God of Salvation
Soteriology in Theological Perspective

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Chapter 8
Salvation’s Setting:
Election, Justification and the Church
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I

As its title suggests, this chapter is about salvation, the new life in and through Jesus Christ, promised and announced in the gospel, which it is the church’s singular responsibility to make known in word and deed in all times and places. Strictly speaking, salvation is experienced in the form of anticipation, but as such it is experienced in the reality of worldly existence. The fullness of salvation is an eschatological affair: it occurs when the reign or kingdom of God comes in its fullness at the end of the age.¹ The shape and content of the new life ‘in Christ’ or ‘in the Spirit’ are characterized in the New Testament in many different ways, among these through metaphors of justification, reconciliation and redemption. It is always assumed that this life will be ecclesial, though this in no way suggests that it is not in the space and history of this world. There is a sense, then, in which the church is ‘salvation’s setting’, inasmuch as the concrete practices of this community give expression to the meaning and implications of the gift of salvation, and the church gives praise to God for this gift.

But the experience of salvation, fragmentary and incomplete as it is, also has its setting in a theological framework, as distinct from its empirical setting, in the salvific plan (the eternal purpose) and action of God. The New Testament knows this as the ‘economy of the mystery hidden for ages in God’ (Eph. 3:9), which has come to expression in ‘the boundless riches of Christ’ (Eph. 3:8).² The theology of the Eastern church has taken up the concept of the divine economy as a shorthand expression for the mystery of salvation and shared it with the church of the West. For the writer to the Colossians, this ‘mystery’ has a name: Jesus Christ (Col. 2:2). He is ‘the mysterion of God as the one who brings salvation to all creation, the inheritance … of the kingdom of God’.³

¹ See Christiaan Mostert, ‘Justification and Eschatology’ in Michael Weinrich and John P. Burgess (eds), What is Justification About? Reformed Contributions to an Ecumenical Theme (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 185–206.
² See also Eph. 1:9 and the whole passage of Eph. 3:3–11; also Col. 1:26.
To speak of the *economy* of ‘the mystery hidden for ages in God’ is to speak of God’s eternal being. In trinitarian terms, it is to speak of the *essential or immanent* Trinity, the presupposition of the *economic* Trinity. It is to think of what kind of God God is from ‘time before time’, as the Orthodox describe eternity. In this context Christian theology has spoken of God’s sovereign freedom to be as God in fact is. The very life of God, far from being determined by some other being, is self-determined. As Karl Barth puts it, ‘God’s being as He who lives and loves is being in freedom’.⁴ God is known through the *economy*, which is to say that God is identified narratively, through the stories of the people of Israel and definitively through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. On this basis God’s *being* can be described in more abstract statements about the divine attributes, or what is to be predicated of God as *God*. Colin Gunton refers to these as God’s ‘defining characteristics’.⁵ With support from Christoph Schwöbel, he argues that a theology of God’s being and a theology of God’s action are complementary; neither can be dispensed with. What is to be avoided, however, is the ‘past’ of Greek conceptions of divine attributes on to biblical conceptions of divine action, especially if this makes it impossible to attribute to God what the narrative of God’s action in the world in Jesus Christ requires us to say about God.⁶ God’s being is not reducible to God’s acts, but is expressed in and through them. As Barth writes, ‘[G]od is not ... who He is only in His works. Yet in Himself He is not another than He is in His works’.⁷ Only this gives finite human creatures the confidence to say anything at all about who God is and what God is like. Minimally, the *economic* Trinity is the lens through which we see the mystery of the *immanent* Trinity, God *in se*.

However, to distinguish between the *immanent* (or eternal) and the *economic* Trinity is to speak of the *being* of God, not just about the human *knowing* of God. To speak about justification is to speak, if only implicitly, about the *being* of the God whose work salvation is, a work most fittingly described as the work of the Father through the Son in the Spirit. To ask about salvation is to ask about the character of the one who saves. Only a particular God is the author, the agent and the perfecter of the salvation which humankind knows through the testimony of Holy Scripture. In articulating the doctrine of God, however, it is axiomatic that the identity of the God who is creator of all things, visible and invisible, is self-determined; God is not caused to be what God is by anything else that exists. In classical terms, God *elects* to be who he is. Christian theology has used the notion of *election* first of all in relation to God’s own being, as ‘three-personed’ or ‘tripersonal’,⁸ and then in relation to that which is other than God. In the next section we consider the doctrine of election in both of these aspects.

