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Karl Barth's Theology of God as the Absolute Person: Decision and the Problem of the Counterfactuals

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Abstract: This article argues that the tension identified by maximalist interpreters in Barth's theology between his concrete identification of Jesus Christ with the essence of God and affirmation of counterfactual possibilities is motivated by Barth's theology that God is *the* absolute person. Barth's theology of divine personhood includes an element of self-mastery over Godself. It is demonstrated that Barth uses the concept of decision and counterfactual claims to secure God's Lordship over Godself and avoid any necessity of compulsion in God's actions. God is the absolute person, a self-determining and self-motivated intentional agent, which Barth utilises to secure God's irreducible, full presence in God's gracious turning towards us in revelation and reconciliation.

Introduction

Karl Barth's theology teaches us to fix our eyes on Jesus Christ and to never glance away to other sources for knowledge of God: Jesus Christ is the will of God; Christ is the mystery and freedom of God[1]; Christ is the eternal subject and object of election.[2] Barth proclaims:

> In no depth of the Godhead shall we encounter any other but Him. There is no such thing as Godhead itself. Godhead is always the Godhead of the

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1 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. in 13 pts., G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, eds. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956–77) (hereafter *CD*), II/2, p. 104.

2 *CD* II/2, pp. 94–145.

> Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. But the Father is the Father of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of Jesus Christ.[3]

For Barth, the Godhead is always determined by God's gracious covenantal election in Jesus Christ. We cannot transcend Jesus Christ and find something higher or hidden in God. Barth insists that any concept of divine nature that is not derived entirely from what God does in Jesus Christ 'is too narrow, too arbitrary, too human – far too human'.[4] Theology must be unapologetically based on God's concrete revelation. However, despite Barth's commitment to derive all knowledge of the divine nature from Jesus Christ, he nevertheless asserts counterfactual possibilities that posit God could have done otherwise than what God chose to do in revelation and reconciliation in Christ: 'From all eternity God could have excluded man from this covenant. He could have delivered him up to himself and allowed him to fall. He could have refused to will him at all'.[5] Barth's utilisation of abstract counterfactual statements seems to be in contradiction to, or at the very least to seriously undermine, Barth's radical claims about the identification of Jesus Christ with the essence of God.

This seeming contradiction has led theologians to two very different interpretations of Barth's theology depending on which aspect of Barth's theology is deemed primary. Over the past twenty years in Barth scholarship, there exists a continuing debate about whether Barth's innovations in the doctrine of election led to extensive revisions to his doctrine of the Trinity. The maximalist position affirms that Barth's doctrine of election led to a fully actualistic divine ontology.[6] The minimalist position argues that Barth's doctrine of election did not lead to changes in his doctrine of the Trinity, which is viewed as an example of classical metaphysics. Minimalist interpreters view the significance of Barth's doctrine of election as limited in scope and only applying

3 *CD* II/2, p. 115.
4 *CD* IV/1, p. 186.
5 *CD* II/2, p. 166.
6 The terms "maximalist" and "minimalist" are preferred since they identify the material claims of each interpretation. I am indebted to Tyler Frick's work for this terminology. For an extensive bibliography and overview of the debate in Barth scholarship, see Tyler Frick, *Karl Barth's Ontology of Divine Grace: God's Decision is God's Being*, Religion in Philosophy and Theology 113 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), pp. 1–10, 16–40.

to God's dealings with creation.[7] In short, the debate centres around whether Barth's doctrine of election has ontological implications for his doctrine of God.

The aim of this article is not to enter the debates in Barth interpretation concerning the relation of God's triune being and election; there has been enough ink spilt on that topic. Instead, this article explores a tension in Barth's texts immanent to the maximalist interpretation; therefore, the basic premises of the maximalist interpretation are assumed.[8] Fundamental to the maximalist reading is the conviction that Barth's doctrine of election is first and foremost about God's *self*-determination. This is an essential self-determination and pertains to God's eternal being and not just God's works in time. God is fully identified with God's action in time because God is never without the intention to fulfil the covenant of grace through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The ontological consequences of the doctrine of election are wide-reaching, which requires re-thinking some aspects of Barth's prior theology of the doctrine of the Trinity and the divine perfections.

7 The minimalist interpreters, identified with George Hunsinger, Paul Molnar, and Edwin Christian van Driel, view Barth along traditional lines and do not find these counterfactual statements problematic. Barth is interpreted as advocating for God's being as complete in Godself, and election is a secondary or contingent decision in God's eternal being. For an extended defence of this interpretation, see George Hunsinger's *Reading Barth with Charity: A Hermeneutical Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015). The maximalist interpreters, on the other hand, identified with Bruce McCormack, Paul Nimmo, and Matthias Gockel, find Barth's counterfactual statements incongruent with Barth's stated convictions of identifying Jesus Christ essentially with God. McCormack believes that the persistence of counterfactual statements threatens understanding Barth's radical reworking of election and its implications for God's being – implications that God's being was never without the determination for incarnation. Alexandra Pârvan and Bruce McCormack, 'Immutability, (Im)passibility and Suffering: Steps Towards a "Psychological" Ontology of God', *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 59 (2017), pp. 1–25. For a recent extended textual defence of this interpretation, see Frick, *Barth's Ontology*.

8 McCormack's 'Grace and Being' essay set in motion the interpretative debate in Barth scholarship. While that essay provides an overview of the maximalist reading, McCormack's terminology and theology have developed significantly since that essay. Bruce McCormack, 'Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology', in John Webster, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 92–110. For a more updated work related to McCormack's constructive work and the maximalist reading, see Bruce L. McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son: Reformed Kenoticism and the Repair of Chalcedon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2021). Eberhard Jüngel's paraphrase of Barth is an essential text to the maximalist interpretation serving as a primer and predecessor. Eberhard Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. John Webster (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 35–7, 83–98, 114–23.

The maximalist reading explicitly rejects the idea that Barth views God's self-determination to election as secondary and additional to God's being. God's being-in-act is a *singular* act that includes both the processions and missions. Maximalist interpreters vigorously deny the accusation that their interpretation 'collapses' the economic and immanent Trinity or that God is made dependent on creation. Assuming this interpretation accurately elucidates Barth's theology, this article asks: How does one account for Barth's continued use of counterfactuals? The goal is to explore this openly acknowledged tension for the maximalist position by examining and assessing the theological motivations and assumptions that inform Barth's affirmation of both counterfactual possibilities and the rejection of any abstraction in light of Jesus Christ.

This article argues that Barth's theology that God is *the* absolute person motivates his affirmation of counterfactual possibilities. Barth's theology that God is the absolute person and Lord includes an element of self-mastery over Godself. Barth uses the concept of decision and counterfactual claims to secure God's Lordship over Godself and avoid any necessity of compulsion in God's actions. God is the absolute person, a self-determining and self-motivated intentional agent, which is central to how Barth understands God's gracious turning towards us in revelation and reconciliation. Barth's theology of God's personhood provides the vital ontological foundation of God's gracious self-revelation and explains how the God encountered is present but remains wholly other. It is at the intersection of God's personhood as an intentional agent and the divine gracious self-revelation that best explain why Barth maintains counterfactuals after his doctrine of election. This article is relevant for all Barth interpreters because the question and answer explored here relate to the autonomy thesis – an interpretation of Barth held by Trutz Rendtorff, Jürgen Moltmann, and Wolfhart Pannenberg long before the current debates. Any interpreter of Barth must wrestle with these questions.

First, this article explores the definition and significance of Barth's theology of God's absolute personhood in the pivotal §28. God is *the* person – a self-motivated being in decision. God's personal-being-in-act means God is intentional, self-sufficient, and acts freely. Barth's description of God's being in personal terms ensures that God is the type of agent who is uniquely and fully present in revelation without becoming a given in the world or subject to humanity's capacities. Decision is central in Barth's theology of God as the absolute person. The agent God is and God's agency are equivalent to Barth. The doctrine of God's absoluteness serves as a case study testing the argument about Barth's theology of God's personhood.

