

ELECTION AND TRINITY

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I. Introduction

*... election is God's self-election, God's decision to be God in this way, in and as the man Jesus. The consequence is that God is the one who determines himself to be in relation to us through Christ.*¹

The current debate among Barth scholars concerning the Swiss theologian's understanding of the relation between the Trinity and God's decree is as stimulating as it is potentially useful for aiding the church to advance a robust Christian doctrine of God. At the heart of the debate is this question: Does God's being in triunity constitute his divine act of electing, or, conversely, does God's act of election constitute his essence as the triune God? The question could be posed another way: Does God's act constitute his being or does his being constitute his act? The discussion has also spilled over into the area of Christology. How are we to understand the relation between the two natures of Christ? If election constitutes God's being then we cannot speak of some abstract notion of the second person of the Trinity, the *Logos asarkos*, who is eternally self-existing without any necessary reference to being *pro nobis*. Therefore, the discussion has opened up a number of possibilities for refining and perfecting the church's understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ in our redemption.

We will attempt to show that in this debate there are two mutually exclusive positions: a position that proves itself to be a more accurate interpretation of Barth, and a position that proves itself to be closer to the historic Christian position on the matter. In response, we will seek to plumb the depths of some of the richest expressions of the historic position. Particularly, we will show how the cross section of historic Reformed trinitarian theology on the one hand and Reformed biblical theology on the other can provide us with faithful expressions of the relationship between God's trinitarian nature and his redemptive-historical acts which can move us forward through the current impasse among Barth scholars.

Therefore, the goal of this article will be to refine the church's understanding of her rich trinitarian doctrinal history. Thus, we are not seeking to innovate in the sense of advancing some new dogmatic formulations, but rather to take the

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¹ John Webster, introduction to *God's Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, by Eberhard Jüngel (trans. and with an introduction by John Webster; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), xvii.

church forward by advancing her understanding of the relation between Reformed systematic and biblical theology.

II. *The McCormack Proposal*

Contemporary tensions over the relation between God's triunity and his act of election flow from Bruce McCormack's provocative article "Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology."² Here McCormack points up the fact that Barth's unique contribution to the doctrine of election is that Jesus Christ is not just the object of election (hardly a new idea in Reformed theology), but that he is also the electing subject, and as such is no abstract *Logos asarkos* but was, is, and always will be Jesus Christ, the God-human.³ He notes that seventeenth-century Reformed orthodoxy made a distinction between the *Logos asarkos* (the eternal divine Word before and apart from taking on human flesh) and the *Logos ensarkos* (the eternal divine Word in the flesh in time). They further expressed this difference through another distinction, that of the *Logos incarnandus* (the eternal divine Word who *is to be* incarnate by virtue of the eternal decree of God) and the *Logos incarnatus* (the eternal divine Word in the flesh in time). So, building off this seventeenth-century distinction, Barth can say that the *Logos incarnandus* has his being determined "by the eternal divine decision for incarnation in time."⁴ The difference, however, between what Barth wants to say versus what the seventeenth-century orthodox wanted to say was that they spoke of the *Logos incarnandus* only as the object of election (whereby the *Logos* is determined to become flesh only because of a previous decision by God to elect certain people in Christ), whereas Barth wants to say that he is also the subject, that is, the electing God. Therefore, there is no *Logos* apart from or prior to the act of electing. So, it is Jesus Christ—the *Logos* to be incarnate—who elects and not some abstract, absolute *Logos asarkos*.

McCormack goes on to explain that Barth was motivated in this direction by a desire to avoid speculation and abstraction. If we posit a *Logos asarkos* apart from the incarnation then we would have to go elsewhere to determine who the *Logos* is. This would lead us to seek other epistemic grounds for knowing the *Logos* other than Jesus Christ. Because of these concerns, Barth criticized the *extra Calvinisticum* found in Reformed Christologies. McCormack quotes from Barth's criticism as follows:

There is something regrettable about that theory insofar as it could lead, as it has to the present day, to disastrous speculation about a being and activity of a *Logos asarkos* and, therefore, about a God who could be known and whose divine essence could be

² Bruce L. McCormack, "Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (ed. John Webster; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Reprinted without substantial change in Bruce L. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 183-200. Since McCormack's interlocutors are working from the earlier version of "Grace and Being," references below are all to it.

³ McCormack, "Grace and Being," 93.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

defined on some other basis than in and from the perception of his presence and action as incarnate Word. And it cannot be denied that Calvin himself . . . went a long way in falling prey to the temptation of reckoning with such an ‘other’ God.⁵

McCormack goes on to explain that Barth’s concern here is not so much epistemological, but ontological. How can God come into time without undergoing a fundamental ontic change? The answer is found in the eternal self-determination of God to be a God who is “for us”: the God who freely decides to be who he is. In this way the divine decision to act in election grounds and constitutes the divine essence, without changing it.⁶ Thus, there is nothing “left over,” no *extra*. McCormack explains:

The identity of this Logos is, in fact, *already established* prior to the eternal act of Self-determination by means of which the Logos *became* the *Logos incarnandus*. And if all that were true, then the decision to assume flesh in time could only result in something being added to that already completed identity; an addition which has no effect upon what he is essentially.⁷

Given the *extra*, Jesus Christ tells us nothing of the God who is. The *extra* leaves too much “extra stuff” unsaid about the divine nature of Jesus Christ. McCormack is concerned that the humanity of Christ not become a mere accident—an arbitrary assumption—by an abstract divine essence. On the traditional view, the person of Jesus Christ does not seem to contain the fullness of deity, such that McCormack asks, “Is Jesus Christ ‘fully God’ or not?”⁸

The solution to this problem proposed by Barth is that God is not some unknown being, but that in his making himself known through Jesus Christ he shows himself to be who he always was: the eternally electing God. His being is not abstract, but determined by his act toward us. The eternal God is Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ is the eternal God. His humanity and his divinity are co-extensive, with nothing left over. Following on Karl Rahner’s famous maxim McCormack concludes, “Perhaps the most significant consequence of this move is that the immanent Trinity is made to be wholly identical in content with the economic Trinity.”⁹

God, in an act of self-determination, chooses to be triune in covenant with humanity. This decision is not arbitrary, but has metaphysical significance:

What Barth is suggesting is that election is the event in God’s life in which he assigns to himself the being he will have for all eternity. . . . He takes this human experience into his own life and extinguishes its power over us.¹⁰

⁵ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 96-97.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 97; emphasis is his.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 98. See also his comments in, “The Actuality of God: Karl Barth in Conversation with Open Theism,” in *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives* (ed. Bruce L. McCormack; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 185-242. Here McCormack summarizes his position: “What makes this decision [to be God in the covenant of Grace] truly ‘primal’ is that there is no other being of God standing back of it. . . . The eternal event in which God chose to be ‘God for

It should be noted that this act involves no change in God's essence (here McCormack wants to safeguard the doctrine of immutability) because his essence is determined by his act. There is no essence to speak of which may change apart from his act of election. Thus, God's essence is not hidden to human perception. God's essence is knowable in his act. Inasmuch as we can perceive Jesus dying on the cross, that much we see the essential God. For Barth, says McCormack, God's act and his essence are identical because there is no essence where there is not first God's free decision in election.¹¹

Now, McCormack is quick to caution us not to confuse Barth with Hegel or process theology at this point. God does not become conscious of himself in history; God exists as a self-conscious being before creation.¹² God's being as it is constituted by his election is a being that exists eternally and prior to time. God's decision to be triune in election is a *primal* decision, not one that takes place in time (by this McCormack believes he is maintaining the Creator-creature distinction).¹³ Nevertheless, God in electing—and thus constituting his own being—has an eye toward time and creation. History *is* significant for God's essence, but only because God freely chooses to allow it to be so.

Even so, McCormack does note that Barth himself did not speak in this way, namely, of election constituting Trinity. Barth wrote on the Trinity in *CD* I/1 and I/2 before his more mature thought as expressed in his doctrine of election in *CD* II and IV. Elsewhere McCormack has argued that there was a progression in Barth's thought after listening to a lecture by Pierre Maury in 1936 that led to his unique doctrine of election.¹⁴ But Barth never went back to correct

us' is, at the same time, the eternal event in which God gave (and continues to give) to himself his own being—and vice versa. So there are not two eternal events, one in which God gives being to himself and a second . . . in which he enters into a relationship with the human race; these are, in fact, one and the same event. Thus divine election stands at the root of 'God's being or 'essence'” (210).

¹¹ “Grace and Being,” 99.

¹² It may be helpful to note that it seems as if McCormack wants to distinguish between God's eternal act of election and his temporal work of creation. McCormack says that Barth's position is that the former alone is constitutive of God's being.

¹³ “Grace and Being,” 100.