**II**

Few doctrines of the Christian faith are more open to misunderstanding, indeed outright repudiation, than the doctrine of election. This is especially the case when election is equated with predestination, particularly double predestination: the doctrine that by divine decree some people are foreordained to everlasting life, others to everlasting death, irrespective of merits or faults of their own. It is a doctrine that has found its most fertile soil in Reformed theology. Calvin himself, though regarding this teaching as difficult, confusing and even dangerous,⁹ gives the following summary of the doctrine:

As Scripture, then, clearly shows, we say that God once established by his eternal and unchangeable plan those whom he long before determined once for all to receive into salvation, and those whom, on the other hand, he would devote to destruction. We assert that, with respect to the elect, this plan was founded upon his freely given mercy, without regard to human worth; but by his just and irreprehensible but incomprehensible judgment he has barred the door of life to those whom he has given over to damnation.¹⁰

If this is to be heard as ‘good news’, as it is said to be, it is good news only to those who are predestined to salvation. If this decree is an actualization of God’s mercy, freely given, as it is said to be, it is a very selective mercy. To have ‘the door of life’ barred to one is no small matter.

Karl Barth, for whom the doctrine of election is ‘the last or first or central word in the whole doctrine of reconciliation’,¹¹ takes this doctrine in a very different direction from his patristic and Reformation forebears, especially Calvin. On the basis of the apostle Paul’s verdict about God’s calling of Israel, which has not been revoked, Barth declares that election is and must be about grace. ‘The doctrine of election is the sum of the gospel because of all words that can be said or heard it is the best: that God elects man; that God is for man too the One who loves in

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⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956–75) [hereafter CD], I/1, p. 301.
⁷ Barth, CD II/1, p. 260.
¹¹ Barth, CD II/2, p. 88.
freedom." Election is about grace, and this means before anything else that it is about the love of God. It is not about an eternal decree of God abstracted from Jesus Christ; neither is it about God’s omnipotence or providence.

For Barth, there is no other way to speak of election than Christologically. In Stacy Johnson’s words, ‘the figure of Jesus is the hinge upon which election turns, both ontically and noetically’. For what happened under the name of Jesus Christ is that ‘God Himself realised in time, and therefore as an object of human perception, the self-giving of Himself as the Covenant-partner of the people determined by Him from to and all eternity’. Barth then sets out on the most radical Christological reshaping of this doctrine: Christ himself is the divine election of grace. At the beginning of his discussion he announces the theme: ‘the eternal beginning of all the ways and works of God in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ God in his free grace determines himself for sinful man and sinful man for himself. He therefore takes upon Himself the rejection of man with all its consequences, and elects man to participation in His own glory’. If we are to speak of an eternal decree, it can only be understood in Christological terms.

Election is thus an eternal determination which, at the right time, is given effect in a particular time and place in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is in the first place about God’s self-determination. ‘... in the mystery of what takes place from and to all eternity within Himself, within His triune being, God is none other than the One who in His Son or Word elects himself ...’. At issue here is God’s disposition; God has determined upon a covenant of grace with the human covenant-partner who is already anticipated, as it were, from eternity. God the Father determines, in the fullness of time (Gal. 4:4), to send the Son into the world for its salvation. In the English-speaking world particular care needs to be taken with the idea of determination, since its typical context is the problem of free will and causal determinism. But that is not the semantic context here; to determine for oneself a particular kind of disposition and action implies no negation of freedom; it presupposes it. God is self-determining. At issue here, as Johnson says, is ‘an eternal determination [of God] at the beginning that reaches a concrete result within human history’.

