically asks, 'As presented to us in the Bible, what can the election be at all . . . if it is divorced from the name and person to which the whole content of the Bible relates as to the exhaustive self-revelation of God?'[10] The God of scripture is a revealed and therefore known God. Predicating election of this God cannot mean speaking of absolute mystery, transcendent disposition, a volitional trump card yet to be played, because the revelation of this God is exhaustive. There is no part of God waiting to be revealed apart from Jesus Christ. There is no pre-temporal elective moment independent of Jesus Christ. If there were such a moment we would have no knowledge of it. The only *electing* God we know is the only God we know: Jesus Christ. The God to whom the entire Bible refers is this God and no other, so to speak of election we must speak of this God and no other.

So to rescue the doctrine from its own obscurity, Barth reminds theology that Jesus Christ is the subject and object of election.[11] Now, Barth has more

[9] Ibid., pp. 152–3.

[10] Ibid., p. 153.

[11] This is not to say that for Barth the mystery of election is solved. In removing the mystery of the who of election, Barth does not claim that election is now a doctrine laid bare, before which we no longer need be humble and adoring. He does not intend that by making elector and elected known he is somehow pulling back a curtain and exposing the inner workings of grace. What he is doing is putting the mystery of predestination on a surer footing, making it definite and thereby protecting it from any kind of mere speculation. 'The mystery must have a definite character', Barth writes, '[which provokes] an equally definite silence and humility and admiration. Otherwise, it is inevitable that we ourselves should try to fill in the gap' (ibid., p. 147). The subject and object of election must be given not so that inscrutability is eliminated, but so our admiration for God's elective operations may be properly

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to say about this reality than I can handle here.[12] What I must, however, make a bit clearer before proceeding is the first of this two-part assertion: that Jesus Christ is the electing God.

Barth begins his discussion of election with an exegesis of John 1:1–2, wherein he considers two important issues: the nature of the phrase 'in the

focused; so that, in other words, we do not set the parameters of the mystery ourselves and then reverence it. For Barth, if we are to think rightly of the mystery we must recognise it as something revealed to us and not as something of God which is not revealed. We affirm that Jesus Christ is the subject and object of election precisely 'so that we may know before whom and what we must be silent and humble ourselves and adore', and so avoid a 'self-projected image' of a hidden deity (ibid., p. 147). Such precision is helpful, not only to protect the integrity of our doctrinal formulation and the character of our piety, but also to buttress our sense of assurance in light of God's decision. Throughout § 33, Barth consistently attacks the well-known *decretum absolutum* (see esp. pp. 100–15, 134–45, 158–60). He does so because to speak of any kind of absolute, unconditioned decree of elect and rejected effectively relegates God's decision not to a gracious act of overflowing love, but to an incomprehensible, fixed principle (see also *CD* II.2, p. 333). But such a principle is hardly revealed. It is a deduction, a capitulation on the part of humanity to our own uncertainty and doubt. Barth acknowledges that there might be a kind of ironic comfort in such a move (abandoning ourselves in an '[unsearchable] idea of God and man is no doubt very mysterious and exciting and in its own way consoling', p. 158), but it is a move we must resist and reject. All pastoral consolation founded upon mystery and not revelation, upon unknown and not known, cannot but prove unsatisfying. 'All the earnest statements concerning the majesty and mystery of God, all the well-meaning protestations of His fatherly loving-kindness, cannot in any way alter the fact that we necessarily remain anxious in respect of our election' (p. 111). Our own assurance of election rests entirely on the fact that we know that God is not 'electing elsewhere and in some other way' (p. 111). Barth wants to define the mystery of God's election not only so that we might not 'fill in the gaps' ourselves, but also so that it can be assurance. Against, therefore, any *decretum absolutum*, against the possibility of losing ourselves in non-knowledge rather than knowledge of God, Barth concludes forcefully, 'when we are called upon to define and name the first and decisive decision which transcends and includes all others, it is definitely not in order to answer with a mysterious shrug of the shoulders. . . . There is no such thing as a *decretum absolutum*. There is no such thing as a will of God apart from the will of Jesus Christ' (pp. 104, 115).

[12] On the implications of this construal for human election and the grounds of human freedom, see *CD* II.2, pp. 115–27, 175–80. For a discussion of the repercussions of Barth's formulation of the doctrine for the double nature of predestination (that in Christ God has ascribed to humanity salvation and to himself death), ibid., pp. 161–75. That this decision is a living decree and not a static outcome, that in it God remains free to continue to decide for his creature, that election is therefore actualistic, something continually dependent upon God's grace and realised in an ongoing way, ibid., pp. 185–94.

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beginning', and the fact that Jesus Christ is the Word. Each of these merits a brief restatement.

First, the Word was *in the beginning*. Barth understands this phrase in view of created reality. He takes the beginning at which the Word was, to be the genesis of creation. 'The Word', he writes, 'is above and before all created realities. It stands completely outside the series of created things. It precedes all being and all time.'[13] The beginning is that realm of existence prior to all things that are (except God) and prior to all time. It exists in 'eternity'. 'Within the sphere of creation', he continues, 'there is . . . no time which is not enclosed by the eternity of this Word, no space which does not have its origin in its omnipresence'.[14] There is no created time or thing that is not encompassed by the eternity of the Word. Again, I must impress that Barth resolutely defines this eternity in terms of creation and not in terms of divine existence. The eternity of the Word is not the primordial sphere of God *in se*, but the beginning of his ways and works *ad extra*. But can this hold, can there be any other eternity beside the one in which God determines his own being? Why is 'the beginning' the origin of 'all that which, being created by Him, is distinct from God', and not the realm of existence wherein all that which, being uncreated, is God?[15] In fact, this issue is at the heart of the aforementioned debate and is thus better considered below after I have reviewed the parameters of disagreement. For now, suffice it to note that Barth understands the Word's eternity to be pre-temporal reality at the origin of creation and time, and not necessarily the eternity in which God assigns himself his being.