¹⁴ Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909–1936* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 456-63. See also McCormack's recent response to critics in, “Seek God Where He May Be Found: A Response to Edwin Chr. Van Driel,” *SJT* 60 (2007): 63-66; reprinted in *Orthodox and Modern*, 261-77. It is worth noting how Barth stated his theology after the shift in his thinking due to Pierre Maury's lecture. McCormack explains that for Barth there is no higher desire in God than to be gracious. Therefore, “God's purpose in creating and sustaining the world are his redemptive purposes.” To see things in any other way than that God's grace constitutes who he wills to be leads to “a speculative doctrine of God which would seek to establish the meaning of His power, goodness, and wisdom without reference to the goal which God has set for Himself in that gracious election of the human race which is the ground of all His activities” (*Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 460). It should be pointed out that in shifting the doctrine of election from an eternal self-referential *decretum absolutum* to an actualistic election of all humanity in the revelation-event of Jesus Christ, Barth's formulation is more than undoing the historic Calvinistic doctrine of predestination. He has also undone the Reformational principle of *solī Deo Gloria*, i.e., the idea that the ultimate motivation for all that God brings to pass is for his own

his less mature thought on the Trinity in light of his more mature doctrine of election. Therefore, McCormack wants to “register a critical correction” to Barth’s view of the Trinity. He does so by explaining that

the *decision* for the covenant of grace is the ground of God’s trinity and, therefore, of the eternal generation of the Son and of the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit from Father and Son. In other words, the works of God *ad intra* (the trinitarian processions) find their ground in the *first* of the works of God *ad extra* (viz., election). And that also means that eternal generation and eternal procession are willed by God; they are not natural to him if ‘natural’ is taken to mean a determination of being fixed in advance of all actions and relations.¹⁵

McCormack then turns to discuss Jesus Christ as the object of election. But, here again, he is not speaking of the *Logos asarkos* as being the object of election, but of Jesus Christ as the elect human. So all humankind is elect in him. For he comes to take the wrath and judgment of God upon himself as the God-human, and not as a mere man. It is the God-human, in his two united natures, who suffers for us. It is not that Jesus is a mere human being manipulated by the divine being, but is himself the self-willed, suffering Subject. In Jesus Christ God freely elects to suffer for us, and, at the same time, man freely elects to suffer. Therefore, Jesus is not only electing Subject but also elected Object. And what is more, in Jesus Christ “double predestination” is preserved, though altered from its historical formulation. For Barth, Jesus is both elect and reprobate. He is the electing God and the reprobate man who freely becomes both the reprobate God and the elected man.¹⁶

III. Responses to McCormack’s Proposal

1. George Hunsinger

Reviews of McCormack’s handling of Barth’s trinitarian theology with reference to election have been mixed. George Hunsinger has furnished perhaps the most concise response to McCormack recently in his paper presented at the 2007 Barth Conference.¹⁷ Hunsinger opens his critique this way:

glorification, and not first and foremost for the salvation of mankind. Barth says that there is no higher desire in God than to will to be gracious, whereas the Reformers taught that there is no higher desire in God than that he be glorified. Despite Barth’s efforts to the contrary, this central commitment will inevitably result in an anthropocentric religion.

¹⁵ “Grace and Being,” 103; emphasis is his.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 105-7. Here McCormack anticipates his later work on the passibility of God and *kenosis*. See his “The Ontological Presuppositions of Barth’s Doctrine of the Atonement,” in *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historical and Practical Perspectives; Essays in Honor of Roger Nicole* (ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2004), 346-66; “Karl Barth’s Christology as a Resource for a Reformed Version of Kenoticism,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8 (2006): 243-51; and *Orthodox and Modern*, 201-33.

¹⁷ George Hunsinger, “Election and the Trinity: Twelve Theses” (paper presented at the 2007 Barth Conference, Princeton, N.J.). This lecture has recently been published under the title “Election and the Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth,” *Modern Theology* 24

Barth nowhere says that God's being is *constituted* by God's act. He says only that God's being and act are inseparable. I read him to mean that act and being for God are each ontologically basic. Act for Barth is no more prior to or constitutive of God's being than the reverse. . . . They are equally and primordially basic.¹⁸

Hunsinger continues to explain that throughout *CD II/2* Barth speaks of the Trinity as being determined (not constituted) by God's free decision of election; nevertheless, election is an "act of the Holy Trinity in which God determines himself *ad intra* for his saving work *ad extra*."¹⁹ In this way God's triunity is *necessary* to his being while his electing is only *contingent* to it.

In Hunsinger's fourth thesis he cites from several passages in Barth's writings spanning over thirty years of his life. In these passages the Basel professor states that even if the world had never been created God would still be triune. This is a sound strategy for Hunsinger because part and parcel of the McCormack proposal is that Barth shifts his view on the relation between Trinity and election after 1936. Hunsinger attempts to cut off that argument by showing how Barth from the beginning of his writing of the *CD* to the year of his death had one view on the matter. However, McCormack might point out that in his work he explicitly states that, for Barth, the constituting of the Trinity by his act of election comes before and apart from his work of creation.

In thesis five Hunsinger makes an important distinction in how we are to read Barth. He argues that when Barth says that Jesus Christ is "the subject of election" he is not speaking *simpliciter* (without qualification) but rather *secundum quid* (in a certain respect). In other words, when speaking of the eternal Son as *incarnandus*, we must carefully distinguish between the eternal Son as eternal versus the eternal Son as incarnate. For the Son is the eternal Son necessarily, but he is *incarnandus* only contingently. So, it is only the eternal Son, apart from being *incarnandus* or *incarnatus*, who is the subject of election.²⁰

To summarize, then, Hunsinger wants to distinguish carefully between God's eternal act of election and who he is *in himself* from what he does in time *for us*. He wants to maintain the distinction between the *Logos* in his divine and eternally self-contained nature on the one hand, and who he is at the incarnation on the other. Although, Hunsinger himself does not seem to be consistent in this distinction. For instance, in an on-line posting he has made the following claim about the relation between being and act in Barth's theology:

(2008): 179-98. There have been other critical responses issued against McCormack's reading of Barth, but none as dispassionate and well reasoned as Hunsinger's. See Paul Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2002); and more recently, "The Trinity, Election and God's Ontological Freedom: A Response to Kevin Hector," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8 (2006): 294-306. Also, Edwin Chr. van Driel, "Karl Barth on the Eternal Existence of Jesus Christ," *SJT* 60 (2007): 45-61. For a sympathetic critique see Kevin Hector, "God's Triunity and Self-Determination: A Conversation with Karl Barth, Bruce McCormack, and Paul Molnar," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 (2005): 246-61. These other critiques will be discussed below.

¹⁸ "Election and the Trinity," 180.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 181.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 182-83.

Following Barth, however, I do affirm that God's being is in act. I believe that for Barth the terms "being" and "act" are both logically basic, and that for him neither is derived from the other, and that neither is privileged in relation to the other.²¹

The logical inconsistency here is glaring. If God's being is in his act, how can it be that both being and act are logically basic? And certainly if act and being are properly basic, how can one say that God has his being prior to and independent of his act in the Christ event for us? It seems that one cannot reasonably hold simultaneously to act and being as equally ultimate on the one hand, and the idea that "the Holy Trinity is ontologically prior to and logically presupposed by the pre-temporal act of election" on the other.²²

2. *Paul Molnar*

Another strong voice in opposition to McCormack's reading of Barth is Paul Molnar. Even the title of his major volume on the doctrine of the Trinity is telling: *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity*. The contention here is that a conflating of the economic and immanent Trinity endangers divine freedom. Molnar believes that if the being of God is constituted by his act, then he will become necessarily conditioned by the creation. Thus he wants to "avoid both separating and confusing the immanent and economic Trinity."²³ In speaking about the Rahner axiom, he wonders if modern theologians have moved beyond Rahner's intent and asks if they "can truly respect God's freedom as a doctrine of immanent Trinity must."²⁴ He further inquires:

Does the vice versa obscure God's freedom, so that any attempt to reconcile God's freedom with this axiom, as it stands, inevitably underplays God's actual pre-temporal, supra-temporal and post-temporal freedom?²⁵

Molnar then anticipates the answer he will provide throughout the volume:

Some confusion and reversal of the creature-creator relationship inevitably follows. Several indications of such a reversal today are: (1) the trend towards making God . . . indistinguishable from history; (2) . . . the idea that Jesus, in his humanity as such, is the revealer; (3) the failure to distinguish the Holy Spirit from the human spirit; (4) a trend to begin theology with experience of self-transcendence.²⁶

In other words, the trouble with much of today's doctrine of God is that God's work in history is not sufficiently kept distinct from God's being *a se*. When a lack of distinction occurs, theology tends to fall back into the error of liberal theology: doing theology from man's own experiences and subjective realities.

²¹ Online: <http://faith-theology.blogspot.com/2007/10/george-hunsinger-and-kim-fabriceus.html> (accessed 1 November 2007).

²² "Election and the Trinity," 181.

²³ Molnar, *Divine Freedom*, x.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, xi-xii.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, xii.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Molnar then turns his attention specifically to McCormack's formulation. After summarizing the Princeton systematician's position, he proceeds to set forth some objections. In many ways, his critique of McCormack's formulation anticipates Hunsinger's:

The order between election and trinity cannot be logically reversed without in fact making creation, reconciliation and redemption necessary to God. It is precisely this critical error that is embodied in McCormack's proposal. 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 trinity 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 that takes place in pre-temporal eternity as the Father begets the Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit. . . . His essence most certainly is not contingent upon his works *ad extra*.²⁷

The problem with McCormack's view, then, is that God's works *ad extra*—namely, his act of election—are necessary for his essence. This in turn makes God's being contingent, and thus in no way absolutely free. Creation, reconciliation, and redemption are necessary to who God is. And if that is so, then the creator is dependent on the creature.²⁸

Even so, Molnar does admit that McCormack indicates at least tacit approval of distinguishing between the economic and immanent Trinity. However, McCormack does not make this distinction “real” in his theological formulations:

While McCormack admits that such a distinction is necessary, it plays no conceptual role at this point in his argument. Consequently, it is just because McCormack failed to make such a distinction at this important point, that he is misled into believing that God became the triune God only by virtue of his self-determination to be our God.²⁹

Molnar is concerned that what McCormack gives with the one hand he takes away with the other. On the one hand he says that a distinction needs to be made between the economic and the immanent Trinity. On the other hand, however, what happens economically—and here God's eternal act of election must be considered an economic event—constitutes who God is. Of course, election presupposes a creation, a fallen humanity to elect, and a work of redemption in history. Thus, God's being is contingent upon something outside of himself. This leads, inevitably, to a thorough rejection of the *Logos asarkos* in McCormack's thinking.³⁰ And for Molnar this notion necessarily compromises God's freedom.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 63. For a defense of McCormack over against Molnar's objections see Matthias Gockel, *Barth and Schleiermacher on the Doctrine of Election: A Systematic-Theological Comparison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 179-80.