Barth’s discussion of election has recently been interpreted in a particularly radical way, as meaning that the covenant of grace is in itself already constitutive of God’s being from eternity. Bruce McCormack argues that for Barth the Logos asarkos is from the beginning the Logos incarnatus (the Word ‘to be incarnate’) though of course he was not the Logos ensarkos (the Word incarnate) till he came and dwelt among us (Jn. 1:14). This means that ‘there is no Logos in and for himself in distinction from God’s act of turning toward the world and humanity in predestination’. The (anticipated) act of reconciliation is constitutive of God’s being; ‘what God is essentially is itself constituted by an eternal act of Self-determination for becoming incarnate in time ...’. The implication of such a view of the foundational status of election is that it makes the immanent Trinity identical with the economic Trinity. More contentiously, ‘the triunity of God’ is to be seen ‘logically as a function of divine election ... The decision for the covenant of grace is the ground of God’s trinity, therefore, of the eternal generation of the Son and of the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit ...’. Unsurprisingly, this is strongly disputed by other interpreters of Barth, notably Paul Molnar, who consider that McCormack makes creation, reconciliation and redemption ‘necessary’ for God, and that a denial of God’s freedom is entailed by such a view. Molnar’s agenda is to safeguard the distinction between the immanent and the economic Trinity. He argues that for Barth ‘the Trinity exists eternally in its own right’ and that the covenant of grace expresses a logically subsequent will of God to direct ad extra the eternal love that is expressed in the intra-trinitarian relations.

It is not possible in the space available to comment in detail on this difference of interpretation. It is difficult to see how McCormack can be accused of making election a necessity: God is still, on the latter’s view, a being who lives and acts in freedom. It is clear from the discussion of Barth above that God’s self-determination to be for humankind in a covenant of grace is as much from eternity as God’s self-determination as triune. Nor is there any threat of a collapse of the immanent Trinity into the economic Trinity: that the Logos asarkos is also the Logos incarnatus – he does not become incarnatus in time – in no way removes the difference between the Logos asarkos and the Logos ensarkos, which is the point. However, if it should be important to establish a logical priority of God’s self-constituting triune being over God’s determination to be God for humankind or vice versa, one must incline toward the view of Molnar. The question hinges on the difference between God’s self-constitution and God’s self-determination. As to God’s self-constitution, the first thing that Barth says about God is that God simply is; God is self-moving. Unlike every other being, God is ‘absolutely [God’s] own, conscious, willed and executed decision’, executed once for all in eternity, and

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12 Barth, CD II/2, p. 3.
14 Barth, CD II/2, p. 53.
15 Barth, CD II/2, p. 94.
16 Barth, CD II/2, p. 76.
22 Molnar, Divine Freedom, p. 63.
24 Barth, CD II/1, pp. 257–72, esp. pp. 269 ff.
to fall on the Son, Jesus Christ. In a cryptic statement Barth says that, in electing fellowship with the human being, God 'elected our rejection', God 'elected our suffering'; but God 'elected it as His own suffering'. Humankind, on the other hand, is elected to bear the image of God, becoming a participant in the image of Christ, who is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15).

The theological discussion of the human person, elected in Christ for fellowship with God, cannot be free-floating or plotted between various philosophical or sociological coordinates. That would be to miss what Barth calls 'the one Archimedean point given us beyond humanity', the one possibility we have of knowing our true ontological determination. There is no Christian anthropology that does not stand in the closest relation to Christology. What the human person is, is learnt from the man Jesus, in particular in his relation to God and to other human beings. We stand in a history determined by the divine election, tangibly and visibly expressed in the life of Jesus Christ. We participate in his election and in his response, as *vere homo*, to the divine determination to be God for us. The human response to God's gracious election of us to be God's covenant-partner is actualized in the one person, Jesus Christ; it is at once a representative response on behalf of, and an exemplary response for, humankind as a whole. As such it enables and empowers those who abide in him to make their own response of gratitude and service, imperfect though that is bound to be.

To be 'determined' for covenant-partnership with God is to be determined for life and freedom, for faith and fellowship with Christ. In the history that follows the eternal election of God and humankind in Christ, humankind is free to enter into the actuality of its election or not. This freedom hinges on hearing of this election (Rom. 10:14), a hearing which requires a thick description, for the capacity to hear can be dulled or distorted by all kinds of things, not least features in ecclesial life and practice that obscure the gospel. Nevertheless, Barth is right to say that 'the purpose and meaning of the eternal divine election of grace consists in the fact that the one who is elected from all eternity can and does elect God in return'.