After establishing that this Word, which was in the beginning with God is in fact God a second time – that is, 'the mode of being, and being, of a second "He" [which] is identified with the mode of being with and being of the first "He," God'[16] – Barth considers, secondly, the identity of the Word. He understands this Word to be none other than Jesus Christ. In a quintessentially Barthian moment of elegant dismissiveness, he takes John's lack of specificity as to the referent of the *logos* (Greek philosophy? Jewish/mystic name traditions?) not as presenting an unknown to be overcome by historical-critical research, but as an indication of John's unique appropriation of the term:

> It will probably always be a waste of time to look for that unknown quantity, the source used by the writer of the Fourth Gospel. . . . What is

[13] Ibid., p. 95.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., p. 96.

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> certain is that he had no intention of honouring Jesus by investing Him with the title of Logos, but rather that he honoured the title itself by applying it . . . as a predicate of Jesus. He offered no other exegesis of the concept apart from that in which he made this predication.[17]

Barth takes John's exegetical scantiness to indicate that his intention was to reinterpret the term by ascribing it to Jesus Christ. Beyond this, it is of little value (a waste of time even!) to try to determine the context of usage upon which John was drawing in making use of the title. What is important is to note that in the Fourth Gospel, the *logos* is honoured, it obtains its value, its content, from Jesus Christ and not the other way around. While a seemingly subtle move, the significance of this observation ought not to be overlooked. Barth is here contending that the Word of God, which is God, the God who elects 'in the beginning', is Jesus Christ and *not some abstract* logos-*concept*. John does not invest Jesus Christ with the philosophical (epistemological or metaphysical) content of 'logos', but invests the title of the incarnate deity. The electing God is not the Word of the realm of divine Ideas but none other than the concrete person Jesus Christ. *Jesus Christ and not some abstract* logos *is the subject of election*. It is in this context that the debate between McCormack and Molnar finds its centre.

McCormack and Molnar on the *logos asarkos* and the Being of God

The claim that Jesus Christ is the subject of election has profound implications for Barth's comprehension of the Second Person of the Trinity and the being of God. Once again, Barth's assertion is that the divine *logos* is not only the object of a primordial decision for incarnation, but also participatory in that decision as incarnational subject; that is, as Jesus Christ. In other words, it is not as though, in the first place, the *logos* is passive recipient of divine decree; rather, he actively takes part in decreeing. Nor is it, in the second place, that the decreeing *logos* is an abstract modality; rather, he is none other than the God-man.

McCormack works from this basic structure of Barth's thought to draw two interrelated conclusions about God and his Word. First, he qualifies the need for a pre-enfleshed *logos*. McCormack observes that, while the *logos asarkos* is a necessary concept in Barth's programme, its place is at the same time necessarily secondary and its character must not be taken as indeterminate and wholly independent. Regarding its necessity, one must acknowledge the existence of the *logos asarkos* and distinguish between it and the *logos ensarkos* because, 'after all, the human nature (body and soul) of Jesus only came

[17] Ibid., pp. 96–7.

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into existence at a particular point in time, in history. It was not eternal; the Logos did not bring it with him, so to speak.'[18] Barth ultimately did not wish to collapse history into eternity and read the human body and soul of Jesus of Nazareth into the Godhead. The *logos* is eternally incarnational, not incarnate, and so it is finally obligatory to affirm the reality of the *logos asarkos*, which at a point in time took on flesh. However, in saying this it must immediately be added that this *logos asarkos* is not an independent agent existing for itself, not an abstract 'being' awaiting action, but a concrete reality actively postured toward *ensarkos*, enfleshment. The subject of election is, again, not an indeterminate *logos* but the particular person Jesus Christ, God determined to be for the world and humanity, which means that the *logos asarkos* does not exist as an unconditioned reality:

> If now Barth wishes to speak of Jesus Christ (and not an abstractly conceived *Logos asarkos*) as the Subject of election, he must deny to the Logos a mode or state of being above and prior to the decision to be incarnate in time. . . . To say that 'Jesus Christ' is the Subject of election is to say that there is no *Logos asarkos* in the absolute sense of a mode of existence in the second 'person' of the Trinity which is independent of the determination for incarnation; no 'eternal Son' if that Son is seen in abstraction from the gracious election in which God determined and determines never to be God apart from the human race.[19]

For McCormack (and for Barth), affirming the reality of a *logos asarkos* is necessary to preserve the distinction between time and eternity, but it should not be taken in an absolute sense to indicate an existence in God apart from the temporal existence of Jesus Christ. There is no abstract Son prior to his inner triune decision to be God for humankind.

How can this be so? How can the eternally existing Son be only relatively and not absolutely distinct from Jesus of Nazareth? How, in other words, can the person of Christ be constitutive of divine determination without reading human nature (body and soul) back into eternal divinity? McCormack answers with the modality of *anticipation*. 'God', he writes, 'is already in

[18] McCormack, 'Grace and Being', p. 96.

[19] Ibid., pp. 95, 100. In Barth's own words, 'If it is true that God became man, then in this we have to recognize and respect His eternal will and purpose and resolve . . . behind which we do not have to reckon with any Son of God in Himself, with any *logos asarkos*, with any other Word of God than that which was made flesh. According to the free and gracious will of God the eternal Son of God is Jesus Christ as He lived and died and rose again in time, and none other. . . . We must not ignore [God's free decision] and imagine a "Logos in itself" which does not have this content and form [Jesus Christ]'. *CD* IV.1, p. 52.