²⁸ Responding to Kevin Hector, Molnar makes clear that the idea of the creation being “contingently” necessary for God is an idea that Barth never accepted nor could accept given his doctrine of divine freedom; see Paul Molnar, “The Trinity, Election, and God's Ontological Freedom: A Response to Kevin W. Hector,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8 (2006): 295.

²⁹ Molnar, *Divine Freedom*, 64.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 81. However, see McCormack's reply to this accusation in, “Seek God,” 63.

Molnar goes on to lament the current situation in contemporary Trinitarian theology in which he sees much conflating of the immanent Trinity and economic Trinity. He explains that when the immanent Trinity is collapsed into the economic Trinity, man always begins his theologizing from his own experiences. In this way theology is turned into anthropology. The solution that he offers is to begin with God's revelation in the Word of God. Of course, what he means by this idea is that we begin our discussions about the triune God from Jesus Christ himself:

I have stressed, therefore, that theologians should neither separate nor confuse the immanent and economic Trinity and that, because theology really is faith (in the triune God) seeking understanding and not understanding seeking faith, we must adhere to the economic Trinity for our information about the immanent Trinity.³¹

In other words, when formulating our theology of the Trinity we must begin with God's act in Jesus Christ. To do otherwise runs the risk of either confusing or unduly separating the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity.³²

To summarize, for Molnar the Creator-creature distinction remains all-important. McCormack's view jeopardizes that distinction. As long as something within the created order, including God's acts, are said to constitute his being, the freedom of God remains in question. Molnar's theological instincts here, like those of Hunsinger, are good. It is agreeable to traditional theology to guard God's aseity and freedom. The issue, however, is whether or not Molnar and Hunsinger have successfully represented Barth's view. While their theological concerns are more in line with a traditional doctrine of God, one must wonder if, precisely for that reason, they have not tamed Barth's own view. Hence, the question becomes, have Hunsinger and Molnar read Barth accurately? If not, has McCormack understood him correctly? Or, are both camps wrong?

IV. *What Would Barth Say About All This?*

1. *Preliminary Considerations*

The question in this section will be: Who has gotten Barth right in the current debate? Before we begin our examination of Barth's writings and thought, some preliminary considerations are in order. To begin with, it should be noted that McCormack himself says that he is "smoothing out" Barth's doctrine of

³¹ *Divine Freedom*, 312.

³² At first blush, Molnar, with his concern not to confuse the immanent and economic Trinity, may appear to be in line with a more traditional stance. To be sure, it is important to make this distinction on the traditional view. However, Molnar continues in a non-traditional vein and ultimately cannot free himself of the problems that arise from the views of those he seeks to criticize. This is because he starts his theologizing at the opposite end from the traditional view. Molnar begins with the act of God, whereas the traditional view begins with God's being. Starting as he does, it is not clear how Molnar can for long avoid the pitfalls for which he takes McCormack (among others) to task.

God in light of his later, developed doctrine of election in *CD* II/2 and following.³³ As expressed above, McCormack proposes a definite shift in Barth's thinking after the 1936 lecture of Pierre Maury. Before 1936 Barth still had a "residual commitment to aspects of classical metaphysics."³⁴ But after 1936, when Barth develops his doctrine of election, he enters into a profoundly "post-metaphysical" stage in his thinking.³⁵ So, McCormack is willing to admit that one may very well find in sections of the *Church Dogmatics* evidence of this older "metaphysical" doctrine of God. Nevertheless, given the development in Barth's thinking concerning election it is untenable to maintain his former notions about God's being. In other words, Barth's doctrine of election forces us to understand his doctrine of God in exclusively actualistic terms (i.e., in such a way that election constitutes being).

That said, McCormack does readily admit that citations can be found from the *CD* that support the contention that God's being is prior to his act of election. However, reading these texts in this way is still fundamentally unfaithful to Barth's theology because it abstracts passages out of the broader context of the dialectical theologian's thought. We must read Barth's comments about God's being *in light of* his comments about election (particularly his comments about Jesus Christ as both object and subject of electing grace).³⁶

It seems that McCormack is basically correct,³⁷ and his approach to reading Barth seems the most level-headed way to proceed. First, we must read Barth (or any other theologian for that matter) in his historical context, as well as in the context of the development of his published thoughts. That being said, it doesn't seem that dismissing an actualistic doctrine of God—even before *CD* II/2—is all that easy from the text of the *CD* itself. Second, we will proceed by beginning with the end. That is, we will start with Barth's more mature thought towards the end of the *CD* and from there work back toward the beginning of the theological study. A theologian ought to be read, first and foremost, in the light of his more mature thought such that his earlier formulations—where ambiguous—may be clarified in light of his later expressions. To an investigation of the *CD* we now turn.

2. *The Church Dogmatics*

It is a well-known fact that Barth's theology is radically Christocentric. That is, it is a theology that has Christology at its center. Barth's Christology finds its

³³ "The Actuality of God," 212.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 211.

³⁵ *Ibid.* See also Gockel's treatment of the shift in Barth's thinking from 1936 onward, including a brief discussion of his 1936 pamphlet *Gottes Gnadenwahl (Barth and Schleiermacher)*, 4). In light of Gockel's research, it ought to be noted that McCormack himself does offer a slight correction to his earlier interpretation of this shift in Barth's thinking. McCormack says that the shift did occur, just not as suddenly or dramatically as he once suspected (see "Seek God," 64).

³⁶ See McCormack's comments in "Seek God," 77-78.

³⁷ Although it appears that McCormack is not completely right to "register a correction" against Barth's doctrine of God. We believe that it can be argued that Barth's actualistic ontology, which demands God's act to be prior to Trinity, is resident in his theology very early on in the *CD*. More on this below.

most mature expression in *CD IV/1*. This does not mean that he does not treat Christology in other parts of the *CD* because he does. In fact, Christ himself is the foundation—often a silent and invisible foundation—upon which he builds his entire dogmatics. But here in *CD IV/1* he sets out ostensibly his understanding of the person of Christ, particularly his view of the hypostatic union.

To set the context we should note that Barth writes this volume with Rudolf Bultmann in mind. In fact, he writes this volume as a debate with Bultmann.³⁸ This factor will have a significant bearing on Barth's Christology in light of Bultmann's tendency toward Docetism. As Barth proceeds he makes clear that this section on reconciliation stands at the center of the dogmatic task.³⁹ He says, "'God with us' is the center of the Christian message—and always in such a way that it is primarily a statement about God."⁴⁰ In other words, the incarnation (God with us) forms the heart of Christian theology in general, but the doctrine of reconciliation in particular. We might even go so far as to say that the incarnation *is* reconciliation. There is no adding to it, there is no taking away from it. God's act of reconciliation has taken place objectively in the incarnation,⁴¹ in the joining of God and man in the one God-human. So this is how we know the divine reconciler. We do not know him as the abstracted second person of the Trinity without human flesh (here Bultmann is in Barth's scope), as the *Logos asarkos*.⁴² This formulation raises a significant question: Is the eternal Son—in himself and apart from being *pro nobis*—"pre-existent?" It seems not, for Barth says:

At the beginning of all things in God there is the Gospel and the Law, the gracious address of God and the gracious claim of God, both directed to man. . . . For Jesus Christ—not an empty *Logos*, but Jesus Christ the incarnate Word, the baby born in Bethlehem, the man put to death at Golgotha and raised in the garden of Joseph of Arimathea, the man whose history this is—is the unity of the two. He is both at one and the same time. . . . That He is both as the Word of God spoken in His work, as the Word of God which has become work, is something which belongs to Himself as the eternal Son of God for Himself and prior to us. In this He is the pre-existent *Deus pro nobis*. . . . To that extent He alone is there at the beginning of all things.⁴³

If we are understanding Barth correctly here, he seems to be saying that we cannot speak of the *Logos* as some abstract essence or being apart from his incarnation. Jesus Christ, as the God-human, has always been. In this way, the incarnation is an eternal act of God that makes God who he is. In other words, Barth, far from divinizing the humanity of Jesus Christ, has humanized God. God from all eternity is God in the flesh.

³⁸ *CD IV/1*, ix.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴¹ See Bruce McCormack, "*Justitia Aliena*: Karl Barth in Conversation with the Evangelical Doctrine of Imputed Righteousness," in *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges* (ed. Bruce L. McCormack; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 167-96.

⁴² *CD IV/1*, 52.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 53.

This reading is further supported by what he says in *CD IV/3*. Again, we must set the context. Volume IV of the *CD* is addressing the issue of the problems of the doctrine of reconciliation. In his typical, three-fold fashion Barth will speak about the first problem of “God coming to man” in a chapter called “Jesus Christ, the Lord as Servant”; the second problem of “man being exalted to God” is addressed in the next chapter entitled “Jesus Christ, the Servant as Lord”; and in *IV/3* he addresses the third problem of the union of the two movements (God toward man and man toward God) in a chapter called “Jesus Christ, the True Witness.” The section to be examined in this chapter is called “The Glory of the Mediator” in which the third problem is addressed. That problem is the problem of the relation between reconciliation and revelation. Barth resolves this problem by identifying reconciliation and revelation. In the union of the two movements of God in the Christ event we have at one and the same time reconciliation between God and man and God’s revelation to man. So, naturally, the theology of the union of God’s humiliation and man’s exaltation in Jesus Christ is discussed. And Barth begins the discussion with a peculiar formulation when he states, “That Jesus Christ lives means quite simply that He exists in the manner of God, and therefore *prior to* all else that exists. . . . But it also means quite simply that He exists in the manner of a man.”⁴⁴ This seems to imply that Jesus Christ—as *the God-human*—existed before creation.⁴⁵ Barth goes on:

The Creator, God Himself, exists only as He does so together with this One who also exists as man, and each and everything in the created world exists only together with this One who also exists as man. . . . As God exists only together with this One, and so too the world, His existence as such is the fact in which *God and the world*, however they may oppose or contradict one another, are not of course one and the same, but *do exist together in an inviolable and indissoluble co-existence and conjunction* . . . so that His life-action is identical with that of God Himself, His history with the divine history.⁴⁶

What Barth seems to be saying here in these two passages is something that radically goes beyond the traditional Chalcedonian formulation.⁴⁷ He seems to be saying that God exists from all of eternity *as Jesus Christ* in which both God and the world co-exist.