Second, the article assesses the nature of counterfactual statements in Barth's theology. For Barth, counterfactuals are rejected possibilities in God's primal self-determination and decision. However, Barth is unclear about whether these primal possibilities have any ontological weight – whether they are genuine or fictional. This section argues that counterfactuals are always

used by Barth to highlight divine grace, which also enables them to be swiftly negated. However, despite Barth's efforts to do otherwise, counterfactuals throw Barth's full identification of God's being with Jesus Christ into doubt. If they are genuine, they require either that God's essence is mutable or that there is a hidden essence of God behind the primal decision, which creates problems with the identity of the God known in revelation.

In the final section of this article, Barth's motivation for affirming counterfactual possibilities is attributed to his view of God as the absolute person. The critique here is differentiated from that of the autonomy thesis. God's personhood requires a measure of self-mastery to ensure that God is Lord over Godself. Decision is the crucial concept that maintains God's unconditioned and self-motivated personhood and allows God to be fully identified with all of God's acts. Barth is deeply concerned to avoid any necessity of compulsion in God's actions. However, Barth views God acting from natural necessity as a form of an unacceptable internal necessity of compulsion. The concept of decision becomes essential for Barth's notion of personhood so that God's personhood is God's own. This is the exact reason Barth is keen to understand the agent God is in terms of God's agency. Counterfactual freedom in God's primal decision secures God's personal communicative freedom to be *pro nobis*. Barth's confusing affirmation of counterfactuals and the identification of Jesus Christ with God's being cannot be overcome when the concept of decision is foundational to God's being and absoluteness, and this requires re-thinking necessity and divine personhood.

God the absolute person

Barth's doctrine of God rests on the conceptual cornerstone that God is the absolute person. The actualism of Barth's theological claim that God's being is in God's act – including the particular act of revelation – is well-known.[9] However, Barth further specifies that being in act is the being of a person.[10] More accurately, for Barth, God is *personal*-being-in-act. The following section outlines Barth's definition of God's personhood and examines the indispensability of this concept for Barth's theology. First, Barth defines God's personhood as God's self-moved being in decision. According to Barth, God is properly speaking the *only* real person: 'The real person is not man but God. It is not God who is a person by extension, but we. God exists in His act. God is His own decision. God lives from and by Himself'.[11] This statement explicitly affirms the absolute nature of God's personhood, as well as

9 *CD* II/1, pp. 257–72. Barth's actualism is well-documented in secondary literature; see Paul Nimmo, *Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Barth's Ethical Vision* (London: T & T Clark, 2007), pp. 4–12.
10 *CD* II/1, p. 267; cf. 270–2.
11 *CD* II/1, p. 272.

establishing the centrality of self-movement and decision to Barth's understanding of divine personhood.

Second, divine personhood is not merely a verbal concept for Barth. Robert Jenson observes: 'And it must be remembered that Barth is not offering event or person or decision as metaphors or slogans for something else. He is *recruiting* them for use in formal ontological propositions'.[12] Barth's theology of God as the absolute person functions as the necessary divine ontological commitment to establish God is intentional and freely acts without any necessity of compulsion. This article utilises the terminology of agent and agency to elucidate Barth's theology. God's personhood means that God is the agent who is fully present and known in revelation based solely on God's own agency. The concept of personhood describes the divine ontological foundation Barth deems necessary to describe the God encountered in revelation and reconciliation while still maintaining the otherness of God (or God's Godness). Barth's theology of God's personhood and revelation rely heavily on notions related to agency. For Barth, God as the absolute person indicates the type of free agent and agency required to make possible God's gracious self-revelation.

God is the self-moved person

Barth argues that the particularity of the act and life of God encountered in God's revelation is that of a self-moved (*selbst bewegt*) person. Before Barth details the act of God, he first proclaims that with the being of God, 'the word "event" (*Ereignis*) or "act" (*Akt*) is *final* . . . not any event, not events in general, but the event of His action, in which we have a share in God's revelation'.[13] If God's being is truly in the event of revelation, Barth asks: how does one differentiate and distinguish this from other events or happenings in the world?[14] Barth answers that God meets us in revelation, in contradistinction to anything else we know, as the self-motivated and

12 Robert Jenson, 'Karl Barth on the Being of God', in Bruce L. McCormack and Thomas Joseph White, eds., *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: An Unofficial Catholic-Protestant Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), p. 44. Cf. Katherine Sonderegger, 'God', in Paul Dafydd Jones and Paul T. Nimmo, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Barth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 219–24.

13 *CD* II/1, p. 263; Karl Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*. 5 vols. in 14 parts (Zollikon: Verlag der Evangelischen Buchhandlun, 1932–1970), (hereafter *KD*), II/1, p. 294.

14 *CD* II/1, p. 265. Barth's abiding concern with realism is that God's revelation and, therefore, God Godself would become equated with created reality either in history, nature, or human consciousness: 'God distinguishes himself from fate by the fact that he is not so much *there* as rather that he *comes*. Confidence in God's *self-giving* is therefore rather different from realism's confidence in God's *givenness*'. Karl Barth, 'Fate and Idea in Theology', in H. Martin Rumscheidt, ed., *The Way of Theology in Karl Barth* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1986), p. 40. Emphasis added.

self-moved person.[15] The personal nature of God establishes that God's agency is free and that God acts without necessity or dependence on humanity, which ensures that God is the fully present agent in the event of revelation. In short, God's unconditioned agency secures God as an agent. The importance of the concept of God as the exclusively self-moved person is difficult to underestimate because it is the ontological foundation that explains the encounter of revelation and reconciliation.

Barth utilises the idea of God's self-moved being to navigate the narrow passage between unmoved or moved being, two misconceptions regarding God's being in revelation. God is not an 'it' (*Es*) nor a 'he' (*Er*), but an I (*Ich*).[16] On the one hand, an 'it' is unmoved and unknowable while a 'he' is moved and externally determined and conditioned. As an 'I', God is self-moved: 'It is an I who knows about Himself, who wills Himself (*das sich selber will*), posits and distinguishes Himself (*sich selber setzt und unterscheidet*), and in this very act of His omnipotence is wholly self-sufficient'.[17] Therefore, Barth affirms, 'The being of God as we know it from revelation is moved in itself and therefore motivating'.[18] In affirming that God is self-moved, Barth seeks to establish two key ideas: 1. God's being is knowable with apodictic certainty in the event of revelation because God is the agent of revelation (self-*moved*), and 2. God's revelation is based entirely on God's own act, or agency, that does not depend on nor is it conditioned by humanity (*self*-moved). In summary, God is the agent present in revelation based entirely on God's agency. The concept of God's self-moved personhood is the ontological description that explains God's agency as the one who acts freely in revelation in space and time.

A brief examination of unmoved and moved being further elucidates the foundational nature of God's self-moved personhood for Barth's theology. God is not an 'it' who is unmoved; an 'it' who cannot act; an unmoved 'its' revelation would consist in 'images and likenesses', but these would not be 'strictly and properly true' of its being.[19] The issue for Barth is that an unmoved 'it' cannot be known but remains unobservable or incomprehensible. Revelation would be a chimaera and provide no knowledge of God's being because God would not be acting in space and time.

Nor is God a 'he' that is moved by something outside of Godself.[20] Barth claims humans normally know spirit and nature (the totality of being) as

15 *CD* II/1, pp. 266–9. For another example of the concept of God's self-movement in the theology of Thomas Aquinas, see Simon Oliver, 'Motion According to Aquinas and Newton', *Modern Theology* 17 (2001), pp. 163–99.
16 *CD* II/1, p. 268 (*KD*, p. 300).
17 *CD* II/1, p. 268 (*KD*, p. 300). Translation revised.
18 *CD* II/1, p. 268.
19 *CD* II/1, 267.
20 *CD* II/1, p. 269.

moved only by something outside or external. However, the *human being* is the external agent to nature and spirit that moves them. Barth is making an epistemological point: humans are normally subjects (agents) over the objects of their knowledge. However, ontology and epistemology cannot be separated for Barth because God gives God's being to us in the event of revelation: '[I]n this very event God is who He is'.[21] How something is known cannot be separated from what it is. Therefore, Barth adamantly opposes the idea that the God known by humans is moved: 'God is not the being moved in and by us which we know or think we know as our movement of nature and spirit'.[22] God is Lord in revelation and not externally conditioned by anything, including humans. Rather, God as an 'I' is still fully the subject (agent) in the event of revelation. It is helpful to think of this in terms of control: the being of God is not controlled or mastered (i.e., moved) by humans and their capacities in the event of revelation; rather, God is fully in control. The being of the God of revelation does indeed move; however, crucially, nothing moves this God's being but Godself. The question becomes, How does God move Godself? Decision is Barth's answer.

