

# KARL BARTH'S SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY, 1918 – 1933

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The enterprise of theological ethics is not one with which to trifle. It must be taken up properly – and this can mean only on the assumption that the command of the grace of God is its sole content – or it is better left alone.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2 p. 533.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a contribution to the contemporary reassessment of Karl Barth's social philosophy. A close reading of the English translation of the text of a series of posthumously published lectures on ethics which Barth gave in the universities of Münster and Bonn between 1929 and 1933 is the basis of the work. Previous literature includes no discussion of the lectures.

The thesis argues that the lectures show the foundation of Barth's thinking both of theology as a science and of ethics as a part of dogmatics, and that his subsequent work developed these ideas. Barth's intellectual debt to Hegel is recognised by showing that he returns to the fundamental theological questions of the relationship between faith and reason, and truth and method in the form in which Hegel discussed them at the end of the nineteenth century. The thesis acknowledges the influence of Barth's helper, Charlotte von Kirschbaum, and contrary to other opinions claims that the impact of Wilhelm Herrmann's thinking on Barth remained until 1933.

Although principally about material from the period 1918 to 1933, later work by Barth is included in the study to give evidence for the proposals that his ethical thinking helped shape his dogmatics, and that his later ethics show development, not stages and breaks. A discussion of criticisms of his ethics highlights the problem of choosing a method of enquiry that is appropriate to the object studied. A dialogue with two other ethical projects helps focus attention on his insistence on a proper foundation for Christian social ethics. The thesis argues that Barth's work is a theological ethic, because his social philosophy gives a method for asking appropriate

questions and creates a way of considering these questions from a Christian perspective.

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

This thesis is a contribution to the contemporary Anglo-Saxon reappraisal of Karl Barth's ethics. The main task of the study is a reassessment of Barth's Christian social ethics written between 1918 and 1933. There are two reasons why it is an appropriate time for such an undertaking: firstly, the recent interest in Barth's ethics by the scholars Nigel Biggar, John Webster, and, in part, Bruce McCormack; secondly, the publication of material on ethics written by Barth, which was previously unavailable.<sup>1</sup>

The study examines newly published material by Barth on ethics. Primary consideration is given to the series of lectures on ethics given by him at the universities of Münster and Bonn in 1928 and 1930. To inform the reading of this material there is a discussion of the influences on him during this period. New material is discussed on Charlotte von Kirschbaum, Wilhelm Herrmann and Cornelius van Til. The work of Herrmann, Barth's teacher at Marburg, is discussed at length not only because of its importance as one of the main foundations of Barth's thought, but also because of its continuing influence on some of Barth's critics. Additional material from his writings after 1933, from *Church Dogmatics* and the three essays published in *Community, State and Church* are used to illustrate two points: firstly, to show his ethics developing, and secondly, that social ethics were a primary concern of

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<sup>1</sup> Nigel Biggar, *The Hastening that Waits*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993)

John Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1995)

John Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998)

Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press; 1997)

his throughout his life. Barth's intellectual debt to Hegel receives particular attention. An awareness of the tradition in which Barth was working informs the reading of his critics. Focusing on points of methodological disagreement shows the importance both that the form is appropriate to the object of study, and of the primacy of the spoken word in the tradition. The weakness and fragility of the study of Christian doctrine in English theology, within both universities and the church are recognised as causes of hostility to Barth's thought in England. There is a discussion of the criticisms of Barth's ethics. The work of van Til receives exacting consideration and detailed treatment. There are two reasons why van Til's disapproval receives lengthy consideration: firstly, because there is no previous discussion of van Til's work and secondly, because of its continuing influence. The thesis calls for the recognition of von Kirschbaum's influence on Barth's theology. Scholars have overlooked, and even disregarded her contribution to Barth's theological ethics. A proper estimate is made of her involvement in the development of Barth's ethical writings, particularly the significance of her participation in the decision *not* to publish the Münster ethics in his lifetime.

The thesis discusses the meanings given by Barth to the concepts of knowledge, experience and determination. Concepts of knowledge, as used by him, are often different to the way such concepts are commonly understood in Anglo-American theological and philosophical discourse. A long history of suspicion of German theology, in many English theologians, is the background to the misreading and misunderstanding of his dogmatics. In the Birbeck, lectures delivered in the University of Cambridge in 1947 on 'The Righteousness of God, Luther Studies', Gordon Rupp made the following comment:



The virile theological tradition deriving from the Oxford movement has made great and positive theological contributions to English religion, but from the time of Hurrell Froude onwards its blind spot has been a rigid, narrow and wooden hostility towards the Reformers and their works.<sup>2</sup>

Colin Gunton points out that English systematic theology suffered much damage during the nineteenth century, from the hostile attitude of some nationalistic Tractarians, notably Edward Bouverie Pusey. They questioned, with alarm, the influence of Hegel and Schleiermacher on the development of German theology. Gunton says, that as a result:

A breach between different European traditions was opened, and this has meant that English systematic theology, never very strong, has suffered injuries from which it has not yet recovered.<sup>3</sup>

He goes on to say:

The form of English systematic theology arises from an essentially nationalistic fear of continental thought...what happens is that nationalistic isolation tends to institutionalise, so to speak, the typical problems, just as incest can inbreed genetic ones. Strengths, uncriticised, become weaknesses, while weaknesses are magnified. English theology tends to reflect the weakness of English thought in general: a suspicion of intellectuals of all kinds, allied to a tendency to naturalism and moralism. Daniel Hardy has observed that these are the reasons why English theology has found it so hard to come to terms with the theology of both Schleiermacher and Barth.<sup>4</sup> They seem to say things that it is simply not possible to say. Because of inbred tendencies the English simply fail to understand what these seminal thinkers are doing.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God, Luther Studies*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1953) p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Colin Gunton, 'An English Systematic Theology?' in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* 46 (1993) pp. 479-96.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Hardy, 'The English Tradition of Interpretation and the Reception of Schleiermacher and Barth in England', in *Barth and Schleiermacher. Beyond the Impasse*, ed. by J.Duke and R.Streetman, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988)

<sup>5</sup> Gunton, 'An English Systematic Theology?' p. 492.

Anglo-American scholars have received Barth's *Church Dogmatics* with a lack of comprehension and his ethics with hostility.<sup>6</sup> It is part of the task of this study to contribute to the current reassessment of his ethics avoiding misreading and misunderstandings.

Gunton was writing specifically about the situation in England in an article mainly criticising the Anglo-Catholic section of the Church of England. In Scotland, the situation is very different. There is a long tradition of the study of German language, culture and theology by Scottish theologians. This is illustrated by the work of the Revd Professor John Caird who was Professor of Divinity of the University of Glasgow from 1862 to 1872, and became Principal and Vice Chancellor. As Principal, he gave the Gifford lectures in 1892-1893 and 1895-1896.<sup>7</sup> His brother, Edward Caird, was Master of Balliol College, and wrote a 'Memoir' of John as a preface to the published version of the lectures.<sup>8</sup> Writing of his brother's intellectual development between 1847 and 1849 he says:

Still more important, perhaps, as a step in his intellectual progress was the fact that he began the study of the German language and literature and brought his mind into contact with the theological and philosophical thought of Germany.<sup>9</sup>

Discussing Principal Caird's introductory lecture, 'Theology as a Science', Edward Caird writes:

He was interested in Hegel mainly for two things: first, by the thoroughness with which he carries out the idealistic principle, and, secondly, by the strong

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<sup>6</sup> Colin Gunton, *Theology through the Theologians*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> John Caird, *The Fundamental ideas of Christianity*, (Glasgow: James MacLehose, 1899)

<sup>8</sup> Edward Caird, 'Memoir' as a preface to John Caird, *The Fundamental ideas of Christianity*.

<sup>9</sup> Caird, 'Memoir' pp. xxxiii-xxxiv.

grasp of the ethical and religious experience which is perhaps Hegel's greatest characteristic.<sup>10</sup>

Writing about his Gifford lectures as a whole Edward Caird says:

He was very deeply influenced by Hegel, and believed himself to be in the main interpreting his thought.<sup>11</sup>

As early as 1930, the University of Glasgow awarded the Revd Professor Karl Barth an honorary doctorate of divinity.<sup>12</sup>

## 1.1 The structure of the thesis

The second chapter is a discussion on current scholarship on Barth's moral theology principally of the work of John Webster. In the third chapter, recently available material, the posthumously published lectures Barth delivered in the Universities of Münster in 1928 and Bonn in 1930, is examined through a close reading. These lectures form the focus of this study and are the material upon which the call for a reassessment of Barth's ethics is based. They have not previously been discussed in any detail. In the fourth chapter, the place of the Holy Spirit is the focus of discussion. Barth has often been accused of ignoring the third person of the Trinity in an over-insistence on the revelation in Jesus Christ. Again, the material is a lecture, 'The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life', which was given in 1929 and has received little

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<sup>10</sup> Caird, 'Memoir' p. lii.

<sup>11</sup> Caird, 'Memoir' p. lxxvii.

<sup>12</sup> Glasgow University Calendar 1929-1930.



attention. Development in Barth's dogmatic work has been the central point of controversy among scholars who, in the main, have ignored his ethics.

Many theologians have limited their interpretation of Barth's work to his early material and to *Dogmatics in Outline*.<sup>13</sup> Their argument is that Barth moved from using a dialectical method in *Romans* to analogy in *Dogmatics in Outline*, and their view has become the established opinion.<sup>14</sup> This interpretation ignores the evidence of the thirteen volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*. Bruce McCormack's recent study has seriously undermined the two-stage hypothesis of a move from dialectic to analogy. Although, it has to be said that Boyd notes that a few scholars have argued against the two-stage hypothesis before McCormack's study.<sup>15</sup>

Until recently scholarship on Barth's work has been dominated by an examination of the two-stage and three-stage hypotheses. However, close study of other material shows development in Barth's work; not breaks or stages. The material may be found in the Münster and Bonn lectures of 1929 and 1930 and the later work on ethics in *Church Dogmatics* II § 36. The material discussed later in chapter six shows that the lectures include the main ethical themes of the later *Church Dogmatics*. This evidence further supports the view that Barth's work in dogmatics and ethics shows development, not breaks or stages.

Any discussion of Barth's ethics has to face the problems of human freedom. Chapter four is a close reading of a small section of *Church Dogmatics* III/4 in this section,

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<sup>13</sup> Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G.T.Thompson, (London: SCM, 1993)

<sup>14</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. by E.C.Hoskins, (London: OUP, 1933)

<sup>15</sup> Ian Boyd, 'Dogmatics among the ruins: the relevance of German expressionism and the enlightenment as contexts for Karl Barth's theological development', (unpublished doctoral thesis: University of Edinburgh, 1996)



pages 116-59, Barth discusses what he means by human determination and freedom. This section is central and most important, as here Barth answers those critics who so frequently accuse him of denying room for human freedom.

Chapter six examines more specifically Barth's social ethics in three essays, published over a ten-year period.<sup>16</sup> He delivered the first essay, 'Gospel and Law' as a lecture in Barmen in 1935. The second, essay, 'Church and State' published in 1938, appeared at a time when questions about the relationship between the church and the state were of vital importance in Germany. In 1946, Barth delivered 'The Christian Community and the Civil Community' the third lecture in which he called the German Confessing Churches back to the fifth thesis of the Barmen Declaration that they had signed twelve years earlier.

The first six chapters of the thesis discuss in detail most of Barth's ethical writings. In chapter seven, the attention turns to three of Barth's critics: Cornelius van Til, Norman Robinson and Robert Willis.<sup>17</sup> These three scholars provide a range of criticisms and their work spreads over a wide span of time from van Til in 1938 to Robinson in 1956 and Willis in 1971.

Cornelius van Til receives the most attention, because his criticism of Barth is the most vehement and has remained influential. van Til accused Barth of basing his work on modernist philosophy and of not being sufficiently biblical. Yet, although

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<sup>16</sup> Karl Barth, *Community, State and Church*, trans. by R. Smith, (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1968)

<sup>17</sup> Cornelius van Til, *The New Modernism: An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner*, (London: J. Clarke, 1946)

Norman Robinson, *Christ and Conscience*, (London: Nisbet, 1956)

Robert Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971)

mentioned in a footnote by von Balthasar, van Til's work has not previously been discussed.<sup>18</sup>

Robinson disagrees with van Til's opinion and says Barth theology was too biblical and left insufficient room for human experience. The third critic, Willis, begins sympathetically but by the end of his work, he finds Barth's work deficient in the area of human autonomy and freedom. Willis also, like some other American theologians, criticises Barth for failing to take a stand against communism.

Chapter seven also takes up, in section 7.4, the debate about the foundation of Christian ethics by examining the work of Donald Shriver, and Miroslav Volf.<sup>19</sup> This discussion provides the basis for chapter eight, which contains the conclusions.

The concluding points are:

1. Christian dogmatics is the foundation of Christian ethics.
2. Social ethics were central to Barth's thought throughout his life.
3. Barth's ethics show the continuous development of his early ideas and not radical changes.
4. Barth has an intellectual debt to Hegel, which has not been recognised in Anglo-American readings.
5. Through misreading, Barth has been falsely accused of disregarding the freedom, autonomy and hence the responsibility of the human subject.

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<sup>18</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation* trans. by Edward Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992) p. 61.

<sup>19</sup> Donald Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies*, (Oxford: OUP, 1995)

Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1996)



The thesis argues for the premise that Barth has an intellectual debt to Hegel similar to that of the relationship between Aquinas and Aristotle. The reading of the material by van Til informs and reflects this understanding. The proposal is that Barth, although writing among the ruins of the Enlightenment and German Expressionism, followed the intellectual tradition of Kant and Hegel. Barth, who took Schleiermacher extremely seriously, realised that liberal Protestant theology had neither the strength nor the will to face the collapse of the Weimar Republic. It was political and social ethics that took Barth back to concerns raised by Hegel.<sup>20</sup> Those concerns have to do with the recognition that philosophy and theology have the same object, the truth, which is God. Hegel says:

Philosophy lacks the advantage, which other sciences enjoy, of being able to *presuppose* its *ob-jects* as given immediately by representation. And, with regard to its beginning and advance, it cannot *presuppose* the *method* of cognition as one that is readily accepted. It is true that it does, initially, have its ob-jects in common with religion. Both of them have the *truth* in the highest sense of the word as their ob-ject; for both hold that *God* and *God alone* is the truth.<sup>21</sup>

Barth recognises the truth of this statement with regard to theology and is concerned to establish theology as a science, which is to realise that it does not have its object immediately given by representation, nor can it presuppose its beginning and method of advance. Barth says of Hegel's doctrine:

We must first of all establish that with what we have come to know as his Christian opposition to modern consciousness, Hegel had something of decisive and lasting importance to say, or to recall, to theology, and not only to the theology of his age. A theology which is jostled by philosophy – and

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<sup>20</sup> Karl Barth 'Hegel' in *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: its background and history*. The first complete translation of *Die Protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert* (Evangelischer Verlag, Zollikon, Zürich, 1952) Chapters 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 19, 19, 29 trans. by Brian Cozens and revised by the editorial staff of SCM Press; the remainder trans. by John Bowden, (London: SCM Press, 1972) pp. 384-421.