Two things need to be noted here. First, it appears that for Barth the incarnation is an eternal event. Second, it is more than the humanity of Christ that is “eternalized,” but with Christ “the world” is “eternalized” as well.⁴⁸ This would mean that the *Logos* never did exist apart from the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth.

⁴⁴ *CD IV/3*, 39; emphasis is mine.

⁴⁵ It ought to be kept in mind that whenever Barth speaks of “Jesus Christ” he has in view not the second person of the Trinity *in abstractio* (i.e., the *Logos asarkos* or the *nuda Dei*), but the person Jesus Christ in all that he is as the God-human, God in the flesh. Therefore when he says here that Jesus Christ is prior to all other things that exist, he really means that Jesus Christ, as God-human, exists eternally.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 39-40; emphasis is mine.

⁴⁷ See McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, 232.

⁴⁸ This reading of Barth is not so far fetched if it is pointed out that even someone as opposed to McCormack’s understanding of Barth as Hunsinger can come to the same, or at least similar, conclusion. See George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 236-43.

This, however, is not the first time we see Barth intimate such a radical Christology. Elsewhere in the *CD* Barth denies the *Logos asarkos*. In a telling passage from *CD I/2*, which seems to have been overlooked by many of those involved in the current debate, Barth makes this denial clear. For starters Barth can say:

The inconceivable fact in it is that without ceasing to be God the Word of God is among us in such a way that He takes over human being, which is His creature, *into his own being* and to that extent makes it his own being.⁴⁹

According to this text the humanity of Christ is assumed into the being of God such that God really has no being without the act of incarnation. In this way, God's act in the Christ event is eternal and thus must constitute who and what he is by nature. God's consideration of who he will be in Christ *ad extra* forms who he is *ad intra*. So necessary is God's act in the incarnation to his being that Barth can say "The Word, and therefore God Himself, does not exist for us apart from the human being of Christ."⁵⁰

At this point Barth enters into a discussion of the debate among the Lutheran and Reformed about the hypostatic union. And Barth does not seem favorable to the Reformed *extra Calvinisticum*. In fact he can say summarily, "In short it cannot be denied that the Reformed *totus intra et extra* offers at least as many difficulties as the Lutheran *totus intra*." Furthermore, by the time he gets to *CD IV/1* he outright denies the Reformed (and with it, the traditional Chalcedonian) view when he writes:

We may concede that there is something unsatisfactory about this theory, in that right up to our own day it has led to fatal speculation about the being and work of the *Logos asarkos*, or a God whom we think we can know elsewhere, and whose divine being we can define from elsewhere than in and from the contemplation of His presence and activity as the Word made flesh. And it cannot be denied that Calvin himself (and with particularly serious consequences in his doctrine of predestination) does go a good way towards trying to reckon with this 'other' god.⁵¹

But the roots of Barth's actualistic ontology, and thus the idea of God's act constituting his being, may be traced back as early as *CD I/1*. On pages 350 and 351 he speaks of God as one subject three times. Barth's actualism begins here. Yes, it is developed more consistently in *II/2* and following (as McCormack has correctly pointed out), but it begins here in seminal form. It is this God, this one subject who manifests himself three times in three modes of being, who elects. He chooses to be God for us in this way and in no other. So, while Barth may use language that sounds like metaphysical essentialism at

⁴⁹ *CD I/2*, 160-61; emphasis is mine.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁵¹ *CD IV/1*, 181. Also cited in McCormack, "Grace and Being"; see n. 5 and the accompanying citation above.

times (for instance, when he speaks about the God who exists antecedently), that language must be interpreted in light of his more foundational modalistic⁵² actualism:

All we can know of God according to the witness of Scripture are His acts. All we can say of God, all the attributes we can assign to God, relate to these acts of His; *not, then, to His essence as such*. . . . The trinity of God, too, is revealed to us only in God's work.⁵³

All of this then makes sense of what Barth says in *CD II/1* and 2 about election and the triune God. McCormack and others have dealt with those sections at length. Suffice it to say that what Barth says in his later work (*CD II/1* and 2) is supported by what he says about Christology elsewhere. In jettisoning the traditional Chalcedonian model, and eternalizing human flesh (and with the flesh of Christ, all of creation as well), we can understand how God's single eye toward reconciliation and revelation for us determines and constitutes who he is in his very nature. There is no being of God that stands "abstracted" from his work for us in Christ. God exists as *actus purus*: he is always acting and never just "being" in a static sense.

3. *Concluding Observations*

On the basis of the evidence from the *CD* it seems that McCormack is vindicated in his assessment of Barth's doctrine of the Trinity. The fact that Barth places his discussion of election smack dab in the middle of his treatment of the doctrine of God strongly indicates his commitment to understanding the Trinity in light of his actualistic doctrine of election.⁵⁴ Hunsinger's approach, by

⁵² Some have tried to defend Barth against the charge of modalism. See, e.g., D. M. Baillie, *God Was in Christ: An Essay on Incarnation and Atonement* (London: Faber & Faber, 1955), 137. More recently Dennis W. Jowers has defended Barth against the charge of modalism while offering ways in which Barth could have been more clear by maintaining the term "person" rather than rejecting it. See Jowers, "The Reproach of Modalism: A Difficulty for Karl Barth's Doctrine of the Trinity," *SJT* 56 (2003): 231-46. William J. Hill recognizes that there is a difference between modalism historically speaking and what Barth advocates. Yet, for Hill, Barth does advocate a type of modalism, which Hill has dubbed "modal trinitarianism." See Hill, *The Three-Personed God: The Trinity as a Mystery of Salvation* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 117. However, it seems that an attempt to get Barth off the hook of modalism completely is impossible in light of what he says in *CD I/1*: "The biblical witness to God's revelation sets us face to face with the possibility of interpreting the one statement that 'God reveals Himself as the Lord' three times in different senses. This possibility is the biblical root of the doctrine of the Trinity" (376). It is this idea of God revealing himself "three times" that confirms the modalism, or at least a type of modalism (even though Barth himself rejects modalism by name; see *CD I/1*, 382). It does not seem, on Barth's formulation, that God is one being in three persons at one and at the same time. But his modes of being are determined by his acts. Hence the term used here: "modalistic actualism."

⁵³ *CD I/1*, 371. We must be reminded here that for Barth revelation is Jesus Christ, so for him trinity is revealed only and exclusively in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the work in which God reveals himself as the triune One. So, really, there is no antecedent Trinity that stands behind and apart from Jesus Christ—at least not that we can know of.

⁵⁴ McCormack, "Seek God," 78.

contrast, seems all too “proof-texty.” And Molnar (while in our opinion more consistent with orthodoxy) tames Barth’s actualistic ontology and misses his radical theological program. In addition, Hunsinger is inconsistent when he attempts to affirm both the equality of being and act on the one hand and that the Trinity is ontologically prior to his electing grace on the other. This leads us to believe that his reading of Barth cannot reasonably be held. McCormack is then the more consistent (even and especially because he acknowledges inconsistencies and developments in Barth’s thought which neither Hunsinger nor Molnar will allow) and accurate interpreter of Barth on this issue. But is McCormack correct on the theological issue itself? That is to say, is it at all reasonable to maintain the belief that God’s act is (logically) prior to his being triune? This conclusion is by no means sound. In fact, McCormack’s formulation—as well as that of Barth before him—proves to be a radical aberration from both Reformed theology and sound biblical exegesis.

V. *Going Forward by Going Back*

It is in this context that the insights of Cornelius Van Til and Geerhardus Vos can be of great help to us as we move beyond the Barthian impasse. We will consider a Reformed solution from two angles: one systematic-theological and the other biblical-theological. It will be shown how these two approaches work in harmony for one faithful formulation of how God remains God *ad intra* and necessarily, while also being “for us” in his act of election *ad extra*. In other words, it will be shown that God is self-contained, yet not an impersonal abstraction.

1. *The Systematic-Theological Contributions of Van Til and Vos*

Van Til, drawing upon the best of the Reformed tradition, explains the relation between God’s knowledge and our knowledge in this way:

The orthodox notion begins with God as the concrete self-existent being. Thus God is not named according to what is found in the creature, except God has first named the creature according to what is in himself. The only reason why it appears as though God is named according to what is found in the creature is that, as creatures, we must psychologically begin with ourselves in our knowledge of anything. We are ourselves the proximate starting point of all our knowledge. In contrast to this, however, we should think of God as the ultimate starting point of our knowledge, God is the archetype, while we are the ectypes. God’s knowledge is archetypal and ours ectypal.⁵⁵

In other words, we do not describe God according to what we know in creation such that creation provides us with only a “name” for God. Rather, when we use human language to describe God, we can be sure that this language has a real referent in God because God first created language to reflect something of his very nature. God is the original speaker (archetype), and we are speakers in

⁵⁵ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1976), 203.

a derivative fashion (ectype). If this is an accurate way to speak epistemologically, then—and this is all-important—the archetype/ectype relation *must be representative of an underlying ontic reality*. In other words, if God's speech and knowledge are prior to our speech and knowledge, then likewise his being must be prior to and the ground for his redemptive acts. His personal intertrinitarian being (with the perichoretic relationship between the three persons) forms the archetypal ground of which his covenantal acts are its ectypal manifestation. God's acts *pro nobis* can be truly personal only because he first exists as absolute personality itself.⁵⁶

To put it another way, God—in his triunity—is personal. God, as he exists *apart from* and *prior to* his act, is personal. He *is* three persons in one being, but that being is not some other *thing* than his personality. His being, as triune and as self-contained, is eternally and essentially personal. The Father eternally begets and loves the Son. The Son is eternally begotten of the Father and loves the Father. The Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son and loves the Father and the Son, even as the Father and the Son love the Spirit. God *is*—prior to and apart from his acts toward humanity—personal love.

