

Is God *Necessarily* Who God Is? Alternatives for the Trinity and Election Debate

Kevin Diller

Taylor University, 236 West Reade Avenue, Upland, IN 46989, USA

kevin_diller@taylor.edu

Abstract

As a contribution to discussions of the relationship between trinity and election, in this article I explore the helpfulness of a return to ancient modal and metaphysical theological distinctions. At the forefront of trinity/election debates has been Bruce McCormack's controversial claim that election could be conceived as logically prior to, and the motivation for, God's being triune. Steering clear of questions about the right interpretation or trajectory of Karl Barth's theology, I attempt to identify the motivating theological convictions of this debate's interlocutors and find constructive options which maintain or address those convictions. One option I defend is the possibility that triunity is *not* logically prior to election.

I begin with an analysis of three central theological convictions which seem to be at the heart of the trinity/election debates. They are: (1) a *revelation axiom* – that knowledge of God's nature is governed by the particular historical revelation of God in Christ; (2) a nuanced commitment to divine immutability; and (3) divine *libertas a coactione* – God's being free in nature and action from external constraint. I then contend that if more attention is paid to modal and metaphysical options with respect to the existence and essence of God, one will see that there are a number of viable positions which respect these convictions.

I argue that at least some of the conceptual difficulties of McCormack's position can be eliminated if we properly distinguish kinds of necessity in reference to God's being and if we dispense with any notion of priority between God's essence and God's willing God's essence. With respect to kinds of necessity, I recall the ancient distinction between properties that are (a) necessary consequents of God's essence, (b) contingent and (c) a necessary consequence of God's essence given certain contingent states of affairs. Those distinctions, along with clarifications about the nature of divine freedom *vis-à-vis* his essence and actions, allow us to see the range of theological positions which remain faithful to the relevant concerns of the revelation axiom, divine immutability and divine freedom.

I conclude that, while it is problematic to defend the logical priority of election over triunity, McCormack is justified in his claim that granting election as part of God's essence does no violence to divine freedom and he is perfectly entitled to the view that God's essential properties, including both God's

fit-for-election-hypostatic-configuration and God's being the electing God are mutual aspects of God's single self-caused being.

Keywords: election, freedom, immutability, McCormack, modality, necessity, Trinity.

The 'Trinity and Election Controversy' has been one of the more interesting, creative and sometimes heated discussions over the last decade in Reformed theology. It features, of course, the surprising suggestion that election should be seen as logically prior to, and the motivation for, God's being triune.¹ And, while the debate is often occupied with the right interpretation of Karl Barth or the trajectory of Barth's theology, the most pressing question is whether it is a coherent alternative for Christian theology as such. In this brief contribution, I will – for the most part – avoid disagreements over Barth and focus attention on the multiple, viable, though somewhat neglected, modal and metaphysical theological alternatives which satisfy the jointly held convictions of this debate's interlocutors. I will first explain what I take those common convictions to be, and then explore some of the options available in light of long-standing distinctions in kinds of necessary and contingent truths about God. If these thoughts are correct, it would challenge one interpretation of McCormack's thesis while also defending the possibility that election is essential to who God is; moreover, it would require McCormack's objectors to acknowledge the perhaps strange-seeming possibility that triunity is not logically prior to election.

Common Convictions

I'll begin with an attempt to accurately condense the prime motivations for McCormack's view. These prime motivations are, I think, held in common by many of the debate participants.

At the heart of McCormack's view, as I understand it, is a commitment to take very seriously an insight which is fundamental to Karl Barth's

¹ McCormack, 'Grace and Being', in John Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), pp. 92–110. Also see clarifications given in his Foreword to the German edition of Karl Barth's *Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (repr. in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), pp. 291–304); 'Seek God Where He May Be Found: A Response to Edwin Christian van Driel', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60 (2007), pp. 62–79; and 'Election and the Trinity: Theses in Response to George Hunsinger', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63 (2010), pp. 203–24. At the 2011 Barth Conference in Princeton, NJ, McCormack delivered a paper titled 'Processions and Missions: A Point of Convergence between Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth' in which he continued to defend and clarify his position.

theology – the same insight which underlies Barth’s rejection of natural theology and his elimination of the distinction between general and special revelation. Simply put, for Barth, the God who is hidden in *himself* is revealed in Jesus Christ, really and definitively revealed.² Two significant conclusions are drawn from this.