<sup>21</sup> G.W.F.Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia of Logic* Part 1 of the *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences* with *Zusätze*, trans. by T.F.Geraets, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991) p. 24.

which theology is not – is just the one which has often forgotten and still forgets that the truth should not concern it less than philosophy but, on the contrary, much more. It should not be concerned with manifestations of life in general, with some kind of expressions, declarations, avowals, assertions and symbols attempting to express the inexpressible in some form or another, nor with a kind of verbal music-making, nor with a description of conditions and circumstances, nor even with a view of essentials, however deep, but with truth, with a kind of knowledge which does not have its foundation in some kind of given thing, as such, but in the link of this given thing with the final origin of everything given. If theology does not speak the truth in this sense, then in what sense can it assert that it is speaking of God? Can it perhaps absolve itself from the earnestness with which Hegel equated the truth and the knowledge of God? Dare it fall short of Hegel in this respect, if it is not to stand – for all the supposed independence of its source of knowledge – in the shadow of philosophy, philosophy being regarded as something more important. A theology whose basis was merely historical, merely phenomenological, could in fact stand in this questionable shadow. And did not nineteenth-century theology to a large extent stand indeed in this shadow when and after it passed by Hegel's doctrine?<sup>22</sup>

The quotation from Hegel and the lengthy extract from Barth on Hegel are included to form part of the foundation of the thesis. The method of theological study has to be appropriate to the object. The form is determined by the object and *is* the object.

There is no fixed property and not even language is owned. The method is more like seeing a film than reading a text: although each frame is fixed it can only be understood by seeing the whole film. Although Barth won a Sigmund Freud prize, in praise of the eloquence of his academic prose, the text is an antitext, not a literary fixed property.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, in this respect Barth continues in the Hegelian tradition in which language is suspicious, and cannot claim to encapsulate the Truth. The Truth revealed makes language into itself. Thus, the main concern is with language as the form of exposition.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, Barth begins his ethics with a discussion of method.

The method has to be appropriate to the task of expounding the content. The

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<sup>22</sup> Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 415.

<sup>23</sup> Letter to R. Karwehl, 30 October 1968. in Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. by John Bowden (London SCM, 1976) p. 494.

<sup>24</sup> See 'Skoteinos, or How to Read Hegel', in Theodor W. Adorno *Hegel: Three Studies* trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994) pp. 126-7.



command of the grace of God is its sole content, and using a method appropriate to that content is the necessary assumption of any exploration of Barth's thought. An appropriation of language and a unification of form and content occur. Ethics has to ask questions about what is the case now that God has chosen to reveal himself in Jesus Christ. The object of study imposes these parameters upon the science of theological ethics.

Barth defines science as the study of the experience of knowledge of an object,<sup>25</sup> saying, 'Knowledge is the confirmation of human acquaintance with an object whereby its truth becomes a determination of the existence of the man who has the knowledge.'<sup>26</sup> The object of investigation creates the conditions under which the subject's knowledge of the object produces the subject's *experience* of that object. The subject's *experience* of the object is the determination of the subject. Barth is working within a neo-Kantian framework in which there is a gap in human knowledge between the knowledge of an object and the object as it is in itself. Boyd makes the perceptive comment that McCormack's attempt to establish Barth's Kantianism, and thereby to distance him from neo-Kantianism, is misconceived.<sup>27</sup> The gap is the distinction between the *phenomena* and *noumena*. The *phenomena*, in Barth's definition of knowledge, are the experiences of an object. The *noumena* are the objects as they are in themselves. God's knowledge has no distinction, as God knows things as they are in themselves. Barth claims human knowledge only becomes real knowledge when the gap between *noumena* and *phenomena* is eliminated by God's revelation. How then does human language express this real knowledge? Language

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<sup>25</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume I The Doctrine of the Word of God, part 1 trans. by G.W.Bromiley, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975) pp. 10-1.

<sup>26</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1 p. 198.

<sup>27</sup> Boyd, 'Dogmatics among the ruins'.

itself has a gap, as human language does not express the 'true' meaning until God reveals it. Wilhelm Herrmann's influence, his teacher at the University of Marburg, is the source of Barth's use of neo-Kantian epistemology. The words of Herrmann illustrate the similarity with Barth's thinking on revelation and his own, 'Revelation as a Fact inside our own Experience, but Distinct from Ourselves, Convincing us of God's Working upon us.'<sup>28</sup>

Graham Ward discusses Barth's neo-Kantian thinking in relation to language,<sup>29</sup> and shows how God's revelation overcomes the linguistic gap between the Word of God and the word of man.<sup>30</sup> Ward also discusses the preoccupation with the paradoxical nature of theological language within the intellectual and cultural context of Barth's time. He cites the works of Buber and Heidegger as having similar preoccupations about religious language.<sup>31</sup> Ward's perceptive analysis of Barth's use of two models of language will inform the later discussion, in chapter five, of Barth's understanding of human determination through the revelation of God's Word. He says, 'If there is to be knowledge of God, if there is to be theological realism, then a relation must be found between the human word and the word of God.'<sup>32</sup> It is argued later that this relationship is established in Barth's understanding of human determination. This is not the place to consider in depth the problem of the relationship between divine and human speech, but some observations are appropriate and necessary to an understanding of Barth's thought on this matter.

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<sup>28</sup> Wilhelm Herrmann, *The Communion of the Christian with God: Described on the basis of Luther's Statements*, trans. by J. Sandys Stanyon 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Williams and Norgate 1906) Chapter II § 2 p. 59.

<sup>29</sup> Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1995) Chapter One on Logo centrism.

<sup>30</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume II The Doctrine of God, part 1, trans. T.H.L. Parker, et al (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1957) pp. 3-204.

<sup>31</sup> Ward (1995) p. 34.

<sup>32</sup> Ward (1995) p. 63.



Kierkegaard introduced the place of language in dialectical theology in his concept of contemporaneity, which constitutes the essence of being present. Hans Georg Gadamer gives a lengthy treatment of the development of the subject in Protestant thought.<sup>33</sup> McCormack challenges Ward's understanding of the relationship between presence, in a Derridean sense, and God's self-revelation:

God in his self-revelation is not a "presence" in the Derridean sense. Rather, because God unveils himself by veiling himself in human flesh and human words, revelation only reaches its goal in the human knower when the Holy Spirit gives us the "eyes" or "ears" to see and hear that which remains hidden to outward perception.<sup>34</sup>

William Stacy Johnson, in a recent work, has developed the discussion about the gap between the language of God and the language of men and women.<sup>35</sup> His innovative reading suggests that Barth provides a foundation for a post-modern theology.

McCormack claims that:

Johnson has moved well beyond previous attempts to read Barth as a forerunner of post-modern sensibilities (e.g., those by Walter Lowe and Graham Ward).<sup>36</sup>

Johnson claims that Barth is a non-foundationalist, because he claims that the reception of everything, including language, is given in revelation as the eternal now of the present. Johnson is right to make this observation, for as McCormack says:

Johnson recognises that Barth was primarily interested in making claims about the nature of "reality" (divine and creaturely).<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (London: Sheed & Ward, 1996) p. 127.

<sup>34</sup> Bruce L. McCormack, 'The Mystery of God: Karl Barth and the Postmodern Foundation of Theology by William Stacy Johnson', *Theology Today*, 55 1998-99 pp. 458-9.

<sup>35</sup> William Stacy Johnson, *The Mystery of God: Karl Barth and the Postmodern Foundations of Theology*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1997)

<sup>36</sup> McCormack, *Theology Today*, 55 1998-99 p. 458.

<sup>37</sup> McCormack, *Theology Today*, 55 1998-99, p.458.



Richard Roberts gives due acknowledgement to Hegel's influence on Barth, but criticises him for his neo-Kantian solution to the problem of time and eternity.<sup>38</sup> He considers that Barth's concept of the eternally present now, which is made true in human language by God's revelation, creates problems for a satisfactory explanation of God's actions in time.

Although Johnson is right to make the point that Barth does not presuppose a foundation, it is necessary to remember that Barth writes as a modernist. He believes in the existence of a self, which is the subject of the knowledge of the experience, whereas post-modern philosophy assumes the self to be socially constructed.<sup>39</sup> In addition, he resolves the distinction between knowledge of the thing in itself and human knowledge by the determination of the subject in God's revelation. The subject only becomes real in revelation. For him, the determination of the subject becomes the object of study, which is the revealed knowledge of God. The experience of this knowledge is the determination of humanity, and takes place within the three persons of the Trinity. This point is the primary connection between Barth and Hegel.

The fundamental point of agreement between Barth and Hegel is that the object of scientific study determines the appropriate method of investigation. Theology is the science of the study of the knowledge of God. Both Hegel and Barth believe it is the object that is being studied that determines the appropriate methodology. Therefore, it follows that in Barth's and Hegel's thinking theology has a method, which is determined by its object. God is the object of the science of theology. Since God is unique and not a member of a set of objects any method relating to the investigation

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<sup>38</sup> Richard Roberts, *A Theology on Its Way? Essays on Karl Barth*, (Edinburgh: T&T. Clark) pp. 1-58.

of other objects would be inappropriate. Knowledge of God is only available through God's self-revelation, because both the revelation and the means of receiving it are His gifts. Thus, the science of theology must remain true in method to the determination of theological knowledge. Barth maintains this truth in his exposition of dogmatics and ethics. His work is in the tradition of German expressionism, in which form and content remain united in the exposition.<sup>40</sup> There can be no pre-existing logical structure providing the form into which knowledge is poured as the content. The truth of the knowledge is in the method, not in an *a priori* logical reality. Barth's style is dissimilar to that of an Anglo-American analytical discourse in which a sequential development logically progresses from initial propositions. In the analytic tradition, the object provides the content and the underlying Aristotelian logic gives the form. For example, in the analytical tradition, the propositions *P* and not *P* are mutually exclusive. Whereas, in Barth's dialectical thinking, the knowledge of the object contains the thing and its opposite: one requires the other. He comments appreciatively on Hegel's innovation that, 'Life itself is not a unity resting in itself, but a perpetual *a = non-a*, despite of the whole of western logic'.<sup>41</sup> Impossible possibilities, stated as paradox, are the truth of Barth's dialectic. For him, knowledge of God does not begin with propositions but with both the form and the content of revelation. There is no underlying and presupposed Aristotelian logic to provide an existing form into which God pours revelation as the content. Charles Taylor gives the following helpful explanation of Hegelian logic, and it is important to read Barth with

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<sup>39</sup> Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construct of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1967)

<sup>40</sup> Roberts, *A Theology on its Way?* For discussions sympathetic to the view that Barth has a considerable intellectual debt to Hegel, particularly the two essays 'Karl Barth's Doctrine of Time: Its Nature and Implications', and 'Karl Barth on the Trinity'.

<sup>41</sup> Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* p. 413.



this in mind, because readings of Barth that criticise him from an empiricist viewpoint sometimes overlook their own imbedded Aristotelian logic:

Hegel holds that the ordinary viewpoint of identity has to be abandoned in philosophy in favour of a way of thinking which can be called dialectical in that it presents us with something which cannot be grasped in a single proposition or series of propositions, which does not violate the principle of non-contradiction:  $\sim (p. \sim p)$ . The minimum cluster which can really do justice to reality is three propositions, that A is A, that A is also  $\sim A$ ; and that  $\sim A$  shows itself to be after all A.<sup>42</sup>

This means that the form, which is the dialectic, is appropriate to its object and is an expression of the truth. In other words the truth is the method, and hence the enormous significance in this thesis given to form.<sup>43</sup>

In the following passage, Barth discusses how knowledge of God is only available through God's self-revelation and dismisses as irrelevant knowledge of God obtained from elsewhere.<sup>44</sup> His words clearly illustrate the distinctiveness of his concept of the knowledge of God, and how it differs from the concept of knowledge of God derived from methodologies that presuppose the existence of propositional logic:

We start out from the fact that through His Word God is actually known and will be known again. On principle, we have to reject any anxiety about this occurrence as not only superfluous but forbidden. Knowledge of God within the Christian Church is very well aware that it is established in its reality and to that extent also called in question by God's Word, through which alone it can have reality, and on the basis of which alone it can be fulfilled. However, precisely because the knowledge of God cannot call itself in question in its effort to understand itself, it cannot ask whether it is real from some position outside itself.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Charles Taylor, Taylor, *Hegel*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1997) p. 80.

<sup>43</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Part II pp. 171-212- for a discussion about the question of truth in the human sciences.

<sup>44</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1 p. 270.

<sup>45</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1 p. 4.

The knowledge he is discussing *determines* the subject. As the knowledge of the experience reveals reality, the object is seen, retrospectively, to have determined that reality. He asks the reader to keep in mind Anselm of Canterbury's methodology,<sup>46</sup> particular in his proofs of God,<sup>47</sup> and also his own subsequent work on Anselm.<sup>48</sup> He rejects the idea that there may exist outside the knowledge of God a position or theory through which questions about that knowledge may be decided. It is necessary to keep this point in mind during the study of his ethics. Before asking questions, understanding must come from within. Entering the system is the means of making a beginning with Barth, as with Hegel. Using this method questions are usually answered more profoundly than the way in which they have been formulated.

The defining moment of all, past, present and future reality was the entry of Christ into humanity, which was a new and unpredictable event. When Barth compares the entry of Jesus Christ into the world with the entry of the Commendatore in his beloved Mozart's *Don Giovanni*,<sup>49</sup> it was the newness and unpredictability of the event that he wished to emphasise.<sup>50</sup> This unique phenomenon necessitated prophetic utterance as the only possible form of prediction. The event could only be anticipated as that which could not be anticipated, as by the prophet Isaiah when he declares, 'Thus saith the Lord ... Remember ye not the former things, neither consider the things of old. Behold I will do a new thing'.<sup>51</sup> Philosophers, seers, astronomers or scientists could not have foretold this prediction. Human reason could neither

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<sup>46</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1

<sup>47</sup> Anselm of Canterbury *Proslogian* 2-3

<sup>48</sup> Karl Barth, *Fides quaerens intellectum : Anselm's Beweis der Existenz Gottes im Zusammenhang seines theologischen Programms*, (Munich : Kaiser, 1931)

<sup>49</sup> *Zwischen den Zeiten* 2 (1923): 31.

