

TYLER J. FRICK

# Karl Barth's Ontology of Divine Grace

*Religion in  
Philosophy and Theology*

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**Mohr Siebeck**

# Religion in Philosophy and Theology

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Tyler J. Frick

# Karl Barth's Ontology of Divine Grace

God's Decision is God's Being

Mohr Siebeck

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Seattle, Washington, USA, July 2021

*Tyler J. Frick*



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## Abbreviations

*CD* *The Church Dogmatics*. Edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. 14 vols. Edinburgh T&T Clark, 1936–69.

*KD* *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*. 4 vols. in 13 parts. Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1932, and Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1938–65.

*ST* Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologiae*. Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. New York: Benziger, 1948.

## Introduction

This introduction will highlight what is arguably the most innovative feature of Barth's doctrine of divine election, enter the conversation surrounding the best way to interpret Barth's doctrine in light of his theology as a whole, and detail how this particular study contributes to the current discussion. To accomplish this task, the introduction first addresses Barth's novel understanding of divine election as a component of theology proper, rather than under the locus of soteriology or divine providence, as was conventional in traditional articulations of the doctrine. It will then provide a description of two strands of interpretation surrounding the question regarding how best to understand the significance of Barth's novel placement of divine election within the context of the doctrine of God. From there it will explain this study's particular contribution to the debate surrounding the interpretation of the significance of Barth's doctrine of election for his theology as a whole. It will conclude with a brief outline of the ensuing chapters of this study, noting how the content of each chapter substantiates its particular understanding of the comprehensive significance of Barth's doctrine of election. A detailed literature review of the debate surrounding how best to interpret the ontological implications of Barth's integration of divine election with theology proper will be reserved for the second chapter of the book. The reason for this is that highlighting the differences between the two main strands of interpretation regarding Barth's doctrine of election requires a thoroughgoing exposition and analysis in order to rightly frame what follows in the subsequent chapters.

### Barth's Reconstruction of Divine Election

Arguably the most innovative and controversial doctrine within Barth's theological writings is his doctrine of election elaborated in *Church Dogmatics* II/2 (1942). In his doctrine of election, Barth subjects his Reformed theological tradition to critical scrutiny, and his concern to ground all theological claims exclusively on God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ becomes most visibly apparent. Arguably, the most significant feature in Barth's treatment of election is found in his placement of the doctrine under the heading of theology proper,

rather than under a separate heading pertaining to soteriology or divine providence, as was typical in traditional articulations of the doctrine. By placing election within the doctrine of God, Barth was seeking to elucidate with precision the identity of the one encountered in Jesus of Nazareth. Such a move was thought to deflect all potential abstractions from entering into theological discourse by insisting that there is no God other than the God who graciously elects to become humanity's God in the covenant-fulfilling existence of Jesus of Nazareth.

Despite the fact that all recognize the unique features present in Barth's integration of divine election with his understanding of the being of God, strong disagreements have arisen regarding how to properly interpret the implications of Barth's attempt to define God in terms of the specific content set forth in God's pretemporal elective decision. A major source of scholarly debate surrounding Barth interpretation concerns how best to consider the ontological significance of Barth's innovation. The debate concerns whether or not Barth's doctrine of election pertains to God's original and proper being, or if it is exclusively related to what God decides to do in relation to the economy of salvation. On the one side, advanced by Bruce McCormack, is a maximalist understanding of the ontological significance of divine election.<sup>1</sup> These interpreters

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<sup>1</sup> This book will be citing the latest versions of republished material. Bruce L. McCormack, "Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology," in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, by Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 183–99; originally published in a slightly different form under the title, "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), 92–110; "Seek God Where He May Be Found: A Response to Edwin Chr. Van Driel," in McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, 261–78; originally published in a slightly different form under the title "Seek God Where He May Be Found: A Response to Edwin Chr. van Driel," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60 (2007): 62–79; "We Have 'Actualized' the Doctrine of the Incarnation . . .': Musings on Karl Barth's Actualistic Theological Ontology," *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie*, no. 1 (2016), 179–98; "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; "The Doctrine of the Trinity after Barth: An Attempt to Reconstruct Barth's Doctrine in the Light of His Later Christology," in *Trinitarian Theology after Barth*, ed. Myk Habets and Phillip Tolliday, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 87–118; "Election and the Trinity: Theses in Response to George Hunsinger," in *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, ed. Michael T. Dempsey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 115–37; originally published under the title "Election and the Trinity: Theses in Response to George Hunsinger," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63, no. 2 (2010), 203–24; "God Is His Decision: The Jüngel-Gollwitzer 'Debate' Revisited," in *Theology as Conversation: The Significance of Dialogue in Historical and Contemporary Theology*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack and Kimlyn J. Bender (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 48–66; "Justitia Aliena: Karl Barth in Conversation with the Evangelical Doctrine of 'Imputed Righteousness,'" in *Justification in Perspective*,

argue that Barth's doctrine of election requires of those who wish to follow in Barth's train to critically rethink divine triunity and the being and attributes of God based on Barth's primary focus in his treatment of divine election, the God who elects.<sup>2</sup> On the other side, advanced by George Hunsinger and Paul Molnar,