Furthermore, the three persons as one self-contained personality have fellowship in their mutually effected personal properties.⁵⁷ As such there is nothing impersonal or un-relational about this self-contained ontological Trinity.

Again, Van Til makes it clear how one can maintain an absolute triune God who is prior to his act without sacrificing relationality when he writes:

Take now these two points together (a) that I have consistently stressed the necessity of asking what God is in himself prior to his relation to the created universe and (b) that I have consistently opposed all subordinationism within the self-contained trinity and it will appear why I have also consistently opposed correlativism between God and the universe and therefore correlativism between God and man. By correlativism I understand a mutually interdependent relationship like that of husband and wife or the convex and the concave side of a disk. I know of no more pointed way of opposing all

⁵⁶ The relation between God's absolute personal being and derived human relations has also been helpfully described by K. Scott Oliphint as an "Eimi/eikon" relation. In this way, the absolute self-contained "I Am" (original/absolute personality) is always distinguished from the human "image" (derived/concrete personality). See Oliphint, *Reasons for Faith: Philosophy in the Service of Theology* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2006), 174-81. Here the connection between the Creator/creature distinction in metaphysics and the archetype/ectype in epistemology is made explicit. In light of the dualities of Creator/creature, archetype/ectype, and Eimi/eikon, it would seem impossible to posit God's act as prior to his being without blurring or confusing the distinctions involved.

⁵⁷ Van Til was committed to saying that God is three persons, but also one absolute personality. Following in the tradition in which he stands—namely, that of Old Princeton as it follows the Hodges, and that of the Dutch Reformed as it follows Herman Bavinck—Van Til can posit *perichoresis* as the conceptual paradigm by which the three persons of the Godhead interpenetrate such that there are not three independent wills or minds, but one will and mind. See the discussion in Lane G. Tipton, "The Function of Perichoresis and the Divine Incomprehensibility," *WTJ* 64 (2002): 289-306. Also see Tipton, "The Triune Personal God: Trinitarian Theology in the Thought of Cornelius Van Til" (Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2004), 39-62. The remainder of this article is greatly indebted to Tipton's project in his dissertation.

forms of identity philosophy and all forms of dialectical philosophy and theology. I have also spoken of this self-contained triune God as “our concrete universal.”⁵⁸

The expression “our concrete universal” is key to understanding Van Til (and the Reformed orthodox that came before him). God is not abstract, but very much concrete (i.e., personal and relational) without giving up his universality (i.e., unity, simplicity, and aseity). His concreteness and his universality ever remain distinct without being confused or communicated. To put it another way, he is by nature absolute because he is one, and he is by nature concrete because he is three in person. Thus, God is not dependent upon creation to be either absolute *or* concrete.

In this connection we would do well to introduce the so-called “representational principle” found in Van Til.⁵⁹ In short, this is the conceptual linchpin by which Van Til can relate God’s being and his act. God’s absolute personal being (archtype) forms the basis and ground upon which he can relate to his creation by way of covenant (ectype).⁶⁰ So Van Til can say, “God is the original and man is the derivative.”⁶¹ It seems Van Til drew, at least in part, from the Westminster divines:

The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God’s part, which He hath been pleased to express by way of covenant. (WCF 7.1)

This carefully stated clause brings out the analogical nature of the relation between God and man and, thus, between God’s self-contained being and his

⁵⁸ Cornelius Van Til, “Presuppositionalism,” from *The Works of Cornelius Van Til* (ed. Eric Sigward; CD-ROM; New York: Labels Army Co., 1997). The phrase “concrete universal” was used by Hegel long before Van Til. However, needless to say, Van Til used this expression in a very different way than did Hegel. See also Cornelius Van Til, *Defense of the Faith* (ed. K. Scott Oliphint; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008), 17, and the annotation there.

⁵⁹ See Tipton, “The Triune Personal God,” 10-12, 45 n. 107. Tipton explains that the representational principle denotes two things. First, it denotes that “the personal communion within the Godhead is so complete that it excludes every vestige of impersonality.” Second, it denotes the *pro nobis* aspect of God’s relationality, that is, his condescending in covenant to the creature in a real and personal relationship (114). Summarized, “the representational principle provides a theological paradigm that affirms as equally true God’s aseity and eternity, on the one hand, and divine condescension, on the other hand” (115).

⁶⁰ We would do well at this point to mention Herman Bavinck’s discussion of the archtype/ectype distinction, particularly given his influence on Van Til. See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; 4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), 2:107-10. In a statement with which Barth would *not* have been comfortable, Bavinck says: “It is not contradictory, therefore, to say that a knowledge that is inadequate, finite, and limited is at the same time true, pure, and sufficient.” For Bavinck, “God’s self-consciousness is archetypal; our knowledge of God, drawn from his Word, is ectypal” (2:107). In other words, God’s relation to the world (both ontologically and epistemologically) is not merely *symbolical* (nor *dialectical*, for that matter) but *analogical*. This means that God remains essentially different from the creation and yet, at the same time, directly related to it by way of covenant-revelation. Again, Bavinck states: “Implied in creation is both God’s transcendence and God’s immanence, the essential difference as well as the close kinship between God and his creatures” (2:110).

⁶¹ Van Til, *Introduction*, 203.

acts *pro nobis*. The distance between God and man is so great it may be called a duality. God and man are two completely different kinds of beings. There is no scale of being here, as there is in the *analogia entis*. There is no commonality of being shared by God and man. The only way for man to know God is through God's initiative and willing condescension to him. With this Barth would have no quibble. However, he would object with what is presupposed by this consistent Creator-creature distinction. It means that God, as Van Til has pointed out, is self-contained and has a being that in no way is contingent upon his acts *pro nobis*. He is all-original, and man is all-dependent. God's being is necessary, but his free act of condescension is contingent. To put it another way, being *precedes* covenant.⁶²

The legitimate concern of Barth and Barthians to avoid an abstract and impersonal God is addressed and fully satisfied through the archetype/ectype relation and the Creator/creature distinction already resident in the Reformed tradition. In other words, by virtue of the doctrine of the Creator/creature distinction on the one hand, and the archetypal nature of God's absolute personal being as the basis of his ectypal works on the other, we have in the Reformed orthodox tradition an "absolute-yet-personal" God. The idea of this God, who is three persons yet absolute singular personality, answers the "anti-abstractionist" concern.⁶³ Furthermore, it does so without undoing the historic doctrine of God.

Geerhardus Vos, Van Til's professor during his days at Princeton Seminary, set the theological groundwork for his much-admired student. The Princeton professor aptly expressed the relationship between the ontological Trinity and the economical Trinity in this way:

At this point the Reformed principle and the doctrine of the covenant of redemption are interlocked. The fact that redemption is God's work by which He wills to be glorified can in no wise be more strongly expressed than by thus exposing its emergence from out of the depths of the divine Being himself. Here it is God who issues the requirement of redemption as God the Father. Again, it is God who for the fulfillment of that requirement becomes the guarantor as God the Son. Once again, it is God to whom belongs the application of redemption as God the Holy Spirit. In the clear light of eternity, where God alone dwells, the economy of salvation is drawn up for us with pure outlines and not darkened by the assistance of any human hand. It is a creation of the triune One from whom, through whom, and to whom are all things.⁶⁴

It is the triune God, and no other, who orders creation and redemption according to his very nature. Anticipating the debate among Barthians, Vos here eliminates any possibility that the self-contained ontological Trinity could be an abstraction.

⁶² In this instance, we might clarify by saying that the priority of being to covenant is both logical and temporal. In the case of election, as we shall see, the priority of being to act is only logical.

⁶³ On anti-abstractionism like that found in Barthian theology, see the helpful survey and critique in John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1987), 169-91.

⁶⁴ Geerhardus Vos, "Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr.; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980), 247.

God is eternally and *ad intra* personal, and this personal nature grounds the personal relationship that he forms with his creatures by way of covenant, whether in the eternal act of election or in creation. Therefore, we must carefully distinguish between who God is *ad intra* and who he is *ad extra*; and we must do so without confusion or separation.

In summary, what Van Til and Vos have done so well is to help us better understand the relation between this personal God and his interaction with us. His interaction with us is the manifestation of and is grounded in his personal, trinitarian being.⁶⁵ He remains original (archetype) as the immanent Trinity, and yet, by way of covenant, relates to us as the economic Trinity (ectype). Here, the archetype/ectype relation has the advantage of maintaining *both* God's contact with us and the Creator-creature distinction.

2. Vos's Biblical-Theological Contribution

In addition to the quotation cited above, where Vos proves himself a capable historical and systematic theologian, he has also (and primarily) proved helpful in understanding God's aseity on exegetical and biblical-theological grounds. Particularly what is in view is his helpful treatment of the second chapter of Hebrews. Again and again in Heb 2 is the implied question, "Why the God-man?" Why was it necessary for the Son, whom the author has just shown to be the eternal God (1:8-12), to take on human flesh, undergo temptation, suffer, and die? Vos hints at an answer in his treatment of Heb 2, especially when he speaks of the necessity of the atonement given God's self-contained nature:

Already in the second chapter the subject of the priesthood of Christ is lightly touched upon (vv. 17, 18), and that for the purpose of convincing the readers of the necessity of Christ's earthly humiliation and weakness.⁶⁶

Elsewhere Vos puts it this way:

True, he [the author of Hebrews] sometimes seems to attribute Christ's death purely to the will of God (the Scotist view), which would represent the death as having not *inherent* value. . . . The Messiah received a body in order that He might be able to die. He received it that by dying He might fulfill the will of God. . . . The statement is found in 2:10, *For it became him . . .* that it was necessary for realizing God's world-plan.⁶⁷

Indeed, the incarnation was necessary for the salvation of mankind. It was unnecessary that God bother to save mankind. He did not have to save man. He had the freedom either to redeem sinful man or to let him perish in his sin. But

⁶⁵ So Muller: "The revelation *ad extra* corresponds with the reality *ad intra*, and the issue, so prominent also in the Reformed orthodox discussion of the attributes, that *ad extra* manifestations of God are fully grounded in the essential reality of God." Richard A. Muller, *The Trinity of God* (vol. 4 of *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*; 2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 259.