<sup>50</sup> I am indebted to Professor Michael Banner for the acuteness of this observation see: *Turning the World Upside Down (and Some Other Tasks for Dogmatic Christian Ethics)*. An inaugural lecture from the Department of Theology & Religious Studies King's College, London by Michael Banner, F.D.Maurice Professor of Moral & Social Theology delivered on 16 October 1996.



anticipate nor define the *event* of God's revelation or its outcome. Both the newness and the unpredictability of the event are the major themes of Barth's work. These themes appear continuously from his early revolutionary commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Romans<sup>52</sup> to the closing pages of his magnum opus forty years later.<sup>53</sup> The seriousness with which he elaborates these two themes, and the way in which he pursues them relentlessly to show how reality is determined, coupled with the beauty and elegance of the resulting theology make his work worthy of study. However, there is more to reading Barth than simply the appreciation of his elegant exposition. He combines all the aesthetic, religious and ethic elements with style because God is their author. The religious experience of reading him is therefore also aesthetic and necessitates an ethical response. The style of writing reflects his acceptance of the reality of God's revelation with thanksgiving and joy. The style is elegant, form and content are one, and there is no superfluity of language, no flamboyance of style and no intrusive ego. The *Church Dogmatics* is a classic text, which pursues uncompromisingly the purity and clarity of the truth, not only for the joy of aesthetics but also as a prophetic call. It is prophetic, and many consider it to be the greatest work of moral theology since Aquinas.

Like Aquinas Barth returns to the sources of dogmatics: the Scriptures and the works of the early church fathers, and confronts the Post-Enlightenment condition of alienation. In so doing, he goes back beyond the theologies of Luther and Calvin and engages with Augustine, Aquinas and Bonaventure, and is able to reject from the Reformation theology doctrines that he considers ill formed. For example, he is willing to discard Luther's two-kingdom doctrine and its four hundred-year-old

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<sup>51</sup> Isaiah 43. 18-19, and 65. 17f

<sup>52</sup> Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, 1<sup>st</sup> edn, (Bern, 1919)

legacy of the division of church and state. This rejection is discussed fully in Chapter 6. As a theologian writing in the Reformed Protestant tradition, Barth might be expected to move away from Luther, but surprisingly he treats Calvin similarly, as he is highly critical of Calvin's natural theology. Even though Barth, as is well known, in his debate with Brunner, rejects any form of natural theology he does incorporate a form of it within his doctrine of creation.<sup>54</sup> The Word of God received in revelation does become a form of natural theology. Chapter 3 discusses this point.

However, Barth does not stay within the walls of the theological house that he has constructed. He takes his own advice and walks through and out the other side into the fresh air of the world and engages with people:

A good theologian does not live in a house of ideas, principles and methods. He walks right through all such buildings and always comes out into the fresh air again. He remains on the way.<sup>55</sup>

Uniquely Barth has seen and emphasised, the newness of the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and how these events have created a boundary, which restricts reason within the limits of human thought. Reason has thus been properly determined by the entry of God into the world, and the outcome is both ontic and noetic. Thus defined and limited reason receives its freedom to be that which it is. Humanity, and its experience and knowledge are all determined by these events. Because these events determine humanity no *a priori* philosophical presuppositions may be brought to the theological task. Natural theology is rejected, and must be seen

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<sup>53</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*.

<sup>54</sup> Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology*, trans. by Peter Fraenkel, (London: The Centenary Press 1946)

<sup>55</sup> Quoted by George Newlands in, *God in Christian Perspective*, p. 7, and taken from a letter of Karl Barth to Heiko Miskotte of 12 July 1956, and to Marcus Barth 21 April 1956. Professor Newlands says, 'This comment seems to me to be one of the best pieces of advice ever given in theology, and I endorse it without qualification.'



for what it is, a human self-determining desire, and Barth states that revelation cannot be made into a form of natural theology. As revelation and its knowledge cannot be appropriated, there is no possibility of building a body of knowledge. Barth's work is therefore a dogmatic theology that must be begun anew each day, thus we cannot turn to Barth's work looking for solutions to today's questions. However, we can look to Barth for a way to understand our position and for a description of the moral space in which we act.

The newness of the event of God's incarnation in Christ was not intended to sweep away the old creation that existed before Christ. Through his incarnation, God initiates a renewal of the old creation, and forms a new one, which establishes a new relationship between God and humanity. This relationship is a covenant in which God has chosen men and women as partners. A covenant is not a contract as there are no preconditions, and no penalty clauses. Contracts are legally enforceable agreements, whereas covenants are pure acts of generosity. Barth sees Christian marriage as the nearest human analogy to God's covenant. As covenant partners with God how should humans act? This is the question, that Barth answers in his discussion of both the ethical and the moral dimensions of life. Throughout his ethical writings Barth argues that an *ought* proceeds from an *is*, for it is only when we know who God is that we know how to act.

To the question how can we know the God who is completely other Barth replies that we can know God, because He freely chose to enter human history. He reminds us that God is not hiding behind Jesus Christ, and that we are not required to engage in philosophical speculation about the possible attributes of an unknowable God, He has chosen to reveal himself in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Therefore,



we can know what it is we *ought* to do. The *is* precedes the *ought*. In Barth's phrase, 'dogmatics itself is ethics and ethics is also dogmatics.'<sup>56</sup> The phrase asserts, that a description of the acts of God is a description of an action to which certain human action correctly and of necessity corresponds, and which thus creates it and evinces it.

Barth's argument is that revelation defines both itself and the means by which it is received, as the experience and the knowledge of the experience are the revelation. Revelation is its own object and creates its own subject. God's self-revealing revelation determines both ontically and noetically those to whom he chooses to be revealed. The New Testament contains the human records of those who witnessed to the revelation of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. These are Barth's presuppositions and his starting point, and from this position he struggles with what can be said about God, as God reveals Himself to men and women as partners in that revelation.

Whilst at Marburg Barth assimilated much of the thinking of Herrmann who was his teacher, who tried to find a middle path between those two philosophical giants, Hegel the German idealist and Kierkegaard the existentialist. Barth later rejected existentialism and in his essay on Hegel repeatedly draws attention to his thought:

Only someone who does not understand Hegel's philosophy can miss its peculiar greatness. Again and again we find we must think three times before contradicting it, because we might find that everything we are tempted to say in contradiction of it has already been said within it, and provided with the best possible answer. It is great in two ways: first, looked at in itself, because it has seized upon and implemented an idea that is at once simple and all-embracing, the at least relative truth of which is self-evident. It has done this so energetically, that whatever attitude we adopt towards it we cannot help hearing it and coming to terms with it. It is possible to bypass Fichte and Schelling, but it is as impossible to pass by Hegel, as it is to pass by Kant.

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<sup>56</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2 p. 509.

And the promissory nature of the truth Hegel enunciated and the ease with which it lends itself to equalisation will perhaps be even greater than the case of Kant for someone who, as a theologian, must finally say 'No' to Hegel.<sup>57</sup>

Barth understood more clearly than most, that the theological problems discussed by Hegel in the nineteenth century had not been resolved, but merely bypassed. The questions are:

What is the proper relationship between faith and reason?

What is the place of human religious experience?

How should human freedom and autonomy be understood?

In addition to these questions, there is always, in the science of theology, the more particular, peculiar and intransigent question of how to make a beginning. Barth has an intellectual debt to Hegel who discussed the questions and provided a method, which is simple in its beginning and comprehensive in its outcome. He has a lesser debt to Kierkegaard, who provided the insight that God is wholly other, and the concept of the contemporaneity of the Word.<sup>58</sup>

Barth's theology is an inverted mirror image of Hegel. However, unlike Hegel, he offers no prolegomena. Hegel discussed a way of moving from Kant's sense certainty, and evolved a way of beginning the task of thinking about thinking which is the task of philosophy.<sup>59</sup> Without a similar form of introduction, reading Barth is conceptually difficult. There is, on his part, an unspoken assumption that the readers will know Hegel, and be able to unlock the text; sadly, this is not usually the case. For Anglo-

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<sup>57</sup> Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background and History* p. 396.

<sup>58</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical fragments; or a fragment of philosophy by Johannes Climacus*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1962) Ch. 4, and elsewhere.



American readers Hegel has long remained a deeply mysterious and difficult Continental European outside mainstream Anglo-American analytical thought. In the main Anglo-Saxon theologians have disregarded Hegel. There are exceptions; Gunton refers to Hegel, and quotes from his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in which the reader is taken from where they are to a place from which they can begin.<sup>60</sup> However, Gunton accuses Hegel of the sin of immediacy, which means God is available to consciousness as it thinks about itself. This is a misunderstanding. A reading of the foreword to *Encyclopaedia of Logic*, Hegel's major work, corrects this misreading.<sup>61</sup> God gives himself to consciousness, and only then does he become available to it. Hegel further explains that the Spirit, who is experienced in consciousness and reflected on in self-consciousness is the second person of the Trinity. He says, the Gospel accounts witness to the faith of the disciples who had yet to receive the gift of Truth. He says faith was:

Declared to be only the beginning and the fundamental condition for that which was still incomplete. Those who believed in that way still did not have the Spirit; they were to *receive* it. The Spirit, the truth itself, the Spirit that leads us into all truth, comes only later than that faith.<sup>62</sup>

Hegel explains that the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost would lead humanity into truth through the process of thinking about thinking. He thought the Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, would be made manifest through philosophy. Although Hegel believed his philosophy was true, he was not so vain as to believe it to be unique. He thought a philosophy was of its time, and during his lifetime the Ideal Absolute dominated. Hegel believed philosophy is of its time and Barth believed that theology was of its

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<sup>59</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A.V.Millar, (Oxford: OUP 1977)

<sup>60</sup> Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation: The 1993 Warfield Lectures*, (Edinburgh, T&T.Clark, 1995) p. 3.

<sup>61</sup> Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic Part 1 of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with Zusätze*, trans. by T.F.Geraets, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991)

time, and during his lifetime the problem of human experience was dominant. Hans Urs von Balthasar, a Roman Catholic theologian, does appreciate the relationship between Barth and Hegel and in his stylistic and sensitive treatment of Barth's work says:

Barth scales mountains. He has chosen for his standpoint a summit so high that faith can survey the whole meaning and plan of the divine economy. *Formally* considered this is very similar to the stance adopted by Schleiermacher or Hegel, although Barth never leaves the standpoint of pure theology and never sketches out a philosophy as such or metaphysics that could bridge the divide between theology and philosophy. What Barth has in fact done is to invert the Hegelian intent but in the Hegelian manner: as Hegel tried to absorb the assertions of theology into a more comprehensive philosophy, Barth orders all the paths of human wisdom, philosophical and religious, around the central core of a purely theological view.<sup>63</sup>

Boyd, in an unpublished Ph.D. thesis, takes up the theme of Barth's work being an inverted image of Hegel's writing in his interesting discussion of the relationship between German expressionism and the work of artists and Barth.<sup>64</sup>

Barth, like Hegel, is concerned with the problem of making a beginning. Both search for the truth by beginning with Scripture, and in using dialectic methods. Whilst it is necessary to read Barth as part of the tradition of German Idealism, it is also important to delineate the distinctiveness of his thought, particularly in the development of ethics from dogmatics. To read Barth without Hegel can lead to a misunderstanding of Barth's methodology. Both authors require the reader to enter the system at any point and a beginning will be achieved. Both their works develop in similar circular spirals, which repeat themselves on different levels, and from different perspectives, thus the beginning can be regained from any starting point.

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<sup>62</sup> Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, p. 20.



With both theologians, no adequate reading can be undertaken from a neutral position outside the systems they have created. Any supposed neutral position, which attempts to transcend and judge the system from an external omnipotent place of judgement is a fantasy and leads to misreading and disappointment. The repeated hostile criticisms of both Barth and Hegel from Anglo-American analytical readings confirm this point.

Hegel was investigating the movement of the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, which is the gift that brings truth into the world, and becomes known through the consciousness of experience. He says:

The human import of consciousness, which is based on thinking, does not *appear in the form of thought* straightaway, but as feeling, intuition, representation – which are *forms* that have to be distinguished from *thinking itself as a form*.<sup>63</sup>

If the task of the philosopher is to think about thinking, then he must explain how the knowledge of being, which comes into being in consciousness, becomes apparent.

This process Hegel describes in the phrase, 'what is actual is rational and what is rational is actual.' It must be remembered that he believed in the existence of the world of objects, and his task was therefore to bring together the real and the phenomena, a task defined, and begun, but not completed, by Kant. In this task philosophy and theology share the same object, which is the knowledge of the truth, and both Barth's theology and Hegel's philosophy share the belief that God is Truth.

The similarity between the two theologians continues as both use scripture as their starting point. However, they choose different events in scripture and use different

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<sup>63</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation* trans. by Edward Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992) p. 36.

<sup>64</sup> Boyd, 'Dogmatics among the ruins'.

methodologies for their beginnings. Hegel uses the recorded account of those who witnessed the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church at Pentecost, which brought the truth and set them free. Barth, on the other hand, uses the recorded accounts of the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Hegel employs pneumatology in his account whilst Barth employs Christology. Despite their differences of approach, both of their accounts are soundly grounded in the doctrine of the Trinity and are expositions of the doctrine.

For Hegel reality is defined by consciousness. There is a process, a dynamic, which expresses itself in the movement of the dialectic. The thing and everything that is not the thing become combined in thought, until their unity provides a new thing and its negation. The process constantly repeats itself in the negation of the negation until it becomes at home with itself in pure thought, the Idea.

For Barth there is no teleologically determined goal, because reality has already been defined by the entry of Christ into the world. Here we have the inversion, a mirror image of Hegel's beginning. Barth's dialectic holds together the impossible possibilities of God and man, time and eternity, finite and infinite, and it expresses the paradox. In Barth's dialectic, the movement is not in the dialectic but in the gradual working out of what must be true, following Christ's entry into the world. Hegel's dialectic on the other hand has movement in the synthesis between what is and what is not, which takes place in thinking about thinking. Barth insists there can be no synthesis in human thought, for, he says, it is only through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, who is both God and man that synthesis is possible.

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<sup>65</sup> Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, p. 25.



We now return to the beginning of this introduction to take up again, and examine, Barth's concept of knowledge and the place of experience. Hegel established the universal, the 'Here' and the 'Now' of space and time, in consciousness, and the awareness of them in thinking about thinking.<sup>66</sup> He argued that philosophy brings to consciousness the awareness of itself and its determination of actuality.

Barth has inverted this position by arguing that actuality is given, and its reception is determined in God's self-revealing act. He says, following the event of revelation that the task is to describe how thinking, determined by the revelation of God, explores what must now be reality. In Hegel's work, there is a movement, the movement of the Holy Spirit in history towards actuality, whereas in Barth's work, an event in history, the Incarnation, has determined actuality. The theologian's task is to express the event in the doctrine of the church in a systematic way, which ensures the cohesiveness and coherence of the doctrine and its relationship with culture and intellectual ideas. Therefore, Barth in his theological method defines reality, humanity, and the moral space in which life is acted.