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ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 167–96; “What’s at Stake in Current Debates over Justification? The Crisis of Protestantism in the West,” in *Justification: What’s at Stake in the Current Debates*, ed. Mark Husbards and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 81–117; “Karl Barth’s Historicized Christology: Just How ‘Chalcedonian’ Is It?” in McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, 201–33; this essay was originally published in a slightly different form under the title “Barths Grundsätzlicher Chalcedonismus?” in *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 18 (2002): 138–73; “Karl Barth’s Version of an ‘Analogy of Being’ A Dialectical No and Yes to Roman Catholicism,” in *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or Wisdom of God?*, ed. Thomas White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 54–112; “Let’s Speak Plainly: A Response to Paul Molnar,” *Theology Today* 67, no. 1 (April 2010): 57–65; “The Lord and Giver of Life: A ‘Barthian’ Defense of the Filioque,” in *Rethinking Trinitarian Theology: Disputed Questions and Contemporary Issues in Trinitarian Theology*, ed. Robert J. Woźniak and Giulio Maspero (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 230–53; “The Ontological Presuppositions of Barth’s Doctrine of the Atonement,” in *The Glory of the Atonement*, ed. Charles Hill and Frank James (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 346–66; “Participation in God, Yes; Deification, No: Two Modern Protestant Responses to an Ancient Question,” in McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, 235–59; this essay was originally published in a slightly different form under the title, “Participation in God, Yes, Deification, No: Two Modern Protestant Responses to an Ancient Question” in *Denwürdiges Geheimnis – Beiträge zur Gotteslehre: Festschrift für Eberhard Jüngel zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Ingolf U. Dalferth, Johannes Fischer, and Hans-Peter Grosshans (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 347–74; “Processions and Missions: A Point of Convergence between Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth,” in *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: An Unofficial Catholic-Protestant Dialogue*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack and Thomas J. White, OP (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 99–126; “Sanctification after Metaphysics: Karl Barth in Conversation with John Wesley’s Conception of ‘Christian Perfection,’” in *Sanctification: Explorations in Theology and Practice*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 103–26; “Karl Barth’s Christology as a Resource for a Reformed Vision of Kenoticism,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8 (2006): 243–51; “Whither Protestant Ecumenicism? The Contribution of Karl Barth’s Later Christology to the Task of Protestant Ecumenical Theology Today,” in *Dogmatics after Barth: Facing Challenges in Church, Society and the Academy*, ed. Günter Thomas, Rinse H. Reeling Brouwer, and Bruce L. McCormack (Leipzig, Germany: Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2012), 144–51; “Why Should Theology Be Christocentric? Christology and Metaphysics in Paul Tillich and Karl Barth,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 45, no. 1 (2010), 42–80; “Divine Impassibility or Simply Divine Constancy? Implications of Karl Barth’s Later Christology for Debates over Impassibility,” in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James F. Keating and Thomas J. White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 150–86.

<sup>2</sup> Scholars who strongly endorse the basic insights set forth in McCormack’s interpretation of the ontological significance of Barth’s doctrine of election include Paul T. Nimmo, *Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Barth’s Ethical Vision* (London: T&T Clark, 2007); “Barth and the Christian as Ethical Agent: An Ontological Study of the Shape of Christian Ethics,” in *Commanding Grace: Studies in Karl Barth’s Ethics*, ed. Daniel L. Migliore (Grand