⁶⁶ Geerhardus Vos, "The Priesthood of Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, 130.

⁶⁷ Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 1998), 119.

once God decided to redeem man, he had to become man to carry out that redemption—and in no other way.

Vos's insights here are helpful to support the traditional understanding of how God's nature is self-contained and is not constituted by his electing decree or acts in creation. Vos intimates that throughout Heb 2:9-18 the implied answer to the question of how God can redeem man without himself becoming man is quite simple: he cannot. It is *impossible* for God to save men without himself becoming man. And this is shown in at least three different ways: with reference to death, suffering, and temptation. This will be demonstrated through closer exegetical work building on Vos's contributions.

To begin we will mark out the perimeters of the pericope. The $\nu\upsilon\nu\ \delta\epsilon\ \sigma\upsilon\pi\omega\ \acute{\omicron}\rho\acute{\omega}\mu\epsilon\nu$ ("at present, we do not yet see" [ESV]) of 2:8c marks what follows in contrast to what is said before in vv. 5-8b about the exalted status of the Son of Man. In v. 5 we see that "the Son" spoken of in ch. 1⁶⁸ is the one to whom God has subjected the world to come.⁶⁹ The author (invoking Ps 8) describes "the Son of Man" in v. 6 in terms of the one to whom all power and authority in the world to come has been subjected. So comprehensive is this subjection that the author can say in v. 8b that God "left nothing outside his control." In view here then is nothing less than the Son's kingly office.

However, at v. 8c we find the "hinge" upon which the conception of the Son's reign swings between *already* fulfillment and *not yet* consummation. The Son who reigns over the presumably invisible and heavenly world to come of v. 5, already has all things in subjection to him in anticipatory principle. However, that subjection is not yet presently visible in an earthly way, such that the author says: "we do not yet see everything in subjection to him" (ESV).

On the other side of the pericope, beginning in 3:1, the author renders another parenthesis on the basis of the historical-redemptive indicative contained in 2:5-18. This serves as the ending "bookend" of which 2:1-4 serves as the front "bookend" to our pericope. This then sets the scene for how our author will develop the necessity of the incarnation with reference to death, suffering, and temptation.

⁶⁸ Even in ch. 1 an argument can be made that the author reflects a fundamental understanding of the distinction between the Son's self-contained essence and his economic act in vv. 1-4. See William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (Dallas: Word, 1991), 6-7. See also Lane G. Tipton's improvement on William Lane's understanding of the chiasmic structure in 1:1-4, "Christology in Colossians 1:15-20 and Hebrews 1:1-4: An Exercise in Biblico-Systematic Theology," in *Resurrection and Eschatology: Theology in Service of the Church; Essays in Honor of Richard B. Gaffin Jr.* (ed. Lane G. Tipton and Jeffrey C. Waddington; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008), 177-202. Tipton summarizes well the teaching of Heb 1:1-4: "[Vv. 3a and b], when properly understood, therefore express the glory and deity that belong to the eternal Son of God prior to and apart from any economic activity at all. In this sense, then, the revelatory and redemptive work of Jesus Christ—his eschatological significance in redemptive history—derives ultimately from his eternal ontic status as the Son of God. What the Son *does* in redemptive history has significance because of who he is from all eternity" (181; emphasis is his).

⁶⁹ τὴν οἰκουμένην τὴν μέλλουσαν here contrasts in the strongest antithetical terms with "the world" mentioned in 1:6. This formulation is original here to the author of Hebrews within the NT, but has its substance expressed elsewhere, e.g., τῷ αἰῶνι . . . μέλλοντι in Matt 12:32 where the heavenly eschatological kingdom is in view.

First, let us consider death. God cannot die. In 2:9 we read, “But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God⁷⁰ he might taste death for everyone” (ESV). With the introduction of the idea of Jesus tasting death ὑπὲρ παντὸς we are brought from the sphere of his kingship to that of his priesthood. The ὑπὲρ here, along with δόξη καὶ τιμῇ, reminds us of Exod 28:2, 40 (LXX) and thus is charged with priest-service conceptions (i.e., the idea of priesthood as a vicarious service in and for the covenant community).⁷¹ But what is distinctive about this priest is that he is made a little lower than the angels so that on behalf of those with whom he identifies he “might taste death” (γεύσῃται θανάτου). The verb here is an aorist subjunctive and in this context denotes the idea of permissibility.⁷² To capture the essence of what is being said we can summarize that the eternal Son (who by nature is “above” the angels, not subject to conditions like they are; see 1:10-12) became lower than the angels so that *he may be able to taste death* for everyone. To put it another way, he who was at one time *unable* to taste death become incarnate so that he might be *able* to taste death in and through human flesh.

At this point we must be cautious. The accent must always remain upon the inability of God to taste death in his divine nature, as the *Logos asarkos*, even after his humiliation in being made lower than the angels. God cannot die (according to 1:11 all other created beings can and do “perish,” but the eternal pre-incarnate Lord of 1:10 “remains”) either before the incarnation, during, or after it.

Second, the author continues to speak about the priestly ministry of the incarnate Son. At the heart of the issue is the self-identification of the priest with those he has come to redeem.⁷³ The eternal Son, in fact, cannot be a priest apart from human flesh. According to Old Covenant code a priest must be a brother drawn from Israel, particularly from the line of Aaron (Exod 40:15). Here the concept parallels that found in Paul when he speaks about how it was

⁷⁰ The inferior textual evidence reads χωρὶς θεοῦ, “apart from God.” This reading is attractive for the point being argued here; however, the evidence in support of the critical text is too strong. See B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (2d ed.; London: Macmillan, 1892; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 46. For a plausible, but ultimately unconvincing, argument and alternate views for χωρὶς θεοῦ see F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 70 n. 15. See also the discussion in P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 94-97.

⁷¹ Much discussed is Chrysostom’s interpretation of the author’s words with reference to a physician who tastes a bitter medicine as an example for his patient. But Calvin is right to accent the concept of substitution over the idea of an exemplar; see *Calvin’s Commentaries* (22 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 22:61. For the connection with Exod 28 and the high priesthood of Aaron, see Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 49.

⁷² If the negative were present the aorist subjunctive would have a prohibitive sense; see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 469. But given the lack of a negative, the opposite sense of prohibition is in view, namely, the idea of permission, which makes the subject able to perform the action in view.

⁷³ Lane explains that v. 10 is a “homiletical midrash and here serves to emphasize Jesus’ solidarity with the human family” (*Hebrews 1–8*, 53).

necessary for the Son to be born under the law, if he is to redeem those who are under the law (Gal 4:4). God who is above all and who is himself the lawgiver, in himself, can not be subject to the law nor can he be subject to suffering. This is why it is fitting that he διὰ παθημάτων τελειῶσαι (v. 10d). But why was it fitting that he suffer? Verse 16 further explicates for us that the eternal Son helps not angels, but the offspring of Abraham, that is, human beings.⁷⁴ And since it is humanity that he must become like, ὄφειλεν κατὰ πάντα τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς ὁμοιωθῆναι, “he had to be made like his brothers in all things.”⁷⁵ What needs to be pointed up from this striking text is the necessity of having to become human. The ὄφειλεν here denotes the idea of a binding necessity, and the ὁμοιωθῆναι has the sense of transition in state. What the author is saying here is that if the Son is to identify with humanity he must *become what he is not already by nature*.⁷⁶ Only in this way can he be a sympathetic high priest identifying with the sufferings of those he has come to represent as priest-sacrifice. Vos, developing the idea of Jesus identifying with us as high priest, states it well:

It is plain that to satisfy these requirements there must be a close identification between the priest and his followers. The line must be unbroken. They must follow him in his nature. All of this may be embodied in the term *identification*. That is the great prerequisite. Note here the emphasis on *the two natures* of Christ. As revealer, Christ’s divine nature is emphasized, 1:3. But in his priesthood, the emphasis is on his human nature. If he had been an angel, He could not have been a priest.⁷⁷

Therefore, the implication standing behind this text is that God, in himself, is unable to suffer apart from human flesh and before the time of the incarnation. So, any idea of the divine nature suffering at all, much less as the God-human from all of eternity, is necessarily precluded by the theology of the author to the Hebrews.

Third, we can say that the eternal Son became lower than the angels by taking on human flesh so that he might identify with his people by being tempted. Again, Vos brings out the necessity of the Son’s incarnation well when he writes:

In 2:10ff. we note the steps in which this close identification between Christ and His people is worked out. The new covenant is made subject not to angels but to man. . . . Christ and His people are therefore identified here. This is the first step in the bringing out of this identification.⁷⁸

In other words, an effectual high priestly ministry must be one in which the priest himself can identify with the conditions of those he represents, especially

⁷⁴ The all-important ontic distinction between God, angels, and humans has already been established in 1:5–2:8, with the citation in 2:6–8 of Ps 8 solidifying the difference between angels and humanity.

⁷⁵ Translation is mine.

⁷⁶ The πάντα τοῖς of humanity here parallels what the author says in v. 14 about the Son partaking also in flesh and blood.