Decision

Barth concludes §28.1 with the bold assertion, 'God is His own decision'. The basis of God's self-moved being in act is God's decision, according to Barth. God is the *only* self-moved person because, 'No other being is absolutely its own, conscious, willed and executed decision (*Kein anderes Sein ist schlechterdings seine eigene, bewußte, gewollte und vollbrachte Entscheidung*)'.[23] Jüngel observes the foundational nature of decision in Barth's theology: 'Decision does not belong to the being of God as something supplementary to this being; rather, as event, God's being *is* his own decision'.[24] In Barth's theology, with decision, we enter the very heart of God's being. Decision is ground-zero – there is no going beyond this to anything higher in God. In the terms of this article, God's agency just is the agent God *is*.

This article contends that the concept of decision (*Entscheidung*) is vital to Barth's theology because he uses it to describe God's agency as intentional, unconditioned, and absolutely free:

21 *CD* II/1, p. 262. Barth connects this to his earlier Trinitarian theology that describes the God of the event of revelation as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

22 *CD* II/1, p. 269. The ensuing small print section clarifies that Barth views much of modern theology as an attempt to speak about God by speaking even more loudly about the human. This is the epitome and insufficiency of understanding God as a moved being.

23 *CD* II/1, p. 271 (*KD*, p. 304).

24 Jüngel, *God's Being is in Becoming*, p. 81; Cf. Frick, *Barth's Ontology*, pp. 41–73.

> The fact that God's being is event, the event of God's act, necessarily (if, when we speak of it, we turn our eyes solely to His revelation) means that it is His own conscious, willed and executed decision. It is His own decision, and therefore independent of the decisions by which we validate our existence. It is His conscious decision, and therefore not the mechanical course of a process, in so far it can be spoken of such a thing, whose rationality would be found outside of itself. It is His willed decision, and therefore not an event occurring through external causes or only in external relationship. It is His executed decision – executed once for all in eternity, and anew in every second of our time, and therefore in such a way that confronts what is not divine being, not as a mere possibility, but always as a self-contained, self-containing reality.[25]

Based on this important citation, the following section examines the intentionality and free, unconditioned agency that describes God's decision.

Decision indicates that God's personal-being-in-act is intentional. Barth repeatedly clarifies that the event and act of God's being is not a general event (*allgemeinen Geschehen*), but a particular event (*bestimmtes Geschehen*). This is not an event of necessity, but a personal event: 'It [event, act, and life of God] is the freedom of a knowing and willing I.'[26] The intentionality of God's personal being is implicit when Barth defines the apex of the event and act of God as God speaking as an I who addresses a thou. Revelation is not inevitable but a personal event. God intends and moves Godself towards this end. The concept of decision implies an intention towards an end, and God is identified essentially with those intentions. It is striking that before Barth describes the nature of God's decision, he stops to remind the reader that the event and act of God's being under consideration is revelation. This is especially noteworthy because Barth has just elucidated the implications of God's self-moved being for revelation. Barth does not want the reader to lose sight of what exactly God is self-moved towards. God intends or decides Godself for the specific act of revelation, and this *is* God's being as the self-moved person.

The decision that is God's being is absolutely free and unconditioned. Barth describes decision with the adjectives: own, conscious, willed, and executed. The description Barth gives to these qualifiers points to the unconditioned nature and freedom of God's decision and agency. Barth states that God's decision is 'independent', 'not the mechanical course of a process', does not occur through 'external causes' or 'external relationships', and is 'self-contained'. Rephrasing this in terms of necessity helps clarify Barth's concerns: God does not decide from any necessity of compulsion. Nothing external to God compels God's decision. For this reason, Barth can proclaim

25 *CD* II/1, p. 271 (*KD*, p. 304). Translation revised.
26 *CD* II/1, p. 267.

God is God's own decision. However, this claim goes further and is the basis on which God's revelation and covenant are authoritative and irrevocable – they do not depend on human foundations or work, but only on God's decision.[27] The freedom of a knowing and willing I is precisely that God decides from Godself and nothing else.

Decision implies a choice. If God's being is God's own decision, what exactly does God choose? Barth does not explicitly state the content of God's decision in II/1. He discusses the event of revelation but also mentions in passing the being of God in its Trinitarian nature.[28] Barth gestures towards God's choice in the next subsection when describing the act of God's being as love which overflows in God's seeking and creating fellowship with us.[29] Importantly, Barth affirms that the overflow of God's essence (*Wesen*) in seeking fellowship with us belongs to God's essence.[30] In II/2, Barth explicitly addresses the choice God makes in the elective primal decision (*Urentscheidung*). While discussing God's election of Jesus Christ, Barth states:

> Our starting-point must always be that in all His willing and choosing what God ultimately wills is Himself. All God's willing is primarily a determination of the love of the Father and the Son in the fellowship of the Holy Ghost . . . But in this primal decision God does not choose only Himself. In this choice of self He also chooses another, that other which is man.[31]

The choice God makes in the primal decision is Godself, but this *includes* the choice for humanity. It is imperative to recognise that decision encompasses God's being for Godself, which includes the choice to be the God of humanity in Jesus Christ. For Barth, decision determines all of God's being and establishes that God is an intentional agent.

Barth's theology regarding the divine decision reveals that he relies heavily on concepts of agency to describe God's being. First, the very being of God is a decision. God's agency in decision determines God's personal-being-in-act.[32] Central to Barth's understanding of God's self-moved personhood is the

27 *CD* II/1, p. 270–1.
28 *CD* II/1, p. 271.
29 *CD* II/1, pp. 272–5.
30 *CD* II/1, p. 273 (*KD*, p. 307).
31 *CD* II/2, p. 169.
32 While agreeing with Justin Stratis that God's personhood is central to Barth's reframing of aseity and absoluteness, this article disagrees with his assertion that Barth introduces the language of willing to merely defend God's personhood against liberal Protestant conceptions of God. This assertion amounts to a separation of God's being and personhood that §28.1 does not support. Justin Stratis, 'Speculating about Divinity? God's Immanent Life and Actualistic Ontology', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12 (2010), pp. 20–32, especially pp. 26–7.

equivalence of God's agency with God the acting agent. Jenson, using different terminology, recognises this essential element of Barth's theology:

> To be irreducibly first-personal, an *ich* that also as our object remains subject, this *ich* must . . . be his own knowledge of himself, be his own will for himself, must *sich selbst setzen* and *unterscheiden*, must posit and distinguish his own reality. That is to say, he must essentially be a sheer *decision*, a decision not made by anyone except the person that is the decision. A decision eternally occurs, that is God.[33]

Jenson argues that God is the type of agent in revelation who remains subject while being an object for us, and this requires God's unconditioned agency. Second, Barth uses terms of intellect, 'knowing' and 'conscious', to define God's personal being. However, he disproportionately favours terms of volition, 'will', 'decision', 'execution', and 'positing'. This is no surprise considering the central role decision has in Barth's theology of God's being. Noting the emphasis on agency is relevant for the discussion about the problem of counterfactuals in Barth's theology. Since God's agency and who God is cannot be separated for Barth, if God could genuinely choose otherwise, then we are discussing the possibility of a different God and not just a different act.

Case study: primary and secondary absoluteness – God is absolutely a se and pro se

The claims made in this article about Barth's theology of God's personhood are tested in a case study of his doctrine of God's absoluteness. This article contends that Barth views God as both absolutely *a se* and *pro se* at once, or, more accurately God's aseity includes God's being-for-us. The doctrine of absoluteness describes *the mode* of God's self-moved personal being in decision. Therefore, it mirrors and supports the argument that God's unconditioned agency is the basis for God to be an active and present agent in creation without becoming an object like other created objects. Ultimately, Barth identifies God's absoluteness and freedom with Jesus Christ. Barth establishes the theology of absoluteness through the lens of God as the self-moved person in decision.