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Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010, 216–38; “Barth and the Election-Trinity Debate: A Pneumatological View,” in Dempsey, *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, 162–81; “Karl Barth and the Concursus Dei: A Chalcedonianism Too Far?” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9, no. 1 (2007): 58–72; “The Compassion of Jesus Christ: Barth on Matthew 9:36,” in *Reading the Gospels with Karl Barth*, ed. Daniel L. Migliore (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 69–79; Matthias Gockel, “On the Way from Schleiermacher to Barth: A Critical Reappraisal of Isaak August Dorner’s Essay on Divine Immutability,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 53, no. 4 (2000): 490–510; *Barth and Schleiermacher on the Doctrine of Election: A Systematic-Theological Comparison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); “Theology after Barth – the Dogmatic Challenge,” in Thomas et al., *Dogmatics after Barth*, 109–22; Benjamin Myers, “Election, Trinity, and the History of Jesus: Reading Barth with Rowan Williams,” in Habets and Tolliday, *Trinitarian Theology after Barth*, 121–37; Matthew J. Aragon Bruce, “Theology without Voluntarism: Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Divine Freedom” (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 2013); Shannon Nicole Smythe, *Forensic Apocalyptic Theology: Karl Barth and the Doctrine of Justification* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016); “The Sum of the Gospel: Barth’s Intracanonial and Intertextual Interpretation of Paradiōmi,” in *Reading the Gospels with Karl Barth*, ed. Daniel L. Migliore (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 187–203. John Flett does not deal with issues surrounding McCormack’s reading of Barth’s doctrine of election directly, but it is apparent that his reading of Barth is compatible with McCormack’s interpretation when he writes that “the cleavage of church from mission derives from the cleavage of God’s being in his relationship to the world. Specifically, the fullness of God’s being is presented without material reference or perhaps even in antithesis to his movement into his economy. The witness of God is, as Barth suggests, ‘a problem of God,’ for it is a question of how in anticipation of his being in and for himself includes human existence with him. Only in correspondence to God’s overcoming of the gap between himself and the world does the church live in her connection with the world” (John G. Flett, *The Witness of God, the Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010], 4). It is clear that he sees God’s essential act of turning toward the world in Jesus Christ as what grounds and shapes the church’s outward focused existence as witnessing community. Scholars who share sympathies with McCormack’s maximalist reading of Barth’s doctrine of election, but do not endorse his thesis entirely (specifically in his suggestion that the conceptual arrangement of triunity and election be ordered with divine election as logically preceding divine triunity) include Kevin Diller, “Is God Necessarily Who God Is? Alternatives for the Trinity and Election Debate,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 66, no. 2 (2013): 209–20; Kevin W. Hector, “God’s Triunity and Self-Determination: A Conversation with Karl Barth, Bruce McCormack and Paul Molnar,” in Dempsey, *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, 29–46; originally published as “God’s Triunity and Self-Determination: A Conversation with Karl Barth, Bruce McCormack and Paul Molnar,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7, no. 3 (2005): 246–61; “Immutability, Necessity and Triunity: Towards a Resolution of the Trinity and Election Controversy,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 65, no. 1 (2012): 64–81; Paul D. Jones, “Karl Barth on Gethsemane,” *The International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9 (2008): 148–71; *The Humanity of Christ: Christology in Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics* (London: T&T Clark, 2008); “Obedience, Trinity and Election: Thinking with and beyond the *Church Dogmatics*,” in Dempsey, *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, 138–61; Aaron T. Smith, “God’s Self-Specification: His Being Is His Electing,” in Dempsey, *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, 201–25; originally published as “God’s Self-Specification: His Being Is His Electing,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 62, no. 1 (2009): 1–25; *A Theology of the*

is a minimalist understanding of Barth's doctrine.<sup>3</sup> These scholars claim that although Barth's doctrine of election is significant for his theology, its significance must be restricted to God's dealings with creation rather than require a

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*Third Article: Karl Barth and the Spirit of the Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014); Darren O. Sumner, *Karl Barth and the Incarnation: Christology and the Humility of God* (London: T&T Clark, 2014); Faye Bodley-Dangelo, *Sexual Difference, Gender and Agency in Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 5, 10–14, 114–37.

<sup>3</sup> George Hunsinger, *Reading Barth with Charity: A Hermeneutical Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015); George Hunsinger, "Election and the Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth (Revised)," in *Evangelical Catholic and Reformed: Doctrinal Essays on Barth and Related Themes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015); 32–55; published prior in different form as "Election and Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth," in Dempsey, *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, 91–137; originally published as "Election and Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth," *Modern Theology* 24, no. 2 (April 2008): 179–98; "Introduction," in *Evangelical Catholic and Reformed*, xii–iv; "Karl Barth on the Trinity," in *Evangelical Catholic and Reformed*, 1–20; "The Trinity after Barth: Moltmann, Pannenberg, Jüngel and Torrance," in *Evangelical Catholic and Reformed*, 21–31; Paul Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017); "Considering God's Freedom Once Again," in *Faith, Freedom and the Spirit: The Economic Trinity in Barth, Torrance and Contemporary Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 129–86; "Can Jesus' Divinity Be Recognized as 'Definitive, Authentic and Essential' If It Is Grounded in Election? Just How Far Did the Later Barth Historicize Christology?" in *Faith, Freedom and the Spirit*, 260–312; originally published as "Can Jesus' Divinity Be Recognized as 'Definitive, Authentic and Essential' If It Is Grounded in Election? Just How Far Did the Later Barth Historicize Christology?" *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 52, no. 1 (2010): 40–81; "Can the Electing God Be without Us? Some Implications of Bruce McCormack's Understanding of Barth's Doctrine of Election," in Dempsey, *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, 63–90; originally published as "Can the Electing God Be God without Us? Some Implications of Bruce McCormack's Understanding of Barth's Doctrine of Election for the Doctrine of the Trinity," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 49, no. 2 (2007): 199–222; "The Obedience of the Son in the Theology of Karl Barth and of Thomas F. Torrance," in *Faith, Freedom and the Spirit*, 313–54; originally published as "The Obedience of the Son in the Theology of Karl Barth and Thomas F. Torrance," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, no. 67 (2014): 50–69; "Origenism, Election, and Time and Eternity," in *Faith, Freedom and the Spirit*, 187–224; "Orthodox and Modern: Just How Modern Was Barth's Later Theology?" *Theology Today* 67, no. 1 (April 2010): 51–6; "The Perils of Embracing a 'Historicized Christology,'" in *Faith, Freedom and the Spirit*, 225–59; "The Trinity, Election, and God's Ontological Freedom: A Response to Kevin W. Hector," in Dempsey, *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, 47–62; originally published as "The Trinity, Election and God's Ontological Freedom: A Response to Kevin W. Hector," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 8, no. 3 (2006): 294–306; "Was Barth a Pro-Nicene Theologian? Reflections on Nicea and Its Legacy," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 64, no. 3 (2011): 347–59; *Incarnation and Resurrection: Toward a Contemporary Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