⁷⁷ Gerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 95; emphasis is his.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

in their death, suffering, and temptation. However, it would have been well known to the author's audience that God cannot be tempted (Jas 1:13). So, how can God be of any help to us? The author explains that it is because the Son (referred to in ch. 1 as one who is above the angels) became flesh so that through his flesh δύνανται τοῖς πειραζομένοις βοηθῆσαι, "he is able to help those who are being tempted" (2:18b ESV). He who from all eternity—prior to and apart from the incarnation—was unable to be tempted, can be tempted to the end that he might be a sympathetic high priest. The conception of a sympathetic high priest is not of the divine being *prior to* the incarnation. Rather, priesthood is part of the creaturely realm and is not proper to the pre-existent life of the Son. Vos helpfully maintains this distinction with reference to the Son's Messiahship in his work on Jesus' self-disclosure:

As a matter of fact the sonship to which our Lord traces back his Messianic commission is not something which we have in common with Him, but something unique, something reaching back into His pre-existent, pre-mundane life. In a word, it is nothing less than His Deity, or, strictly speaking, the relation which in His divine nature He sustains to the Father.⁷⁹

In fact, the priesthood into which the Son enters is a contingent state, added onto his pre-mundane divine nature. Again, Vos (although not addressing Jesus' priesthood *per se*) puts it this way:

The Messiahship is in Jesus' life the secondary thing, not merely in the order of being, but also in the order of importance. When seen in the perspective sketched above, the Messiahship will have to be classed with the things that are relative, not with the order of absolutes. This relativity it shares with all other historical things, as compared with the inner life of the Deity.⁸⁰

Whereas McCormack and Barth would want to eternalize his priesthood in making the God-human an eternal reality, the author here explains (and if Vos is correct above, our Lord himself intimates) that at one time God was not a high priest. *Priesthood is something proper to his humanity only.*

Again, careful qualification is necessary. The person of the God-man is tempted only in his human nature. The principle that God cannot be tempted remains intact and unaffected by the taking on of a human nature. It must be this way and no other, otherwise the self-contained divine nature explicated by the author in Heb 1 is contradicted.

Therefore, can we say that God died, suffered, and was tempted? Yes, but only in a qualified sense. We can say that God died, suffered, and was tempted not *simpliciter*, but *secundum quid*. We can say that God died, suffered, and was tempted in the person of Jesus Christ through his human nature and never his divine nature. The reason is clear: if he could have died, suffered, or been tempted *in his divine nature* there would have been no reason for him to take on

⁷⁹ Geerhardus Vos, *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus: The Modern Debate About the Messianic Consciousness* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002), 102.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* See also his expositions on pp. 187 and 190.

human flesh. But the divine nature cannot die, suffer, or be tempted—neither before his incarnation nor during his incarnation. Here the teaching of the Westminster Confession of Faith, following Chalcedon, is helpful:

Christ, in the work of mediation, acteth according to both natures, by each nature doing that which is proper to itself: yet, by reason of the unity of the person, that which is proper to one nature is sometimes in Scripture attributed to the person denominated by the other nature. (WCF 8.7)

Just as the Bible can say that God obtained the church with his blood (see Acts 20:28⁸¹), so we can say God died, suffered, and was tempted in this qualified sense. We may attribute an action that is proper only to the human nature to the person, even while referring to the person by a name that is proper to the divine nature. But this attribution is not a statement of ontic reality (God, in his divine nature, did not bleed), but a naming of the person of Jesus Christ by his deity. In this nuanced way, we may say that in Jesus Christ God died, suffered, and was tempted. Anything else will either distort the clear teaching of Scripture or otherwise confuse the Creator-creature distinction. And if it is the case that the incarnation did not affect the divine nature, that means the idea of the *Logos asarkos*, as the self-contained eternal Son of God, remains a reality. And if the divine nature of the Son in his eternal and pre-existent state can rightly be described as the *Logos asarkos*, then he was such prior to both the incarnation and the divine decision to become incarnate (i.e., the *Logos incarnandus*).

VI. *Assessment and Conclusion*

When considering this current debate among Barthians, one would do well to recall the older debate between Herbert Braun and Helmut Gollwitzer.⁸² Braun was a NT scholar following the trends of Rudolf Bultmann in his existentializing of God's being. This triggered a response by the dogmatician Gollwitzer who, in following Barth, emphasized the objectivity of God and criticized Braun for too much subjectivism (a problem early Barthians thought they left behind when they rejected neo-Protestantism!). Eberhard Jüngel's work was an attempt to mediate this dispute. However, he also was unable to escape the horns of the dilemma, and so was criticized by Ted Peters who believed that Jüngel allowed too much to the being of God that was *a se*. This discussion continues today among Barthians who are not sure if the Swiss theologian believed in the priority of the economic Trinity over the ontological Trinity, or vice versa. To be sure, the swinging pendulum between the contenders is reflective of Barth's dialectical framework. In fact, the debate itself, rather than one side of the argument or the other, captures the true meaning of dialectical theology.

⁸¹ It should be noted in passing that there are alternate readings of this text. Some manuscripts witness to "the church of the Lord," which would relieve the theological tension. However, as to why the reading "the church of God" is to be preferred see, e.g., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 679-80.

⁸² See the helpful summary by Webster, "Introduction," xi.

If Barth were alive today watching it all unfold before him, we might imagine him sitting there, smoking his pipe, nodding his head, and thinking to himself, “Exactly.”

Even so, the issue among Barthians is still about the relationship between God’s being and his act. In other words, how is the Creator distinguished without being separated from the creature? Some want to emphasize the otherness of God (or the “Godness of God,” as some put it), and others his contact with the creation. For Barth, this was *the* issue in his own mind and he struggled to find a solution—a solution that he believes is found in dialectical thinking.

Hence, the debate continues over exactly how to appropriate Barth’s dialectic. A pendulum continues to swing back and forth between the two extremes. But in this dialectic, the Reformed orthodox are able to recognize the problem, and it lies in the Barthian’s fundamental presupposition of what exactly is relationship and abstraction. For the “Hegelian” side of the debate God cannot be *a se* because that would make him abstract and aloof. For the other side, God’s aseity must be maintained if the Creator is to remain truly the Creator and not confused with the creation. The solution for McCormack, following Jüngel in many ways, is to close the distinction between God’s will and his essence. In this way God’s act is his essence and his essence is his act. The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity. Of course, what McCormack has done is conflate the very Creator-creature distinction that he claims to maintain. Or, rather, he has collapsed the creature into the Creator, just as his Christology (with its “Reformed kenosis”) collapses the humanity into the divinity of Christ. Thus, it is argued that Jesus Christ suffered in his divine nature as well as his human. According to McCormack’s viewpoint, to say otherwise is to fall into Nestorianism, and thus to formulate an abstract *Logos*.

Indeed, what McCormack has done, even for us in the conservative-Reformed (read: non-Barthian) tradition, is to challenge us to think of God in non-abstract ways.⁸³ Where he has gone wrong, however, is in overlooking the

⁸³ See also his “The Actuality of God.” McCormack in this article advances the theory that the problem with Open Theism (hereafter, OT) is that (in part at least) it shares the same metaphysical convictions as classical theism (hereafter, CT). This means, in short, that CT believes in metaphysics *at all*. In this way OT is on the same spectrum of thought as CT and process theology. However, says McCormack, Barth offers a viable alternative to both CT and OT because he does not stand on a metaphysical spectrum *at all*. McCormack summarizes four traits of CT: (1) Epistemology controls and determines divine ontology. Our knowledge of some aspect of the created order comes prior to our knowledge of God. (2) It reasons about metaphysics “from below” through a “process of inferential reasoning.” (3) CT, and with it OT, claims to know something of God’s being before considering Christology, thus leading to speculation and abstract reasoning. (4) The being of God is elaborated from creation without any reference to God’s redeeming and reconciling work in Christ. What is ostensibly missing in McCormack’s work here, however, is any distinction between God’s necessary and contingent attributes. That is to say, who God is in himself and who God is toward us in condescending in covenantal relationship. For instance, McCormack explains that the difference between CT and OT, being two extremes on the same spectrum, is that CT takes the pole of God’s pure being and OT takes the pole of God’s love and flexibility. So, OT embraces Bible passages about God changing his mind and explains away passages dealing with his immutability, whereas

riches of Protestant orthodoxy and going to Barth's position, which itself is an overreaction to the received tradition. In other words, one need not go to Barth nor to dialectical theology to find a position that avoids abstraction. Does the "old metaphysic" necessarily lead to abstraction when it comes to God's being? Is a self-contained being necessarily abstract and impersonal? Must we adopt an actualistic ontology in order to have a God who is genuinely "with us"? The evidence from the history of theology points to a negative answer to all three questions. In fact, plumbing the depths of orthodox theology shows the opposite to be the case. Protestant orthodoxy shows that a truly non-abstract God must be ontologically self-contained.

While the Barth-McCormack proposal has sought answers to good questions—questions concerning God's relationality, being, and acts—it has done so in the wrong places. Along the way to finding answers to good questions contemporary theologians would do well to be cautious not to stumble into old theological pitfalls. If it is true that there is nothing new under the sun, today's theologian ought to be both encouraged and cautious. *Cautious* because what seem to be new theological treasures dug up by Barth may in fact turn out to be old, dead men's bones; and *encouraged* because in the midst of theological struggles comfort comes by knowing that giants of the past have struggled similarly, and some of them have found good answers which we can reclaim for the present.