First, there is no hidden truth about God or God’s being which is not revealed in Christ which, if known, would provide a deeper or substantially different view of who God is. God doesn’t have an unknowable essence or back-side which, if known, would adjust in any important way our knowledge of God.

Second, it is misguided to attempt to further our understanding of God in a way that is not anchored in and submitted to the revelation of God in Christ. Abstract metaphysical speculation – working only from generalised principles of human reason and experience, methodologically bracketing the historical particularities of God’s acts – is not only doomed to failure, it is idolatrous in orientation. This is the impetus for what Kevin Hector calls the *epistemological axiom of contemporary trinitarianism*³ (which has vexed and perplexed some philosophers⁴) – that the immanent trinity is the economic trinity;⁵ or, as Hector states it, ‘knowledge of God’s being-in-Godself must be derived strictly from God’s being-with-us’.⁶ God is known definitively by means of God’s self-revealing acts in history, in the economy of salvation, paradigmatically in the incarnation. I’ll refer to this as the *revelation axiom*.

Another prime motivator for McCormack’s view is maintaining divine immutability.⁷ It is important to see, however, that divine immutability is

² ‘What Barth accomplished with his doctrine of election was to establish a hermeneutical rule which would allow the church to speak authoritatively about what God was doing – and, indeed, who and what God was/is – “before the foundation of the world”, without engaging in speculation’ (McCormack, ‘Grace and Being’, p. 92).

³ See Kevin Hector, ‘Immutability, Necessity, and the Limits of Inference: Toward a Resolution of the Trinity and Election Controversy’, a paper presented to the Logos Philosophical Theology Workshop at the University of Notre Dame, 28–30 May 2009.

⁴ See Randal Rauser, ‘Rahner’s Rule: An Emperor without Clothes?’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 (2005), pp. 81–94.

⁵ McCormack explains, ‘the Logos incarnatus is both asarkos (the so-called “extra-Calvinisticum”) and ensarkos (having become embodied). Thus, the identity of both the Logos incarnandus and the Logos incarnatus is the same’ (‘Seek God Where He May Be Found’, p. 68).

⁶ Hector, ‘Immutability, Necessity, and the Limits of Inference’, p. 19.

⁷ McCormack confirms this: ‘Van Driel rightly notes that I am motivated throughout by two concerns: to safeguard divine immutability in view of Barth’s affirmation of divine suffering in CD IV/1 and to ensure that “in the incarnation God is not just

not taken as an inference from a generic, perfect-being theism, but is in fact taken as a corollary of the revelation axiom. If essential change is possible in God then the assurance of definitive revelation in Christ is undermined.

In addition to the *revelation axiom* and a commitment to divine immutability, a third common conviction has to do with God's freedom/independence. Two senses of freedom must be distinguished to avoid confusion. First, there is the notion of *libertarian freedom* – that certain of God's actions are not determined in any way, not even by conditions internal to God (*libertas ab intrinseca necessitate*). If God is libertarianly free with respect to an act, then the outcome is strictly contingent. Second, there is the notion of being *free from external constraint* (*libertas a coactione*). It is possible, as we will discuss later, that actions which are *free from external constraint* may in fact be intrinsically necessary.

Most parties interested in the 'Trinity and Election Controversy' identify to a great degree with the theology of Karl Barth, accept the *revelation axiom*, defend a rigorous though not overly strict notion of divine immutability and are committed to God's being free from external constraint.