rethinking of the doctrine of the Trinity, or the doctrine of God in light of it.<sup>4</sup>

Bruce McCormack's maximalist understanding of Barth's doctrine of election can be briefly explained in the following manner. McCormack claims that Barth's doctrine of election contains revisionary significance for the doctrine of God, since Barth's doctrine of the Trinity and his treatment of the being and attributes of God preceded his innovative reconstruction of divine election. Therefore, he believes it is essential to go back and reconfigure Barth's earlier doctrinal formulations in order to align them with the mature insights that arose as a result of his christologically conditioned understanding of divine election.<sup>5</sup> As McCormack insists, "[Barth's] mature view of election would have required the retraction of certain of his earlier claims about the relation of revelation and trinity, finding in them a far too open door to the kind of speculation his mature doctrine of election sought to eliminate."<sup>6</sup> McCormack thus locates the constructive significance in the fact that Barth's doctrine of election contains the potential for an elaborate theological ontology that is capable of concretely explaining how God is truly identified with what God does in the vicarious history

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<sup>4</sup> Others who are sympathetic to Hunsinger and Molnar's aversion toward McCormack's thesis regarding the ontological significance of Barth's doctrine of election are Edwin chr. Van Driel, *Incarnation Anyway: Arguments for Supralapsarian Christology* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2008); "Karl Barth on the Eternal Existence of Jesus Christ," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60, no. 1 (2007): 45–61; D. Stephen Long, *Saving Karl Barth: Hans Urs Von Balthasar's Preoccupation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014); Adam J. Johnson, *God's Being in Reconciliation: The Theological Basis of the Unity and Diversity of the Atonement in the Theology of Karl Barth* (London: T&T Clark, 2012); Justin Stratis, "Speculating about Divinity? God's Immanent Life and Actualsitic Ontology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, no. 1 (January 2010): 20–32; *God's Being Towards Fellowship: Schleiermacher, Barth and the Meaning of "God is Love"* (London: T&T Clark, 2019); Alan Torrance, "The Trinity," in Webster, *Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, 72–91; Shao Kai Tseng, *Karl Barth's Infralapsarian Theology: Origins and Development 1920–1953* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016). Robert B. Price, *Letters of the Divine Word: The Perfections of God in Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* (London: T&T Clark, 2011); Nicholas M. Healy, "Karl Barth, German-Language Theology, and the Catholic Tradition," in Dempsey, *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, 229–43; Scott A. Kirkland, *Into the Far Country: Karl Barth and the Modern Subject* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016); Christopher R. J. Holmes, "'A Specific Form of Relationship': On the Dogmatic Implication of Barth's Account of Election and Commandment for His Theological Ethics," in Dempsey, *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, 182–200; 'The Person and Work of Christ Revisited: In Conversation with Karl Barth,' *Anglican Theological Review* 95 no. 1 (2013): 37–55; Michael T. Dempsey, "Love Is Free or It Is Not Love: Why the Immanent Trinity Still Matters in the Thought of Karl Barth and in Contemporary Theology," *Science Et Esprit* 63, no. 2 (2011); "Introduction," in Dempsey, *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*; Ivor J. Davidson, "Divine Light: Some Reflections after Barth," in Habets and Tolliday, *Trinitarian Theology after Barth*, 48–69.

<sup>5</sup> McCormack, "Grace and Being," 192–96.

<sup>6</sup> McCormack, "Grace and Being," 192.

of Jesus as portrayed in the biblical witness.<sup>7</sup> He views Barth's doctrine of election as providing an explanation for God's full and unreserved involvement in the event of Jesus's atonement. In addition, McCormack believes Barth retains all the essential values of the ecumenical tradition, while eliminating many of the abstract premises that prevented those values from adequately conforming to the way God is concretely presented in the biblical witness.<sup>8</sup> Thus, his attempt to revise some of Barth's theological claims is not intended to be a departure from Barth's theological project. Rather, it arises from the peculiar theological ontology that resulted from Barth's novel treatment of divine election and the historicized Christology that his doctrine of election made possible.