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pre-temporal eternity – *by way of anticipation* – that which he would become in time . . . The being of God in eternity, as a consequence of the primal decision of election, is a being which looks forward. It is a being in the mode of anticipation.'[20] In a primordial choice, God elects not to be God other than as looking forward, other than as by nature anticipative. The Son in and for himself, as subject of this pre-temporal, eternal decision (i.e. there never was a time when this decision was not), wills not to be other than incarnational, which is to say that he wills not to be in and for himself at all, but always in and for humankind. In this way the pre-incarnate *logos* does not exist in abstract independence, but in his being anticipates incarnation; by way of anticipation he already is, in his eternal being, what he would become in time: Jesus Christ.[21]

This brings us to a second conclusion McCormack draws from Barth's doctrine of election: God's triunity logically follows his elective will. If we say that there is no *logos asarkos* in any abstract sense, and that the Son is Jesus Christ and not some pre-Christ-ian, speculative 'being' operating in strict independence, then we must also say that the being of the God who chooses not to be other than this way obtains his existence as such as a logical consequence of his gracious choice:

> The denial of the existence of a *Logos asarkos* in any other sense than the concrete one of a being of the Logos as *incarnandus*, the affirmation that Jesus Christ is the second 'person' of the Trinity and the concomitant rejection of free-floating talk of the 'eternal Son' as a mythological abstraction – these commitments require that we see the triunity of God logically as a function of divine election. Expressed more exactly, the eternal act of Self-differentiation . . . is *given in* the eternal act in which God elects himself for the human race. The *decision* for the covenant of grace is the ground of God's triunity.[22]

God is as he is because of his gracious decision. He wills to be this way, for humanity in Christ (and Spirit) and not any other way. If the Son is Jesus Christ, then the Son obtains his existence as a consequence of the divine decision to *be* in time, for humanity.

[20] Ibid., p. 100; emphasis in original.

[21] Specifically, the modality of anticipation allows McCormack to understand God's determination to be for the human in the concrete person of Jesus Christ, without making the Hegelian move of collapsing divine existence into human history. See ibid., pp. 99–100.

[22] Ibid., p. 103; emphasis in original.

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McCormack acknowledges that this argument clearly stretches temporally conditioned, human cognition to its breaking point. 'How can the second "person" of the Trinity', he wonders, 'participate in the decision which gives him his own distinctive mode of origination?'[23] It would seem impossible to assert that God's elective decision is prior to his triunity while at the same time insisting that a result of that decision, the Second Person, participated in it. He must exist before he could will himself into existence. Even to conceive of the possibility that divine election determines divine being requires McCormack to stress that this relationship is *logical* and not temporally sequential. Again, God's decree and being are eternal:

> We are not asking here about a chronological relation. Election is an *eternal* decision and as such resists our attempts to temporalize it; i.e., to think of it in such a way that a 'before' and an 'after' are introduced into the being of God in pre-temporal eternity. . . . The triunity of God cannot follow this decision in some kind of temporal sequence of events. The two things belong together because God is a Subject insofar as he gives himself (by an eternal act) his own being.[24]

It is necessary to consider election before being in light of Barth's claim that Jesus Christ is electing subject. Nevertheless, this ordering is of a conceptual and not chronological character. The notion that the Son is not other than incarnational, that God's being is anticipative – these concepts demand that elective will be given priority of treatment: God's being did not exist first for itself and then for humanity, but eternally for humanity, which means God's decision to be for his creature determined his mode of being. Still, we must remain clear that this priority of treatment is logical, and does not suggest a temporal sequence. God's will and being are necessarily simultaneous, existing as they do among the same eternal subject.

This developed conclusion – that divine will logically precedes being – is again McCormack's and not Barth's. Barth himself never carried through the implications of his doctrine of election to this extent. 'He should have', McCormack argues, 'but he did not', and so McCormack sees his own work on this score as a 'critical correction' to Barth's inconsistent, or at least incomplete, thinking.[25] It is here that Molnar begins his defence of Barth's stated position.

Molnar takes his point of departure from the recognition that Barth never corrected his way of speaking about God as self-existent prior to

[23] Ibid., p. 104.
[24] Ibid., pp. 101, 104; emphasis in original.
[25] Ibid., pp. 101, 102.

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election, nor did he ever reverse his treatments of the doctrines of God and election. For Molnar this is exactly so for the good reason that the existing content and structure of Barth's insights preserve divine freedom. 'The order between election and triunity cannot be logically reversed', Molnar writes, 'without in fact making creation, reconciliation and redemption necessary to God'.[26] The fact that Barth does not alter his understanding or treatment of God in light of his mature doctrine of election is no oversight or shyness of expression. Barth intentionally checked his understanding of election against his overriding concern to preserve God's freedom to be other than he is as creator, reconciler and redeemer. 'The reason Barth never changed his view', Molnar concludes explicitly, 'is because he consistently recognized and maintained God's freedom, without which the doctrine of the Trinity becomes nothing more than a description of our relations among ourselves'.[27] To speak of trinitarian relations without affirming the priority of divine being to divine will is, for Molnar, to speak of human relations in a Schleiermacherian loud voice; in other words, not to speak of God at all. God is as he is over, apart from and without need of the human:

> Barth insisted that the Trinity exists eternally in its own right and thus even the electing God is not subject to any necessities, especially a necessity that would suggest that the ground of his triunity is the covenant of grace. It is exactly the other way around. The covenant of grace is a covenant of *grace* because it expresses the free overflow of God's eternal love . . . as the Father begets the Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit. . . . God's being is not the result of his will. Rather, his will to elect expresses his freedom to be God in a new way for us.[28]

God is God *in se* primally, and this in tri-unity, and for the human consequently as a gratuitous act of overflowing love, as it is expressed in the eternal procession of the Son. God's triune existence is not a conceptual outcome of his elective affinity. Contra McCormack, God's gracious decision to be for the human in Jesus Christ does not precede, even logically, the free being of God to be as he would with or without the human. There is no necessity to his being. God's gracious choice *expresses* his free, triune existence. It does not *constitute* that existence.

Molnar understands the *logos asarkos* as playing a significant, albeit minor, role in Barth's trinitarianism and christology. What critics of this concept

[26] Molnar, *Divine Freedom*, p. 63.
[27] Ibid., p. 64.
[28] Ibid., p. 63.

