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## Introduction

How is God related to time? What is the proper theological way of expressing that relationship, and why? Such questions may appear to many to be precisely the kind of abstract, irrelevant speculation that relegates theological discourse as a whole off to the margins of so-called real life. What difference *does* it make, one may ask, *how* God is related to time, whether God is temporal or atemporal?

Behind this book lies the conviction that it does matter. The question of God's relationship to time bears on almost every theological doctrine, in some places only implicitly, yet elsewhere quite prominently. The meaning and efficacy of prayer; the doctrines of creation, providence, and last things: all are quite readily affected by how one answers this question.<sup>1</sup> For if God is atemporal, then

1. Stump and Kretzmann put it well in a different context: "The concept of eternity makes a significant difference in the consideration of a variety of issues in the philosophy of religion, including, for instance, the apparent incompatibility of divine omniscience with human freedom, of divine immutability with the efficacy of petitionary prayer, and of divine omniscience with divine immutability." Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Eternity," *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981): 429. This article is also printed in Thomas V. Morris, ed., *The Concept of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). It is now available (although with

does that make our prayers ineffectual? If God is temporal, does that make God dependent upon, and thus subject to, time? Does Christian hope depend on a concept of time running to a definite end? Other doctrines even more central to Christian faith (such as election, prophecy, eschatology, or the freedom of the will) are likewise impacted by theological judgments regarding God's temporality or atemporality, and although these effects may be less obvious, they are nonetheless genuine. For surely the incarnation, to name one such central doctrine, is a doctrine about, among other things, a unique event of historical time interrupted by God. Insofar as the connection between that event and the being of God is in view, any doctrine of the incarnation takes up, if only implicitly, the question of how God and all time are related.

Now, none of this is to say that how one decides the issue of divine eternity determines all other doctrines in one's theological system. This issue is neither the *Grundfrage* nor the Rosetta Stone of all doctrinal theology.<sup>2</sup> In any theological scheme, some elements are primary and others are derived, some doctrines are central and others are peripheral. The question of God's relationship to time bears an unusual relationship to other doctrines. It is not central or foundational, nor is it really peripheral either, because, as we have seen, it touches on so many other doctrines. Rather, I will suggest that decisions concerning God's relationship to time reflect prior theological judgments. For Barth, these judgments concern, to name only a few, the being of God, the doctrine of the Trinity, the nature of theological language, and the proper use of philosophy in

different pagination) on the web site of St. Louis University (where Prof. Stump is on the faculty) at <https://sites.google.com/site/stumpep/Eternity.pdf?attredirects=0>.

2. It is not here denied that one could construct a systematic theology in which divine eternity or temporality exercised such a fundamental role. However, it seems to me that such a construction would be rather odd chiefly because, to my knowledge, no religious tradition (Christian or otherwise) places at the center of its doctrines a particular concept of God's relationship to time.

theology—thus this question intersects or interpenetrates decidedly central or foundational doctrines.

The twentieth century saw a great deal of ferment surrounding the question of time. Theoretical physics may have been the first area of inquiry to see such changes, as the work of Albert Einstein led to a profound alteration in our understanding of time. Einstein's special and general theories of relativity have rendered quaint the idea that time is a uniform constant, and quantum theory has pushed that project even further, sometimes with intriguing (and even whimsical) results.<sup>3</sup> In philosophy, Martin Heidegger took up a phenomenological analysis of time, reviving by means of existentialism an approach reminiscent of St. Augustine (albeit with very different results);<sup>4</sup> since then, certain philosophers, such as Stephen Toulmin, approach the problem of time with the tools of analytic philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

Accompanying this rejuvenated focus on time was a renewed interest in how we ought to understand the relationship between time and God. Much of this attention may be described as a discussion over what sense there can be made of the claim, deeply embedded in the Christian tradition, that God is eternal. Many participants in the discussion argued that God's relationship to time is not rightly construed as that of an atemporal eternity, but rather as an everlasting existence in and throughout time. From a variety of voices came a trenchant criticism of the traditional understanding of God's relationship to time.

3. Two examples that readily suggest themselves are the Schroediger's cat thought experiment, and an entertaining essay, David Deutsch and Michael Lockwood, "The Quantum Physics of Time Travel," *Scientific American* (1994): 68–74.

4. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1962).