Those who see Barth's doctrine of election as functioning in a limited capacity that exclusively pertains to God's relationship to creation contend that the maximalist interpreters impose their insights upon Barth's texts and fail to read him in a textually sensitive and contextually accurate manner. As George Hunsinger contends, "I am convinced that the Barthian-revisionist viewpoint [his term for the maximalist line of interpretation] rests to a large degree on a series of unwarranted inferences."<sup>9</sup> Hunsinger writes that the maximalist interpreters of Barth "rests mainly on deductions derived from Barthian arguments that are taken from their context and treated in isolation."<sup>10</sup> The minimalist interpreters claim that statements can be found in Barth's thought that follow his treatment of divine election that reflect many of the concerns resident in his earlier theological formulations.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, they contend that any attempts to revise Barth's earlier doctrine of the Trinity and his doctrine of God cannot be textually sustained and, therefore, that the maximalist interpreters should discontinue ascribing their doctrinal formulations to Barth, since much of what Barth says directly refutes their interpretive conclusions.<sup>12</sup> As Hunsinger posits, "The inferred Barth is the gold standard against which the actually existing textual Barth comes up wanting. The deduced entity is used to claim that the textual Barth is inconsistent."<sup>13</sup> From a constructive standpoint, the minimalist interpreters of Barth see the maximalist line of interpretation as failing to recognize Barth's concern to develop a theology that reflected the trinitarian and christological insights of "the ecumenical church."<sup>14</sup> Molnar insists that the maximalist interpreters of Barth "[are] at variance not only with the 'textual Barth' but also

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<sup>7</sup> McCormack, "Impassibility," 173.

<sup>8</sup> McCormack, "Historicized," 216–32; "We Have 'Actualized,'" 180–82.

<sup>9</sup> Hunsinger, *Charity*, xvi.

<sup>10</sup> Hunsinger, *Charity*, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Hunsinger, "Election and the Trinity," 54.

<sup>12</sup> Hunsinger, "Election and the Trinity," 54–55.

<sup>13</sup> Hunsinger, *Charity*, 14.

<sup>14</sup> Hunsinger, "Karl Barth on the Trinity," 1; Molnar, *Divine Freedom*, 92.

with the classical doctrine of the Trinity and with Christology as well.”<sup>15</sup> Minimalist interpreters see Barth’s legacy as champion for catholicity and Nicene and Chalcedonian orthodoxy as potentially becoming eclipsed by the version of Barth presented by the maximalist interpreters. Therefore, they argue that the maximalist interpretation is both textually unwarranted, and also a deviation from the bounds of the limits fixed by the dogmatic formulations set forth by the ancient church.

Despite the fact that McCormack’s reading is often treated as a novel interpretation of Barth that diverts from conventional understandings of Barth’s theology, his understanding of Barth is anything but new. It is actually the logical outworking of a consistent way of reading Barth present in the work of noted German scholars for many decades now.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, many of those who advance a minimalist understanding of the ontological significance of Barth’s doctrine of election incorrectly categorize McCormack’s reading of Barth’s theology as “revisionist” in character. Hunsinger categorizes McCormack’s interpretation as completely novel when he makes the following claim: “That in Barth there is some supposed contradiction [...] is easy to assert, but it has never been

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<sup>15</sup> Molnar, *Divine Freedom*, 92.

<sup>16</sup> Eberhard, Jüngel, *God’s Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth: A Paraphrase*, trans. John B. Webster, 2nd ed. (London: T&T Clark, 2014); *Gottes Sein ist im Werden: Verantwortliche Rede vom Sein Gottes bei Karl Barth: Eine Paraphrase* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1986); *Barth-Studien* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1982); Wilfried Härle, *Sein und Gnade. Die Ontologie in Karl Barths Kirklicher Dogmatik* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1975); Hans Theodor Goebel, “Trinitätslehre und Erwählungslehre bei Karl Barth: Eine Problemanzeige,” in *Wahrheit und Versöhnung: theologische und philosophische Beiträge zur Gotteslehre*, ed. Dietrich Korsch and Hartmut Ruddies (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, Gerd Mohn, 1989), 147–66; *Vom freien Wählen Gottes und des Menschen: Interpretationsübungen zur ‘Analogie’ Nach Karl Barths Lehre von der Erwählung und Bedenken ihrer Folgen für die Kirchliche Dogmatik* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1990); Thies Gundlach, *Selbstbegrenzung Gottes und Die Autonomie des Menschen: Karl Barths Kirkliche Dogmatik als Modernisierungsschritt evangelischer Theologie* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1992). These scholars do not directly draw the connections made between the doctrine of election and the divine identity, but the fact that they recognize that Barth’s theology possesses a peculiar theological ontology corroborates with our understanding of Barth’s theology in many ways: Berthold Klappert, *Die Aufweckung des Gekreuzigten: der Ansatz der Christologie Karl Barths in Zusammenhang der Christologie der Gegenwart* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1971); *Versöhnung und Befreiung: Versuche, Karl Barth kontextuell zu verstehen* (Dusseldorf: Neukirchener, 1994); Walter Kreck, *Grundentscheidungen in Karl Barths Dogmatik: zur Diskussion seines Verständnisses von Offenbarung und Erwählung* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1978); Ingolf U. Dalferth, “Karl Barth’s Eschatological Realism,” in *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays*, ed. Stephen W. Sykes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 14–45; Wolf Krötke, “Gott und Mensch als ‘Partner.’ Zur Bedeutung einer zentralen Kategorie in Karl Barths Kirklicher Dogmatik,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 6 (1986): 158–75.