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fail to perceive is that this doctrine functions as a necessary safeguard.[29] Affirming the *logos asarkos* preserves the possibility that, logically speaking, there might never have been a *logos ensarkos*. That is, as a doctrine the *logos asarkos* allows God to remain free *from* us, and not just free *for* us:

> [Barth] believed [the *logos asarkos*] was necessary because God acting for us must be seen against the background of God in himself who could have existed in isolation from us but freely chose not to. He rejected a *logos asarkos* in his doctrine of creation if it implied a 'formless Christ' or 'a Christ-principle'; . . . he rejected it in connection with reconciliation if it meant a retreat to an idea of God behind the God revealed in Christ; but he still insisted it had a proper role to play in the doctrine of the Trinity and in Christology.[30]

Molnar acknowledges that Barth was not unqualified in his inclusion of the doctrine of the pre-enfleshed Word in his dogmatic programme. Nevertheless, Molnar accords it a more central place in Barth's thought than does McCormack. Recognising the *logos asarkos* not only staves off the deduction that the flesh of Christ inhabited pre-temporal divinity, more importantly, this doctrine affirms that the being of God exists as triune apart from anticipation of the creature's redemption; the Creator's being is in no way contingent upon human need, even anticipatorily, because the second person of the Trinity exists free *from* enfleshment as well as free *for* it.[31]

[29] Besides McCormack, Molnar takes issue with Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999), and with Robert Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) and *Systematic Theology*, vol.1, *The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). See Molnar, *Divine Freedom*, pp. 64–81. As Molnar sees it, both of these latter figures represent a radicalised position on the *logos asarkos*, dismissing it entirely. It is for this reason that I chose to investigate Molnar's debate with McCormack, who, despite Molnar's conclusion to the contrary (ibid., p. 81) does not dispense with the *logos asarkos* entirely. He allows the doctrine a place in Barth's thought, albeit a secondary or insignificant place. The greater proximity of McCormack's thought to Molnar's makes the disagreement between these two the more fruitful to explore, as it touches the heart of the matter: not simply whether one acknowledges the existence of the *logos asarkos*, but the minimum conceptual and functional role that it must be accorded in our doctrine of God in order to think rightly about (the order of) election and triunity. In other words, setting Molnar against Farrow or Jenson could give the impression of a false dichotomy, as though in discussing the topic of God–world relation one either includes the *logos asarkos* or does not.

[30] Ibid., p. 71.

[31] One might charge that Molnar's position is open to critique insofar as he seems to hold to a particularly modernist (western post-Enlightenment) understanding of

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Adjudicating the debate: the specification of divine being

What are we to make of this debate, and on what grounds might we suggest a way forward? Our first move must be to note the somewhat different concerns of our two Barthian expositors, and then to reconsider election in the light of their gains. McCormack's principal goal is to think through the implications of Barth's doctrine of election, a process that results in, among other things, a revised understanding of divine freedom. Molnar's principal aim is to defend the 'accepted' position on Barth's construal of God's freedom. The focus of Molnar's critique, therefore, is primarily on a consequence of McCormack's argument, and only secondarily on the argument itself.

Molnar's thesis is more corrective than constructive. Along the lines of conciliar statements, it does not offer a case for understanding the relationship between God's being and choice in light of Barth's mature christology, but sets boundaries around any such proposal. What this means is that Molnar does not really engage the core of McCormack's argument. He identifies what he knows is not an acceptable conclusion to it – the being of God in any way conditioned by human existence – but he does

freedom, which is influenced by the notion of autonomous existence. Hector suggests something along these lines ('God's Triunity', pp. 255–7). To Molnar, freedom and contingency seem antithetically opposed, and as such God is not free unless in his essence he is utterly free from external relation in some primordial moment of selfhood. But how well does this accord with the *biblical* notion of freedom in self-deference to the other? Is it not the point of Genesis 3 that humankind fell by failing to grasp freedom-in-obedience, and instead opted for an 'ideal' of unconditioned autonomy, a free-from existence? Barth, of course, when not read as McCormack does, is accused of the same kind of modernist impulse. And, of course, this question raises the corollary as to whether freedom-as-essential-unbridled-autonomy is not really more scholastic than modern. (Does substantialist ontology not trade upon the same concept?) Nonetheless, it is instructive to consider whether Molnar and Barth are indeed concerned for divine freedom, or for an abstract notion of divine freedom. We must, however, at least honour Barth's intention, which is not to oppose freedom and contingency, but to contend for a kind of freedom that transcends this polarity, and in doing this grant a sympathetic reading to Molnar as following Barth here. God is indeed free of contingency, unrestrained by anything that is not him. But God is not free because he is independent. Rather, he is independent because he is free. His freedom is in essence threefold (this is my language, not Barth's): God is free from contingency, he is free for contingency, and he is free for relationship that is genuine yet not contingent. This last is the ultimate sense in which God is free; he is able to be in communion that finds its basis and fulfilment in nothing but himself. It is indeed genuine communion, genuine love, precisely because it is *God's* love. 'It is His freedom not merely to be in the differentiation of His being from [created] being, but to be in Himself the One who can have and hold communion with this reality (as in fact He does) in spite of His utter distinction from it'; *CD* II. 1, p. 304.

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not address the full force of McCormack's concern: how can Jesus Christ, *not an abstract* logos, be the *eternal subject* of divine election without implying that God's being is in some measure determined by his will for humankind? If, as I made clear above, Barth understands not some philosophical *logos* but the God-man Jesus Christ to be God 'in the beginning', then how can he simultaneously contend that God is primordially free *from* his creature? Molnar's work is less concerned with working this out for Barth than with asserting its necessity, although not entirely so.