5. Stephen Toulmin and June Goodfield, *The Discovery of Time* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965.)

Among theologians, two obvious examples of those who accepted this criticism are Robert Jenson<sup>6</sup> (in whose work the criticism is explicit) and Thomas Torrance<sup>7</sup> (where it is more implicit). I believe that one can make the case that Eberhard Jüngel and Jürgen Moltmann assume the validity of the criticism, and incorporate it into their work.<sup>8</sup> In addition, many philosophers and philosophers of religion have argued against the traditional understanding of God's eternity,<sup>9</sup> so many, indeed, that it would be accurate to describe the position as dominant in philosophical theology.

For all of these who take this tack, theologians and philosophers alike, their arguments amount to a conscious rejection of the conception of God's relationship to time that had until relatively recently dominated the Christian tradition and indeed all of Western philosophical thought. This traditional conception holds that God is not in time, but exists outside of time; that is, God always exists, but cannot be temporally located and thus confined, and furthermore is

6. Robert W. Jenson, *God after God: The God of the Past and the God of the Future, Seen in the Work of Karl Barth* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969); Robert W. Jenson, "Does God Have Time? The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Concept of Time in the Physical Sciences," *CTNS Bulletin* 11 (1991): 1-6; Robert W. Jenson, *Unbaptized God: The Basic Flaw in Ecumenical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

7. Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).

8. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theologie der Hoffnung* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1965); Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (London: SCM Press, 1967); Eberhard Jüngel, *Gottes Sein ist im Werden: verantwortliche Rede vom Sein Gottes bei Karl Barth: eine Paraphrase*, 4th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1986); Eberhard Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. John Webster (T. & T. Clark, 2001).

9. It should be sufficient to cite a few representative works: Charles Hartshorne and William L. Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); W. C. Kneale, "Time and Eternity in Theology," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 61 (1961): 87-108; Martha Kneale, "Eternity and Sempiternity," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 69 (1969): 223-38; Anthony Kenny, "Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom," in *Aquinas: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Anthony Kenny (Garden City, NY: Doubleday-Anchor, 1969), 255-70; Nicholas Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," in *God and the Good*, ed. Clifton J. Orlebeke and Lewis M. Smedes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 181-203; Alan G. Padgett, *God, Eternity, and the Nature of Time* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

not subject to the limitations and burdens of time to which temporal creatures are subject.

The traditional conception also has its defenders, some of whom, beginning in the early 1980s, joined the conversation to challenge the challengers.<sup>10</sup> The new defenders of divine timeless eternity have creatively thought anew about the traditional concept of eternity, so as to draw on its benefits and correct its shortcomings. I am convinced that they pose a significant challenge to those for whom the literal temporality of God has become an unquestioned article of faith.

### **Approaching the Question through Barth's Theology**

These mid- to late- twentieth-century developments marked a new phase for the question of God's relationship to time. To be sure, those developments were stimulating, showing (for example) a refreshing openness to the post-Einsteinian physics. However, I will argue (throughout, although mainly in chapters 3 and 4) that the apparent disregard for the Western theological tradition of reflection on eternity in these developments is unwarranted. In a number of theologians who accept the modern view of God's temporality (again, I see Robert Jenson as an important example) I find a curious stance that, when it comes to the question of God and time, the past has nothing of value to contribute but must be entirely rejected. Yet we impoverish ourselves if we regard earlier answers as negligible. We have a twofold opportunity: to allow the old answers to speak to our modern questions, and to use our contemporary perspective to gain insight on historic contributions.

10. The following would count as able representatives: Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity"; Paul Helm, *Eternal God: A Study of God without Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

The burden of this project is to show that this twofold opportunity is present in the theology of Karl Barth. On the question of God's relationship to time, on the puzzle over the nature of eternity, the contributions may surely run in both directions. Barth has a position that deserves our attention. Furthermore, a perspective shaped by the discussions over the last forty years enables one to explore Barth's position in ways not possible before. In Barth's mature theology, we find a full, rich, and fascinating understanding of God's relationship to time. Not surprisingly, Barth's is a thoroughly *theological* answer to the question. It is theological in that (again, not surprisingly) it is intimately connected with Barth's doctrine of the Trinity and with his doctrine of revelation. For that reason, Barth's statements about God, time, and eternity are sometimes difficult to follow. Indeed, to some they often seem contradictory.<sup>11</sup>

Yet it is precisely at this point that Barth's work provides us with the twofold opportunity I wish to pursue. Barth has, it will be shown, a deeply theological, complex, and often metaphorical understanding of time and eternity. That understanding can provide some guidance for us in the contemporary, paradoxical age of quantum theory, analytic philosophy, deconstructionism, and postmodernity try to think about God and time. But today's conversations, particularly the philosophical conversation about divine atemporal eternity, may in turn give us a new opportunity to understand Barth afresh, for they can provide an important conceptual context in which to understand Barth's ideas about God and time.