proven or even clearly set forth.”<sup>17</sup> However, a closer inspection of the history of Barth interpretation yields a much different conclusion.<sup>18</sup> McCormack's insistence that Barth's doctrine of election warrants the revising of some of Barth's earlier dogmatic formulations in order to be articulated with greater consistency may not be completely free from criticism. But, it certainly has “been clearly set forth” by German interpreters over the span of many decades

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<sup>17</sup> Hunsinger, “Election and the Trinity,” 54.

<sup>18</sup> Statements intended to place McCormack's understanding of Barth's theology within the realm of novelty fail to acknowledge how McCormack's interpretation of Barth is anticipated by the German scholars mentioned above. The thesis that Barth's doctrine of election ought to be seen as operating in a critical capacity in relation to Barth's earlier understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity and his doctrine of God is most eloquently described by Thies Gundlach, who contends that “Barth muß darin kritisiert werden, daß seine frühzeitige Einführung der Trinitätslehre vor der Erwählungslehre und das entsprechende Theologumenon von dem erwählenden Gott Jesus Christus faktisch die Intention konterkariert, die seine Erwählungslehre verfolgt: Die theologisch einzigartige Bedeutung der Offenbarung Gottes in Jesus Christus zu betonen!” (*Selbstbegrenzung Gottes und die Autonomie des Menschen*, 162). The criticism offered by Gundlach is the result of the fact that the identification of God with Jesus requires a certain rethinking of the divine being that makes election function in a capacity that ought to shape even Barth's trinitarian reflections. God is the God self-determined to be God exclusive as Jesus Christ and that self-determination then shapes how one ought to conceive of the divine identity, the triune relations, and the attributes one ought to ascribe to the divine identity. Gundlach is perceptive to recognize the significance of divine election as an act regarding the very divine identity itself. Consequently, Gundlach concludes that “Diese Einwände führen zu der These, daß nach der hier vorgelegten Interpretation die Erwählungslehre als eine korrigierende Präzisierung der trinitätstheologischen Offenbarungslehre Barth's verstanden werden muß” (*Selbstbegrenzung Gottes und die Autonomie des Menschen*, 164. Emphasis original). The corrective element Gundlach rightly perceives in passages such as these is that the content of Jesus Christ's vicarious history now informs how one ought to perceive God's identity rather than the earlier claim regarding God's self-sufficient Lordship (Cf. *KD I/1*, 323). Therefore, it is nothing less than the distinctly Christian character of God's self-revealing activity that is concretized in Barth's doctrine of election, as Gundlach himself posits: “Die Trinitätslehre Barths leistet diesen Aufweis doch gerade darum nicht, weil – wie der Name schon sagt – die Christlichkeit der christlichen Offenbarung an Jesus Christus hängt und nicht schon daran, daß Gott sich als der Herr offenbart! Ist die Herrschaft Gottes nicht wirklich eine so unspezifische und formale Bestimmung, daß sie für jede Offenbarungsreligion gelten kann und nicht nur für die christliche?” (*Selbstbegrenzung Gottes und die Autonomie des Menschen*, 162). See also Goebel, “Trinitätslehre und Erwählungslehre,” 154. In the English-speaking world, this shift in Barth's trinitarian reflections was noted by Rowan Williams, “Barth on the Triune God,” in *Karl Barth – Studies in His Theological Methods*, ed. Steven W. Sykes (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 147–93. Needless to say, it has been a consistent observation in Barth interpretation that Barth's doctrine of election and his later Christology indicate that certain material changes have arisen in his theology as a whole and that some of the formulations set forth in the earlier volumes of the *Church Dogmatics* require revision as a result.