The election that is actual from eternity becomes actual on our side when we 'elect' God in return and are made free for friendship with Jesus Christ (Jn. 15:15). Even where this does not happen, where the divine Yes meets with a human No, where the identity given by the divine election is declined, the riches of the divine Yes are not exhausted. Barth considers at some length the situation of those who 'go on living as Satan's prisoner', culminating in the confrontation of the for of Jesus and the against of Judas, one of the most subtle and moving sections of Church Dogmatics. Those who stand with Judas live in their rejection, and the seriousness of this is not to be underestimated. But the last word is that Jesus died for Judas as

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25 Barth, *CD II/1*, p. 271.
26 To quote from the sublime answer to the first question of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (1648).
27 Barth, *CD II/2*, p. 125.
29 Barth, *CD II/2*, p. 164.
30 Barth, *CD III/2*, p. 132.
31 Barth, *CD II/2*, p. 178.
32 Barth, *CD II/2*, p. 450.
much as for anyone else. The promise of election ‘always outlasts and excels and surpasses its rejection’.33

As for those who have never, even in the most minimal sense, ‘heard’ what the church proclaims, their election in Christ cannot be in doubt. For those with an unreconstructed view of election, the question whether people of other faiths or none might possibly be among the elect is likely to receive a negative answer. Those whose view inclines toward a universal salvation — not necessarily as a principle that conditions God’s freedom — will find as strong an impetus in this corollary of election as anywhere. The question is whether the doctrine of election, particularly Barth’s form of it, grounded in the election of Christ and the consequent election of humankind, can bear the weight of the biblical assumption that grace is received in faith and met with faithfulness. Katherine Sonderegger offers a picture of Jesus and his mission which reflects the fact that in our time the Christian faith is one among many faiths in the world and which is consistent with a strong emphasis on a Christologically grounded doctrine of election. ‘In our day, Jesus Christ goes his way into the world … as the stranger, an instrument of the Father’s working who carries out his Father’s business in season and out, but whose name and countenance are known by but a few.’34

III

To move from election to justification — though we have implicitly touched on justification already and must return to election in connection with the church — is to move from God’s intentionality or determination to God’s action: the Father’s revelatory and salvific action in and through the Son. Here one may indeed speak of a becoming in God, a becoming in which God does not become other than what God is,35 but in which the church must speak of the incarnation, the cross and the resurrection. Here, in the economy of salvation God enacts the election of the creaturely covenant-partner which characterizes God’s self-determination from eternity.

The term justification has a long history in Christian theology, beginning with the apostle Paul and including intense conflict at the time of the Reformation. We are led to the doctrine of justification by questions like these: how do we stand before God? How does God deal with us? What may we expect from God?36 To

33 Barth, CD II/2, p. 506.
35 Alan Torrance, ‘The Trinity’, in John Webster (ed.) The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 72–91, at p. 86. Torrance makes clear that such a view is to be distinguished from a range of other, superficially similar, views.
36 These are the three questions with which Gerhard Sauter begins his study of justification, which he regards as a foundational concept for evangelical (Protestant)

speak of justification is to speak of grace, ‘grace alone’ as the Reformers insisted. It is to speak about the sufficiency of God’s ‘right-making’ or rectifying act in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For Luther this was the article of faith by which the church stands or falls, and for Calvin it was, with sanctification, one of the two great gifts which Christians owe to Christ. In the history of this doctrine, justification became the currency in which various problems were fought over. In the theological arena it was discussed against the backdrop of different technical understandings of grace and different theological articulations of how people are set on the way of salvation.

The vocabulary of justification has played no major part in the theology of the Eastern Orthodox churches, it has been central in Western, notably Protestant, theology. The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification between the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church in 199937 has raised the profile of this doctrine in Catholic theology. That justification is prominent in the New Testament, especially in the Pauline corpus, is beyond dispute. It is associated with the forgiveness of sins, freedom from the power of sin, restoration to communion with God through union with the crucified and risen Christ, and incorporation into the one community, the body of Christ.38 As to the core truth of the doctrine of justification, the Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church declare:

In faith we together hold the conviction that justification is the work of the triune God. The Father sent his Son into the world to save sinners. The foundation and presupposition of justification is the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. Justification thus means that Christ himself is our righteousness, in which we share through the Holy Spirit in accord with the will of the Father. Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.39