It is surely the case that Barth deserves to be understood afresh. For on the question of God, time, and eternity, until recently Barth has not been given the careful attention he deserves. Many who have actually read Barth have, furthermore, interpreted his views

11. William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 36.

on God and time in a less than satisfactory way. In particular, the common practice seems to be for theologians to make much of Barth's statements about God's temporality, God's time, God's historicity, in addition to Barth's expressed antipathy to more Platonic conceptions of God. So far, so good. But then these statements are usually read as giving explicit support to a theological conception of God's absolute temporality, such that no distinction from creaturely temporality seems to remain.<sup>12</sup> What is missing in these interpretations is acknowledgment that Barth also found much that was theologically necessary in the traditional conception of eternity. More importantly, also missing is an awareness of the all-important doctrinal context of Barth's statements.<sup>13</sup>

Such a reading of Barth is common among his admirers. Among others, however, the tendency is to notice Barth's genuine interest in a more or less traditional concept of eternity, but to judge such interest as evidence of conceptual incoherence<sup>14</sup> or of theological inadequacy.<sup>15</sup>

The latter tendency is clear in the work of Richard Roberts. Roberts sees the whole of the *Church Dogmatics* as a monolithic and totalitarian theological system that is closed off from real life, and posits the dialectic of time and eternity to be the key to the *Dogmatics*, assessing it as the fuel that drives the system's isolation. Roberts's criticisms are important because they point to a significant issue:<sup>16</sup>

12. Although such an approach seems common, I have in mind particularly Jenson, *God after God* and Jenson, *Unbaptized God*, chapters 8 and 10.

13. Neglect of this data also seems to play into the tendency of these interpreters of Barth to overemphasize the distinction between the early Barth and the later Barth, particularly between the second edition of *Römerbrief* and the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*. We will return to this point in chapter 4.

14. One representative of this stance is Padgett, *God, Eternity, and the Nature of Time*.

15. See Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History* (London: SCM Press, 1962); and Richard H. Roberts, *A Theology on Its Way? Essays on Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991).

16. However, Barth himself was concerned about this issue.

our understanding of God and time should not carry implications that deny all freedom to God or human beings. Yet Roberts's work represents a seriously flawed interpretation of Barth, for it fails to see the genuine openness of the *Dogmatics*. It furthermore perpetuates the long-standing yet fruitless attempt to seek one concept, in this case the dialectic of time and eternity, that alone provides coherence to the whole of the *Church Dogmatics*, an attempt that has since been discredited by the work of George Hunsinger.<sup>17</sup>

### The Thesis of This Work

For these reasons, a new look at Karl Barth on the question of God's eternity is needed, not only to move beyond flawed interpretations, and not simply to achieve a better understanding of Barth's theology, but also to gain greater insight into the issue itself by means of Barth's work. In this book I propose just such a new look. The thesis to be pursued has, to some small extent, already been implied, but I now state it explicitly.

Karl Barth's understanding of God's relationship to time, of God's eternity, is thoroughly theological (that is, both its subject matter and its method of development arise from reflection on the being and works of God). Consequently, it can be comprehended only if one understands the *doctrinal context* out of which his ideas on time and eternity develop. Furthermore, Barth's theological judgments about the meaning of time and eternity and their relationship to each other are not well understood unless one understands the *conceptual context* out of which his judgments grew and, in part, against which they reacted. Finally, Barth's understanding of time and eternity evolved over time; yet, within that growth and development, continuity is

17. George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).



far more important than discontinuity.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, Barth is not well understood on the question before us unless one understands the *developmental context* of Barth's views.