Barth's methodology explores and explains what must be the case following God's revelation in and through the action of the Holy Spirit. In the *Ethics*, he investigates what God's revelation means for humanity. The lectures are an examination of the consequences of God's acts of revelation. He explains that the event of God's acts is revealed in the three-fold form of creation, reconciliation and redemption and that they determine the truth of all reality. God's act of revelation establishes that life is a gift, and His acts of reconciliation, revealed through Jesus Christ, institute the truth of humanity. The Incarnation of Jesus Christ, he says, creates the reality of the

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See G.W.F.Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, section A pp. 58-79.



relationship between God and mankind. The event of God's act of reconciliation, he explains, establishes a covenant relationship with men and women. Barth emphasises, like no other theologian, the significance this covenant has for man's actions. If, as he says, the event of God's revelation determines human then this reality is accepted by man's obedience to God, and thus forms the ethical act. God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, he says, determines the actions of self-determining men and women.

The apparent paradox in Barth's statement, the determining of self-determining men and women, causes difficulties for many thinkers in the Anglo-American theological tradition. The Enlightenment assigned a central role to freedom in the formation of human identity, and consequently autonomy became an essential concept of that freedom. Thus, freedom of self-determination determines the autonomy of human individuality. The Enlightenment stresses that individual responsibility is the result of free autonomous actions, and moral philosophy, or ethics, is a discussion of the content of these actions. Human autonomy establishes itself and defines reality by acting over against the other and the world. It is this position that Barth challenges in *Ethics*.

The idea, which developed during the Enlightenment, that the autonomous mind acts freely and independently, and assesses and judges reality, led to the interpretation of God's revelation through Jesus Christ as a myth. The autonomous mind, which expresses itself in human freedom, dismisses the authoritarian demands imposed on it from an external source. Thus the Word of God, as received in the Decalogue and the Sermon on the Mount is relevant only in as much as it agrees with a prior human view and judgement. From this viewpoint, philosophical foundations become the only basis

for ethical judgements, and moral philosophy becomes a discussion of values and the balancing of outcomes. Barth's moral theology however opposes this view.<sup>67</sup>

His work has had a major influence on twentieth century theology as he radically reinterpreted our understanding of reality, humanity and of the moral space in which human beings act. Reality, he argues, is determined in the threefold revelation of the Word of God as Creator, Redeemer and Reconciler, and not in presupposed or given categories defined by consciousness. For, he says, life is God's gift and not "my life" which is a creation of the self-assertive ego. In theological ethics, it is the concrete command of God that defines the moral space, whereas in philosophical ethics abstract ideas of the good define the moral space. His descriptions of reality, humanity and of the moral space witness to God's self-revelation as an *event* within the Trinitarian being of God. The doctrine of the Trinity is therefore both the starting point and the basis of exposition for all of Barth's theological work.

In the *Ethics* he argues for a reinterpretation of the Trinitarian being of God. He rejects both the God of classical theism and of the theologies of immanence. He contends that God's being is revealed in God's acts, as He creates, redeems and reconciles. God freely chooses to reveal himself in these acts, and The New Testament is the interpretation of those who witnessed God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

There is not another God hidden behind the revelation of Jesus Christ, because God has chosen to be in his becoming.<sup>68</sup> It is the gift of faith in and through the Holy Spirit

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<sup>67</sup> On this point Boyd says: 'The loss (or rejection) of the belief that the human *telos* is given by a particular act of divine grace enters theology in the transformation of the understanding of revelation



that enables those who receive it to accept the revelation. The Trinity contains all and men and women neither bring nor provide anything. God gives all. Here Barth is continuing to follow the path between Hegel and Kierkegaard set by his teacher Herrmann. However, Barth decisively rejects Herrmann's beginning in immediacy and inner feeling.<sup>69</sup> God's immanent being is inseparable from his economic being, and theology is not required to choose between an objective and a subjective orientation. The doctrine of the Trinity provides, 'an answer to the question of the God who reveals Himself in revelation'.<sup>70</sup> The attention Barth gives to ontology resists subjectivity its reduction of theology to affective or moral discourse. He follows Hegel's logic, by keeping ontology and epistemology together. Hegel rejected Aristotelian logic in which form is a given and content can then be provided, leading to its application to different situations. For Hegel and Barth form and content remain united. Revelation is the dominant principle of Barth's theological ethics; it is not an abstract idea of good, or a general truth. Revelation is an *event* in which ontology and epistemology, form and content are united. Barth describes *event* in the lectures thus:

In accordance with the doctrine of revelation in the prolegomena to dogmatics we cannot lay too much stress on the fact that the dominant principle of theological ethics, the sanctifying Word of God, is to be understood as an *event*, a reality that is not seen at all unless it is seen as a reality that takes place.<sup>71</sup>

Throughout his theological development, Barth remained a committed realist. He insists on the existence of God as wholly other, and as the source of all knowledge.

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such that human reason acts as a criterion by which revelation can be measured, assessed, judged and, ultimately rejected'. 'Dogmatics among the ruins', p. 209.

<sup>68</sup> See John Webster's introduction to the discussion in Eberhard Jüngel's *God's Being Is in Becoming*.

<sup>69</sup> See Wilhelm Herrmann, *The Communion of the Christian with God*, Chapter III § 27. 'The Foundation of a Christian System of Ethics.' "It must be clearly shown how far the natural impulse of one who is blessed in communion with God, is following the tendency towards that which makes him blessed when he gives himself in hearty surrender to his neighbour."

<sup>70</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* CD I/1 pp. 311 f.

<sup>71</sup> Barth, *Ethics* p. 50.



His 'method' illustrates three significant points: the first is the symbiotic relationship between dogmatics and ethics; the second is that there is no system; and the third is that there is no definitive human endeavour, all is prolegomena.<sup>72</sup>

In this 'method,' where no human thought is definitive and nothing can be assumed; each day begins afresh with the Word of God. Method establishes content as in Barth's social philosophy there is no system. He gives examples, but no system. For example, he gives a way of looking at the State, but it is not an Ideal State, and he resolutely refuses to construct a human system for that would be to limit God's freedom and establish human autonomy.

In summary it is clear that readings of Barth from a position of *imagined* neutrality will inevitably fail, and the truth that Barth discusses will be lost in fruitless debates about human freedom and responsibility. Barth reminds the Church that the truth is that Christ's entry into the world is a new event that determines everything. It assures our salvation and our place as God's covenant partners. He says, our actions must follow from these events. The ethical question is are our actions obedient to this reality? Answering this question is, for Barth, the task of Christian ethics.

There are several good reasons for continuing to study Barth's writings. First, he has reworked the traditions of Luther and Calvin. Second, until the questions raised by him are resolved the study of his work is not exhausted. The study of Leibniz, for example, does not stop simply because he is a pre-Enlightenment figure. Fourth, classical texts are worthy of study because the questions they ask need to be reworked

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<sup>72</sup> Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. by E.C.Hoskins, (London: OUP, 1933) p.10. [The Preface to the Second Edition.]

in the language and models of thought of our time. Fifth, and this is the focus of the thesis, new and important, material on his ethics is now available, which enables modern scholars to predict the overall shape Barth's ethics would have taken had it been completed For example,.

Since its publication, scholars have discussed the importance of *Church Dogmatics*, and the debate continues. The Trinitarian foundations of Barth's thought are the subjects of several theses. Some theologians use material from *Church Dogmatics* as a critique of modernity, and they call for a re-establishment of Christian foundations in theology.<sup>73</sup> Others have drawn on Barth to establish a Trinitarian foundation for the re-ordering of human relationships.<sup>74</sup> Some scholars read Barth's dogmatics as an ethic of the *other*, and as the foundation of a theology appropriate for resolving ethnic conflicts.<sup>75</sup> Others claim Barth as a source of post-modern theology.<sup>76</sup> Yet, despite all this current scholarship on Barth's dogmatics there is still considerable hostility to his ethics. There are some notable exceptions, and this thesis refers to recent publications on the ethics that bring the richness of Barth's thinking in his theological ethics before scholars so, that a re-assessment may be made of its significance.

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<sup>73</sup> Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many God, Creation and the culture of Modernity* (Cambridge, CUP, 1993)

<sup>74</sup> Alan Torrance, *Persons in Communion: An Essay on Trinitarian Description and Human Participation: With Special Reference to Volume One of Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics*, (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1996)

<sup>75</sup> Volf *Exclusion and Embrace* ( 1996)

<sup>76</sup> Johnson, *The Mystery of God* (1997)

## Chapter 2 A reassessment of Karl Barth's moral theology

Discussion of Barth's ethics has intensified recently in Anglo-Saxon theology. The interest has been generated by publications from the scholars Nigel Biggar, John Webster, and to a lesser extent Bruce McCormack.

Biggar and Webster have argued for a reappraisal of Barth's moral theology.<sup>1</sup>

However, both moral theologians, in arguing their cases, have chosen to give little attention to questions about moral freedom, which arise so frequently in criticisms of Barth's work. This thesis is a contribution towards rectifying that omission.

Webster's work follows the German Evangelical theological tradition of Barth and Eberhard Jüngel. He has translated, from the German into English, some of Jüngel's writings and has published commentaries on Jüngel's work.<sup>2</sup> Jüngel, who is Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy of Religion, at the University of Tübingen, Germany, is the natural successor to Barth, and considered the world's foremost teacher and interpreter of his work. Webster's most recent writings have continued the process of integrating Anglo-American and German theology the separation of which was discussed in the introduction to this thesis. In a recent work, John Webster has argued for a reappraisal of Barth's ethical writings.<sup>3</sup> There are two reasons that support Webster's claim. The first is that material on ethics by Barth has recently

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<sup>1</sup> Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology*

Biggar, *The Hastening that Waits*

<sup>2</sup> Webster, *God's Being is in Becoming*

<sup>3</sup> Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*



been published for the first time, and the second is that there is a new attitude towards Barth's work.

Webster's claim is made against the background of a more general reconsideration of Barth's work following the publication of McCormack's study on Barth's early work.<sup>4</sup> McCormack argues that Barth's theology is dialectical from beginning to end, and not as previously understood as moving from dialectic to analogy. Although there has been a renewed interest shown in Barth's work, it is nevertheless true, as Webster says that the study of Barth's ethics is still in its infancy.

There are three works by Barth, which have recently become available in English. The first is *Ethics*, published in English in 1981. This is a translation by Bromiley of the German edition of Barth's lectures on ethics given as courses at the University of Münster in 1928 and 1929, and the University of Bonn in 1929 and 1930.<sup>5</sup> These lectures represent Barth's first systematic account of Christian ethics. The two sets of lectures are published in English as a single volume; in German they appeared in two volumes: *Ethik I* 1928 published in 1973 and *Ethik II* 1928/1929 in 1978.<sup>6</sup>

The second work is, *The Christian Life* published in English in 1981. This work is the English version of the surviving drafts of the final unfinished volume of *Church*

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<sup>4</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*

<sup>5</sup> Karl Barth, *Ethics*, trans. by G.W. Bromiley, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981)

<sup>6</sup> Karl Barth, *Ethik I: Vorlesung, Münster, Sommersemester 1928*, ed. Dietrich Braun (Zurich: TVZ, 1973)

Karl Barth, *Ethik II: Vorlesung, Münster, Wintersemester 1928/29*, ed. Dietrich Braun (Zurich: TVZ, 1978)

*Dogmatics*. Had it been completed it would have formed Volume IV, Part 4 of *Church Dogmatics*.<sup>7</sup>

The third work is *Barth on Calvin*. The first German edition was published in Zurich in 1922 as *Die Theologie Calvin*. The English translation by Bromiley was not published until 1995.<sup>8</sup>

These three works provide evidence that Barth's ethical concerns were consistent throughout his work from the 1928 *Ethics* to the Fragment IV/4 *The Christian Life*.<sup>9</sup>

In 1998, John Webster published the second of his works on Barth's moral theology.

He made the following observation about the body of material referred to above:

Close study of Barth's ethical writings is still in its infancy. Recent years have certainly witnessed a number of attempts to break down what had become a (largely Anglo-American) reading of Barth as either indifferent, or hostile, or even incompetent in his approach to questions of human moral action. Yet a great deal of work needs to be done. What is required more than anything else is detailed study of Barth's writings which, by close reading tries to display the structure and logic of his concerns without moving prematurely to making judgments or pressing too early the usefulness (or lack of it) of Barth's work for contemporary moral theology.<sup>10</sup>

Webster, whilst recognising there is a case to be answered against those who claim Barth's theology leaves no room for human self-determined action and therefore no possibility of responsibility for human freedom, does not in his exposition specifically respond to the critics. He says of the recent publications in English of Barth's ethics:

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<sup>7</sup> Karl Barth, *The Christian Life*, Church Dogmatics IV,4, Lecture Fragments, trans. by G.W.Bromiley, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981)

<sup>8</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, trans. by G.W.Bromiley, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995)

<sup>9</sup> The fragments from the literary remains were published in English in 1981.

<sup>10</sup> Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology* p. 1.



This material calls into question any idea that Barth's theology before the *Church Dogmatics* can be construed as a kind of inhumane transcendentalism, or that his establishment of an independent theological stance did not involve him giving serious attention to ethical issues. To read these lectures is to come to see that Barth's response to the theological, political and moral culture of his day, and his espousal of a set of counter-positions was as much a matter of ethics as it was of doctrines.<sup>11</sup>

There is no detailed study of Barth's ethical writing. The recently published works, on Barth's moral theology, by Webster and Biggar have begun the task. Their work has stimulated an interest in reading Barth's work as moral theology. Webster, particularly, has begun a reappraisal of Barth. He argues that the entire Barth corpus should be read just as much as a work of moral theology as a work of dogmatics. There is much work still to be done both on a detailed exposition from a close reading of Barth's lectures, and also an engagement with Barth's critics from within the text. The first and most important of the criticisms is the claim that Barth's ethics deny any form of human freedom.

Biggar, whilst acknowledging the problem, brushes aside the question of human autonomy and claims that the question of human moral freedom is merely an anthropological problem. Having dismissed the question, he published a work on Barth's ethics, which has become a standard work.<sup>12</sup> Speaking of Barth's conception of determined freedom he says:

It is true, of course, that the freedom to reject the liberating grace of God is the freedom to enter voluntary into bondage. But if the ultimate spiritual and moral commitments of human beings are to retain their dignity and weight, then it is just such a paradoxical freedom that they must possess. At this point in his account of human freedom we believe that Barth fails.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology* p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Biggar, *The Hastening that Waits*

<sup>13</sup> Biggar, *The Hastening that Waits* pp. 5/6.



McCormack has recently challenged von Balthasar's description of Barth's work as having two turning points.<sup>14</sup> He says, 'If there is one point on which all recent Barth scholarship agrees it is that von Balthasar's belief in a second 'break' in Barth's development cannot be sustained.'<sup>15</sup> He argues that von Balthasar failed to see Barth's use of the dialectic form in *Church Dogmatics* and therefore misread Barth's use of the concept *analogia fidei*. Barth's writing contains the dialectic form within the *analogia fidei*. This dialectic is the relationship between God and man that Barth discusses in general ethics within the Doctrine of Creation, and in the special ethics of The Doctrines of Redemption and Reconciliation. von Balthasar's understanding of the central concept, "God and Christ, God and man", without the dialectic form of the covenant relationship, allowed for a reading of Barth which appeared to give all to God's Command and nothing to man within the partnership. In addition, von Balthasar confused two different theological concepts and categories. In Barth's work, dialectic is a *method*, whereas analogy is a *category*, and is an analogy of faith. These observations are important for any discussion about human moral freedom since they rightly place the emphasis of the dialectic on covenant relationships. McCormack's primary thesis, which is that Barth's work shows the continuation of a critical realistic dialectic throughout, has its critics.