Although the term justification has a legal context — it speaks of being put in the right or being acquitted — the heart of the matter is relational.40 It is about being restored to a right relationship with God, simply because of the gratuitous goodness of God, not because we have earned it by building up moral or spiritual credit. It is about being given a new status before God, as children of God, heirs of all that

37 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).
38 Joint Declaration, § 8.
39 Joint Declaration, § 15.
God has to give us (Rom. 8:16–17). The metaphor of justification, in conjunction with others, expresses the reality of liberation from the crippling power and effects of our estrangement from God and the freedom for new life, a new relationship with God and membership in a community in which the customary polarity of Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female (Gal. 3:28) ceases to be divisive.

In the writings of the apostle Paul, particularly the letters to the Romans and the Galatians, ‘justification’ and ‘justify’ are associated negatively with works required by the law (Rom. 3:20, 28; Gal. 2:16, 21; 3:11; 5:4) and positively with the grace of God (Rom. 3:24; 5:21; Gal. 2:21; 5:4) and faith (Rom. 3:26, 28, 30; 5:1; Gal. 2:16; 3:11, 24). The most polemical passages occur in Galatians, in which Paul opposed the ‘Teachers’, the Christian-Jewish evangelists who had come into the churches of Galatia after Paul had gone elsewhere in his missionary work. He accuses them of ‘perverting the gospel of Christ’ (Gal. 1:7). The issue was God’s way of dealing with evil, God’s way of righting wrong. Paul’s opponents regarded the Law not only as a good thing—Paul agreed with them on that—but as the core of their good news, even for Gentiles. For Paul the good news was what God had done in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The great antithesis in Paul is between justification by ‘the works of the Law’ and justification through Christ crucified and risen, even ‘the faith of Jesus Christ’ (pistis Christou Iesou, Gal. 2:16), and therefore in fulfilling his divine mission from the Father. It is not because of one’s faith but through faith that salvation is received. Paul is emphatic that God has provided a way out of sin through the death of Christ on the cross and his resurrection from the dead (Rom. 3:25; 4:25). Indeed, in baptism, as the name of Jesus is pronounced over new converts and the Spirit of Christ descends on them (1 Cor. 6:11), this action of God is made real for them.

As an apocalyptic thinker, Paul always believed that God would put everything to rights at the end of the age, when every power would be destroyed and when the Son would hand the kingdom back to the Father (1 Cor. 15:24–8). What is radically new for Paul is that the death of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection from the dead have made a decisive beginning to this rectifying, salvific act of God. The cross marks the turning point from the old age (the age of Adam) to the new (the age of Christ). Paul understands himself and his contemporaries to live in a curious situation of overlap, their existence already determined by the power of the new age, with its new structure of belonging and obedience, yet empirically not having left the old age completely behind. Already they have been justified by God through Christ (Rom. 3:24; 5:9). The fellowship with God for which God elected them from eternity has been actualized. God’s covenant of grace has been enacted and their hope for the future is secure.

The doctrine of justification, though having its basis in the Pauline metaphor of justification, is more comprehensive and more fully (trinitarianly) articulated. Its centre is the death and resurrection of the incarnate Son who, though without sin, was made to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21). Its framework, however, is the divine economy, the work of the three persons of the Holy Trinity for the reconciliation of the world with God. Robert Jenson sees it as ‘a trine event, a mode of the divine persons’ mutual life. Every work of God is begun by the Father, accomplished in the Son, and perfected in the Spirit, having its unity in their perichoresis. The economy of salvation that is the content of the doctrine of justification is the work of the Father, the Son and the Spirit. Its beginning is in the Father, who, in the fullness of time, sent the Son into the world (Gal. 4:4; 1 Jn. 4:9–14). It is also an act of the Son, who lived a human life in our space and time and experienced the brokenness of the world and its alienation from the Father. He came to his own, and his own did not receive him (Jn. 1:11). Without sin, he was made sin for our sake, that we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21). He suffered death on the cross, a nonsense to many but to believers the power of salvation (1 Cor. 1:18). In his obedience to the will of the Father, he gives effect to the Son’s commitment to the Father within the immanent Trinity. The Spirit empowers the Son’s faithfulness to the reconciling will of the Father, on the one hand, and, on the other, makes our justification a reality for us in our concrete experience, setting us free from slavery and guilt and bringing the new life of the future into the present. It is through the Spirit that we are able to cry, ‘Abba, Father’, and are given the assurance that we are children of God and heirs of all that the Father has in store for us (Rom. 8:15 ff.).