When we pay attention to each of these three contexts, we come away with the following picture. For Barth, God is not determined or confined by time as human beings are, but neither is God completely alien to time. In different senses, God is neither temporal nor atemporal, and, in yet still different senses, God is both temporal and atemporal. One cannot express Barth's understanding of God's eternity by saying simply and without qualification that for Barth God is temporal.<sup>19</sup>

Through critical appropriation of classical understandings of God's eternity, particularly those developed by Augustine, Boëthius, and Anselm, Barth expresses this radically other relationship to time by creative use of three Christian doctrines, from which two major patterns emerge. The three principal doctrines he uses are the doctrines of the Trinity, revelation, and the person of Jesus Christ. The two patterns derived from these doctrines, which weave themselves throughout the entire *Church Dogmatics* and are used as structuring devices or rhetorical tools (and thus are not simply restatements of their originating doctrines), are the pattern of God's threefold eternity, and the pattern of the distinction and the connection between God's being in God's own self (God's being *ad*

18. Such a point is one of the many significant things to be learned from McCormack's groundbreaking work on Barth's early theological development. His influence is found in those sections dealing with the developmental context. Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909–1936* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Bruce L. McCormack, "A Scholastic of a Higher Order: The Development of Karl Barth's Theology, 1921–31" (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1989).

19. Nor, for that matter, can one adequately convey Barth's position by saying without further explication that, for Barth, God is atemporal. However, it appears that the oversimplification stated above is by far the more common one.

*intra*, the ontic Trinity) and God's being as revealed toward the world (God's economy or God's being *ad extra*, the noetic Trinity).

The first pattern, that of God's threefold eternity, is an exceedingly important piece of Barth's thought. Barth portrayed divine eternity as a living relationality structured as God's pretemporality, supratemporality, and posttemporality. That is, God is the origin of all time, God accompanies or contains all time, and God is there after time as its goal and hope.

In so structuring his concept of divine eternity, Barth sought to express a distinction and yet a positive *relationship* between eternity and time. Eternity is described not as merely atemporality, but rather, in this threefold way, with each aspect, pre-, supra-, and posttemporality, *having time in view*. The terms by which Barth defines eternity (*Vorzeitlichkeit, Überzeitlichkeit, Nachzeitlichkeit*) point to a conception of eternity that is oriented to time rather than alienated from it. However, as a temporality that is before, above, and after time, in Barth eternity is clearly distinct from time as it is typically understood and experienced. The temporal cast to Barth's construction notwithstanding, eternity is not the same as time.

The importance of this first pattern is seen in another, more doctrinal, matter. In giving eternity this threefold structure, Barth thereby connects eternity with his doctrine of the Trinity. The connection is demonstrated not simply because he had a threefold understanding of eternity. The mere occurrence of a pattern of three does not a trinity make. Rather, the connection of Barth's concept of eternity with his doctrine of the Trinity is seen in a much more substantive, and doctrinal, focus. This conception of eternity, with its threefold cast, is understood *perichoretically*.

The doctrine of *perichoresis* in traditional dogmatics is a means of describing the relations between the persons of the Trinity. Those

relations, the doctrine insists, are mutual and cooperative, unified yet distinct. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist and work together in such a way that they are both united with and distinct from each other. To say that Barth's threefold conception of eternity is perichoretic is to say that the relations among the three aspects of eternity are construed in analogy with the relations among the persons of the Trinity. Pre-, post-, and supratemporality are to be understood as describing divine realities that may be distinguished but not ultimately separated from one another, and that must be understood in their relation to each other.

We see this threefold pattern throughout the *Dogmatics*, not only as a structuring device, and not only as reflecting the doctrine of the Trinity, but put to use in Barth's Christology. For Barth, Jesus is the Lord of time,<sup>20</sup> because the risen Lord reveals to us the unity of his past life, death, and resurrection; his presence with us; and his future coming, such unity mirroring the eternal being of God, for whom past, present, and future are one, to whom the entire divine life is present.

The second major pattern that emerges from Barth's doctrinal formulation of divine eternity is one I will call the pattern of revelation. It is, as Hunsinger might describe it, a pattern of dialectical inclusion.<sup>21</sup> It is a pattern reflected in the very distinction and relation between time and eternity Barth is careful to draw. Fundamentally, or rather, with regard to the most basic doctrines of the faith, this pattern is found in the distinction and relation that Barth draws between the economy and the being of God, that is, between God in God's works and God in God's self. For Barth, in express opposition to Schleiermacher, the doctrine of the Trinity is not a doctrine of

20. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956–69), III/2, §47.1. Hereafter *CD*.

21. Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, e.g., 107.

an *economic* Trinity only, saying only how God appears to us, but a doctrine of an *immanent* Trinity as well, indicating who God really is. Barth believed that it is only through the economy that we know God, and that the God thus known is the real God. For Barth, revelation is a real making known *of* God *by* God, a self-disclosure of the inner life of God. Yet what God reveals is revealed through God's works; we know God only through them. We know God *ad intra* or *a se* by means of God *ad extra* or *pro nobis*. Yet Barth is careful never to collapse the two into each other, for God's freedom and mystery prevent a simple identification of our knowledge of God with the inner being of God. However, the revelational dialectic of God's veiling and unveiling, of God's being and act, expresses Barth's conviction that we can know something true about God, while it also preserves the mystery and freedom of God. This very significant pattern pervades the entirety of the *Church Dogmatics*.

The dialectic of the economy and the being of God determines a parallel dialectic of time and eternity. Many times throughout the *Church Dogmatics* we find Barth speaking of time and eternity. These many instances could give the impression (as it apparently does for Roberts) that this dialectic is itself a fundamental key to the whole of the *Church Dogmatics*. Yet that would be a mistake. It is very important to notice that the time–eternity dialectic in the *Church Dogmatics* is used as a shorthand for a more fundamental dialectic of revelation: the economy and the being of God—God for us and God in God's own being. As Karl-Hinrich Manzke puts it, “The relationship of time and eternity is for Barth an essential means for bringing into effect the subject of theology as a whole.”<sup>22</sup>

22. “Die Relation von Zeit und Ewigkeit ist für Barth ein wesentliches Mittel, um das Thema der Theologie insgesamt zur Ausführung zu bringen.” Karl Hinrich Manzke, *Ewigkeit und Zeitlichkeit: Aspekte für eine theologische Deutung der Zeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1992), 490.

## Terms and Scope

Before we turn to the investigation that lies before us, allow me to clarify a few items. First, throughout I frequently use the word *eternality*.<sup>23</sup> I do this quite intentionally. My purpose in using this uncommon word is to suggest that for Barth, God's eternity is not a thing separate from God's own being, such as a place in which God exists, but is rather a perfection<sup>24</sup> of God's being, an integral aspect of God's nature, which, because of divine simplicity,<sup>25</sup> is connected with all of God's other perfections. As George Hunsinger puts it so well, "Eternity for Barth is not the container in which God lives. It is a predicate of God's triune being."<sup>26</sup> Gotthard Oblau nicely speaks of eternity for Barth being God's "form of existence": "Eternity and time are thus related to each other analogically: As time is the form of existence for human beings, so eternity is the form of existence for God. As time is the formal principle of human history, so eternity is the formal principle of history in the divine being."<sup>27</sup>

In other, perhaps more philosophical, contexts, eternity might be called a *mode of God's being* or a *mode of existence*. But in the context of interpreting Barth, this expression could be misleading, since Barth uses *modes of being* to describe the persons of the divine Trinity. Also, one might mistakenly infer from the phrase that God may or may not exist in that mode at a given moment, that, essentially, such a "mode" is not intrinsic to God's being. In short, the important thing here is

23. It is likewise used frequently by Stump and Kretzmann.

24. *Perfections* is Barth's preferred word for the divine attributes.

25. The doctrine of divine simplicity holds that God does not have parts but is a whole.

26. Hunsinger, "Mysterium Trinitatis: Karl Barth's Conception of Eternity," in *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 189.

27. "Die Ewigkeit und die Zeit stehen also zueinander im Verhältnis der Analogie: Wie die Zeit die Daseinsform des Menschen ist, so ist die Ewigkeit die Daseinsform Gottes. Wie die Zeit das formale Prinzip der Geschichte der Menschen ist, so ist die Ewigkeit das formale Prinzip der Geschichte im göttlichen Dasein." Gotthard Oblau, *Gotteszeit und Menschenzeit: Eschatologie in der Kirchlichen Dogmatik von Karl Barth* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1988), 120.

that, for the purposes of this book, eternity/eternality is not a thing separate from God, but is an aspect of the very being of God.