Peppered throughout Molnar's efforts are the seeds of a counter-argument, divergent suppositions, which together form a rebuttal, and which bring into relief exactly what is at stake in his disagreement with McCormack. Foremost, we note that McCormack and Molnar operate with different understandings of 'eternity'.[32] McCormack, I have already stated, takes eternal to mean *never not taking place*, such that being an eternal choice, there never was a time when God did not elect the human. According to this definition, Molnar's position is strained: God could not remain free from humankind if there never was a time he did not elect himself for humanity, if God's election in Jesus Christ always *was*; free *for*, yes, free *from*, no. Not surprisingly, Molnar takes Barth's conception of eternity differently. 'I don't think [Barth] means what [McCormack] takes him to mean', he acknowledges, 'namely, that if it is an eternal decision, then it has never not taken place. By eternal in that context Barth simply wishes to distinguish God's unique existence from ours and from his works *ad extra*'.[33] Molnar understands 'eternal' in the context of divine election existent-ially (i.e. as concerned with the character

[32] This difference has not been sufficiently addressed by either McCormack or Molnar. Molnar indicates that he finds McCormack's definition of 'eternal' problematic: *Divine Freedom*, p. 62. Critiquing McCormack's position he states that 'if God's election has always taken place, how then can it be construed as a decision; does it not then become a necessity?' Apart from this rhetorical observation, though, Molnar offers no alternative definition.

[33] Molnar, email message to the author, 28 March 2005. As noted, McCormack does take on the relationship between time and eternity more directly in his 2007 response to van Driel. Here, McCormack contends that Molnar errs in his understanding of McCormack's position: while God's election is eternal, it is not timeless, meaning there was a 'time' in God when it had not taken place. It seems to me McCormack's earlier and less-nuanced argument was the stronger. Yet the problem is not with McCormack, but Barth. Barth's three-tiered concept of time/eternity is biblically awkward and philosophically deficient. If God's being is in the act of electing from all eternity, and he overcomes the discontinuity between time and eternity in Christ (all the while sustaining the distinction between his being and ours in the an-enhypostatic dialectic), then it is correct to say that election has never not taken place, or positively, that is has always happened. But that implies necessity in God only to the extent that we bail out of the actualism underlying this observation. If God's being is and has always been

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of existence), connoting the distinction between the realms of divine and human existing. God's decision to elect humankind is eternal, but here meaning it takes place outside (free *from*) the reality of human affairs and prior to the way God works in those affairs (his operations *ad extra*).

In his definition Molnar points to what appears in Barth's thought to be a three-tiered understanding of time and eternity, which we began to notice above in our rehearsal of Barth's exegesis of John 1. First, there is that eternity in which God is in himself, as he exists in triune seclusion, utterly free and not contingent, able to assign himself his being with recourse to none but himself, happily alone in unfettered autonomy and perfect contentment apart from all that is not him.[34] Second, there is a kind of eternity between eternity and time, 'in the beginning', at the origin of all God's 'ways and works', at the genesis of the 'theatre' distinct from himself in which he interacts with humankind, at which point stands Jesus Christ (*CD* II. 2, p. 94).[35] Finally, there is that sequential state of existence in which humanity carries on, what we might call earthly time, which is not God's realm but in which God nevertheless elects to participate, creating a 'history' between himself and humanity (*CD* II. 2, p. 175 *passim*).

In trinitarian terms, Barth understands God primally as Father, Son (*logos asarkos*) and Spirit, who wills to be for humankind as Creator, Mediator (*logos ensarkos*) and Redeemer.[36] In this, he follows a long-standing tradition – operative at least since Aquinas – which distinguishes conceptually between the economic and immanent Trinity.[37] Furthermore, between God *in se* and

act, then Christ's electing is nothing more than the specification of a subject that is already self-determining in perpetuity, by the objective content of that determination.

[34] It is in this inward manner of being that God is pre-eminently 'Lord' of his life, and from which he acts as Lord a second time, out of which his love 'overflows' in a sovereign choice to be for humankind (*CD* II. 2, pp. 99–101, 121, 176).

[35] That Barth does in fact conceptually distinguish between God's *in se* eternity and that of Jesus Christ is made clear by the following assertion: 'As the subject and object of [election], Jesus Christ was at the beginning. *He was not at the beginning of God*, for God has indeed no beginning. But He was at the beginning of all things, at the beginning of God's dealings with the reality which is distinct from Himself' (*CD* II. 2, p. 102); emphasis mine. In the sphere of God's primordial non-beginning, Jesus Christ was not; but he was in the eternity at which God begins to deal with all that is not God, reality distinct from himself.

[36] See *CD* I. 2, pp. 878–9, 'The content of the doctrine of the Trinity which the Church has formulated . . . is not that God in His relation to man is Creator, Mediator and Redeemer, but that God in Himself is eternally Father, Son and Holy Spirit. . . . This Subject God Himself cannot be dissolved into His work and activity, but wills to be known and recognized as this Subject in His work and activity'.

[37] On this issue Barth's thinking reflects basic Thomistic Trinitarianism. Thomas, for the very reason Molnar identifies – the preservation of an absolute species of

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the earthly, sequential realisation of his operations *ad extra*, Barth places the sphere of Jesus Christ, 'in the beginning', at the genesis of the overflow of God's love, and in so doing introduces a second distinction. Now between God a first time and the reality distinct from him stands Christ (*logos ensarkos* anticipatorily), the electing God, God a second time. Jesus Christ is not in the beginning with God because God has no beginning (distinction one, between the Word for humanity and the non-beginning of God – see n. 35), nor as Elector is he in time, but 'precedes all being and time' (distinction two, between the Word and the reality distinct from God – see the first section of this article). Therefore, Molnar could argue against McCormack that in Barth's trinitarianism the fact that Jesus Christ is electing God does not determine God's triunity, because it is the triune God, Father, Son and Spirit, who chose to be a second time Creator, Mediator and Redeemer. Jesus Christ is still the subject of election from all eternity, because the eternity in which he is for humanity is not that of God *in se*, but that which is above and before earthly time. God remains the autonomous Lord of his inner life, yet Jesus Christ is the subject and not simply object of election; standing in the beginning, he is the eternal (i.e. pre-temporal) electing God.[38] God's choice