Barth's doctrine of absoluteness is unapologetically personal. He first introduces the concept of God's absoluteness at the end of §28.2. Barth vehemently denies God is an impersonal absolute.[34] Barth affirms God just *is* this One who loves, and there is no antithesis of absoluteness and personalness to overcome. By arguing that God's absoluteness is personal, Barth establishes

33 Jenson, 'Being of God', p. 48.
34 *CD* II/1, p. 287.

God's self-moved nature in decision and act as a central concept of divine absoluteness. Barth does not discard God's personhood as he discusses the freedom, aseity, and absoluteness of God.

Barth's starting point for all reflection upon divine freedom and absoluteness is Jesus Christ.[35] God's freedom, which includes aseity and primary and secondary absoluteness, is Jesus Christ: 'The freedom of God must be recognised as His own freedom and this means – as it consists in God and as God has exercised it. But in God it consists in His Son Jesus Christ, and it is in Him that God has exercised it'.[36] Jesus Christ, the revelation of God as *pro nobis*, is included within and based upon God's aseity and primary absoluteness. Wilfried Härle helpfully summarises that for Barth, God's secondary absoluteness does not exhaust God's freedom. Rather, at *the same time*, God's loving being is self-founded (aseity) and needs no other (primary absoluteness), yet God lovingly gives and devotes Godself to another (secondary absoluteness).[37] Barth understands God as both absolutely *a se* and *pro se*, which means God's aseity has a concrete form in the personal and self-moved God's full involvement in revelation.

God's independent and self-sufficient fullness of being in aseity and primary absoluteness (*self*-moved) includes and grounds God's intentional, complete self-revelation and giving of Godself in God's secondary absoluteness (self-*moved*). Barth is happy to define primary absoluteness as God's utter independence of everything outside of Godself, which is the reality of God's inner Trinitarian being.[38] However, just as God's self-moved personhood is the explanation for God being fully present in revelation, it is precisely God's primary absoluteness that grounds God's secondary absoluteness, which is God's *real* relation with the creation.[39]

For Barth, the apex of God's absoluteness is God's free and unconditioned decision to be bound and conditioned by maintaining fellowship and communion with a reality outside of Godself.[40] God's secondary absoluteness is explicitly linked to God's personal nature and decision: 'His presence in the life and being of the world is His personal and therefore actual presence expressed in continually new forms according to His sovereign decisions'.[41] One should note the importance of personhood, decision, and divine agency. God is absolute in relation to the world because the personal God decides to be absolute in this particular way. This is vital for God's unique and full

35 *CD* II/1, pp. 317–21.
36 *CD* II/1, p. 320.
37 Wilfried Härle, *Sein und Gnade: Die Ontologie in Karl Barths Kirchlicher Dogmatik* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1975), pp. 68–9.
38 *CD* II/1, pp. 308–9, 317.
39 *CD* II/1, pp. 309, 317.
40 *CD* II/1, pp. 303, 308–10, 320–1.
41 *CD* II/1, p. 314.

presence in revelation.[42] God is the agent present based exclusively on God's self-moved agency; therefore, God cannot be conflated with our reality or human thought about God. The form of God's absolute personhood is God's primary and secondary absoluteness.

Does God's absoluteness preclude the possibility of God acting differently than God does in Christ? Barth's theology of divine absoluteness is unapologetically concrete and personal in its focus on Jesus Christ. For Barth, we cannot get behind God in God's revelation. God's absoluteness and being are made known in the concrete act of revelation. This act cannot be separated from God's being. The agent God is and God's agency are not separable. This begs the question: could God have genuinely decided otherwise than God does in Jesus Christ?

The problem of uncertain counterfactuals: genuine or fictional?

Counterfactuals are statements that leave open the possibility of an 'otherwise' despite what God has done. A central question for the maximalist interpretation is the status of Barth's counterfactual claims. Barth never clarifies the exact nature of counterfactuals, and this creates problems with interpreting his work and assessing the coherency of his claims. Is the possibility that God could have remained satisfied with God's own being and not willed the covenant and creation a genuine possibility, or is it fictional – a conceptual tool to indicate God's choice as solely based on Godself?[43] This section argues that the nature of counterfactual possibilities is unclear in Barth's theology. It explores the two possibilities that counterfactuals are either genuine or fictional and the consequences of each for Barth's theology. If counterfactuals are genuine, they are only genuine as *rejected* possibilities that indicate a possibility which never would be actualised since God has irrevocably decided otherwise. If counterfactuals are fictional, then one must assess what conceptual purpose they serve for Barth. At the heart, this concerns whether God as the self-moved person in decision is fully identified with God's intentions and whether God's self-revelation is trustworthy.

Fictional possibilities or genuine rejected possibilities?

There are statements in Barth's texts that indicate counterfactuals are genuine but in the highly qualified manner as *rejected* possibilities. In II/1, Barth makes several key claims about God's omnipotence that clarify the nature of counterfactuals. Barth maintains divine freedom is not unfettered voluntarism,

42 *CD* II/1, p. 304.

43 For a few examples of the claim that God could have remained satisfied with God's own being, see *CD* II/2, pp. 29, 101–2, 121, 166–7; *CD* III/1, pp. 7, 69, 230; *CD* III/2, p. 187; *CD* IV/1, pp. 52, 213–14, 220; *CD* IV/2, pp. 41, 346.

for God cannot do *anything*; rather, 'He can do only what is possible for Him and therefore genuinely possible'.[44] However, what is possible for God is not exhausted in what God actually does. Barth rejects the notion that God's omnipotence is exhausted solely in God's omnicausality.[45] Omnicausality is God's activity in creation, reconciliation, and redemption.[46] God is omnipotent in God's eternal Trinitarian being; therefore, God can and does bind Godself to creation and stoops down to it in grace.[47] Barth's reason for affirming omnipotence above and beyond omnicausality is to secure God as the agent present to us in God's work and to preserve the self-moved freedom of God's love.[48]

It is for this reason that Barth affirms the distinction between *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata* in a short excursus in II/1:

> God would not have power, nor would His power be in His hands, nor would it be the power of a Lord, . . . if His actual will (*Wollen*) and action were not a real decision and did not take place in freedom; if the capacity which He actually uses did not contrast with the different capacity which He did not use. And this being the case, the grace of creation, reconciliation and redemption would not then be grace, but God would be under obligation to the created powers over which He is Lord.[49]

Here it seems Barth insists that God's freedom and power require genuine alternate possibilities. Barth's understanding of grace appears to require that he always keeps open a counterfactual 'otherwise'. For Barth, any hint of necessity outside of God's free self-determination does not honour the free Lord and destroys God's grace.[50] It is vital to note that counterfactuals always appear within the context of affirming what God has actually done in God's gracious decision for us. Counterfactuals function in Barth's theology to uphold God's unconditioned initiative so that God is the self-sufficient agent fully present in God's gracious revelation and reconciliation.

Barth severely restricts the scope of these other possibilities while attempting to quickly shut the door to the dreaded *Deus absconditus*:

> God neither was nor is bound to the one possible way (*diese Möglichkeit*) . . . But since God has actually chosen and still chooses this possibility, since in virtue of His will He actually applies His capacity to this possibility, we must recognise His capacity, His *potentia absoluta*, only in the capacity

44 *CD* II/1, p. 533.
45 *CD* II/1, pp. 526–32.
46 *CD* II/1, pp. 526–8.
47 *CD* II/1, pp. 526–9.
48 *CD* II/1, p. 528. Schleiermacher's theology of omnipotence is clearly in Barth's mind in rejecting omnicausality as the extent of God's omnipotence, pp. 529–31.
49 *CD* II/1, p. 539 (*KD*, p. 606). Translation lightly revised.
50 *CD* II/1, p. 539.