McCormack's Controversial Conclusion

From these convictions, McCormack reasons that if God is revealed to be the electing God who achieves the purposes of his election through specifically trinitarian action, then it must be eternally and unchangingly true that God is the electing God who chooses to achieve the purposes of his election through specifically trinitarian action. '[God's] very being – already in eternity – is determined, defined, by what he reveals himself to be in Jesus Christ.'⁸ He reasons that it must be the eternal and unchanging will of God to be configured for incarnation and reconciliation. Particularly in view for McCormack is a christology wherein the eternal logos, on the basis of his eternal obedience, eternally wills to be a conduit for the reception of humanity. On this view there is a kind of divinely willed human-shaped vacuum in the heart of God.⁹ McCormack concludes that God has chosen to

playing a role" – i.e. that Jesus Christ is not merely an accommodation of an as yet unknown eternal Son.' 'Seek God Where He May Be Found', p. 68.

⁸ McCormack, 'Grace and Being', p. 97.

⁹ McCormack offers penetrating accounts of Protestant debates in christology and Barth's contributions to them, but he offers his own modifications. 'I would find the root of kenosis in the eternal obedience of the Son and would make its content to consist in a relation of willed receptivity to all that would come His way in and through the assumed human nature in time – or, alternatively expressed, willed non-use of the divine attributes of omnipotence, etc. through or upon His human nature. To put it this way is not only to create an ontic space in the eternal being of God for the genus

have an election orientated configuration – election is at the heart of God – and triunity follows from it.¹⁰

McCormack claims in addition that, given these concerns, the best way of thinking about the ontology of God is *actualist* rather than *essentialist*.¹¹ In fact, he finds that a tendency to operate with an ‘essentialist’ ontology has derailed theologians from drawing the proper conclusions from the core convictions just mentioned. Unfortunately, the distinction between *actualist* and *essentialist* ‘ontologies’, perhaps clear to some, is positively gnomonic to others. It will assist our understanding of McCormack’s position if I take a brief moment here to clarify what he means by ‘actualist’ and ‘essentialist’.

What McCormack is suggesting is, in some ways, not all that radical. *Actualism* is a descriptor which has long been associated with the theology of Karl Barth, who is well known for affirming that God’s being is in act, and revelation is an event.¹² The intention of these affirmations, among other things, is to oppose the notion that God is merely a ‘divine nature’, a set of attributes, or an abstract essence utterly distinguishable from God’s acts. It is thought that conceiving of God as ontologically independent of God’s acts would undermine the *revelation axiom*.¹³ McCormack finds that such ontological independence, while aimed at securing the freedom of God’s acts from any external necessities, has carried, for instance, the cost of rendering

tapeinoticum; it is also to define God in the second mode of His being by means of the assumed human nature. The second Person of the Trinity has a name and His name is “Jesus Christ”.’ McCormack, “‘With Loud Cries and Tears’: The Humanity of the Son in the Epistle to the Hebrews”, a paper delivered at ‘The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology’ Conference, St Andrews, Scotland, 19 July 2006, p. 16.

¹⁰ ‘The triunity of God is a function of the divine election. To be sure, neither precedes the other chronologically. But it is God’s act of determining himself to be God for us in Jesus Christ which constitutes God as triune.’ ‘Seek God Where He May Be Found’, p. 67. McCormack appeals to Barth, ‘There can be no Christian truth which does not from the very first contain within itself as its basis the fact that from and to all eternity God is the electing God. There can be no tenet of Christian doctrine which, if it is to be a Christian tenet, does not necessarily reflect both in form and content this divine electing . . . There is no height or depth in which God can be God in any other way.’ CD II/2, p. 77.

¹¹ McCormack, ‘Grace and Being’, p. 99.

¹² ‘Actualism’ is one of seven modes of thought George Hunsinger identifies in Barth’s work. He defines it as follows: “‘Actualism’ is the motif which governs Barth’s complex conception of being in time. Being is always an event and often an act (always an act whenever an agent capable of decision is concerned).’ *How to Read Karl Barth* (Oxford: OUP, 1993), p. 4.