Second, I wish to make clear the specific meaning of the word *doctrine* as I use it here. In the context of Karl Barth's theological work, a doctrine is the articulation of a dogma of the church. It describes a fundamental theological reality to which the Christian faith points and that may be considered basic to the faith. For Barth, there are several doctrines, but not everything is a doctrine. Among those that are would be the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of Jesus Christ. Barth's work contains other items that, although significant, are not doctrines in this sense, although they grow out of his treatment of doctrines. Barth's scriptural hermeneutics may be one: it is a significant piece of Barth's work, it grows out of his understanding of the doctrines of revelation and Scripture, but he does not raise it to the level of a doctrine. Something similar may be said about Barth's understanding of eternity. It is a very important feature of Barth's theology, it grows out of his doctrinal exposition of several church dogmas, but it is itself not a doctrine. For this reason, I am careful throughout this book to speak of Barth's concept or teaching of time and eternity, but not of his doctrine of time and eternity.

I should also make clear the scope of this investigation. I have excluded, perhaps quite noticeably for some, significant exploration of two areas. The first of these is the relationship between theology and science. I have chosen to keep that area of inquiry out of this book for reasons that flow from my stated objectives above: to move beyond flawed interpretations of Barth, to understand more adequately Barth's contribution on this matter, and to gain better understanding of the underlying theological issue of the nature of God's relationship to time. Certainly with regard to the first two of these, but also, in this context, with regard to the third, the

extension of our inquiry into scientific cosmology or theoretical physics would yield very little benefit. Not to be too simplistic, but I find it pretty clear that Barth's working out of the question of time and eternity is a matter of systematic theology and perhaps, as an ancillary discipline, of philosophy. Questions of physics and quantum mechanics, although very important in other contexts, recede in importance within the context of explicating Barth's thought. Even with regard to that third goal, using Barth's theological understanding of God's relationship to time, I see little benefit from expanding the scope of this thesis to include the work of theoretical physics.

Such is by no means universally accepted. Thomas Torrance wrote quite often of the connections between science and theology,<sup>28</sup> and did so in some cases as an interpretation of Barth. At least one relatively recent dissertation has drawn on Barth and the natural sciences in order to propose a Christian theological concept of time and eternity.<sup>29</sup> Such explorations of scientific connections have no doubt been interesting, and even productive in certain ways. But I am convinced that what is needed is a careful interpretation of Barth on eternity and time; and, specifically, such an interpretation must keep the scientific questions and interconnections in the wings, for they are not immediately relevant to the interpretive task. To exclude these questions is not to say that they are unimportant. Rather, they are excluded here only for the sake of keeping the path clear for our main task.

28. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation; Theological Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); *Belief in Science and in Christian Life: The Relevance of Michael Polanyi's Thought for Christian Faith and Life* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1980); *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); *Reality and Scientific Theology* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1985).

29. Duane Howard Larson, "The Temporality of the Trinity: A Christian Theological Concept of Time and Eternity in View of Contemporary Physical Theory" (PhD diss., Graduate Theological Union, 1993).

Indeed, there is some warrant to be found for this decision in Barth's own statements. He had great respect for other forms of inquiry. Yet he believed that theology had its own contribution to make, and must speak on its own terms. When discussing the nature of time, under the heading "Man in His Time" (§47), he has this to say:

It is obvious that the problem of time, too, is a problem of all anthropology. We cannot, therefore, ignore the attempts and conclusions of other non-theological understandings of being. But this should not debar us from approaching the problem from our own particular standpoint, the theological; and therefore from noting what is revealed to us in this respect by the Word of God.<sup>30</sup>

Yet there is another, more substantive reason for excluding discussion of science. Scientific discussions describe time as particles, waves, quantum phenomena, light cones, and the movements of the heavenly bodies. Barth describes time doctrinally, that is, in the context of the covenant, Christology, the doctrine of the Trinity, and revelation. Barth will even, to make a point, speak of time phenomenologically, that is, by describing how human beings, particularly *fallen* human beings, experience time. Certainly, the scientific, doctrinal, and phenomenological are all quite appropriate fields of discourse for the subject of time. Yet it must be emphasized that they are not the *same* fields of discourse. A pronouncement in one field may not be transferred uncritically over to another. We see such uncritical transference frequently in theology, where scientific statements about time are turned into phenomenological statements, and phenomenological statements are placed into a scientific context, without reflection or qualification.