> chosen by Him, in His *potentia ordinata*. We no longer need reckon with the possibility that he could have acted differently . . . and that every other conceivable capacity is a capacity which He Himself has excluded and rejected.[51]

Here Barth alters the understanding of *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata* and with it the concept of different possibilities and capacities of God. Barth still maintains other possibilities and capacities, but they are rejected and excluded by God. This ensures that God is truly known and given in revelation.[52] However, God's primal determination and decision are final, and other possibilities are utterly rejected and impossible.[53] Since they are rejected, there is confidence in the certainty of God's revelation and reconciliation.[54] God's choosing, deciding, excluding, and rejecting demonstrate God's intentional nature. Counterfactuals, in these passages, are possibilities rejected in God's self-moved personal being in decision as God intends Godself for determinate actions and ends.[28] By altering the meaning of the *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata*, Barth appears to have made other possibilities fictional by evacuating them of all reality in God's actual choice.[55] The question now is whether these rejected possibilities are genuine or fictional?

This article contends that Barth does not clarify if counterfactuals are genuine or fictional possibilities. There are statements where Barth seemingly affirms the fictional nature of counterfactuals by negating any other genuine

51 *CD* II/1, p. 541 (*KD*, p. 609).

52 Many thanks to Daniel Pedersen for conversations about this important excursus.

53 After affirming that we need not reckon with these other possibilities, Barth appears to again affirm that these possibilities (though rejected) do exist for God: '*daß dieses sein anderes Können in der Unendlichkeit der Möglichkeiten, die wir ihm tatsächlich nicht absprechen dürfen*'. *KD* II/1, p. 609.

54 *CD* II/1, p. 542.

55 A possible interpretation for understanding counterfactual possibilities is to assign them the same ontological status as Nothingness (see *CD* III/3, pp. 289–368). Through God's positive act of willing, God's negative rejecting will gives a form of existence to those rejected realities. One could think of God's decision as God bringing into 'reality' the other rejected possibilities. It is noteworthy that at the end of the small print section examined, Barth states, '[I]t was and is His business to decide what "everything" is and also what "nothing" is, so that the latter exists in the sphere of His power only in its "nothingness" (*Nichtigkeit*)'. *CD* II/1, p. 542 (*KD*, p. 610).

possibilities in God's decision.[56] However, other statements indicate that Barth insists counterfactuals are genuine rejected possibilities.[57] He is abundantly clear that those possibilities are rejected and impossibilities due to God's primal decision. We are only to look at what God has actually done. However, Barth's lack of clarity on the nature of counterfactuals has left his work open to opposing interpretations.

Consequences

There are different and important consequences depending on how one interprets counterfactuals in Barth's theology. First, if counterfactuals are genuine rejected possibilities for God, then we lose the apodictic certainty that Barth seeks in revelation. Bruce McCormack summarises the results of viewing counterfactuals as genuine possibilities – God's decision would be contingent:

> But: a determination of divine *essence* in what would amount to a 'contingent' decision (i.e. one which need not have taken place), would have to have effected a change, a mutation, in God's essence in taking place.

56 A few examples suffice to demonstrate the feasibility of interpreting counterfactuals as fictional in Barth: Barth declares that God's power is real and is opposed to power-in-itself. Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G.T. Thomson (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), p. 48; Barth's insistence that God's freedom is not from humanity but freedom to and for humanity. Karl Barth, 'The Gift of Freedom: Foundation of Evangelical Ethics', in *The Humanity of God*, trans. Thomas Wieser (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960), p. 72. Barth further insists that human freedom, which is based on God's freedom, is not about choice amongst possibilities. Barth, 'Gift of Freedom', p. 77. Barth insists that God's divinity consists in God's loving that *includes* seeking and creating fellowship with humanity (*CD* II/1, pp. 275, 280–1) and apart from Jesus Christ God would be a different and alien God (*CD* II/2, p. 87). These examples would appear to indicate that any counterfactual statement is merely fictional and designed to highlight God's full self-possession in the free decision for humanity in the election of Jesus Christ.

57 A few examples provide evidence that Barth's counterfactual statements were genuine but rejected possibilities for God: Barth's limited acceptance of the distinction between the *potentia absoluta* and *ordinata* because God's Lordly power requires God to actualise one possibility against another possibility God decides not to utilise (*CD* II/1, p. 539). After this Barth continues to make counterfactual statements without further qualifying them. It is reasonable to assume that he intends those statements to be understood in light of what he argued in II/1. Additionally, his repeated and unqualified assertions that God could have remained satisfied with God's own being and done otherwise than God did imply that this was a genuine possibility: *CD* II/2, pp. 29, 101–2, 12, 166–7, 176; *CD* III/1, pp. 7, 69, 230; *CD* III/2, p. 187; *CD* IV/1, pp. 52, 213–14, 220; *CD* IV/2, pp. 41, 85, 113, 346, 755, 766. Barth claims even further that God not only could have remained satisfied, but God had no obligation to *Godself* or humanity to will as God does: *CD* II/2, pp. 29, 101, 166; *CD* IV/1, p. 52.

> A contingent decision sets up an ineluctable logic: first, the being of a subject (understood as complete in itself) – followed by an act of decision – making in which the subject gives himself a determination of essence.[58]

As argued earlier, Barth's theology of God's self-moved personal being in decision describes the divine ontological foundation that allows God to be the fully present and self-authenticating agent of revelation. However, if God's agency could genuinely have been different, then according to Barth's convictions regarding the divine being, God would in fact be a different God. There would be no revelation of God's being, and the *Deus absconditus* and nominalism would rear their heads again in full force. Counterfactuals, in this sense, would work against the very theological truth Barth never tires of repeating – humanity encounters the true God in Jesus Christ. If it was genuinely possible that Jesus Christ was not, who is God? The genuine possibility to choose otherwise either implies malleability in God's essence or some hidden essence of God behind Jesus Christ. This would be particularly devastating to the maximalist interpretation since God's work in revelation and reconciliation could not be described as essential to God (unless one is willing to give up immutability). However, other interpreters would need to account for this since Barth would not have solved the problem of nominalism and the *Deus absconditus* as he desired. These implications are exactly the conclusions Barth is ardent to block at all costs. Barth would be contradicting himself if he did ascribe genuine possibility to counterfactuals.

Second, if counterfactuals are only fictional possibilities and function as a conceptual tool to highlight God's unconditioned, self-sufficient, and free agency in all God does, then much less damage is done to Barth's theological aims. If they are merely fictional, then there are no ontological consequences for how one theologises about God's being. However, one must acknowledge that Barth's counterfactual statements, even if fictional, potentially undermine Barth's central and principle theological convictions. What then motivates his persistence in utilising them? The question to answer is: why does Barth view counterfactuals as necessary for theological reflection? While reserving judgement on whether Barth's counterfactual claims are genuine or fictional possibilities, this article moves to explore what theologically motivates Barth's use of counterfactual statements. Recognising his motivations for using counterfactuals is vital regardless of how one interprets Barth's understanding of them.

Motivations: God's personhood as self-mastery in Lordship

Can God be fully identified with God's intention and decision to be gracious in Christ if God's primal decision could have been different? This is fundamentally a

58 Pârvan and McCormack, 'Immutability', p. 18; cf. Matthias Gockel, *Barth and Schleiermacher on the Doctrine of Election: A Systematic-Theological Comparison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 177–80.

question about the trustworthiness and identity of the God encountered in revelation. Barth never resolves this dilemma. This article does not contest Barth's actualistic doctrine of God's being nor his desire to speak of the intentionality of God's self-moved personal being; rather, the critique is directed at *how* Barth secures intentionality and determination through insisting upon a genuine decision. For those maximalist interpreters who view counterfactuals as inconsistent with Barth's overarching theological project, the common diagnosis is that the source of the problem is Barth's definition of freedom.[59] Although Barth's counterfactual claims never cease after the doctrine of election, proportionally they are a minor counterpoint to Barth's *cantus firmus* that God's freedom is for humanity. Counterfactual freedom in God's primal decision secures God's personal communicative freedom to be *pro nobis*. The important theological question is: why does Barth need this understanding of freedom? Barth's theology of God as the absolute person necessitates the notion of freedom that include claims, whether genuine or fictional, that God could have done otherwise. The source of this problem resides at the heart of his theology of God as *the* absolute person. Barth's account of God as a person requires *self*-mastery to ensure that God is in control as Lord of God's own life and being, and this makes the concept of decision essential to securing God's personhood.