divine freedom – insists on a logical (not material) distinction between God's operations *ad extra* and his inner triune existence (cf. *Summa Theologica* I, q. 39). This distinction has resurfaced as a hotly debated topic in contemporary theology since Karl Rahner's highly interpretable, axiomatic identification of the immanent and economic Trinity (cf. *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Crossroad, 1997), pp. 21ff.). Molnar's assessment as to how Barth would have replied to Rahner is by now predictable: Barth would affirm that in reality the immanent Trinity is the economic, but insist on a conceptual distinction with respect to the vice versa of this reality, in order to preserve divine freedom (cf. *Divine Freedom*; and 'The Function of the Immanent Trinity', pp. 397–8). For a more recent study, which also understands Barth's thought as ultimately anchored in this freedom-preserving logical distinction, see Fred Sanders, *The Image of the Immanent Trinity: Rahner's Rule and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Issues in Systematic Theology 12; New York: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 142–58.

[38] This is my own construal of some challenging material in *CD* I. 2, II. 2 and IV. 1 relative to the *logos* and the Trinity. Once again, I have brought together Barth's comments with respect to these themes as follows: God *in se* is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Son being the *logos asarkos*. God *ad extra* is Creator, Mediator and Redeemer, the Mediator being the *logos ensarkos*. However, because there is a beginning of God *ad extra* above and beyond temporal reality and being, the 'in the beginning' of John 1, there is a 'time' when the Second Person of the Trinity is *logos* for humanity yet pre-flesh, what I (not Barth) have called the *logos ensarkos* anticipatorily. We might also call this 'contingent *logos asarkos*'. The designation is not altogether important, so long as it is clear that the *logos*, at this stage, is utterly for humanity, which is not the case at the stage of the autonomy of the Son.

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to be a second time as God for us *confirms* his being, it does not constitute it; the *logos ensarkos* is not constitutive of the *logos asarkos*, but authenticating.

Having said this, we must stress that the above distinctions are conceptual and not real. For Barth, and here we perceive the dialectic moment in his christological and trinitarian reflections, the Son is the Word is Jesus Christ.[39] We distinguish conceptually between God *in se* and *ad extra*, between stages of the *logos*, because not to do so would make the Creator dependent for his being upon his creation. Nevertheless, because God is one and has revealed himself in an exhaustive way, we dialectically affirm that, though God could have been otherwise, he is in fact, in the very core of his being and not simply *ad extra*, none other than for us in Jesus Christ; God *in se* is God *ad extra*, the Son is Jesus Christ, the *logos asarkos* is the *logos ensarkos*. As Father, Son and Spirit, God could have remained in and for himself (conceptual distinction), but he has chosen not to so remain, that the Son should be the Word should be Jesus Christ, and this from all eternity (no real distinction).

But affirming this have we not come back to the very point of our debate's origin? Have we not fought ourselves full circle and returned to the crux of the whole matter, McCormack's first question: how can Barth maintain that Jesus Christ is the electing God *and not revise his trinitarian thought in such a way as to reflect the unity of Son and Word enfleshed, of God* in se *and* ad extra? For McCormack, Barth's doctrine of election forces him to hold together two

This is not, however, the only way to understand Barth's comments with respect to the *logos* and God's triune existence. If we take his exegesis of John 1 (*CD* II. 2, pp. 95–9) programmatically, then we would be forced to hold a conceptual distinction between the Son and the Word, so that the eternity of the Word (not that of the Son) is the *logos asarkos* and its temporal fulfilment is the *logos ensarkos*. The reasons I have not chosen this particular interpretation of Barth's work are (1) in *CD* IV. 1 he associates the Son with the *logos asarkos* (p. 52), and (2) that Molnar's argument is nonsensical in this structure. If there is no *logos* with God in his *in se* primordiality, then it can have nothing whatsoever to do with the preservation of divine freedom. The restriction of the Persons' relationality to each other would be the only argument for maintaining divine autonomy from us, as the *logos asarkos* would not participate in this reality. See also *CD* II. 2, p. 79. Barth here commends a simple distinction, between the internal and external operations of God, and is critical of any notion of God *in se* if it implies an abstract Trinity without definite direction and reference. God is always directed out of himself, in the realm beyond time and in time. Again, though, this singular differentiation is difficult to reconcile with prior and succeeding claims about the pre-fleshed *logos* and the autonomous being of God, which, if not suggesting an abstract deity, at least imply that God could have remained apart from his works, internal or external.

[39] Cf. *CD* II. 2, p. 99, 'God Himself in all His ways and works willed wholly and utterly to bear this name, and actually does bear it: the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, the Holy Spirit of the Father and the Son.'

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contradictory assertions. On the one hand, as the Son there never was a time in God's existence in which Jesus Christ did not participate in the decision in which God assigns himself his being, and as such there never was a time when God was not for us, yet on the other hand Barth continues to insist that in his essence God exists apart from humanity in isolated autonomy. Would it not be better for Barth to have rethought his commitment to the distinction between the *logos asarkos* and *ensarkos*, between God in unfettered autonomy and God for humanity, and brought this into line with his insight about the agency of Christ in election? In light of the fact that Jesus Christ is electing God, ought Barth not to have abandoned his commitment to an abstract notion of God's potential freedom from humanity, and recognising that God *is* God-for-us collapsed the distinction between the sphere of God's *in se* existence and that 'in the beginning', creating a more accurate division between a single eternity and time, between (strictly) the *logos* enfleshed and the *logos* anticipating enfleshment?