30. CD III/2, 439.



For this reason also, I intend here to keep the scientific material at bay, even in those sections that are more constructive rather than interpretive, so as to prevent the uncritical transference between fields of discourse that causes so many problems in works that seek to connect science and theology. Certainly, this work now bears the burden of having to demonstrate that it has not unreflectively transferred statements from a doctrinal or theological sphere into a phenomenological sphere, or vice versa. The possibility of such transference, however, parallels the problem of the relationship between theology and philosophy, a problem with which almost every page of this work is concerned.

The scope of this work is thus delineated, in one respect, by the exclusion of scientific questions. The second area I have chosen to limit (likewise perhaps to the surprise of some) is exegesis of Scripture. In some theological works on time, extensive discussions of Scripture find a prominent place.<sup>31</sup> It will be noticed that this work does not engage in lengthy exegesis of scriptural texts. Such absence has several reasons. First, this book is primarily an interpretation of Karl Barth's theological reflections on time. While his exegesis of scriptural passages undoubtedly informs his theological judgments about the nature of time and God's bearing toward time, his exegesis is not what is in view here, but rather the theological conclusions that were the result of his reflection on the witness of Scripture.

A second, more substantive, reason would relate to any constructive objective achieved in this work, as well as the interpretive objectives. In short, one must ask what kind of insight

31. Most obvious in this regard are Cullmann, *Christ and Time*; J. Marsh, *The Fulness of Time* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1952); John A. T. Robinson, *In the End, God . . . : A Study of the Christian Doctrine of the Last Things* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968). These three works in particular were criticized quite extensively by James Barr in *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961) and *Biblical Words for Time*, *Studies in Biblical Theology* 33 (London: SCM, 1962). Padgett, *God, Eternity, and the Nature of Time*, draws on Barr's criticisms, but, in my view, draws faulty conclusions from them.

into the nature of time and of eternity one hopes to gain from Scripture. Although the witness of Scripture, in whatever unity it has, may have implications regarding time and eternity, it is rather too much to say that the Bible, in all its literary diversity, has a single understanding of time and eternity. Certainly, the problem of the unity and the diversity of Scripture is far beyond the scope of this book. It should be clear that I am taking for granted that Scripture is diverse, and that the obviously difficult task is to discern the unity therein.<sup>32</sup>

James Barr made the point very forcefully that Scripture does not have a single concept of time, or of eternity, and that it is quite illegitimate to analyze the lexical stocks found in biblical texts in order to discern fundamental concepts underlying the psyches of the peoples whom the biblical authors represent. In short, it is quite risky to go looking in the Bible for one biblical concept of time. Indeed, as Barr has shown quite clearly and thoroughly, the question “What is the nature of time and eternity in biblical thought? is a question for which the Bible itself gives no precedent, and one for the answering of which it affords so little material that [the] appeal [of a writer such as Cullmann] has to be one to the lexical stock of the Bible rather than to its actual statements.”<sup>33</sup> Moreover, there is a “very serious shortage within the Bible of the kind of *actual statement* about time or eternity which could form a sufficient basis for a Christian philosophical-theological view of time. It is the lack of actual statements about what time is like, more than anything else, that has forced exegetes into trying to get a view of time out of the *words* themselves.”<sup>34</sup> For these reasons, Barr suggests that the question should be handled much

32. A conversation with George Hunsinger was instructive on this matter.

33. James Barr, *Biblical Words for Time*, 150.

34. *Ibid.*, 131–32. Also cited in Helm, *Eternal God*, 5f.

more frankly and more completely within the area of philosophical theology.<sup>35</sup>

What Barr meant precisely by the term *philosophical theology* is perhaps open to different readings, but there is little reason to suppose that he would wish to exclude an approach that was thoroughly a work of dogmatic or systematic theology. With regard to interpretation of Barth, I am convinced that whatever Barth sought in Scripture, he was not seeking some one biblical view of time and eternity with which to be (naively) in correspondence.<sup>36</sup>

With these reasons I hope to have made clear why I have focused my task as I have. The path I will take throughout is as follows. I will first explore each of the three formative contexts of Barth's understanding of God and time: the conceptual, the developmental, and the doctrinal. After looking at each of those contexts, I will pursue a more specific analysis of time and eternity in the *Church Dogmatics*. I will conclude with some critical and constructive observations.

35. Barr, *Biblical Words for Time*, 151.

36. Oblau says that Barth's view of time more likely corresponds to the biblical view of time (der biblischen Anschauung von der Zeit). Oblau, *Gotteszeit und Menschenzeit*, 37. I find this inadequate from an interpretive and a theological point of view.