¹³ ‘Divine “essence”, on this view, is something hidden to human perception and, finally, unknowable.’ ‘Grace and Being’, p. 98.

God impassible.¹⁴ Affirming that God's acts are constitutive of God's essence, however, is not to reduce all metaphysical categories to action, or to dispense with the notion of an essence altogether. As Hunsinger says of Barth, we can also say of McCormack: he does not 'turn "essence" into a verb'¹⁵ – at least not entirely.

McCormack does seem to take a more radical turn when his actualism extends to the notion that God determines God's own essence, or assigns to himself his own being, in the act of electing. McCormack claims that, 'God is so much the Lord that he is Lord even over his being and essence. The only thing that is absolutely necessary for God is existence itself.'¹⁶ It is not unexpected that students of theology might find this claim somewhat disagreeable. This is a hard teaching; who can accept it? The conclusion that God elects to be triune has raised not a few eyebrows; and, many have worried that it may open the door to just the kind of metaphysical speculation that McCormack wants to rule out.¹⁷

It is extremely significant that McCormack does not think that he has left open such a door. There is not, on McCormack's view, an unknowable, arbitrary, primordial will at the heart of God which is the God behind God which determined that God would be triune. Opening that door would undermine all that McCormack is trying to achieve.

¹⁴ 'Seek God Where He May Be Found', p. 74; and 'Karl Barth's Christology as a Resource for a Reformed Version of Kenoticism', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8 (2006), p. 248, n. 4.

¹⁵ George Hunsinger, 'Election and the Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth', *Modern Theology* 24 (2008), p. 194.

¹⁶ 'Seek God Where He May Be Found', p. 67.

¹⁷ 'The problem, rather, is that McCormack's move appears to make God's self-determination into an abstraction: whereas Barth identifies God's self-determination in the concrete interaction between Father, Son and Spirit, McCormack abstracts this self-determination from this relationship and makes it into a "thing-in-itself". Divorced from the concrete relationship of Father, Son and Spirit, God's decision to be God-with-us becomes an "absolute will" rather than God's eternal, triune act. Kevin Hector, 'God's Trinity and Self-Determination: A Conversation with Karl Barth, Bruce McCormack and Paul Molnar', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 (2005), p. 258. See also Paul Molnar 'The Trinity, Election and God's Ontological Freedom: A Response to Kevin W. Hector', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8 (2006), p. 295; Paul Molnar, 'Can the Electing God be God without us? Some Implications of Bruce McCormack's Understanding of Barth's Doctrine of Election for the Doctrine of the Trinity', *Neue Zeitschrift fuer Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 49 (2007), p. 220; Edwin C. van Driel, 'Karl Barth on the Eternal Existence of Jesus Christ', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60 (2007), pp. 54–6; and, Hunsinger, 'Election and the Trinity', p. 181, n. 7.

In what follows I will argue that the conceptual difficulties of McCormack's position can be eliminated if we properly distinguish kinds of necessity in reference to God's being and if we dispense with any notion of priority between God's essence and God's willing God's essence. Trouble can be avoided if we apply the notion of divine aseity (being derived 'from self') to God's willed essence in the same way it is applied to God's existence. In short, what is meant by *self-causation* and *self-determination* should be viewed as one and the same.

Necessity and *Who God Is*

For the most part, the responses to McCormack, even by some who are generally supportive, have argued for a reversal of the election/trinity priority. Trinity, it is thought, must be seen as the wellspring rather than the outcome of election.¹⁸ Keeping the priority of trinity over election, it is argued, preserves the revelation axiom, the immutability corollary and divine freedom. Hector argues that election should be thought of as an outworking of the immutable triune life of God.¹⁹ Molnar argues that keeping the priority of election is necessary to maintain 'God's freedom to have existed from all eternity without us.'²⁰

While I am strongly inclined not to prioritise election over trinity, it also seems to me that we are not *required* to prioritise trinity over election. I contend that if more attention is paid to modal and metaphysical options with respect to the existence and essence of God, one will see that there are a number of viable positions, each of which conforms to the relevant concerns of the revelation axiom, divine immutability and divine freedom. One of those options, which seems very close to McCormack's position, is to take trinity and election as mutually essential to who God is – in a sense, grounded in each other.