Boyd has challenged McCormack's position by pointing out that criticisms of von Balthasar's dual hypothesis were made soon after publication in 1951.<sup>16</sup> They have,

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<sup>14</sup> von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation* (1992)

<sup>15</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's critically realistic dialectical theology* p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Hans von Balthasar, *Karl Barth: Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie* (Köln: J.Hegner, 1951)

says Boyd, continued, since then, to be part of the debate about Barth's development of dialectical method.<sup>17</sup>

The new material further illustrates that Barth's ethical ideas in the early work are, in the main, worked out and developed more fully in the later work. It provides the evidence to show that his ethics did not undergo the radical changes between the "early Barth" and the "later Barth" that some critics have wanted to find. Neither does the new material support the four-stage hypothesis for Barth's work put forward by Will Herberg:

We have then schematically expressed, four Barth's: (1) first, the "pre-Barthian" Barth of the liberal period; (2) next, the "proto-Barthian" Barth of the first edition of *The Epistle to the Romans*; (3) then the "early-Barthian" Barth of the second edition of *The Epistle to the Romans* (1922) and of *Christian Dogmatics* (1927); and (4) finally the "late-Barthian" Barth of the *Church Dogmatics* (1932 to date). For our purposes, [social ethics] it is the third and fourth phases that are important, particularly the shift of theological orientation between them.<sup>18</sup>

It is a central proposition of this thesis that a study of Barth's theological writings from 1911 to 1965 shows that ethics were of central concern to him from the beginning to the end of his work, and were the primary force that shaped the *Church Dogmatics*. At the beginning of his career Barth engaged with theological social ethics and in the autumn of 1911 gave a series of lectures with the title, 'Jesus Christ and the Social Movement.'<sup>19</sup> He continued to write and speak about theological social ethics until his death. In addition, the view that his ethics did not undergo a radical change but followed a process of development is central to the argument of this thesis.

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<sup>17</sup> Boyd, *Dogmatics Among the Ruins*

<sup>18</sup> See Will Herberg, the introductory essay 'The Social Philosophy of Karl Barth,' in *Community, State, and Church* (1968) p.15.

Recently published works show that the concept of development, not that of stages or breaks, is the only satisfactory way of interpreting the evidence. The material does not support McCormack's view of Barth's early rejection of Herrmann's neo-Kantianism.

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<sup>19</sup> The correspondence following in the local newspaper is discussed in Hunsinger, *Karl Barth and Radical Politics*, pp. 19-45. For detailed and informative discussions of the history of Barth's ethical development see McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critical Realistic Dialectical Theology* pp. 78-92.



## Chapter 3 The Münster and Bonn Ethics

Karl Barth was Professor of Dogmatics and New Testament Exegesis at the University of Münster between October 1925 and March 1930. He delivered a series of lectures on ethics in the autumn of 1928,<sup>1</sup> and the winter of 1929.<sup>2</sup> Barth gives the date of the first lecture as the 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1928.<sup>3</sup> He repeated the lectures at Bonn with some additional material in the summer and winter of 1930.<sup>4</sup> At Münster Barth was in debate with G.Wünsch his colleague,<sup>5</sup> Heinrich Barth his brother, the philosopher Heinrich Scholz, the religious philosopher Heinrich Knittermeyer, and with leading representatives of Roman Catholic theology.<sup>6</sup> In addition, from 1927, he was a regular member of a theological group composed largely of lay Catholics. Münster is a predominantly Roman Catholic town, unlike Göttingen where he had previously lived. McCormack reports that the group included the following:

Dr Bernard Rosenmüller (an instructor in philosophy of religion in the Münster philosophy faculty) and his wife; Dr G Hasenkamp (the editor of the *Münsterischen Anzeiger*) and his wife; and the Catholic student pastor Dr Robert Grosche. There were occasional visitors such as the Catholic philosopher of religion, Theodore Steinbüchel.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Barth, *Ethik I*

<sup>2</sup> Barth, *Ethik II*

<sup>3</sup> See the letter K.B. to E.Th (Münster) in *Revolutionary Theology in the Making, Barth Thurneysen Correspondence 1914-1925* p. 247.

<sup>4</sup> Barth, *Ethics*

<sup>5</sup> G.Wünsch published, *Theol. Ethik* in 1925 see a reference to the work in CD II/2 p. 534.

<sup>6</sup> Dietrich Braun, Editor's Preface, *Ethics* p .ix.

<sup>7</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* p. 377.

Barth invited the Jesuit theologian Erich Przywara, who was von Balthasar's teacher, to give an address in Münster in February 1929.<sup>8</sup> This event shows Barth was in an ecumenical dialogue with Roman Catholics, which was remarkable, especially when considered alongside the anti-Catholic polemic of Herrmann, who had been his teacher at Marburg.<sup>9</sup> Further evidence of Barth's relationship with Przywara also appears in his response to Emil Brunner,<sup>10</sup> in which he reprimands Brunner for not understanding the Roman Catholic position on prevenient grace, saying:

If he had derived his information from the works of E. Przywara he would have found that this great exponent of the doctrine of analogy long ago used a phrase of the fourth Lateran Council and also the whole Kierkegaardian dialectic to interpret the ability to despair and real despair in a Roman Catholic sense. For Przywara maintains that this correlation is included and preserved in the Augustinian-Thomist scheme of *natura, gratia praeveniens* and *gratia gratum faciens*. He not only did but he *could* justifiably interpret it in a Roman Catholic sense.<sup>11</sup>

The content of the lectures reflects these debates, and reading them is to engage with both Barth and his dialogue partners. They open with a discussion of the knowledge, form and content of ethics. In the first lecture, he defines ethics as a component of the Christian religion, and from this definition he argues that it follows that ethics is a theological discipline and that the object of study is the goodness of human conduct. He opens his discussion by defining ethics as a science:

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<sup>8</sup> Erich Przywara, 'Das katholische Kirchenprinzip', *Zwischen den Zeiten*, 7 (1929) see McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* p. 383.

<sup>9</sup> Wilhelm Herrmann, *The Communion of the Christian with God Described on the basis of Luther's Statements*, section 28 'Eternal Life in Bearing the Cross and in One's Moral Calling,' The first edition was published in Marburg in 1886 and translated into English in 1895. This passage is taken from the second English edition translated by J. Sandys Stanton from the fourth German edition of 1903 and published in 1906, see chapter 1 pp. 19 - 51.

<sup>10</sup> "No! Answer to Emil Brunner", in *Natural Theology* (1934)

<sup>11</sup> Barth and Brunner, *Natural Theology*, p. 116.



Ethics is the *correctness* of the Christian's Christianity, its *validity, origin, and worth*. The goodness of human conduct can be sought only in the goodness of the Word addressed to man.<sup>12</sup>

He argues that theological ethics is a science, which is auxiliary to the science of dogmatics. It is a science because it has an object of study and a method of study. Its object of study is the goodness of human conduct, and its method of study is human reflection on God's revelation.

Scientific disciplines make knowledge claims about their objects of study, and they use appropriate methods to collect and validate that knowledge. Barth applies these criteria to theological ethics, which he claims is a science. He says if the object of study is 'the question of the goodness of human conduct,'<sup>13</sup> then knowledge of the object of study is 'the special elucidation of the doctrine of sanctification.'<sup>14</sup> The means of validation is 'the reflection on how far the Word of God proclaimed and accepted in Christian preaching effects a definite claiming of man.'<sup>15</sup> Through his definition of ethics and the object of study, and crucially, the method and form of knowledge Barth places the task of the study of theological ethics firmly within the church. His definitions define the limits of the task and suggest methods that result in appropriate validation. Here Barth is developing a new foundation and a new epistemology for Christian theological ethics. By being scientific in methodology and logical in exposition he is reacting against the prevailing cultural understanding of Christian ethics.

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<sup>12</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 3.



Barth's time at Münster coincided with a period of interest in existentialism, during which Kierkegaard's thinking received a renaissance. Schleiermacher and Herrmann reflect this appeal, and Barth had read both of them when a student in Berlin.<sup>16</sup> A further existentialist influence was Thurneysen, Barth's life-long friend, who was a disciple of Troeltsch.<sup>17</sup> It was a point in time when dogmatics, it seemed, had been lost in ethics.

By 1922 the second edition of *Der Römerbrief* had been published inaugurating what came to be called "the theology of crisis" or "dialectical theology."<sup>18</sup> Whilst the *Ethics* of 1928 do not belong completely to the dialectic phase of *Romans* neither do they completely embrace the principle of analogy evident in *Church Dogmatics*. Braun, in the Editor's Preface to *Ethics* lucidly suggests that they form a bridge, which links the 1922 essay *Das Problem der Ethik in der Gegenwart* to the *Church Dogmatics* of 1928.<sup>19</sup> However seductive the idea of a bridge is, it should not be overlooked that *Ethics* contains examples of both dialectic method as form and of analogy as content. In the past scholars have over emphasised the idea that Barth moved from dialectic to analogy in his theological method.<sup>20</sup> Some caution is necessary therefore in accepting Braun's "bridge" idea although his suggestion is helpful.

Barth's intellectual debt to Hegel is a major theme of this thesis and the differences in their dialectic need to be examined at this point. They differ in two important and

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<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher's *Speeches on Religion to its Cultured Despisers* and Wilhelm Herrmann's *Ethik*.

<sup>17</sup> See McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* pp. 37-8.

<sup>18</sup> Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, (Munich, 1922)

<sup>19</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. vii.

<sup>20</sup> See McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* for a criticism of the paradigm that Barth moved from dialectic method to analogy.

distinctive ways: firstly, for Barth there is no synthesis in human thought and secondly, the dialectic does not describe movement towards the Idea.

Hegel's dialectic describes the way things appear, as consciousness becomes aware of itself in self-consciousness. Throughout this process, each sense impression, whether recognised in consciousness as thought, feeling, or intuition, realises the *necessity* that it includes *everything* that is *not* the thought in itself. Consequently, sense impression is not as reliable as previously supposed, since it breaks down in a process of thesis and antithesis, only to find that the third position of synthesis breaks down under the same recognition. Thus in Hegel's dialectic, there is movement towards a synthesis in the Idea. Nature and spirit become reconciled when the Spirit is at home with itself.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, for Barth, reconciliation has already taken place in God's decision to reveal Himself as God the creator, God the redeemer and God the reconciler.

Therefore, the dialectic has no necessity to describe movement; synthesis is not possible in human reason, because it has occurred for all time in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. When he argues that God's reality cannot be made into a system, saying: 'God's reality, a reality we do not control, absolute actual reality cannot be used to form a system', he means by the word "system" a concept that has its origin in a single idea. Hegel gives a system; whereas Barth points to a way, saying:

The one Word is God's own Word which we cannot speak but can only hear spoken to us. And what we hear is threefold. This is why we cannot make of it a system. If it were a system, we should have to trace it back to *one* word. A system has a central point or cardinal statement from which all the rest can be deduced. The reality of God's Word is, of course, the central point on which everything turns here. We, however, have no word for this reality. Naturally we can and must recognise it as such but we have only words relating to it and

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<sup>21</sup> Hans-George Gadamer, *Hegel's Dialectic*, trans by P. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976)



not a word for it. These words are creation, reconciliation, and redemption. They do not denote a system but a way.<sup>22</sup>

Barth is emphasising that we do not have at our disposal the synthesis. God is the synthesis but not a synthesis that we have made or can make.<sup>23</sup> Reason's task is not synthesis but the description of the *event*, which is the mystery of how God and humankind are held in eternal unity in Jesus Christ. Thus, Barth's dialectic describes not movement but a paradox.

Even with these differences there are similarities between the dialectics of Hegel and Barth that need to be examined. Readers of *Ethics* may want to apply Gadamer's comment on Hegel's dialectic to their understanding of Barth's dialectic:

Hegel's dialectic is a continual source of irritation. Even one who has succeeded in making his way through the tumultuous logic of Plato's *Parmenides* has mixed feelings about it – his sense of logic is offended; yet he feels speculative exhilaration at the same time.<sup>24</sup>

Barth's dialectic describes that which already has been accomplished. It is not a movement towards, but the consequence of an event. God's being goes before and theological thinking follows. God's being is *prevenient* as it proceeds, and precedes human inquiry. The differentiation that is made here between *being* and *act* is intended logically but not ontologically. Webster says, 'Barth does not ask what it *means* to speak of God, but, rather, in what sense God *must* be spoken of in order that our speaking is about *God*.'<sup>25</sup> Here Barth follows Hegel's logic by keeping ontology and epistemology together within the concept of *event*. He differs from Hegel in that he insists that the event is not a unity from which a system evolves. His dialectic

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<sup>22</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p.53.

<sup>23</sup> Barth, *Ethics* p. 54.

<sup>24</sup> Gadamer, *Hegel's Dialectic*, p. 3.



describes a mutually regarding pair which are distinct and separate. The dialectic pair is held together in a paradox not of a necessity but of decision; each is an analogy of the incarnation in which God and man are united in Christ.

Both Barth and Hegel believe that the truth of an object is expressed in its form and content and both are necessary to the knowledge claimed. They both describe an object by what it is, and by what it is not; that is both the negative and the positive.<sup>26</sup> The dialectic is both the form and the content of the statement. The truth of the object cannot be stated as a proposition which is either true or false. Propositions give the form in which truth is stated and which is later to be filled with content. A pre-existing form which can be applied to different types of content is not acceptable to either Barth or to Hegel as a method appropriate to the object of their study. They describe statements not as propositional but as dialectical in which the negative requires the positive and the positive requires the negative. The dialectic then becomes the appropriate form for expressing the truth of the object. They both believe that religion and philosophy have the same object, which is the truth, and both believe God is the truth. However, for Barth, the Word of God addressed to man in Jesus Christ is the revealed truth whereas for Hegel the truth evolves in the Spirit's self-consciousness of itself through history.

A further important divergence between Hegel and Barth is in their approach to the Doctrine of the Trinity.

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<sup>25</sup> Webster, *God's Being Is in Becoming*, p.1.

<sup>26</sup> Hegel *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 58-66.

Hegel considers the task as philosophical whilst Barth understands it as theological.

Hegel understands the movement of the Spirit becoming at home with itself as the process of thinking about thinking, which is therefore a philosophical problem.