There are two further premises in Barth's understanding of God's personhood that motivate Barth's theology of decision and counterfactual claims: 1. Barth's conviction that God is a self-moved person encompasses God's Lordship, which is first and foremost God's Lordship over God's own being, and 2. Barth views natural necessity as the necessity of compulsion; therefore, he uses the concept of decision and counterfactual statements to avoid any form of the necessity of compulsion. In short, God is Lord over Godself in God's being in decision. For Barth, God is moved by God's own agency and not any necessity arising out of God's essence.

Necessity and God's self-Lordship

A brief definition of different types of necessity provides categories to clarify Barth's concerns and counterfactual statements.[60] Although Barth does not

59 Pârvan and McCormack, 'Immutability', p. 19. Gockel makes the same observation in the different context of the issue of God's triune will preceding the will for election. Gockel, *Barth and Schleiermacher*, p. 179; cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 55–6.

60 Brandon Gallaher similarly discusses different types of necessity and freedom in Barth. This article utilises different definitions than Gallaher because Gallaher's language of bondage/compulsion and dependence in his definitions of N2 and N3 are incompatible with Barth's theology. Brandon Gallaher, *Freedom and Necessity in Modern Trinitarian Theology*, Oxford Theology and Religion Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 12–15, 117–64.

use this terminology, natural necessity, the necessity of immutability, and the necessity of compulsion are all relevant to understanding Barth's theology. Barth does not conceive of the divine nature or essence in traditional terms but has reconceived this idea in terms of God's existence as personal-being-in-act. Despite this conceptual change, the varying types of necessity can aptly be applied to Barth's theology of God if one keeps in mind that God's personal existence is under consideration. First, natural necessity is defined here as the necessity by which something of its nature cannot be otherwise.[61] The second type of necessity differs slightly from natural necessity by focusing on the type of nature of the thing acting.[62] In this necessity, a thing acts necessarily of its own accord from an immutable nature. Crucially, both types of necessity ensure that the necessity in view has no other source than the necessary thing examined. Third, the necessity of compulsion is when one is compelled to act necessarily by force.[63] It is this type of necessity that would destroy God's freedom and aseity.[64] Barth, with the whole theological tradition, roundly rejects the necessity of compulsion. However, as will be seen, he affirms a necessity of immutability based upon God's decision. Despite this affirmation, Barth becomes complicated and ambiguous on the issue of necessity because he also appears to equate natural necessity with the necessity of compulsion.[65] Barth argues that God as the absolute person is not only free from external compulsion but the *internal* compulsion of God's own nature or being. It is at this juncture that Barth interposes decision to ensure that God remains free and self-moved – a person as he understands it.

Two examples suffice to demonstrate that Barth's conception of divine personhood includes both Lordship over God's own being and decision to counter his concern with necessity. In II/1, all of these themes converge in Barth's discussion that God's knowing and willing demonstrate that God's omnipotence is personal. First, Barth rejects a particular idea about the revelation of God's knowledge, which establishes our fellowship with God. The language used to describe the rejected way of conceptualising revealed knowledge is replete with images of natural necessity: 'This knowledge itself, then, is a complete act of will, an utterly definite willing. Note that it is not a mere striving, a kind of *natural life force*, a *mechanically* or *organically necessary movement* . . . In His

61 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, V.5; *Physics*, II.9.
62 Daniel J. Pedersen and Christopher Lilley, 'Divine Simplicity, God's Freedom, and the Supposed Problem of Modal Collapse', *Journal of Reformed Theology* 16 (2022), p. 140.
63 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, V.5. For more on the relevance of the necessity of compulsion and immutability, Pedersen and Lilley, 'Divine Simplicity,' p. 140.
64 Pedersen and Lilley, 'Divine Simplicity', p. 140.
65 Barth's critique of Hegel making God a prisoner of God's own necessity reveals this concern. Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1972), pp. 419–21.

relation to us, therefore, He is not fulfilling a kind of function necessary to Himself'.[66] Barth is specifically addressing God's relation to us, so the necessity he is rejecting is an *internal* compulsion in God.[67] Second, Barth then affirms that if God does act this way towards us, it is only because of God's 'free self-determination, His decision and disposing, and therefore of His resolve and His will'.[68] Decision and God's agency are central to grounding God's intentional action in revelation. Third, Barth argues that starting our reflection with God's deciding leads to several key conclusions:

> If we begin at this point, it breaks through and challenges every idea of God as a prisoner of His own immutable life (*Von diesem Ort her wird jede Vorstellung von Gott, als wäre er der Gefangene seines eigenen unveränderlichen Lebens, durchbrochen und aufgehoben*). On the contrary, He stands before us as the free person who disposes over His own immutable life (*steht er vielmehr vor uns als freie Person, die über ihr allerdings unveränderliches Leben verfügt*).[69]

In recognising that revelation is not the result of natural necessity but God's free decision, we encounter God as a free person. The striking element in Barth's description is the comparison between God as a prisoner of God's immutable life versus the one who disposes over that life. To rephrase Barth, God is Lord over Godself. Decision is the conceptual key that turns the switch from an impersonal natural necessity to God's free personal Lordship over Godself. Barth ties all of this to God's grace and revelation of love; there is revelation because God is a person who freely wills and has intentions.[70]

A brief investigation into Barth's positive usage of necessity is required before the second example can be examined. One would not expect Barth to espouse any form of necessity due to his repeated rejection of necessity or need in God's actions. However, Barth is more than willing to affirm necessity if it is properly understood as based on God's decision, specifically, God's decision for an eternal covenant to fellowship with humanity in Jesus Christ. The following are examples from several volumes across the *Church Dogmatics*:

> His act of reconciliation prevents any counter-question about a necessity *other than that which rests on His will*.[71]

> If this was God's *eternal counsel* in the freedom of His love, the counsel actualised in the manger of Bethlehem, the cross of Calvary and the tomb

66 *CD* II/1, p. 547. Emphasis added.
67 Cf. *CD* IV/1 pp. 204, 221, 417.
68 *CD* II/1, p. 547.
69 *CD* II/1, p. 547 (*KD*, p. 616). Translation revised.
70 *CD* II/1, pp. 548–9.
71 *CD* II/1, pp. 589. Emphasis added.

> of Joseph of Arimathea, God not only could be, *but must be the Creator* (*dann konnte Gott nicht nur, dann mußte er Schöpfer sein*).[72]

> As the love of God could not be satisfied with the *eternal covenant as such*; as it willed to execute it and give it form outside the divine sphere, it made itself this external ground of the covenant; i.e., *it made necessary the existence and being of the creature and therefore of creation*.[73]

> If we can speak of a necessity of any kind here [incarnation and magnifying God's glory], it can only be *the necessity of the resolution* (*Beschlusses*) which God did in fact make and execute, the necessity of the fact that the being of God, the omnipotence of His free love, *has this concrete determination and is effective and revealed in this determination and no other*.[74]

Barth links necessity to God's will, resolve, and covenant.[75] In decision, God as the self-moved person binds Godself to necessarily act in the way that fulfils God's intention. *This way and no other* is the necessity of immutability.[76] However, for Barth, this necessity is inextricably linked to God's willing and deciding. In Barth's theology, God's personal Lordship maintained by decision is the source of the necessity of immutability.