Indeed, we are back at the beginning of our disagreement, but having circled its track we may better understand its character, perceiving exactly what is at stake and thus point a way forward. We now see that the axis on which the debate between McCormack and Molnar turns is the dialectic between unity and distinction in Barth's comments on Trinity and eternity. McCormack works from the perspective of unity, the supposition that in God Jesus Christ always was, that in reality he is the Word is the Son. As electing God Jesus Christ stands at the most primordial moment of divine being, and thus we must conclude that God's gracious choice is in some measure constitutive of that being. In contrast, Molnar emphasises distinction, that in order to preserve divine freedom we distinguish between the eternity of Jesus Christ and the non-beginning of God *in se*. Thus we do not say that being 'eternal' there never was a time when God did not decide for humanity, but that in pre-temporal existence God became God a second time, now not in isolated freedom from the realm distinct from himself, but free for it.

At every point along this axis we encounter the relationship of being and time/eternity. Once again, an understanding of time and eternity is integral to each interlocutor's conception of divine being. McCormack perceives congruence between eternity and time, taking the former almost as an infinite extension of the latter backward and forward, so to say that Jesus Christ is the eternal, electing God is to say that there never was a 'time' when he was not (or will be). I say *almost* an extension of time because McCormack does not deny a pre-temporal eternity, but he effectively understands this as the beginning-less period of God's existence before the created, temporal world, a world that not always was and therefore came to be at a point in God's eternity. Molnar, as I have already mentioned, conceives of

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eternity differently, in terms of existence, or sphere and state of being, as in the divine realm and manner of existing (eternity) versus the human (time-bound). For him, to say that as God's election Jesus Christ is eternal means that he exists prior to creation, although not necessarily always in the same way of being.

In other words, each of these eminent students of Barth's work have discovered therein the grounds of an ontology, both of which stand opposed as corollaries of the dialectical moments of unity and distinction in Barth's trinitarianism, which suppose alternative understandings of time and eternity. McCormack sees Barth on his way to a pure *actualism*. Supposing congruence between the times of Jesus Christ – eternity and earthly time – McCormack perceives the integral nature of God's decision-making to his being: never being without Jesus Christ, God's being is determined by his gracious act of election. Again, this must be because Jesus Christ is one God now and forever, *ad extra* and *in se*, *ensarkos* and *asarkos*. Molnar, on the other hand, argues for a qualified *essentialism*.[40] Supposing distinction between the sphere of God in himself and his eternity in Jesus Christ, Molnar perceives the integral nature of God's being to his decision-making: recognising that God could have been without Jesus Christ, God's gracious act is determined by his being. Again, this must be because in his essence God is triune, the sphere of time is not the sphere of this essence, that (conceptually) *ad extra* is not *in se*, and *ensarkos* is not *asarkos*.

Acknowledging these relationships – between trinitarian unity, temporal congruence and actualism, and between trinitarian distinction, temporal divergence and essentialism – we may at last reconsider Barth's doctrine of election and further the discussion begun by McCormack and Molnar. To begin (and the scope of this project will allow me to do little more than make a start), we must not allow the breadth of analysis thus far to obscure a most fundamental point: Barth's objective in considering Jesus Christ to be the subject of election was to assert that this act is *revelatory*.

By insisting on the centrality of Jesus Christ to the elective event, Barth likewise insists that in this event God himself is revealed. What happens principally in election is not that humanity becomes grouped, but foremost that the truth of the being of God is disclosed. God reveals that he is the kind of being who elects. We know this because we know the one who does the electing, Jesus Christ, and we know that this one is God 'in the beginning'.

[40] 'Qualified' because Molnar does reserve a place for God's decision to determine his being; he simply insists that God makes this decision free from the human and therefore as he is in himself. His inner life, then, is what makes him God (constitutes his being) and grounds his decision for humanity (and not vice versa).

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In Jesus Christ, we have a revelation of the being of God; namely, that God is gracious-being.

In this disclosure, though, we learn another truth of the being of God, which is related to the first. In saying, as Barth does, that the Word of God obtains its content from Jesus Christ and not the other way around, we also affirm that God is a disclosive being. God is the kind of being who reveals who he is. We know this because we know the revealer, Jesus Christ and this one (and not some unrevealed abstract *logos*) is God 'in the beginning'. This latter truth is related to the former in that both reveal the being of God as being open. God is a disclosive being in two senses: it is his essence to manifest himself, and as such it is equally his essence not to be closed but open. He is ready to show himself to and be in relationship with (elect) humankind.

These observations favour McCormack's argument. In the end, it appears that McCormack's position is the more tenable because, as I have indicated, he deals more directly with the implications of Barth's construal of election than Molnar or even Barth himself. If Jesus Christ is the revelatory subject of election, there is no closed deity, no God in himself free from the revealed contingencies of his own existence, no sphere of being in which God could have been other than ready. Molnar and Barth may want to assert a contrary conviction that derives from an abstract God–world distinction in trinitarian thought and notions of temporality, but the character of what takes place in election, as Barth himself insists upon it, prevents such a move. McCormack is right to correct the more abstract components of Barth's trinitarianism in light of the concrete specificity of his doctrine of election. Barth's revelatory concerns in his explication of this doctrine carry implications for the kind of being who elects, and it is no aloof deity potentially free from his creation.

But in siding with McCormack, I must immediately point out that Molnar's instinct is correct. We must not give the impression that in saying Jesus Christ is the electing God, God cannot *be* apart from his creation. It is in order to recognise this important point that I offer the following, concluding remarks.

More attention must be given to the term 'determination'. To determine suggests both to decide and to establish, so what is implied in McCormack's claim is that in the eternal act of grace God both chooses and instates his being as a being this way, in and as Jesus Christ; the being of God a second time is effectively 'determined' by its elective content. Otherwise put, Barth's doctrine of election suggests both the agency of choosing as well as the fact of its accomplishment, such that in Jesus Christ God simultaneously and eternally decides and realises himself.[41] Molnar's difficulty is located

[41] He elects and is elected, with ontological connotations.