Barth on the other hand, sees the thinking about the being of God that *follows* God's being as a theological problem. His theological methodology describes the claiming of man by the Word of God, as God's commission. The commission includes man's task, which is his presentation of obedience to God's Word. The task of theological ethics is the description of this presentation.<sup>27</sup> He further states that the commission creates the methodology, which is appropriate in form, content and method. This point is significant because critics of Barth's ethics have not considered the suitability of methodology, as they assume that philosophical methodologies are appropriate for the study of theological ethics. In addition, sufficient consideration has not been taken of Barth's specific theological use of the concept of knowledge, which is discussed later in the thesis.<sup>28</sup> Barth's critics have misread him on this point, and this misreading, it must be emphasised, have led to gross misunderstandings.<sup>29</sup>

Barth explains his methodology in section three of the introduction to the lectures, and its significance is explained in three sections:

1. The claiming as God's creature.
2. The claiming as a pardoned sinner.
3. The claiming as the heir to the kingdom of God.

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<sup>27</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 45.

<sup>28</sup> Chapter 7, sections 7.1, 7.2 and 7.3.

<sup>29</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 45.

Although expounded in sequence the three sections can be seen as viewpoints of one object. Each viewpoint is further explored in four sub-divisions:

1. The uniqueness of the ethical standpoint.
2. The normative form of the noetic basis.
3. The decisive content of the ethical command.
4. The fulfilment of the ethical demand.

Barth's explanation of his methodology unfolds from, 'what must be the case', and continues by elucidating the consequences. Two points follow; the first is that, 'the way in which the *questions* are to be raised and answered is not a *formal* matter but a matter of finding the right *basic concepts*'<sup>30</sup> and the second is the structure of the task, 'the Word of God subject of the claiming man, as the command that sanctifies him'.<sup>31</sup> Therefore theological ethics seeks and finds the goodness of human conduct in the *event* of an act of God himself toward man, an act of his speech and self-revelation to him. The 'good' is obedience to this reality. The concept of *event*, which Barth introduces in the *Ethics*, is developed further in *Church Dogmatics* as an act in which *being* becomes and *becoming* is a function of God. God's being is located in the *event* of God's coming into the world. T.F. Torrance describes Barth's complex ideas about the doctrine of the Trinity clearly:

The fact that in the incarnation God became man without ceasing to be God, tells us that his nature is characterised by both repose and movement, and that his eternal Being is also a divine *Becoming*. This does not mean that God ever becomes other than he eternally is or that he passes over from becoming into being something else, but rather that he continues unceasingly to be what he

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<sup>30</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 49.

<sup>31</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 61.



always is and ever will be in the living movement of his eternal Being. His Becoming is not a becoming on the way toward being or towards a fullness of being, but is the eternal fullness and the overflowing of his eternal unlimited Being. Becoming expresses the dynamic nature of his Being. His Becoming is, as it were, the other side of his Being, and his Being is the other side of his Becoming. His Becoming is his Being in movement and his Being in movement is his Becoming.<sup>32</sup>

Torrance's elucidation of Barth's thinking on the Trinity finds a way into understanding Barth's concept of the *event*. In his own words Barth says:

In accordance with the doctrine of revelation in the prolegomena to dogmatics we cannot lay too much stress on the fact that the dominant principle of theological ethics, the sanctifying Word of God, is to be understood as an *event*, a reality that takes place. In ethics no less than dogmatics God's Word is not a general truth which can be generally perceived from the safe harbour of theoretical contemplation. Nor is it a being from which an imperative may be comfortably deduced. God's Word *gives* itself to be known, and in so doing is heard, man is made responsible, and his acts take place in that confrontation. The Word of God is the Word of God only in act. The Word of God is *decision*. God *acts*. Only with reference to that reality which is not general but highly specific can theological ethics venture to answer the ethical question. Its theory is meant only as the theory of this *practice*.<sup>33</sup>

Here we see that Barth shows particular awareness of the problems of ontology. It is important to recognise that he keeps ontology and epistemology together in the concept of *event*. As Webster says the concept of *event* 'prevents a subjective reduction of theology to affective or moral discourse'.<sup>34</sup>

In the lectures Barth states that the *events* of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ place 'life under a three-fold *necessity*', which God commands as God the creator, God the reconciler and God the redeemer.

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<sup>32</sup> T.F.Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) p. 242.

<sup>33</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 50.

<sup>34</sup> Webster in *God's Being Is in Becoming* p. xx.

The first command, from God the creator defines the *necessity* of the first event, which is the *life* that God gives each individual. These are Barth's original italics, and they emphasise the importance for him of the concepts of *life* and *necessity* when defining the *event* of God's command as God the creator. Barth wants us to understand these words in this specific usage. From the *necessity* of *life* as an event of God the creator it follows that life is a gift and *not* a possession. This important distinction is relevant to the foundation of Christian ethics as it establishes them as a theological ethic. Radically, he does not begin his definition of *the good* in philosophical discourse. It is to be sought first in the reality of human existence, and not in the classical virtues, because, 'this existence rests on God's creation and therefore on his will'.<sup>35</sup>

The second *necessity*, which comes from the command of God the reconciler, is the *necessity* of *law*.

The third *necessity*, which comes from the command of God the redeemer, is the *necessity* of *promise*.

Barth continues by outlining that within these three necessities there are three areas in which the distinctiveness of the specific knowledge of the claims of God the creator, God the reconciler and God the redeemer are worked out.

The first is the living of a life whose ends are totally determined.

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<sup>35</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 55.

The second is the *necessity* of the *law* as human authority as it encounters us. He says our, ‘conduct is under the contradiction, direction, and instruction of fellowmen who are superior to us because they meet us with authority.’ This authority, ‘determined as the law of the good is necessarily the divine command which strives against us and which we cannot refuse to accept as such.’ Here we see Barth placing both the law and those in authority as part of the divine command. Although this places a necessity on individuals to obey the law it places a greater responsibility on those who exercise authority, as they are to respond in obedience to the divine command and recognise they are part of that divine command.

The third *necessity* is the distinctiveness of the threefold command to the place given eschatologically to conscience. By conscience Barth does not mean a pre-existing inner voice which prompts us to do the good but rather, ‘the *necessity of promise*, in the voice of our conscience’.<sup>36</sup>

It is at this point in the lectures that ‘order’ appears for the first time in the statement, ‘The command of God the *Creator*, the necessity of life, is obviously in content the necessity and command of *order*’<sup>37</sup>. The ‘obviously’ here refers to Barth’s earlier comment claiming that he is following a well-known path of reformation theology. He wants his audience to accept that his argument is a return to the true teaching of the Reformers. A tradition that he thinks has been lost through the existentialist emphasis on inner experience.

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<sup>36</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 57.

<sup>37</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 57.



How does the *event* of God's Word as *event*, relate to the existence of the command of God as orders of creation? Is the *event* of God's Word constrained by the natural theology of orders? Barth resolved this inconsistency in 1942 in a discussion on divine election in which he undertakes a detailed examination of the history of the doctrine of predestination and concludes that election is part of the doctrine of God; a unique position to take within Reformed Christian theology.<sup>38</sup> A consequence of this position is the rejection of any form of self-righteousness as for example in the following of the pre-existing orders of creation. However this was not his position in the lectures in which orders were still an important point of his argument.

He refused to allow publication of the lectures during his lifetime. The reason is his use of the first orders of creation in *Ethics I*. These orders of creation are work, marriage, and the family, followed by equality and leadership, and are the principles that guide human action that are grounded in culture and exist before revelation.<sup>39</sup> The concept of *order* he introduces earlier by discussing the question: 'what does God want in claiming us for himself?'<sup>40</sup> He answers by referring to the doctrine of the threefold use of the law which is a well-known theme of reformation theology. In this law both Christian *necessity* and the Christian content of God's law are fully described as coming from the command of God the *Creator*. The *necessity of life* is therefore part of the content of the command of *order*.<sup>41</sup> In the original text he uses the word "Ordnung" which can be translated as either "order" or "ordinance". "Ordnung" refers to the natural law and not the revealed law.

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<sup>38</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2 pp. 60-76.

<sup>39</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, Chapter 2, 'The Command of God the Creator'.

<sup>40</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, pp. 45-61.

<sup>41</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, section §3, "The Way of theological ethics." p. 57.

Barth quickly moves on to tell us that the natural law is confirmed and indeed only becomes established through revelation. In the first *necessity*, God as creator, Barth is concerned with the law of nature and he says, 'There is the command of law but what occupies us here is materially the problem of the law of nature which is not set aside but confirmed and established by revelation'.<sup>42</sup> Here we see as late as 1931 in Barth's theology the confirmation of natural theology by revelation, not set aside, but confirmed and established by revelation. This is exactly the position taken by Herrmann in his discussion about the natives of New Holland. They have, he says, the innate capacity to receive revelation without which evangelism would have been ineffectual. Herrmann's influence remained in Barth's work at least until 1931. Therefore McCormack's claim that the break with Herrmann's liberalism occurred in 1915 cannot be upheld.<sup>43</sup> Four years later Brunner wrote in a similar way when he said:

But in faith, taking our stand upon the revelation in Jesus Christ, we shall not be able to avoid speaking of a double revelation: one in creation which only he can recognise in all its magnitude, whose eyes have been opened by Christ; and of a second in Jesus Christ in whose bright light he can clearly perceive the former.<sup>44</sup>

Even the most perfect theology will in the main be unable to get beyond the double statement that as concerns the heathen, God did not leave himself without witnesses, but that nevertheless they did not know him in such a way that he became their salvation<sup>45</sup>

Barth responded, in 1934, to this position with the famous "Nein!" saying:

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<sup>42</sup> Barth, *Ethics* p. 58.

<sup>43</sup> McCormack *Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 'Through all the phases of his development after the break with Herrmann liberalism in 1915, Karl Barth was a critically realistic dialectical theologian'. Conclusion, p. 464.

<sup>44</sup> *Natural Theology* pp. 26-7.

<sup>45</sup> *Natural Theology* p. 27.

Ethics will be quite a good and useful thing if it always remembers the commandment of God. In contrast to Brunner's ethics it should not be based on a dogmatic presupposition of those mythical "ordinances".<sup>46</sup>

Barth's rejection of "Ordnung" occurred between late 1930 and 1934. John Baillie, in the introduction to *Natural Theology*, quotes Barth as saying that it was, "roughly after 1929" that a divergence began to manifest itself between his views and that of Brunner.<sup>47</sup> Barth criticises Brunner's use of Ordnung saying:

Brunner's fourth assertion is partly an exposition of the third. It treats separately of the "ordinances" the constant factors of historical and social life ...without which any communal life is conceivable, which in any way be termed human.

Yet as late as the spring of 1931 in the University of Bonn Barth was lecturing in ethics and saying:

The Command of God the *Creator* the necessity of life to which we subject ourselves in obedience to our calling is obviously in content the necessity and command of *Order*.<sup>48</sup>

In the original text the word used is "Ordnung" translated as order:

Das Gebot des *Schöpfergottes*, die *Lebensnotwendigkeit*, der wir uns gehorsam unserem Beruf unterwerfen, ist offenbar inhaltlich die Notwendigkeit und das Gebot der *Ordnung*.

Further, in a letter to Brunner, dated the second of June 1930 Barth used exactly the same word "Ordnung". However by 1934 Barth has taken a contrasting position, which is seen here:

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<sup>46</sup> *Natural Theology* p. 128.

<sup>47</sup> *Natural Theology* p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 96.



The Holy Ghost, who proceeds from the Father and the Son and is therefore revealed and believed to be God, does not stand in need of any point of contact but that which he himself creates.<sup>49</sup>

Ethics will be a good and useful thing if it always remembers the commandments of God. In contrast to Brunner's ethics it should not be based on a dogmatic presupposition of those mythical "ordinances".<sup>50</sup>

However "Ordnung" was inconsistent with Barth's criteria for ethics as a theological science which he discussed in the first lecture in 1928. By his definition the object of investigation, good human conduct, can only be known by reflecting of how far preaching reflects the Word of God. Good human conduct can only be known because of God's revelation of Himself. There can be no presuppositions. Therefore, any ideas that good human conduct may be deduced from cultural norms, as a form of natural theology, must be rejected.

Why did it take Barth four years to realise the inconsistency of his ethics of the orders of creation? One possible explanation is the continuing influence of Herrmann and of his argument that the natives of New Holland have the capacity to receive revelation. The influence is apparent as late as the spring of 1931.

Having discussed Herrmann's influence on Barth it is now possible to continue examining the lectures of Barth which first appeared in English in 1981.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Karl Barth, Letters Karl Barth to Emil Brunner *Briefwechsel* 1916-1966 Bonn, 2.6.1930.

<sup>50</sup> *Natural Theology* p. 37.

<sup>51</sup> The editors of the Swiss *Gesamtausgabe* published the lectures in 1973, in a two-volume edition as *Ethik I*, 1928 and *Ethik II*, 1928/1929. Geoffrey Bromiley translated the two volumes into English in 1981. The lectures *Ethics I* and *Ethics II* were condensed into one volume and published as *Ethics*. The published work is known, as Text B. It contains Text A, the full text of the 1928/1929 lectures, supplemented by additional material from the 1930 lectures. Text B, the collected material, is referred to in this thesis as the Münster and Bonn *Ethics*.

Until recently this material has received little attention from scholars and there are several reasons for this lack of interest.<sup>52</sup> Obviously the main reason is the withholding of the material by Barth himself. However even since their publication the lectures have attracted little interest. The only review received in Anglo-American journals was in *Theology* in which Helen Oppenheimer half-heartedly recommends the work to specialists:<sup>53</sup>

This is hardly a book about ethics, either in the philosophical sense of considering what 'right' or 'good' means, or in the practical sense of considering what people ought specifically to do. Nor would it make a good introduction to Barth's thought.

It is dauntingly long and diffuse, with very little help given to the reader in relating it to the subsequent development of Barth's thought. Yet it is hard to regret the time spent in reading it.

If 'middle axioms' and the study of the substance of ethical problems is what we want, Barth's *Ethics* is the wrong book. Yet it would be a pity if only Barthians were to taste the characteristic flavour of his thinking. That is why this review, unable to recommend the book except to specialists, has relied upon quotations rather than summary to try in a backhanded way to commend it after all.

So, Barth's lectures are damned with faint praise and declared uninteresting. Of those few theologians who took an interest most found themselves hostile to Barth's position due to the commonly held belief that in his ethics man is so dominated by God's command that there is no room for human freedom. This objection to Barth's ethics will be discussed at greater length in chapter five of this thesis.

Despite these rejections the *Ethics* remain important for three reasons:

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<sup>52</sup> Recent works by Nigel Biggar 1993, Bruce McCormack 1997, and John Webster 1995 and 1998.

<sup>53</sup> Helen Oppenheimer, 'Barth Ethics' in *Theology* 1982 no. 85 pp. 315-317.

1. They demonstrate the development of Barth's thinking between 1924 and 1932.<sup>54</sup>
2. They show Barth rethinking ethical foundations.
3. They are the first draft of the ethical sections of *Church Dogmatics*.

His rethinking of ethical foundations is presented in three stages:

1. Ethics is a science
2. Ethics forms a part of the doctrine of sanctification.
3. Ethics reveals the relationship between God and man.