One final passage from IV/1 recapitulates the arguments on necessity, personhood, Lordship, and decision. While strongly denying that God's freedom in Jesus Christ is arbitrary, capricious, or to be associated with a sovereign *liberum arbitrium*, Barth affirms of Christ's reconciliatory work:

> [T]his freedom of which God makes use in His action as the Reconciler of the world is not simply an arbitrary ability. It is not an empty capacity to be now in this way and now in some other way, now above and now below (*Sie ist kein leeres Vermögen, so oder auch anders zu sein, jetzt droben (jetzt drunten)*) . . . [I]f God made use of His freedom in this sense, then the fact that the use of this freedom is an act of obedience characterises it as a holy and righteous freedom, in which God is not a victim driven to and fro by the dialectic of His divine nature, but is always His own Lord (*als Freiheit, in der Gott nicht etwa der Dialektik seiner göttlichen Natur verfallen, hin und her getrieben, sein eigener Herr ist*). He does not make just any use of the possibilities of His divine nature, but He makes one definite use which is necessary on the basis and in fulfilment of His own decision (*Er macht von den Möglichkeiten seiner göttlichen Natur nicht irgend einen, sondern einen*

72 *CD* III/1, p. 51 (*KD*, p. 54). Translation revised. Emphasis added.
73 *CD* III/1, p. 97. Emphasis added. Cf. Frick, *Barth's Ontology*, pp. 147–9.
74 *CD* IV/1, p. 213 (*KD* p. 234). Translation revised. Emphasis added.
75 Cf. Härle, *Sein und Gnade*, p. 72.
76 Brevity does not allow for a discussion of Barth's choice of *Beständigkeit* over *Unveränderlichkeit* for the concept of immutability.

> *bestimmten, den auf Grund und im Vollzug seiner eigenen Entscheidung notwendigen Gebrauch*).[77]

First, it is vital to observe the importance of necessity in this text. Barth again rejects natural necessity by asserting that God is not a victim of God's own *nature*. Barth's utilisation of the language of God being driven to and fro by the divine nature indicates his view that natural necessity would be a necessity of compulsion. However, Barth affirms the necessity of *how* God makes use of divine freedom based on God's decision. It is precisely because this necessity is based on decision that it is not an empty capacity to be one way or the other. Rather, this is a definite and determinate ability on God's part – God is intentional. This is a strong affirmation of the necessity of immutability. However, the background of the necessary 'one definite use' of God's freedom is divine *possibilities*. Barth immediately shuts down that these possibilities would be a reality – they are rejected.[78] The counterfactuals are still lingering in the background while Barth boldly pronounces God's radical freedom in Christ.

Second, God's Lordship over Godself is explicitly affirmed to counter any sort of natural necessity. Barth immediately describes God's Lordship in terms of God's decision. The language of decision combined with God's self-Lordship indicates decision is a form of self-mastery. This is a step further than merely affirming that nothing external conditions God to act. Decision ensures that God is not blindly driven by God's own nature. A decision amongst the possibilities of the *divine nature* shuts down any notion of caprice or unrestrained voluntarism. The consequences of this theology of God's being are vital for Barth: a God who is Lord over Godself is one whose revelation and reconciliation are 'worthy of unlimited confidence'.[78] An assertion of the certainty of God's gracious revelation is always near at hand when Barth strongly affirms God's decision and Lordship, and thus God's personhood.

His own Lord. Based on Barth's description of God's Lordship, decision can be understood as a form of self-mastery. Nothing external or internal controls or compels God, which for Barth means rejecting both natural necessity and the necessity of compulsion. God is in control of God's personal-being-in-act. The necessity of immutability by which God acts is always based on God's decision – God's agency is crucial for Barth so he can avoid compulsion. The personal character of God's works and ways resides in

77 *CD* IV/1, p. 194 (*KD*, p. 212). Translation revised. Cf. *CD* II/1, p. 544; *CD* IV/1, p. 204 (*KD*, p. 223). While Barth does not use the word Lord, the idea is implicit in references to God controlling the divine life, *CD* II/1, pp. 267, 535, 547, 566; *CD* III /1, p. 7; *CD* IV/1, p. 203. Additionally, all the previous references to counterfactuals include the element of self-mastery in Barth's language that God is not obligated to Godself to decide as God does.

78 *CD* IV/1, p. 195.

God's decision to love and be gracious.[79] Barth believes grace is not possible without decision.[80] If Barth did not conceive of natural necessity as violent or forceful but instead viewed God's natural necessity as personal, he could have avoided the need to make God Lord over Godself. Suffice it to say, this article does not think personal necessity and freedom are inimical, but rather are consonant with one another. Re-thinking necessity and personhood would allow one to uphold the theological aims of Barth without the complications of asserting God's self-Lordship.

Barth's discussion of Lordship and divine personhood in terms of self-mastery and control requires decision language at the heart of the absolute God's being. Barth's assertion of divine decision goes together with postulating counterfactual statements. Yet, this very language of decision and possibilities creates a danger and leaves a vulnerability in the centre of Barth's theology. The temptation remains within Barth's theology to think that God's self-determination and primal decision rest on a mutation of the divine nature or there is indeed a hidden primal essence behind what is revealed in Jesus Christ. Although Barth fought to rid theology of all abstractions and to focus solely on the determined and concrete knowledge of God given in revelation and reconciliation, in his 'could have' statements Barth left the possibility and temptation to abstract beyond what God has done in Jesus Christ. The question becomes: does Barth's conception of God as the absolute person mimic the modern concept of the autonomous human subject?

Autonomy thesis: is God the radically autonomous person?

It is necessary to differentiate this article's account from several other critiques and readings of Barth's view of God as subject or person. The autonomy thesis refers to a group of interpreters, including Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, and Trutz Rendtorff, who view Barth as positively related to modernity and Enlightenment. Barth is conceived in different ways as assuming the Enlightenment concept of the autonomous subject in his doctrine of God. For these interpreters, Barth's perceived antagonism with the Enlightenment is not because he has rejected modern concepts, but due to his theological sleight of hand replacing radical human autonomy with God's radical autonomy.[81] For the purposes here, the interpretations of Rendtorff

79 *CD* II/1, pp. 265–72; *CD* II/2 pp. 19, 24–26.

80 Barth's assumption that grace requires the possibility of not being given needs to be interrogated and justified, instead of assumed.

81 John Macken, *The Autonomy Theme in the Church Dogmatics: Karl Barth and His Critics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 125–33. Macken provides a detailed account of both Pannenberg and Rendtorff's interpretations of Barth in his analysis of the autonomy thesis. For a basic overview of Pannenberg's critique, see Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 42–8.

and Moltmann are examined and compared with this article's critique and reading of Barth. This article agrees with the claim of the autonomy thesis that God is the autonomous subject for Barth; however, the autonomy thesis completely misinterprets Barth's motivations and theological ends towards which God's autonomy is directed.

Perhaps the most significant critique is from Trutz Rendtorff. Rendtorff argues Barth has projected the autocratic, Enlightenment self-positing human subject to God.[82] Rendtorff contends that Barth is not repristinating pre-modern theology; rather, Barth is a distinctly modern, liberal theologian.[83] According to Rendtorff, Barth recognised that modern notions of human autonomy obliterated any other positions as conditioned, contingent, and secondary; and theology's survival required that 'The Enlightenment either must be radically implemented, autonomy purely asserting itself, or it [theology] does not take place at all'.[84] Rendtorff believes Barth is carrying out the Enlightenment project in theology by asserting the radical autonomy of God in place of the radical autonomy of humanity.[85] Barth's radical Christological focus is interpreted as the dogmatic version of the autonomy problem.[86] Due to Rendtorff's belief that Enlightenment autonomy is obliterating in nature, autonomy becomes a zero-sum game. Therefore, he interprets Barth's doctrine of election, nothingness, and the church as absorbing or liquidating any genuine autonomy of humanity into God and Jesus Christ.[87] For Rendtorff, the theological recognition of God's radical autonomy functions to secure freedom so that no historical form can claim to be *the* realisation of freedom.[88]

In his later works, Rendtorff acknowledges that Barth's doctrine of God's radical autonomy is ethical in orientation due to its focus on the action of God. God's self-determination is to be the gracious God for humanity.[89] Instead of competition, Rendtorff now views Barth as advocating a relationship of

82 Trutz Rendtorff, 'Radikale Autonomie Gottes: Zum Verständnis der Theologie Karl Barths und ihrer Folgen', in *Theorie des Christentums* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1972), pp. 161–81. For a strong rebuttal of Rendtorff's argument, see Wolf Krötke, 'God and Human as Partners: On the Significance of a Central Category in Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*', in *Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologians for a Post-Christian World*, trans. John P. Burgess (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019) pp. 45–9.