While we may conclude that McCormack has accurately interpreted Barth, it must be acknowledged that both theologians have erred in at least three ways. First, if McCormack is correct that Barth taught that God's act of election constitutes his triune being, then an antecedent being behind the acts of God is denied—no amount of qualifications can change that fact.⁸⁴ And if God has no

CT embraces passages of God's immutability but explains away passages about changing his mind (193-95). But this is a fundamental misreading of the classical position. Perhaps a better model for understanding these Bible passages is found in the essential/covenantal attributes schema set forth in Oliphint, *Reasons for Faith*, 232-55. Whereas McCormack wants to leave the two types of passages in a dialectical tension (since the Bible is not written by a "single Author"), the Reformed have never seen a tension, but a perfect harmony between who God is in himself and who he is for us in covenant.

⁸⁴ This is an insight into Barth's thinking, by the way, which Van Til made long ago; see Cornelius Van Til, *The New Modernism* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1946). If McCormack is right on his reading of Barth, as we have argued he is, then perhaps Van Til was not as "inept" an interpreter of Barth as he has been accused of being. See Alister E. McGrath, "Karl Barth's Doctrine of Justification from an Evangelical Perspective," in *Karl Barth and Evangelical Theology* (ed. Sung Wook Chung; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 172, and the literature cited there. What is interesting, in light of current research that has tried to show how Barth and Schleiermacher were not as far apart as once thought, is that the label "the new modernism" to describe Barth's theology does not appear to be that wrongheaded. See Bruce McCormack, "What Has Basel to Do with Berlin? Continuities in the Theologies of Barth and Schleiermacher," *PSB* 23 (2002): 146-74; and Gockel, *Barth and Schleiermacher*, 9-15, and the literature cited there.

antecedent being prior to his act (even his eternal act of election), then something other than his very nature determines who he is.⁸⁵ This means, then, that God took into consideration fallen man before he became triune. Thus, God is somehow contingent to the created order.⁸⁶ And this, no matter how much Barth speaks about the aseity of God, is actually a denial of it. And if God is not *a se*, then he ceases to be a truly sovereign and free God.

Second, in McCormack's commitment to saying that God suffers, not only does he deny the impassibility of God the *Logos*, but he even goes so far as to affirm the suffering of all the persons of the Godhead (or, "modes of being"), inclusive of the Father. This is, of course, the old heresy of patripassianism. In addition, one is led to wonder how McCormack can possibly avoid teaching a sinful God. If the *Logos asarkos* is identified with the *Logos ensarkos* such that Christ's humanity is eternalized, and if Christ's humanity is sinful and fallen as Barth teaches,⁸⁷ then it must follow that God is sinful. This conclusion seems unavoidable given McCormack's advancement of a doctrine of divine passibility. What is good for one aspect of the life of Christ must be good for another. If the Princeton professor concludes divine *passibility*, then what is to stop him from concluding also divine *peccability*? Once McCormack identifies the *Logos asarkos* with the *Logos ensarkos*, what is to prevent him from affirming a sinful God?

Furthermore, if the Barth-McCormack proposal is concerned to set forth a doctrine of divine possibility⁸⁸ in order to save theology from a putative abstract concept of God, it would do well to consider first whether the "old metaphysic" necessarily leads to such an impersonal (read: non-relational) God. Richard Muller responds to modern misconceptions (particularly in the writings of

⁸⁵ The same problem is resident in, e.g., Adam Eitel, "The Resurrection of Jesus Christ: Karl Barth and the Historization of God's Being," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 10 (2008): 36-53. Whereas McCormack shies away from Hegel, Eitel makes the connection between Barth's anti-metaphysical doctrine of God and the German idealist's philosophy. Eitel's thesis is that what the *Logos ensarkos* does economically—specifically in being raised from the dead—constitutes who God is immanently. It is again worth pointing up how modern Barth interpreters are (unwittingly?) supporting Van Til's reading of Barth. The Westminster professor already drew the connection between Barth and Hegel in *The New Modernism*, 76, 152, and 358. See also Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1977), 414. Van Til explains that Barth, following Hegel, believes that the freedom of God means "God can turn wholly into the opposite of himself."

⁸⁶ Edwin Chr. van Driel, "Karl Barth on the Eternal Existence of Jesus Christ," *SJT* 60 (2007): 45-61. In this connection especially relevant is the question asked on p. 54: "How can McCormack avoid the idea that creation is likewise essential to God and constitutive of the divine being?" See also Tipton, "Christology in Colossians," 200.

⁸⁷ See, e.g., *CDI* 2, 40 and 151. It should be noted that Barth does not say Christ committed actual sins—this he denies clearly. What he does say, however, is that in the incarnation the eternal Word takes to himself sinful and fallen flesh. This doctrine was advanced in Barthian scholarship during the twentieth century. See the helpful survey of this teaching and proposed criticism in Oliver D. Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 90-117.

⁸⁸ Which it certainly is; see n. 16 above and the literature cited there.

Thomas Torrance) about the nature of Scholastic theology when he helpfully states:

. . . impassibility has [n]ever meant a distant, immobile, or inactive deity. Instead, the church has always assumed, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, that these concepts guarantee the constancy of the divine power, activity, involvement, and love.⁸⁹

In other words, if God's self-contained absolute being is compromised, *so is the very action of God that Barth was so concerned to set forth*. In fact, the notion of the self-contained ontological Trinity is what stands behind and assures a God who is truly trustworthy, loving, and free in his saving actions *pro nobis*. Muller continues:

A deistic notion of a distant God was utterly foreign to the medieval theological mind, particularly to the medieval mind as it adapted the Aristotelian idea of the divine "first mover" to the concept of creation and identified God as the first cause of all things, both in terms of the act of creation itself and, more importantly, in terms of necessary causal ground of all contingent being.⁹⁰

This insight is helpful because it reminds us that the *best* of the Scholastic tradition, both in its medieval and post-Reformation expressions, *adapted* (and not *adopted*) Greek philosophical ideas to communicate the biblical concept that God's being forms the basis of his acts *ad extra*, without surrendering his intimacy with creation.

Third, in Barth and McCormack's desire to avoid being Nestorian in Christology,⁹¹ and in the latter's constructive project to set forth a "Reformed kenoticism," they seem to have fallen into the problems of Eutychius.⁹² McCormack, again faithfully following Barth, denies the "communication of operations" doctrine, in which it was taught that the two natures were at work in the acts of Jesus Christ. McCormack has trouble with this because he cannot believe that a divine nature could work "co-operatively" with the human nature without

⁸⁹ Richard A. Muller, "The Barth Legacy: New Athanasius or Origin Redivivus? A Response to T. F. Torrance," *The Thomist* 54 (1990): 696. See also Muller's scathing critique of Barthian interpretation of the Scholastic tradition in "Calvin and the Calvinists: Assessing Continuities and Discontinuities Between the Reformation and Orthodoxy," *CTJ* 30 (1995): 345-75; and its second part in *CTJ* 31 (1996): 125-60.

⁹⁰ Muller, "The Barth Legacy," 696. It is also worth taking note of Muller's insightful observation, "The Christian tradition, however, has always asserted the priority of the One who acts and reveals over the act and over the revelation. If this priority is not maintained, there can no longer be any language of the transcendence of God, even as there can no longer be any God apart from God's givenness in the temporal and phenomenological order" (699).

⁹¹ In various places McCormack accuses the "old metaphysic" as found in the Scholastics, in Calvin, and in the Chalcedonian formula itself of Nestorianism. See McCormack, "Ontological Presuppositions," 363; "Seek God," 68; "Karl Barth's Christology," 248 n. 4; and "Grace and Being," 95. Furthermore, he closely associates the "traditional" view of God's essence with an abstraction ("Seek God," 69). It seems that McCormack subscribes to the older historiography among Barthians that has characterized Protestant orthodoxy as being cold, mechanical, speculative, and abstract; in other words, more influenced by Greek philosophy than biblical exegesis. A refutation of this characterization is offered by Richard Muller in "Calvin and the Calvinists, Part 2," 148-51.

⁹² McCormack, "Barth and Kenoticism," 249-50.

overpowering it. Of course, this potential problem led the church to conclude that Christ had two wills and two minds, thus in some acts he was acting in his human nature (e.g., when he was hungry, tired, suffered, died, etc.), and in others he was acting in his divine nature (e.g., when he shows omniscience⁹³). McCormack dismisses this two-will doctrine as Nestorianism, and instead advances a Barthian Christology in which all that belongs to the human nature is “communicated” to the divine nature⁹⁴ under *one* eternal Subject.⁹⁵ However, the collapsing of the human into the divine under one Subject, rather than one person in two natures without confusion or separation, was the error of Eutychius. On McCormack’s view, Jesus Christ no longer has two wills and two minds. Rather, the God-human is one Subject with one mind and one will such that when the human nature suffers so does the divine nature. This is the confusing and conflating of the natures that Chalcedon worked so hard to avoid. McCormack is still falling on one of the horns of the old dialectical dilemma.

Therefore, we cannot follow McCormack and Barth in their Christology, doctrine of the Trinity, or doctrine of election. Their concern to avoid an abstract God is valid. However, their answers are aberrant, outside any useful ecumenical bounds, and not exegetically tenable. And, ironically, in their attempt to avoid abstraction they have made both God and election new abstractions. If God’s being is constituted by the act of election, then election is independent of God and is itself an abstraction. Likewise, if election constitutes God’s being such that God has no being independent of his act, then God’s being-in-act is also an abstraction. Only the self-contained triune God of Scripture who is both absolute and concrete (not to mention one and many as well as universal and particular) provides for the proper relation between abstraction and concreteness. He is, as Van Til says, our concrete universal.

Contemporary theology would do well to recover the resources that are resident in the best of the Reformed tradition, particularly those found in the writings of Reformed orthodoxy, Old Princeton, and Westminster. Bringing together the two strands of biblical theology and systematic theology in these traditions can bear fruit for restating in a dogmatically sound and biblically faithful way the relational nature of our absolute and all-glorious triune God.

⁹³ As in, e.g., John 2:24; 6:64; and 16:19.

⁹⁴ McCormack, “Ontological Presuppositions,” 356.

⁹⁵ McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, 229.