In his person, Jesus Christ is God’s turning to humankind ‘in goodness, mercy and grace’, in which our election from eternity to be God’s covenant-partner is actualized. This covenant of grace is made effective and real in our concrete existence, in the ‘far country’ of our alienation and wretchedness. Without this it could not be said that God is the reconciling God. The negative aspect of our justification is that, without exception, we come under the judgment of God. The positive aspect, superbly stated by Barth, is that,

God looks back to the fact that as His creature and elect covenant-partner man is from all eternity and therefore unchangeably His own possession: looking back to His own will and plan and purpose, and looking forward to the goal which, in spite of man’s being and activity and attitude as the man of sin, is still unchangeably set for him, since God Himself has set it.

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42 This may be the better translation on theological grounds. The matter is controversial and certainly has theological implications. See Martyn, Galatians, Comment #28, pp. 263–75; also ibid., Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), 116–56.
44 Barth, CD IV/1, p. 514.
45 Barth, CD IV/1, p. 515.
This goal is the forgiveness of sin and the new life lived before God and with God, in which, though deserving rejection and condemnation, humankind receives acceptance and is set free from condemnation. God in Christ has set us free for freedom (Gal. 5:1), free to live in faith, hope and love. Though its riches can be articulated in ever-new ways, this is the substance of the doctrine of justification.

IV

Having argued that justification has its doctrinal setting in the self-determining election of God for the covenant of grace, we turn now to the subject of the church, the final part of this chapter’s title. Expressing it very modestly, Migliore says that the church is ‘not incidental to God’s purposes’. It would be better to say that the church is integral to the purposes of God. The basis upon which to establish the church’s place in the purposes of God is (again) the doctrine of election, God’s determination to enter into a covenant of grace. Migliore speaks of the goal of this election as ‘the creation of a people of God and not simply the salvation of solitary individuals or the privileging of particular nations or ethnic groups’. The discussion of election throughout its long history has mostly focussed on the individual person. Significantly, Barth takes up the election of the community before his discussion of the election of the individual. At the beginning of his discussion of election Barth states: ‘The election of grace, as the election of Jesus Christ, is simultaneously the eternal election of the one community of God by the existence of which Jesus Christ is to be attested to the whole world and the whole world summoned to faith in Jesus Christ’.

Barth speaks of this community in its two forms, Israel and the church, but it is one community, one people of God. Jesus Christ has a relation to both: as the promised Son of Abraham and David, the Messiah of Israel, and as the Lord of the church, comprising both Jew and Gentile. The question of the relation between the election of Israel and the election of the church has been contentious from both sides. Sonderegger remarks, without exaggeration, ‘Scarcely any topic has awakened theologians more to the centrality of the doctrine of election than this theme, the election of Israel, which has proved a deeper and more troubling call to Christian conscience than that of religious pluralism itself’. The church may not see its own election except in continuity with that of Israel; its own roots are firmly in the story of Abraham and the people whose ‘father’ he became. Yet for most of its history the church has stressed a greater discontinuity. Only recently have Christians seriously thought that the church’s election does not ipso facto imply the end of Israel’s election. The apostle Paul wrestled with this question, without complete resolution, in Romans 9–11, but he is adamant that God has not rejected Israel (11:1–2). The Jewish people may be ‘enemies of God’ for the sake of the Gentiles, but ‘as regards election they are beloved’ (11:28). Barth’s view is that the church ‘waits for the conversion of Israel. But it cannot wait for the conversion of Israel to confess the unity of the mercy that embraces Israel as well as itself, the unity of the community of God’. The Second Vatican Council’s ‘Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions’ affirms, following the apostle Paul, that ‘the Jews remain very dear to God, for the sake of the patriarchs, since God does not take back the gifts he bestowed or the choice he made’.