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principally in the latter aspect of this dual claim. He certainly would acknowledge that God is lord over his existence, meaning he retains the freedom to decide and assign himself his being. But for Molnar that decision can only give expression to the primordial being that God already is. There can be no possibility, even logically, of content outside of God (human being) determining his being in the sense of realising who God is; the being of God a second time is strictly the expression of God's relational being *in se*.

Affirming the basic verity of McCormack's insight while acknowledging the import of Molnar's counterclaim, I suggest we understand what takes place in God's elective act, as Barth presents it, to be not the determination of divine being, but its *specification*. I have chosen this particular term because it communicates that in a revelation-orientated doctrine of election God states rather than instates his being. The event in which God decides his essence does not make him to be, ontologically, something other than what and as he was: God was, is and will be disclosive, open, God-for.[42] God subsequent to grace is not in any way other than God before grace (logically or chronologically).[43] In election God states that he is eternally in the posture of openness toward his creature (or, we see in this decisive happening that

[42] I am not certain McCormack has completely carried through the implications of his own insight. If there never was a time that God was not in the decisive act of his being (i.e. deciding for humanity), then there is no *logical* possibility of ever speaking of the will of God prior to his being and vice versa. McCormack is correct to devote serious attention to the subject matter or content of election as Barth construes it, and on this level we might with him speak of the constitutive or determinative character of God's will: in a primal and ontological way God calls humanity to himself. But just as we are prepared to affirm the logical priority of divine will to being we must retreat from speaking thus, because the formal significance of Barth's position *as McCormack puts it* – there never was a time when this being-as-calling was not – refuses sequential statement and urges in its place the formulation of eternal reciprocity. There is no place conceptually prior to God's being for his will to inhabit, and the same is true the other way around, if there never was a time God was not being in the act of his decision.

[43] Those of a scholastic mindset find this dictum to cheapen what takes place in the act of grace. It would seem the very nature of grace qua grace to involve the (abstractly conceived) self-determination of a free individual to give what he otherwise does not have to, and so to set himself relative to another in a way that he could otherwise not; to be in this way and not that. But this is to fix the meaning of grace in advance and then apply it to God. Grace is not the state of being-for rather than being-not-for, reflexively considered and named. Such could be nothing more than the hypostatisation of a desirable human dynamic, the altruistic decision not to be free-from but free-for writ infinite. Grace is not being-for, grace is *God*-for. To say grace is not to say 'this state of being rather than that'. To say 'grace' is to say 'God', and Barth understood this perhaps better than any theologian before him, despite the fact that he seems occasionally to forget it.

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there never was a time when God was not for humanity). This is McCormack's account, but putting it thus more thematically situates it relative to Molnar's check.

As the specification of divine being, Jesus Christ is the event in which God identifies humankind as the substance of his openness.[44] In this event he engages in the moment-by-moment activity of identifying his very self with humankind, an event and act that is not a consequence of will, but the iteration of his primordial and eternal existence. Here is the critical point. The logic of Barth's doctrine of election runs counter to the distinction between being and will he held even up to his reflections in *CD* § 28. *What Barth shows us in election is that the will of God IS the being of God IS Jesus Christ*. There is no abstract willing or being in God, but Jesus Christ is both in total, so there is no possibility of any kind of conceptual priority of the one over the other. What Barth tried to hold on to as late as *CD* § 28, and spottily thereafter, was a dialectical notion of divine existence, grounded in a 'time' of God's internal being, in which God retained autonomy while being in covenantal relationship. But what Barth unfolds in *CD* §§ 32–3 runs counter to this unique paradox of freedom, inasmuch as the reality that Jesus Christ is the subject of election precludes the possibility of the first pole, eternal autonomy, since in this event, *as this event*, a non-autonomous deity is fully revealed.

This does not necessarily mean that God's being is conditioned. It could mean this if will and being are distinguished. But because the one Jesus Christ is the primordial, eternal specification of the being of God as the will of God for humanity there is no priority of volition to ontology, no option of conceiving consequentially of God's being relative to humanity; there is only the singular identification of Godself from all eternity. Ironically, this addresses Molnar's concern. He perceives the problem in McCormack's articulation precisely in that predicating divine being upon will seems to make God's essence subject to his own subjectivity in the elective act; that is, in this act God's essential being is established as a condition of his choice for humanity. Yet at the same time Molnar would not solve the problem (of conditionality) by admitting the unity of will and being, because for him, once more, a necessary distinction obtains here in order that the ground

[44] 'Substance' is a term carefully employed. I am aware of its ontic implications, and in fact it is in light of these that I use it here (rather than, say, 'content'). I am convinced that the trajectory of Barth's thought is not satisfied if we stop short of confirming that in election God affirms humanity in the very 'stuff', however conceived, of his existence. My conviction, further, is that Barth's actualism pushes us to understand this stuff and being in post-metaphysical terms, but that is a subject for another essay.

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of God's decision should remain his triune being. Nonetheless, if we allow the profundity of Barth's insight vis-à-vis election to settle, unity is our only solution and the language of consequence, to which McCormack's observation leads, vanishes.

Apprehending the Deity in and as Jesus Christ means that there is no point at which God abstained from his self-iteration, that from all eternity God freely states his being as in the act of will, decision. *Specifically*, in election we observe that God's decision is for humankind. Election states that the being of God reaches back to the same non-beginning as the grace of God and vice versa, which means that one cannot be grounded in the other.[45] Before the electing God Jesus Christ we must be content humbly to say that as such and from all eternity, God is.[46]

[45] So stated, this is a protological conclusion; eschatologically, I affirm the converse: election reveals that the being of God reaches forward to the same non-ending as the grace of God and vice versa.

[46] I am grateful to McCormack, Molnar and Hector for the pleasure of several conversations and written correspondences, which helped to consolidate my understanding of the issues at hand and their respective positions. Additionally, I owe a word of gratitude to John Webster and Ralph Del Colle, who read and commented on this article in an earlier draft. The work took shape during a seminar on christology with Del Colle at Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI.

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