Barth argues that in theology the object of study is God, the method of inquiry is revelation, and the form and content of the knowledge is sanctification. He says, dogmatics compares the preaching of the church with the teaching of the Bible, whereas the science of ethics seeks an answer, in the Word of God, to the question of human conduct.

By the Doctrine of Sanctification Barth means the reflection on how far the Word of God proclaimed and accepted in Christian preaching effects a claim on man. The incarnation of the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ establishes a covenant relationship between God and man, and this relationship creates man's sanctification.

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<sup>54</sup> Karl Barth, 'Unterricht in der christlichen Religion', ii *Die Lehre von Gott/Die Lehre vom Menschen*, 1924/1925, ed. Heinrich Stoevesandt (Zurich: TVZ, 1990). ET *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, vol. I (contains the first third of the German edition).

Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatics I: Die Lehre von Wort Gottes I* Evangelischer Verlag A.G., Zollikon-Zurich, 1932.



An understanding of the concept of *event* is central to any appreciation of Barth's ethics. He says in the opening lectures, 'We believe that in theological ethics we have to seek and find the goodness of human conduct in the event of an act of God towards man, the act of his speech and self revelation to him'.<sup>55</sup> Here we see Barth's description of *event* as an act. In an *event*, *act* and *being* are not separated but held together.

In classical Christian theism there is a separation between God's being and God's acts. God's being is wholly other and cannot be known. There is nothing we can say about God's being, and we should remain silent, as the only possible theological concept of God's being is that of *via negativa*. The method argues that we know that God can be nothing like us. As we are finite and corruptible God must be infinite and incorruptible. Obviously other attributes can be listed and attached to God's being as analogical descriptions. However God is always somewhere beyond his acts. How we understand God's actions in the world and how we respond to these acts, are the subjects of philosophical speculation. Having rejected classical theism's doctrine of God he replaces it with a doctrine of God in which God is known. He says God is known in the *event* of an act of speech and self-revelation towards man. This knowledge involves man in a conflict because, 'God's Word *gives* itself to be known, and in so doing is heard, man is made responsible, and his acts take place in that confrontation'.<sup>56</sup>

Barth tells us the Word of God is the Word of God only in act. The goodness of human conduct arises out of God's speaking, and thus points away from man to God.

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<sup>55</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 49.

<sup>56</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 50.

‘The good in human conduct is its determination by the divine commanding’.<sup>57</sup> Here we see that Barth has chosen a new foundation for Christian ethics. He places the goodness of human action within the doctrine of God. It is in God’s choosing to become wholly other in the event of the incarnation that God establishes a covenant relationship within which man is determined. He radically redefines the doctrine of God so that the goodness of human action is found in God and not in man. God *is* in the *event* of revelation, and man *is* determined in that *event*.

Man, says Barth, lives in and not apart from his act. In this he is an analogy of God whose being and acting are one. Being is not an abstract concept which acquires attributes but is an act. Barth is maintaining being and becoming in the event of God’s act, which means philosophically that the *event* unites ontology and epistemology. In traditional ethical discussions being, or ontology, is the *given* from which actions are performed. Knowledge about the person who performs the act is a description of his actions. Epistemology is the philosophical description of the knowledge of the act. In Barth’s position man is not a being who acts but rather the act is man’s being.

In addition to giving a new foundation to Christian ethical thought, this is an important shift because God’s act creates our knowledge avoiding the problems of knowledge that are inherent in the distinction between noumena and phenomena. Ethical questions are questions of existence for, Barth says, ‘as we will, we *are*, what we do we *are*’. He has reshaped Augustine's discussion of the two wills, who says:

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<sup>57</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p.50.

So my two wills, one old, the other new, one carnal, the other spiritual, were in conflict with one another, and their discord robbed my soul of all concentration.<sup>58</sup>

Barth describes the will not as an act of a being but as one determined by God's creative act. Therefore he says: 'a good act is one in which the will conforms to God's command'. For Barth there is no inward turn, as in Augustine, to seek the will of God in one's being. Human self-determination is determined by God's act of self-revelation not by *cogito ergo sum*.

The lectures are organised sequentially. Each has three sections, which are the Word of God as creation, the Word of God as reconciliation and the Word of God as redemption. In addition each of the three aspects is in correspondence with the perichorisis of the Trinity and is part of the others.

In the lectures he states that God commands the orders of creation. He first expresses the Command negatively giving a list of items which are not the Command; and then positively, by listing what is the Command. This dialectic style of expression establishes the negative, which is human abilities, and having dismissed it goes on to describe the positive, which is God's acts. The following statement is an exemplar:

'God's word is not *anamnesis* - not self-reflecting recollection, but a reminder.'<sup>59</sup>

Anamnesis is the recovering of knowledge already known and that knowledge is possessed ontologically before God's revelation. Socrates expresses this view in his idea that the teacher is but a mid-wife who gives birth to that which already exists.

Barth however insists there can be no pre-existing knowledge before revelation, no

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<sup>58</sup> Augustine, Saint, Bishop of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. by Henry Chadwick, (Oxford: OUP, 1991) VIII.v (10) p. 140.

<sup>59</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 263.



prior ontology. This, of course, conflicts with his use of the doctrine of the orders of creation.

The concept that revelation is the source of knowledge first appeared in Barth's early work on the Word of God in *Christian Dogmatics in Outline*. This point shapes the rest of his theology. Thus by establishing revelation as the source of knowledge he overcomes the Kantian breach between the truth of being and the truth of doing and in so doing makes the detached consciousness of the observer inappropriate to experience and knowledge of the object. Barth's disagreement is illustrated by the following words by Kant:

This discussion as to the positive advantages of critical principles of pure reason can be similarly developed in regard to the concept of *God* and of *simple nature* of our *soul*; but for the sake of brevity such further discussion may be omitted. [From what has already been said, it is evident that] even the *assumption* – as made on behalf of the necessary practical employment of my reason – of *God*, *freedom*, and *immortality* is not permissible unless at the same time speculative reason be deprived of its pretensions to transcendent insight. For in order to arrive at such insight it must make use of principles which, in fact, extend only to objects of possible experience, and which, if also applied to what cannot be an object of experience, always really change this into an appearance, thus rendering all *practical extension* of pure reason impossible. I have therefore found it necessary to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for *faith*.<sup>60</sup>

This thesis will not undertake a detailed examination of the development of the concept of knowledge from Kant to Hegel and Barth as Jüngel has provided an excellent detailed discussion.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., trans. N.K. Smith (London: Macmillan, 1933), p. 29.

<sup>61</sup> Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983) pp. 130-141.

For Barth the source of knowledge is the revelation of the object. Revelation is the source, the method, the form and the content of knowledge of God. His early lectures expound this important part of his thinking which centres on the question of conditioned and unconditioned truth which he introduced in the very first lecture of *Ethics*. He describes ethics as the unconditioned truth that assesses the truth of all psychological, historical and legal inquiries into human actions which are all conditioned truths.<sup>62</sup> The point is taken up later where unconditioned truth only becomes real in action.

*If there is such a thing — ?!*[as the good] So long as we ask generally and theoretically whether there is such a thing, we can in fact only ask hypothetically. But the hypothesis ventured here is the thesis of the original unconditioned truth which, since it can appear only on the surface of general hypothetical thinking, indicates the limit of this thinking and also its own superiority. Hence the question whether there is such a thing cannot be answered generally and theoretically because, if it exists, it is not a general theoretical truth. How can anything general and theoretical be said, then, about its revelation and knowledge? The universal validity of this revelation and knowledge is the universal validity of the task and proclamation of the church, of which there should be agreement that *this* truth, as the unconditioned truth which alone is universally valid, is not general and theoretical but practical truth, and that its revelation and knowledge can and will become real only in the event of man's *action*.<sup>63</sup>

In the second part of section five of the *Ethics* Barth in his characteristic style then discusses the consequences for other perceptions of the good and points out why they are inadequate, he says:

Thus the truth of the good is the truth by which we are measured as we act, the verdict towards which we go. If we take seriously the positive givenness of the command against which there is no appeal, then it cannot be just a *rule*, an empty form, to which we must give content by our action, so that the form of the action stands under the command and its content under our caprice. This idea seems to be unavoidable wherever the court to which we obey or disobey in our moral decision, whether it be the idea of the good, or the more or less

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<sup>62</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>63</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 73.



categorical imperative understood in Kant's or some other sense, or the will of God, or our own conscience — wherever this court is thought of as something that is indefinite in its content, wherever it is made into a purely formal concept whose truth has first to be investigated.<sup>64</sup>

The *Ethics* show that Barth's theology is a reply to the Enlightenment. He recognises absolutism and the concept that man's decisions come from his social, moral and cultural life and sees them as an inheritance from the Enlightenment which he neither rejects nor opposes. Rather he, 'seeks to overcome it by effecting its inversion, or rather seeking to conform to the decision which matters, the divine decision which has already overcome it.'<sup>65</sup>

The *Ethics* is important because it is the only complete structured set of Barth's lectures and because it is the first draft of *Church Dogmatics*. In *Ethics* Barth rethought ethical foundations and gave a general sketch of ethics that would be further developed at the end of each volume of *Church Dogmatics* as the doctrine of the command of God. This doctrine is the basis of the ethics in *Church Dogmatics* II/2. The command of God the creator forms the ethical content of the chapter of special ethics in the doctrine of creation in *Church Dogmatics* III/4. In addition there is the doctrine of Baptism as the first ethical act in *Church Dogmatics* IV/4. Although there are some sections of the ethics of reconciliation available Barth was unable to complete the ethical sections of *Church Dogmatics*. This fact gives added importance to the Münster *Ethics* because it is the only complete draft of the doctrine of sanctification.

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<sup>64</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p 76.

<sup>65</sup> Boyd, 'Dogmatics among the ruins' p. 244.



### 3.1 Influences

Five main influences formed the background to Barth's lectures on ethics. The first clear influence was his theological education. The second was the intellectual and cultural movement known as German expressionism. The third was the period of Barth's pastorship at Safenwil where his duties included preaching to the church community. The fourth, was World War I, and the final influence was Charlotte von Kirschbaum. With the exception of von Kirschbaum's influence on him during this period the rest have received full treatment in the literature. McCormack, in a recent work, has pointed to the growth of German expressionism influencing Barth's move to the use of dialectic as a method.<sup>66</sup> Boyd also draws attention to the influence of German expressionism on Barth's work and has produced interesting evidence linking Barth with leading expressionist artists of the period.<sup>67</sup>

However, any discussion of Barth's theology of this period, but particularly his ethical thought, must give due regard to the importance of von Kirschbaum's influence. Her role and significance in his theological development have been mainly disregarded. With the exception of Busch's biography of Barth, and Eleanor Jackson's recent collection of von Kirschbaum's writings, she has been practically ignored.<sup>68</sup> Her impact, particularly on Barth's ethical thought, deserves and demands consideration.

In addition to the above points the influence of Herrmann justifies further comment because of Barth's development of dogmatics as the foundation of ethics and because

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<sup>66</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critical Realistic Dialectic Theology*

<sup>67</sup> Boyd, *Dogmatics Among the Ruins*

<sup>68</sup> Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (London SCM, 1976)

of his continuing influence on some of Barth's critics. Indeed the discussion in chapter seven, 'Critical readings of Karl Barth's ethics' has its roots in Herrmann's work.

### 3.1.1 Charlotte von Kirschbaum

The thesis now turns to pay particular attention to Charlotte von Kirschbaum whose influence on Barth during the period under discussion has been much under estimated.

He pays tribute to von Kirschbaum in the introduction to *Church Dogmatics* III/3:

I should not like to conclude this Preface without expressly drawing the attention of readers of these seven volumes to what they and I owe to the twenty years of work quietly accomplished at my side by Charlotte von Kirschbaum. She has devoted no less of her life and to the growth of this work than I have myself. Without her co-operation it could not have been advanced from day to day, and I should hardly dare contemplate the future which may yet remain to me. I know what it really means to have a helper.<sup>69</sup>

The comment should not be taken as the usual polite thanks to a secretary. Barth describes von Kirschbaum as a "helper", which reflects the relationship between men and women described in Genesis.<sup>70</sup> This translation is from The New Revised Standard Version and follows Luther's translation which uses *eine Gehilfin* (qualified assistant) for "helper".<sup>71</sup> However Karl Barth and von Kirschbaum quote from the Zurich Bible, "eine Gehilfe schaffen, die ihm ein Gegenüber sei."<sup>72</sup> Both translations use *Gegenüber* to describe the relationship. Jackson says:

Here it [*Gegenüber*] has the nuance of "sounding board", even "sparring partner", "other half". That was how von Kirschbaum herself saw her

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Eleanor Jackson, *The Question of Woman. The collected writings of Charlotte von Kirschbaum*, trans. by John Shepherd edited and with an introduction by Eleanor Jackson, (Michigan: Eerdmans 1996)

<sup>69</sup> *Church Dogmatics* III/3, pp. xii-xiii.

<sup>70</sup> Genesis 2. 18

<sup>71</sup> 'Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner."' Genesis 2. 18

<sup>72</sup> Jackson, *The Question of Woman*, p. 23.



relationship to Barth, but also how she understood the basic relationship between men and women when it is not debased by sin or sickness.<sup>73</sup>

In a discussion on sexuality Barth writes:

Our sexuality constitutes a second circle, or a unique double circle, of the determination in which we all must live. We do not live merely as men but as males or females. We must add at once: We live as males *and* females. Or as we ought to put it, we live as males *or* females in the indissoluble mutual relation of males *and* females.<sup>74</sup>

At the end of his discussion Barth sums up his thoughts about the relationship between men and women in the quotation from Genesis 2:18 to which he may have been referring in *Church Dogmatics* in his appreciation of von Kirschbaum:

We can sum up positively all that has been said thus far in that other saying from the creation story in Genesis 2:18: “Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.’” The serious purpose of what makes the male male is that according to the saying of the Creator it is not good for him to be alone, that in the power of this saying a helper will be given him. And the serious purpose of what makes the female female is that she *is* this helper.<sup>75</sup>

She was born on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June 1899. Her father, to whom she had been devoted, died when she was seventeen. Jackson writes:

Her father’s death in 1916, commanding the sixth Bavarian Infantry Division in France, devastated her and reduced the family circumstances to such poverty that with the wartime shortages and price inflation she suffered malnutrition and serious damage to her health.<sup>76</sup>

It is also apparent that her relationship with her father had estranged her from her mother. After her father the next most important influence on her was Georg Merz, a Lutheran pastor, who prepared her for confirmation. Merz, with Barth, edited

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<sup>73</sup> Jackson, *The Question of Woman*, p. 24.

<sup>74</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 181.

<sup>75</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 182.



*Zwischen den Zeiten*. He was godfather to Barth's fourth child Robert Mathias and was a regular visitor to the Barth family. He introduced von Kirschbaum to Barth's writings and took her to Barth's lectures. They were both invited to spend a holiday in the summer of 1924 with Barth and his family at Bergli, a mountain retreat outside Zurich. During the holiday it was suggested to von Kirschbaum that she should train as a secretary. Ruedi Pestalozzi, a successful businessman, who owned the holiday chalet and was Barth's friend, paid for the cost of her training.