As Israel was called to be ‘a light to the nations’ (Isa. 42:6; 49:6), so the church is called to announce to all the world that one has come who is ‘life’ and whose life is ‘the light of all people’ (Jn. 1:3–5). The whole community of God is called to serve God’s self-witness, making known what God has given and done in Jesus Christ and calling people to faith in him. With Israel, the church has heard God’s promise of salvation. In particular, it must become ‘for the world and Israel the living testimony for which it is determined’. God intends that humankind should have the fullness of life in ‘the new community of God’s own making’, delighting in the praise of God, enjoying all the gifts of grace and sharing in the responsibility of meeting the needs of the neighbour, both near and far.

Thus the church does not begin with the commissioning of the disciples after the resurrection: it has a place in the divine intention from eternity. This requires an explicitly theological mode of thinking, which goes beyond the pragmatic drift of much ecclesiology and missiology. Sociologically, the church may appear to be an entirely contingent, optional organization, but this contingency is to be seen within a theological frame of reference. The passage about election from Ephesians 3:7–12 includes the church. The plan of the mystery of God must be made known to everyone through the church, ‘in accordance with the eternal purpose that God has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord’. To make a robust theological (and ontological) claim for the church, it is a chosen instrument in the economy of God.

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47 Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, p. 89.
48 Barth, *CD II/2*, p. 195.
49 Sonderegger, ‘Election’, p. 117.
50 Jenson suggests that Paul’s engagement with this question ‘perhaps lacks conceptual coherence, but remains the canonical challenge and example’: *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, p. 335.
51 Barth, *CD II/2*, p. 213.
53 Barth, *CD II/2*, p. 240.
54 Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, p. 89.
Its existence is not merely the outcome of human decisions but a matter of divine election. Its kerygmatic work, doxological life and diaconal mission belong to the eternal purpose of God.

The church is the setting in which faith is awakened and nurtured; it is the sphere in which salvation is received and ‘worked out’ (Phil. 2:12). The church is activated by the Spirit to be an anticipatory sign and an instrument of the reign of God. Particularly in its liturgical life, it manifests—though only in brokenness—the mystery of salvation, in which the image of God in humankind is renewed after the image of Christ. In this way among others, the Spirit works in the world. The church is a community on the way; it has not yet arrived at its destination. It is not yet the full visible realization of the reign of God, though that is its orientation. Wolfhart Pannenberg has made this central in his ecclesiology:

The human society at which God’s eternal election aims will find its definitive form only in the eschatological fellowship of the kingdom of God. God’s work of election in history is oriented to those that are still on the way to this goal. It is oriented to a human fellowship that in the relations of its members with God and with one another is constituted by God’s righteous will and that thus forms an anticipation of the fellowship in God’s kingdom that is the final destiny of humanity.

In Pannenberg’s discussion of election the focus changes from an eternal decision for humankind and for an elect community to election in history, in particular Israel’s sense of election as a chosen people and the church’s sense as elect in Christ. The first Christians believed that ‘the end-time community of the elect’ had been formed in their own fellowship. By sheer grace God had chosen them for this community, though there was nothing remarkable about them in terms of wisdom or power (1 Cor. 1:26–7). The basis of their election was belonging to Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:30; Eph. 1:4), in whom their election was manifest as their calling, made known to Gentiles through the message of Paul and others.

In both Israel and the church election is not understood as a possession to be jealously guarded. Already in the story of Abraham the nations of the world are to be blessed in him (Gen. 12:3; 18:18). Later, as a light to the nations, Israel comes to know its wider mission or service (Isa. 42:6; 49:6). In the New Testament this same sense is both sharper, though no longer ethnically defined, and more urgent. To quote Pannenberg again:

As the eschatological community the Christian church bears witness to the saving will of God in Christ that reaches beyond it and is oriented to humanity as a whole. It bears this witness precisely by the gathering of believers into the fellowship that is grounded in Christ, a model thus being given of what is destined for all humanity and for creation as a whole… Thus particular election stands in the service of God’s comprehensive will to save. We may describe the particular election of both individuals and the community as an anticipation of the fellowship in the kingdom of God that is destined for humanity in Jesus Christ. This anticipation constitutes the concept of election. The eschatological destiny of humanity that is manifest in Jesus Christ is present already in the event of calling to participation in God’s eternal election in Christ.