The distinctions I discuss here are not at all new.²¹ Let us consider God's properties. Some of God's properties are necessary because they belong to

¹⁸ 'Only if the Trinity is the presupposition of election rather than its consequence can Jesus Christ be a co-equal partner in the pre-temporal divine decision.' Hunsinger, 'Election and the Trinity', p. 193.

¹⁹ Hector, 'Immutability, Necessity, and the Limits of Inference', pp. 6–7.

²⁰ Molnar, 'The Trinity, Election and God's Ontological Freedom', p. 306.

²¹ E.g. on necessity of the consequent (*necessitas consequentis*) and necessity of the consequence (*necessitas consequentiae*), see Aristotle, *Prior Analytics*, 1.10, 30b32–40; on preceding necessity (*necessitas praecedens*) and subsequent necessity (*necessitas sequens*), see Anslem, *Cur Deus Homo*, 2.17; on the distinction between necessity of nature (*necessitas naturae*) and necessity of force (*necessitas coactionis*) see Aquinas commenting on Augustine in *Questiones Disputatae de Veritate*, 22.5; on absolute necessity and necessity *ex hypothesi*, see Leibniz, *Discours de métaphysique*, 13 (1686).

God's essence (e.g. self-existence). Some of God's properties may be *necessitas consequentis*, necessary consequents of God's essence (perhaps 'being such that $1 + 2 = 3$ ' or, à la Jonathan Edwards, 'being creator'²²). Some of God's properties may be contingent (perhaps 'being such that God freely chooses to do x' where precisely what God chooses is not determined either by God's essence or any other necessary truth). And some of God's properties may be *necessitas consequentiae*, a necessary consequence of God's essence but only on the condition of the obtaining of certain other contingent states of affairs (e.g. 'being such that if God creates, God will care for what God has created', where whether or not God creates is contingent). From here we could, with respect to God's properties, begin to distinguish layers of dependency or supervenience, and the options quickly become very complex. The point is that in the case of many of God's properties we don't really know exactly how they are connected to God's essence and/or free volition. That so, we may not know if some of God's properties are finally necessary or contingent.

Taking Election as Essential to Who God Is

McCormack seems to think that to guard immutability and the revelation axiom, God's essential properties must be highly specified.²³ Properties like 'being such that God creates human beings' and 'being such that God becomes incarnate' must belong to God's essence. I say, maybe McCormack is right that they do. On his view, God's being intent on fellowship with human beings would be an essential property of God. Yes, this would mean that the creation of some kind of world with human beings would be necessary – a *necessitas consequentis* of God's essence. It seems to me, however, that allowing this is neither a threat to divine freedom, nor does it require a prioritisation of election over trinity.

I'll begin with the worry about divine freedom. If creation is a necessary consequence of God's essence and God is configured for fellowship with human beings, then doesn't that make the divine being dependent on human beings? Does this not introduce an extraordinarily unseemly ontological dependence of the Creator on the creation? And what has become of preserving the graciousness of God's action with the affirmation that 'God

²² Edwards believed that part of God's essence was having a diffusive disposition, and that creation was, therefore, a necessary consequent of God's being. See esp. *Concerning the End for which God Created the World*, in *Works of Jonathan Edwards*: Vol. 8: *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

²³ 'God's being is constituted but in a most concrete, particular relation': 'Grace and Being', p. 99.

would be God without us’?²⁴ It takes careful thinking not to fall for these objections. The concern to safeguard divine freedom, it seems to me, is really two concerns in one. The first concern is about introducing some kind of untoward ontological dependence. The second has to do with God’s liberty of volition. Notice first that we have introduced nothing here that would compromise a robust ontological distinction between the Creator and creation. Affirming that God necessarily will create does not indicate any lack in God before God does create.²⁵ God is no less God before his determination to be God with us is realised. God’s essential properties are, on this view, always fulfilled and complete. For this reason, there is no essential change in God when the Logos *incarnandus* (the Logos ‘to be incarnate’) becomes the Logos *incarnatus* (the Logos ‘incarnate’). Fulfilling an intention in God, even when that intention is an essential property, does not constitute the fulfilment of God’s already complete and perfect being. Realising divine–human fellowship requires metaphysical transformation for human beings, but not for God. Not only can we say that God would be God without us. God was and is God without us, though he chooses to be with us.