now. Although there may be certain points of disagreement regarding the particular way in which divine election critically shapes the overall structure of Barth's *Offenbarungstheologie* project, the recognition that certain formulations in Barth's theology ought to be subjected to critical scrutiny in light of Barth's doctrine of election, or its paradigmatic role in rightly discerning the comprehensive logic that governs Barth's theology as a whole, is certainly not unique to McCormack. In fact, much of what has preceded McCormack's thesis regarding the ontological significance of Barth's doctrine of election anticipates the basic lines of argumentation elaborated by McCormack. This becomes especially apparent when one reads the interpretation offered by Eberhard Jüngel's 1965 monograph, *Gottes Sein ist im Werden: Verantwortliche Rede vom Sein Gottes bei Karl Barth; Eine Paraphrase*.<sup>19</sup> Many of the insights central to McCormack's maximalist view on the divine ontology that flows from Barth's conception of divine election can be clearly seen in Eberhard Jüngel's treatment of Barth's theology over fifty years ago. In other words, McCormack's thesis regarding the ontological significance of Barth's doctrine of election is a natural outworking of consistent observations registered by German interpreters of Barth for a significant amount of time now. Thus, to adequately challenge McCormack's understanding of Barth's theology, one must also challenge the insights adduced by the interpreters that preceded McCormack, since a close observation of how these scholars interpreted Barth yields conclusions that lead in the direction of McCormack's maximalist reading of Barth.

### The Purpose of This Study

To clarify what this book intends to achieve in its interaction with Barth, this section will provide a summary of the argument the book is seeking to substantiate, and detail how this particular argument falls in line with McCormack's maximalist thesis. Along the way, it will underscore several reasons why a rigorous textual analysis is needed for the maximalist understanding of Barth's doctrine of election, and finally, clarify the scope of the argument. Ultimately, this study chronicles Barth's theological development in order to provide the necessary textual evidence to validate the specific contention concerning the significant role Barth's doctrine of election has in animating the theological ontology peculiar to the later volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*.

This book intends to highlight the theological ontology that arises when one rigorously examines Barth's integration of divine election with his conception of the divine being. *The argument is that Barth's claim that God is essentially gracious is made internally coherent as a result of Barth's identification of the*

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<sup>19</sup> This will become apparent in the next chapter.

*divine being with the pretemporal elective decision to become incarnate in Jesus Christ, and die on behalf of fallen humanity.* Recognizing that Barth sees divine election as shaping the very identity of the divine being entails that Barth's "actualistic ontology"<sup>20</sup> – most concretely articulated as an actualistic ontology of grace – is grounded eternally in the essential decision of divine election.<sup>21</sup> Barth operates with an actualistic ontology of grace because God's being is established in the decision to act graciously toward humanity in Jesus of Nazareth. According to Barth's mature theology, God elects to covenant with human beings, and this covenant is one of grace because God elects to make Godself responsible for estranged human beings and graciously fulfill the covenant by becoming human and living a vicarious history that culminates in suffering and death. Barth's doctrine of election provides him with the necessary conceptual tools to describe the very essence of God as originally and properly gracious without deviating from God's concrete self-revelation in Jesus Christ. For it is in the eternal event of electing grace that the self-moved path of God toward humanity in Jesus Christ is concretely established.

Since this book sees Barth's doctrine of election as fundamentally shaping Barth's understanding of the being of God, the goal is to offer a rigorous textual analysis of Barth that highlights the need to theologize in a manner that falls within the realm of McCormack's maximalist thesis. It is important to note that McCormack has only elucidated the nature of his maximalist interpretation of Barth in essay form and has explicitly acknowledged that the question concerning the textual viability of his understanding of Barth "is a hermeneutical question to which an adequate answer would require *close reading of a great many texts*."<sup>22</sup> He is fully aware of the need to demonstrate, with hermeneutical clarity, how his maximalist understanding of divine election is textually legitimate. McCormack's maximalist reading of Barth, or something close to it, is far more consistent with the content set forth in the texts of the *Church Dogmatics* than the reading advanced by those who share a minimalist conception of Barth's doctrine of election. That is not to say that everything presented in this thesis will perfectly mirror McCormack's understanding of Barth (either from a hermeneutical or a constructive standpoint). Yet, the basic insights integral to McCormack's thesis regarding Barth's theological ontology are clearly present if one examines the argument Barth himself advances in the *Church Dogmatics*. And, from a polemical standpoint, this study intends to offer a challenge to those who contend that the maximalist understanding of Barth's theological project is inconsistent with what is actually stated by Barth in the *Church Dog-*

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<sup>20</sup> McCormack, "Grace and Being," 188.

<sup>21</sup> Barth's ontology was first described as an "ontology of grace" by Wilfried Härle in *Sein und Gnade*, 299.

<sup>22</sup> McCormack, "Seek," 275. Emphasis added

*matics*. A thoroughgoing textual analysis actually yields the opposite conclusion – that the minimalist interpreters of Barth are imposing their own affinities for ecumenical orthodoxy onto the *Church Dogmatics* and, in the process, are preventing the full range of Barth’s mature insights from receiving adequate appreciation. In order for theologians to engage the constructive scene in a manner truly reflective of Barth’s fundamental insights and governing premises, one must begin by textually demonstrating both what those insights and premises are, as well as why a proper understanding of the unique ontological significance of his doctrine of election is absolutely indispensable if one is to carry out those insights and premises in a consistent manner.