This passage makes clear that the frame of reference is at once Christological, soteriological and eschatological. In addition, it is not primarily an individual matter, as in the traditional doctrine of predestination. In the election of Christ is implied the election of a community, and this community must see itself as elected for a universal mission. The church has no more justification than Israel for turning its sense of election into an arrogant separation of itself from the rest of humankind. A community that has a sense of its election will be conscious of its responsibility to live and work in the service of humankind, both in its own society and in the larger context of the needs of the world. As it does so, conscious of the brokenness of the world and its own life, it will point beyond its own provisional form to a final form, when it is fully taken up into the Son’s relation to the Father and the triune God is glorified in a reconciled and redeemed world.

To speak of the election of a people of God for a universal mission is to raise the question of the number of the elect, in particular whether it is set or open. Frequently, this number has been thought to be fixed, the decree of election being understood as immutable. Barth subjected this idea to radical critique with his proposal that the divine No, the passing-over of those who are not elected, was borne by Jesus Christ on the cross. The logic of this solution moves in the direction of a universal salvation; Barth denied that conclusion on the grounds that God is not subject to any principle, even of salvation, but he never successfully rid his theology of the suspicion of universalism. Another approach, which avoids universalism, begins from the point of the ultimate aim of God’s election. Pannenberg describes this as the fellowship of a renewed humanity in (God’s) kingdom. On the basis of Rom. 8:29, those who are elect are to be conformed to

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61 This prohibition includes any nation or ethnic group that thinks it has a basis for a sense of superiority or a special role vis-à-vis other peoples in a doctrine of election.
62 In summary, Pannenberg says: 'The election of Jesus Christ stands in the service of the election of the people of God, which for its part again represents our human ordination for fellowship with God': Systematic Theology, vol. 3, p. 460.
the image of God’s Son; they are to participate in his filial relation to the Father. No limit can be set to the number of those who may so participate; it is potentially open to all. Such inclusiveness is the presupposition of the mission of the church to the whole world: to invite all people into participation in the Son’s relation to the Father. There is no guarantee of a universal participation in an inclusive salvation, but the logic of the gospel also precludes a fixed closure.

V

Those theologians who since the early centuries of Christianity have articulated a doctrine of divine election did not lack biblical warrant. Both Testaments of the Christian Scriptures bear witness to a divine choosing. The great problem in understanding such language has been that a choice for some seemed unavoidably to imply a choice against others. In its traditional form, the doctrine of election encouraged such an interpretation. The result is that in large parts of the church the theme became marginal or entirely avoided. This would not matter if there were no positive content in the doctrine, the neglect of which would obscure an important element in the theology of salvation, particularly as an elaboration of the doctrine of God.

The claim of this chapter has been that, to the contrary, the subject of election is of profound theological importance, in spite of its widespread neglect and misunderstanding. Election provides the proper setting – the doctrine of God – for the theology of salvation, and for the justification of sinners of which this theology speaks. It connects the immanent and the economic Trinity. It grounds the divine economy in the eternal determination of God to be the kind of God who, in the economy, becomes human in the person of the Son. It offers a theological basis for God’s being for us rather than against us, notwithstanding our hostility to God. In the language of Barth’s bold claim, the doctrine of election is good news, nothing but good news!

It has also been argued that the doctrine of election shapes the doctrine of the church in important ways. First, it raises sharply the question of the relation between Israel and the church, the church as elect communities of faith, in particular the tension that marks the continuity and discontinuity between them. Second, when oriented to the reconciliation of all people with God, a robust doctrine of election saves the church from making its own existence an end in itself. Finally, it reminds the church of its ontological grounding in God’s eternal self-determination, which sets it free from anxiety over the vicissitudes of its institutional existence in the world. The church lives for the praise of the triune God and for the service of humankind, which longs for a new polity and a new sociality, even when it no longer knows that these have their possibility only in the reign of God. The church’s service of the world takes many forms, but is incomplete if it does not include the invitation to all people to participate in the relation of Jesus Christ to the Father, in which is found their greatest freedom and deepest joy.