As for God’s liberty of volition, we must revisit the distinction between *libertarian freedom* and being *free from external constraint*. If God is essentially a creator and lover of human beings, then the creation and loving of human beings is a necessity of God’s nature (*necessitas naturae*) not a necessity of force (*necessitas coactionis*). God’s having libertarian freedom with respect to creation means that *vis-à-vis* creation God is not bound by any intrinsic necessity (*libertas ab intrinseca necessitate*). It is an analytic truth that if we require that God has libertarian freedom over his decision to create human beings, then creation is not in any sense necessary. Simply insisting on the libertarian freedom of God in this instance, however, is not much of an argument unless some additional reason is given for that assumption. I’m not ruling out the possibility that such reason can be given. What I do claim is that God’s having *libertas a coactione* (freedom from external constraint) with respect to God’s decision to create is sufficient to preserve God’s liberty of volition.²⁶ It is also sufficient to preserve the purely gracious nature of election. There is nothing in creation

²⁴ McCormack affirms that, ‘a statement which takes the form “God would be God without us” is a true statement and one whose truth must be upheld at all costs if God’s grace is to be truly gracious.’ ‘Seek God Where He May Be Found’, p. 76.

²⁵ McCormack addresses this head-on when he rejects a Hegelian interpretation of his view: ‘Grace and Being’, pp. 99–100.

²⁶ It should also be noted that granting the necessity of God’s creating a world with human beings does not mean that all the details of that world are necessary – as Jonathan Edwards seems to have thought. It does not rule out instances of human libertarian freedom.

or human beings which determines or causes God to elect. Election is simply part of who God is.

Taking Election and Trinity as Essential to Who God Is

In agreement with McCormack, it seems that granting election as part of God's essence does no violence to divine freedom. And yet, there seems to be no clear requirement to maintain a logical priority of election over trinity. Granting that A entails B does not require that A is logically prior to B. Making this move is, I think, what raises the questions of trinitarian orthodoxy, and appears to create space for a hidden God or naked will behind the revealed God.

If there is a difficulty for McCormack's view – that 'the only thing that is absolutely necessary for God is existence itself'²⁷ – it comes down to the definition of terms. The essential properties of a being are by definition those which are absolutely necessary to the identity of the being. The essential properties, therefore, of a necessarily existing being are absolutely necessary. To say that only existence is necessary to God is equivalent to claiming that God has no essence except to exist, which is clearly not what McCormack wants to say. McCormack follows his claim with the caveat, 'but such a consideration may not be abstracted from the decision in which God gives to himself his own being'.²⁸

Given McCormack's commitments, it would seem better to say that God's essential properties, including both God's fit-for-election-hypostatic-configuration, and God's being the electing God are mutual aspects of God's single self-existing being. Rather than introduce layers of logical dependence, it would seem that a kind of property priority parity would be preferred. A modest affirmation of divine simplicity could warrant the view that, if election and trinity are both essential to God, they are coextensive, and mutually inhering. On this conception we could even affirm that they are, in that sense, mutually dependent.²⁹ As I suggested earlier, we should think of God's self-determined essence in the same way we think of God's self-caused existence. God is who God is in an eternal act of being in which there is no property priority – temporal, ontological or logical.