83 Rendtorff, 'Radikale Autonomie Gottes', pp. 164, 174.

84 Rendtorff, 'Radikale Autonomie Gottes', p. 165. Translation mine.

85 Rendtorff, 'Radikale Autonomie Gottes', pp. 164–5.

86 Rendtorff, 'Radikale Autonomie Gottes', p. 173.

87 Rendtorff, 'Radikale Autonomie Gottes', pp. 175–8.

88 Rendtorff, 'Radikale Autonomie Gottes', pp. 180–1.

89 Trutz Rendtorff, 'Der ethische Sinn der Dogmatik: Zur Reformierung des Verhältnisses von Dogmatk und Ethik bei Karl Barth', in Trutz Rendtorff, ed., *Die Realisierung der Freiheit* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1975), pp. 125–7.

correspondence between the human and God, which is based on God's predetermination of humanity in God's own self-determination.[90] Yet, Rendtorff still argues that Barth's religious ethic, with its focus on the ethical orientation of the doctrine of God, destroys the horizontal, this-worldly aspects of our life.[91] According to Rendtorff, the radically autonomous God of Barth crowds out anything in this world and inappropriately privileges theology – everything is reduced to God and the event of revelation.

Jürgen Moltmann similarly interprets and critiques Barth's theology. Moltmann argues that Barth betrays his idealist heritage in his Trinitarian theology that makes God the heavenly absolute subject that corresponds to the 'bourgeois culture of personality'.[92] Moltmann views Barth as part of a historical movement that has shifted from thinking of God as supreme substance to absolute subject.[93] Specifically, Moltmann believes Barth reveals his indebtedness to idealism in Barth's employment of self-distinction and self-recollection to establish God's subjectivity. According to Moltmann, Barth evacuates the Son and Holy Spirit of full personhood because of his focus on God as *the* absolute subject.[94] Moltmann narrows in on Barth's concept of Lordship as the central problem in his doctrine of God: 'The reason for the difficulties Barth gets into here with his acceptance of the Idealistic reflection Trinity of the divine subject, is that he puts the divine lordship before the Trinity and use the "doctrine of the Trinity" to secure and interpret the divine subjectivity in that lordship'.[95] It is for the same reason that Moltmann is dissatisfied with Barth's theology of divine freedom. Moltmann argues that making God's Lordship the starting point leads inevitability to a nominalist concept of the free power of disposal and freedom of choice. Moltmann acknowledges that Barth tried to mediate between God's love and goodness and the concept of liberty in Barth's description of God as the One who loves in freedom.[96] Ultimately, Moltmann thinks Barth is unsuccessful due to his insistence on counterfactual possibilities in God's self-determination and God's Lordship. In Moltmann's reading, the arbitrary and capricious God of nominalism is still lurking in the background of Barth's theology.[97]

There are similarities between this article's argument and those offered in the autonomy thesis. The autonomy thesis accurately understands Barth's God as radically autonomous. The argument here that God as the absolute person

90 Rendtorff, 'Ethische Sinn der Dogmatik', pp.130–2.
91 Rendtorff, 'Ethische Sinn der Dogmatik', pp. 132–4.
92 Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 139.
93 Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 139.
94 Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, pp. 142–3.
95 Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, pp. 143–4.
96 Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 55.
97 Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, pp. 52–6.

includes God's Lordship over God's being is merely a different way to render God's autonomy using language in keeping with Barth's own. However, this is where the similarities end. The autonomy thesis drastically misreads and misconstrues the end to which God's autonomy is employed in Barth's theology by failing to grasp the intentionality of God's personhood. The autonomy thesis interpreters all point to the issue of God wielding control over creatures in such a way that humanity and the world are obliterated of genuine reality. *God is the Lord and Master over God's creatures*. The critique offered here contends that Barth claims God's Lordship is not primarily directed outwards to God's creatures nor is it capricious; rather, it is the self-mastery God exercises over God's own nature to maintain God is a person and freely the One who binds Godself to the creature in grace. Contra the autonomy thesis, *God is Lord over Godself, and Master over Godself*. The autonomy thesis misses the reason Barth seeks to establish God as the absolute person: so that he can bring God into a radical relationship with humanity in Jesus Christ without making God a predicate of humanity.

By failing to ascribe proper weight to Barth's claim of God's self-binding, the autonomy thesis improperly emphasises the necessary condition of God's self-binding (God's Lordship or autonomy) as the main point. Wolf Krötke refutes the autonomy thesis for sundering God and humanity, which Barth has made clear belong together in Jesus Christ.[98] As Barth strikingly proclaims: 'The concept of God without man is indeed as anomalous as wooden iron'.[99] Any concept of God's autonomy ripped apart from God's covenantal partnership with humanity is the indeterminate and empty concept of God that Barth loathed. God as the absolute person prohibits understanding God in this manner – God's personal-being-in-act is never devoid of content and self-determination. Thies Gundlach staunchly denies the autonomy thesis because it fails to grasp that Barth believes in the revelation of Jesus Christ, we 'do not receive communication about the radical autonomy of God, but about the autonomous radicality of God's compassion for humanity'.[100] Gundlach recognises the autonomy thesis does not acknowledge the God encountered in revelation.

For Barth, God's autonomy was not the point but how God *used* it in Jesus Christ. According to Barth, without God's unmitigated Lordship or autonomy over Godself, God's interactions would not be gracious nor trustworthy. Self-determination and decision are the *theological* convictions that uphold God's complete and utter unconditioned freedom that secures the gratuity and self-abundance of God's act in Jesus Christ. In Barth's use of counterfactual statements, we enter into the very heart of God as absolute decision, which *is* God's gracious election for covenant in Jesus Christ. The core concern of

98 Krötke, 'God and Human as Partners', p. 48.
99 Barth, 'The Gift of Freedom', p. 72.
100 Thies Gundlach, *Selbstbegrenzung Gottes und die Autonomie des Menschen: Karl Barths Kirchliche Dogmatik als Modernisierungschritt evangelischer Theologie* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1992), p. 113; cf. p. 168. Translation mine.

this article is that Barth establishes God's personal freedom, as communicative freedom for God to be *pro nobis*, upon a primal libertarian freedom in which God decides to be God in this particular way. In short, this article is concerned with the implications and coherence of decision statements with identity statements concerning God's own being and nature.

Conclusion

On practically every page of the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth points us to Jesus Christ. It is in Christ that we know God. Barth tells us to start with Jesus Christ and nowhere else in our theology. His doctrine of God and election identify God's personal being with God's act of establishing and maintaining the covenant in Jesus Christ. However, Barth's inclusion of counterfactual claims in his theology begs the question if Barth was completely faithful to his own principles. For this reason, the maximalist reading finds Barth's counterfactual statements problematic. It is not clear how 'could have' statements are derived from God's revelation in Jesus Christ.[101] Barth's goal to base dogmatics solely on concrete revelation is at odds with the abstraction required if decision is at the heart of God's absolute personal-being-in-act. Barth is pulled in two different directions by two convictions. First, Barth desires to confirm the certainty of the revelation event by establishing the ontological foundations of the divine object encountered. God as the absolute person – the self-moved being in decision – is Barth's answer. The agent God is and God's agency are equivalent. Second, Barth wants to avoid any hint of compulsion or need in God's actions which leads to Barth's assertion of God's Lordship over Godself in decision. Counterfactual 'could haves' secure God's Lordship. Since Barth has identified the person God is with God's decision, this destabilises the certainty of the identity of the person encountered in revelation.

This article has not sought to identify the genealogical source of Barth's counterfactuals, but his theological motivations for them.[102] Barth fervently fought against all too human understandings of God; yet, with the language of decision, an all too human concept and abstraction crept into his theology. Re-thinking necessity, grace, and divine personhood as Barth understands them is needed for those seeking to further Barth and his theological aims.

101 Certain conceptions of grace could lead one to assume counterfactuals based on revelation. However, the basic premise that grace requires the possibility of not being given to be free would need to be argued and not assumed.

102 A question for further exploration: what in Barth's social and political environment necessitated or supported his theology of God's absolute personhood?