The focus here will be restricted to the doctrine of God, specifically the connection between God’s original and proper being as triune and the trinity encountered in God’s gracious action in Jesus Christ. Similarly, the interaction with Barth will be exclusively focused on the writings of the *Church Dogmatics*. Barth operates with a conception of divine freedom that is shaped by God’s antecedent determination to become revealed in space and time as early as *Church Dogmatics* II/1.<sup>23</sup> Once *Church Dogmatics* II/1 is written, the development in Barth’s thought does not involve improvements in his understanding of divine freedom.<sup>24</sup> The real development is how Barth comes to articulate the intratriune subsisting relations in a manner that coheres with his concretely ordered understanding of divine freedom elaborated in *Church Dogmatics* II/1. As will be seen in the chapters that follow, it is not until *Church Dogmatics* IV/1 that a reconfiguring of God’s intradivine life takes place that is consistent with Barth’s understanding of God’s concretely determined and ordered freedom for acting as reconciler and revealer in history. However, the basis for such an understanding of divine trinity is elaborated in seed form in *Church Dogmatics* II/1 and then given the necessary conceptual elements required to be developed into an elaborate trinitarian statement in Barth’s novel claim that Jesus Christ, rather than the *logos simpliciter*, is the active subject of election in *Church Dogmatics* II/2. In *Church Dogmatics* III/1 it becomes apparent that God’s intratriune *Gemeinschaft* is inherently covenantal in character and thus essentially disposed toward the act of establishing the covenant of grace with

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<sup>23</sup> This book follows McCormack’s genetic historical analysis of Barth’s theological development in this regard. McCormack writes, “The root of Karl Barth’s unique ‘divine ontology’ is to be found in his doctrine of election in *Church Dogmatics* II/2. The ground for the moves he makes in that part-volume are prepared for, to some extent, by elements found in the second half of *Church Dogmatics* II/1 – which makes that volume to be something of a transitional document. The elements I have in mind appear in the anticipation of the doctrine of election that come to expression in the opening paragraph of Barth’s treatment of the reality of God” (“Analogy,” 118).

<sup>24</sup> Matthew Bruce offers an extremely convincing case that Barth’s conception of divine freedom is shaped by and ordered to God’s intratriune desire for fellowship with humankind in *Church Dogmatics* II/1 (see *Theology without Voluntarism*, 250–320).

human beings as a result of the pretemporal determination of divine election. The book will then expound and analyze the ontological significance of Barth's understanding of God as inherently disposed toward the enactment of covenant fellowship with humanity in Jesus of Nazareth in Barth's explicit reconfiguring of God's intratriune subsisting relations in *Church Dogmatics* IV/1. To recognize how Barth's conception of divine triunity is informed by his doctrine of election, the argument will explore both Barth's treatment of the obedience of the Son of God and his understanding of the gracious verdict of the Father in raising the obedient Son from the dead. An exposition and analysis of the trinitarian statements present in *Church Dogmatics* IV/1 will yield the interpretive conclusion that Barth clearly sees God's intratriune relations as shaped by the elective determination to initiate and fulfill the covenant of grace with human beings in history. It is here that God is clearly portrayed as the God who is originally and properly gracious because God's intratriune life takes place exclusively for the purpose of graciously turning toward the human race in Jesus of Nazareth. The graciousness that is original and proper to God's triune life is thus made genuinely visible in God's gracious activity toward humanity in the vicarious history of Jesus, because God is a God whose very identity is shaped by the pretemporal decision of electing grace from all eternity.

## An Outline of This Book

This section will now provide a summary of the chapters of this study and how the understanding of divine election as the pretemporal ground for Barth's ontology of divine grace unfolds from a thoroughgoing textual analysis of the *Church Dogmatics*.

Chapter 1 discloses how the maximalist thesis advanced by McCormack can be best understood as naturally arising from the interpretation of Barth advanced by Eberhard Jüngel's famous paraphrase of Barth's theology, *Gottes Sein ist im Werden: Verantwortliche Rede vom Sein Gottes bei Karl Barth: Eine Paraphrase*. It expounds the main themes in this work and demonstrates how they govern the interpretive insights of Barth's theological project adduced by McCormack. Jüngel's understanding of Barth is then demonstrated to be the reading that McCormack's maximalist thesis refines by means of making divine election (rather than divine triunity as such) the antecedent explanation for God's full identification with what God does in the vicarious history of Jesus. This sets up a critical analysis of George Hunsinger's recent monograph *Reading Barth with Charity: A Hermeneutical Proposal*, in which Hunsinger seeks to dismantle the textual legitimacy of the maximalist reading of Barth. This chapter closes by offering four points of criticism regarding Hunsinger's work, where those points of criticism frame the interpretation of Barth advanced in the subsequent chapters.