Then again, can we accept that there is no priority at all among God's essential properties? Isn't God's love more significant or more at the heart

²⁷ 'Seek God Where He May Be Found', p. 67.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Perhaps this could warrant McCormack's affirmation that 'God is triune for the sake of his revelation' ('Grace and Being', p. 101), so long as one equally affirms that God is revealed for the sake of his trinity.

of who God is than the fact that God is uncreated or almighty? Aren't some of God's properties more significant than others for *who* God is? Doesn't God's love guide God's acts in a way that God's power does not? Without going into the many conceptual questions raised here, I think all of these questions can and should be answered in the affirmative. But, differences of property kind, type, function and consequence are poorly conceived in terms of priority precisely because that invites conceiving of God's essential properties in isolation from each other. It seems far better not to consider God's essential properties in isolation from one another anymore than we consider God's essence in isolation from the self-revelation of his being in act. This, at least, seems to be the direction in which we are led by Barth, McCormack and the *revelation axiom*.

Other Modal Options

Against those who say to McCormack that triunity must precede election, I have defended the view that it is entirely consistent with the core theological commitments we have discussed, that election, alongside triunity, is essential to God's eternal self-determined nature. Just because the view is consistent, however, does not mean that it is required.

While McCormack *could* be right that God has highly specified essential properties, including election, it seems not at all required in order to preserve what McCormack wants to preserve. Let's consider two other modal options, each of which, I think, presents no challenge to immutability, the revelation axiom or divine freedom. On both of these options, election is not part of God's essence. On the first option election remains absolutely necessary. On the second option, election is contingent. On each of these options we will affirm that God has an essential property which pertains to election – namely, that God is eternally and immutably such that 'if God creates human beings, God elects to be God with human beings'.

We first turn to the possibility that election is a *necessitas consequentis* of God's essence and therefore absolutely necessary. On this modal option, it might be the case that God's creating human beings is an essential property of God's. 'God creates human beings' is, therefore, a necessary truth. Also, 'if God creates human beings, God elects to be God with human beings' is a necessary truth. The Distribution Axiom in modal logic says that if a conditional is necessary, it follows that if its antecedent is necessary, its consequent is also necessary. Given what we've already granted, it means that the consequent, 'God elects to be God with human beings', is a necessary truth. For the sake of clarity the propositions can be given formally as follows.

Distribution Axiom: if it is necessary that if p then q , then if necessarily p then necessarily q .

Modal Option 1:

Necessarily 'if God creates human beings, God elects to be God with human beings'.

Necessarily 'God creates human beings'.

∴ Necessarily 'God elects to be God with human beings'.

On the second modal option, the only necessity affirmed is a *necessitas consequentiae*, the necessity of the consequence 'if God creates human beings, God elects to be God with human beings'. We will assume in this case that the antecedent 'God creates human beings' is not necessary. God may have libertarian freedom with respect to creating human beings such that he could possibly not create us. On this option then, 'God elects to be God with human beings' is also not a necessary truth.

Modal Option 2:

Necessarily 'if God creates human beings, God elects to be God with human beings'.

Not necessarily 'God creates human beings'.

∴ Not necessarily 'God elects to be God with human beings'.

I claim that neither of these two modal options conflicts with the core concerns of the interlocutors of the 'Trinity and Election Controversy'. There is no challenge to immutability because God is eternally and unchangeably such that 'if God creates human beings, God elects to be God with human beings'. We can wholeheartedly affirm that God eternally and unchangeably has a fit-for-election-hypostatic-configuration. By the same token the revelation axiom is preserved. God is who God is revealed to be, without reservation – the God who is eternally and unchangeably determined to be such that, 'if God creates human beings, God elects to be God with human beings'. And finally, there is no violation of divine freedom. God is absolutely free from any external constraint whatsoever in the eternal self-determination of God's being to be such that 'if God creates human beings, God elects to be God with human beings'. Nevertheless, by a *necessitas naturae* more than mere existence is necessary to who God is. God could not have failed to be such that 'if God creates human beings, God elects to be God with human beings'. This is part of God's unchanging essence; who God has revealed himself to be in Jesus Christ; temporally, ontologically and logically coincident with God's trinity.