The following year Barth moved from Göttingen to Münster to take up his post at the university. As Nelly Barth's wife was imminently expecting a baby and their house in Göttingen was proving difficult to sell Barth moved to Münster on his own. He lived in lodgings where von Kirschbaum visited him in February 1926 a month before his family arrived. Jackson comments:

It seems to have marked the beginning of her romantic involvement with him, and her commitment to do all she could to advance his work.<sup>76</sup>

He was forty-four, she twenty-seven. In April 1929, before beginning to deliver the series of lectures on ethics, Barth took sabbatical leave until the end of September that year. He retreated to Bergli, where von Kirschbaum was among the guests and thus began their long partnership. On 14 October 1929 she moved into the Barth family home Jackson says, 'It is important to understand that von Kirschbaum was not an employee but was treated as a family member'.<sup>77</sup> Gertrud Staewen, a friend of Barth's since 1922, became Charlotte's life long friend described her in a letter:

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<sup>76</sup> Jackson, *The Question of Woman*, p. 6.

<sup>77</sup> Jackson, *The Question of Woman*, p. 8.

<sup>78</sup> Jackson, *The Question of Woman*, p. 13.

I see her before me now as she was in those early years when I first got to know her – it must have been around 1928 – and as she lives in my memory: dressed in fluttering pale blue silk clothes matching her lovely blue eyes, sensitive, delicate, but possessed by a scintillating, concentrated energy that was never loud but always present. This energy, this zest for life, she had decided, entirely and completely, to exist only for one single human being, for his well-being, for his peace of mind, for his friends and for his students.<sup>79</sup>

In 1926 Barth began to send von Kirschbaum manuscripts to correct and her influence on Barth's theology can be seen from this period. The works included a new edition of *Römerbrief* and a volume of his Göttingen lectures, lectures on the Epistle to the Philippians, and most important of all *Die Lehre vom Worte Gottes: Prolegomena zur Christlichen Dogmatik*.<sup>80</sup> Of the latter Jackson says of von Kirschbaum influence:

This was Barth's first attempt at a project that resulted in the fourteen volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*. The first plan did not work to his satisfaction, and he laid it aside, von Kirschbaum had caught the vision and would not let it rest. When *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, volume I, part 1 (*Die Lehre vom Worte Gottes*), appeared in 1932 as a result of her encouragement and hard work, the material was completely reorganized and a subtle theological shift had taken place, as the title suggests. For from the outset von Kirschbaum was far more than a secretary and offered her criticisms and comments, even her advice as to whether something should be published.<sup>81</sup>

It is also now clear that von Kirschbaum would have been deeply involved in the decision not to allow the publication of Barth's lectures and that she would have known of the content of the lectures before they were delivered.

### 3.1.2 Wilhelm Herrmann

Barth began studying theology in Bern but finding the view very conservative, like many Swiss students moved to Germany in quest of a more liberal theology. In Berlin von Harnack influenced him but most importantly Herrmann also influenced him.

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<sup>79</sup> Jackson, *The Question of Woman*, p. 9.

<sup>80</sup> Jackson, *The Question of Woman*, p. 8.

<sup>81</sup> Jackson, *The Question of Woman*, p. 8.



This influence lasted much longer than most scholars think. He recalls his first reading of Herrmann's *Ethics* as intense an experience as St. Paul's on the road to Damascus. He said:

The day almost twenty years ago in Berlin when I first read his *Ethik* I remember as though it were today...on that day I believe my own independent interest in theology began.<sup>82</sup>

After Berlin he moved to Marburg to be able to study dogmatics and ethics with Herrmann. There he met Thurneysen who was to become a life long friend, and Rudolph Bultmann, and he became Martin Rade's editorial assistant on the magazine *Die Christliche Welt*.<sup>83</sup>

Theology in Marburg, at that time, followed the influential school of Albrecht Ritschl and Herrmann was a member of his school. McCormack writes:

The hallmark of this theological movement was its commitment to a churchly theology, oriented towards God's Self-revelation in the historical person of Jesus Christ.<sup>84</sup>

However a split developed among Ritschl's followers. The disagreement was about the place and role of history in theology. Young Ritschlians believed that the development of the historical-critical method had made the acceptance of a supernatural conception of revelation unacceptable. Influenced by the study of comparative religions and Hegelian ideas of progress through history, they believed Christianity was the highest form of evolved religion. They also thought Christianity might be superseded by a higher religious form. Their views diverged from the

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<sup>82</sup>Karl Barth, 'The Principles of Dogmatics According to Wilhelm Herrmann', in *Theology and Church*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith (London: SCM Press, 1962) p. 238.

<sup>83</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critical Realistic Dialectical Theology*, p 38.

<sup>84</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critical Realistic Dialectical Theology*, p. 39.



received Ritschlians non-historical view and by 1897 the split had become a division, students at Marburg had to choose between theology as history and theology that overcame historicism. Herrmann offered such a theology and the young Barth adopted it enthusiastically. McCormack gives a lengthy treatment of Herrmann's influence on Barth.<sup>85</sup>

As Herrmann had contempt for scientific knowledge he became interested in securing a theological epistemology beyond the reach of scientific attack.<sup>86</sup> He needed a way of bridging the gap between the *phenomena* and the *noumena*. How can we have knowledge of God? What methods of acquiring knowledge are appropriate? How can these methods be validated? These questions were uppermost in his thinking.

His most significant work attempts to answer these questions.<sup>87</sup> His response is to protect the church that finds its traditional doctrines attacked by scientific method. In so doing he wanted to appeal to the tens of thousands of people who could no longer accept the truth of traditional doctrines and who rejected Protestant Christianity because it required agreement to doctrinal confession as initiation to the church. He offers an alternative saying:

He today who is willing to see, can find the way which, even in a world altered by science, leads those who seek God to Christ.<sup>88</sup>

Herrmann thought the Protestant church was wrong in requiring assent to biblical truths and doctrine as a requirement for membership arguing that it was not a burden

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<sup>85</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critical Realistic Dialectical Theology*, pp. 49-66.

<sup>86</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critical Realistic Dialectical Theology*, p.54.

<sup>87</sup> Herrmann, *The Communion of the Christian with God*.

<sup>88</sup> Herrmann, *The Communion of the Christian with God*, p. 1.

laid on Roman Catholics. He thinks that through religious experience it was possible to obtain a key that would unlock the secrets of doctrine:

One who comes under the grasp of the spiritual character of Jesus wins a right appreciation of doctrines about the person of Jesus, so that he can find even in them the one thing great and precious to him above all else in the world, the power of the personal spirit over men who are yearning to become conscious of God.<sup>89</sup>

He claims that knowledge of doctrine and biblical truth become available only through personal experience. In this way he hoped to remove biblical and doctrinal truths from the attack of the historical-critical method. He needed to stress that; ‘The doctrine that springs from faith has necessarily an infinite variety of forms.’<sup>90</sup>

Herrmann says that what unites Christians is not doctrine but, ‘the likeness of our ways of thinking, and the unity of the revelation by which that likeness is caused.’<sup>91</sup>

Having claimed religious experience as the source of knowledge, Herrmann has to establish that this knowledge is true knowledge. To protect it from accusations of mysticism he argues that knowledge gained by religious experience is expressible. He says that the difference between mysticism and the Christian’s inner life is acute because mysticism remains silent, whilst the revelation of God can be expressed in words:

We hold that the ineffable in religion can indeed be experienced, but only in connection with that which can be put into words. Apart from this, the experience would lack Christian definiteness and the consciousness of being true. Thus, we escape mysticism without losing the truth it contains.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Herrmann, *The Communion of the Christian with God*, p. 4.

<sup>90</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critical Realistic Dialectical Theology*, p. 11.

<sup>91</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critical Realistic Dialectical Theology*, p. 13.

<sup>92</sup> McCormack, p. 38.



Herrmann argued that mysticism, ‘refuses to be satisfied with a mere longing after God, or to remain on the way to Him, but is determined to reach the goal, and rest with God Himself.’<sup>93</sup> Whereas, he says:

The Christian has a positive vision of God in the personal life of Jesus Christ. This vision of God does actually set us free from the world because it leads us to deny self, and is grasped and realized only in connection with this moral impulse.<sup>94</sup>

Herrmann thinks that a person’s actions show if they have a true knowledge of God and it is in the moral life that we can see who has experienced the knowledge of the inner reality of Jesus. Thus ethics give objective reality to religious experience, by expressing that inner experience and uniting Christians in moral acts. Moral behaviour is the requirement for church membership as it indicates the truth of the person’s inner experience of Jesus. Thus ethics unlocked the truth of doctrines.

Nevertheless, how do we know that Herrmann’s religious experience, exhibited as the moral life, is not simply subjective knowledge? He answers this criticism in a passage that is a reflection of Harnack’s work by drawing attention to Luther. He says:

That teaching of Luther to which we will and can hold is his prophetic word, in which he expresses what he has experienced, the revelation of God as his own redemption.<sup>95</sup>

However, says Herrmann, we live in a different time to Luther and, ‘No one can still hold to the idea that all words of Scripture being the word of God are infallible expressions of the truth.’<sup>96</sup> He has removed himself from the historical Luther but remained with Luther’s inner experience of God’s revelation. In the same way, he

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<sup>93</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critical Realistic Dialectical Theology*, p. 33.

<sup>94</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critical Realistic Dialectical Theology*, p. 33.

<sup>95</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critical Realistic Dialectical Theology*, p. 51.



detaches himself from the historical Jesus but remains with the Christian's religious experience of Jesus' inner life thus avoiding Lessing's 'wide ugly ditch:' the problem of how an accident of history can become a universal of reason. Knowing *a priori* Jesus' inner life is a means of bypassing the historical-critical method and unlocking the secrets of the biblical texts.

He argued that the capacity to receive religious experience is innate and universal. For example, he says that evangelism is only effective with native peoples who have no knowledge of God because they have an inbuilt capacity to receive it. He strongly argues that without such an ability being universal and innate evangelism would be ineffective:

We by no means wish to assert, even for a moment, that the savages of New Holland have no knowledge of God, no pulsations of true religion, and therefore no communion with God.<sup>97</sup>

Here we see Herrmann maintaining that there is a universal knowledge of God before revelation. Herrmann claims that his illustration of the natives of New Holland being able to benefit from evangelism shows that knowledge of God is innate and universal. He then goes on to argue that non-Christians observing the moral life being lived out in the Christian community have the innate and universal ability to be lead to an appreciation and acceptance of the inner life of Jesus. The religious experience of Jesus is the content of the Christian moral life, as Herrmann says: 'The concrete reality amid which we actually live must be the nourishment of our inner life,'<sup>98</sup> and adds of the natives of New Holland who are not living Christian moral lives, 'but we do not know through what medium such knowledge and such communion reaches

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<sup>96</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critical Realistic Dialectical Theology*, p. 52.

<sup>97</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critical Realistic Dialectical Theology*, p. 62.

them.’<sup>99</sup> At this point Herrmann’s use of ethics as the universal foundation for Christianity collapses, because it assumes an existing Christian moral community, and is therefore culturally conditioned. It is an aspect of natural religion that Barth in the *Ethics* further elaborates in the orders of creation.

Herrmann argues that the moral life illustrates an inner religious experience. However, since that experience is united in an innate and universal ability to receive knowledge of God, it exists outside time and space and is not then bound by history. As religious experience is outside the constraints of time and space it unites all Christians in the inner life of Christ. True knowledge, therefore, does not come from assenting to doctrine, which is susceptible to the criticism of the scientific and historical-critical method, but from observing the moral life of the Christian community which illustrates the inner unity with Christ. Herrmann summarises his epistemology thus:

A man has found God Himself only, when, through the influence of what he has laid hold of as God’s revelation, his own existence in the world has become serious and important to him and his neighbour has drawn close to his heart. Only when these impulses to take the world seriously and to serve our neighbour arise within us do we receive from God the highest good, elevation into a Divine life – a life in and with God – By turning in this manner to the world and to other men, we turn to God Himself come to a life common to ourselves and Him. Thus, through the heartfelt desire for God that is kindled by His revelation, the Christian is driven to commune with the world in work and in service of his fellows.<sup>100</sup>

He avoids the attack of the historical-critical method on biblical truths and Christian doctrine but his ethic, which is culturally determined, defeats the logic of his argument because he subjects Christian truths to definition by cultural norms.

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<sup>98</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critical Realistic Dialectical Theology*, p. 64.

<sup>99</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critical Realistic Dialectical Theology*, p. 62.



This was Barth's inheritance. McCormack finds Barth's thinking diverging from Herrmann's liberal theology as early as 1911 and suggests the split was complete by 1914.<sup>101</sup> In the *Ethics*, Barth works out a new foundation and epistemology for Christian ethics in response to Herrmann's theology. However, Herrmann's influence is not over until much later, as can be seen in the evidence of the orders which form part of the lectures to which we now turn.

### 3.2 The Münster and Bonn Ethics

The lectures are divided into two sections. The first, *Ethics I* given in the first semester is in three sections: 'Introduction', 'The Reality of the Divine Command', and 'The Command of God the Creator'. The second, *Ethics II* given in the second semester is in two further sections with an appendix, they are, 'The Command of God the Reconciler', 'The Command of God the Redeemer', and an appendix thesis on 'Church and State'. The division of the material follows Barth the familiar pattern of three-fold revelation of God the Creator, God the Reconciler, and God the Redeemer.

In the first lecture Barth defines his relationship with his dialogue partners. His first statement which is directed to his brother, Heinrich Barth the neo-Kantian philosopher, makes a distinction between theological and philosophical ethics.<sup>102</sup> He defines theological ethics as the study of the goodness of human conduct determined by revelation whilst philosophical ethics, he states, begins with the study of the human response to that reality. The first, theological ethics, is the claim of God and

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<sup>100</sup> Herrmann, *The Communion of the Christian with God Described on the basis of Luther's Statements*, section 28 'Eternal Life in Bearing the Cross and in One's Moral Calling,' p. 321.

<sup>101</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, p. 114.

<sup>102</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 19.



the second, philosophical ethics, is the claim of the neighbour; both have the goodness of human conduct as their object.<sup>103</sup> He attempts to neither defend theological ethics from the attack of philosophical ethics nor write an apology for it. He understands that the entry of theological ethics into the ethical debate is, historically, a recent event and he recognises that philosophical ethics, of whatever form, has a long history of engagement in the discussion. He likens the arrival of theological ethics into philosophical ethics to the entry of the children of Israel into Canaan. His claims are radical:

On the field of ethical deliberation, which is apparently open to all kinds of other possible investigations, and which has been long since lit up and worked over by a whole series of what are often very serious investigations, there takes place the entry, or, one might say, the invasion of a rival whose investigation differs in such an extraordinary way from all other possible and actual investigations that on their part doubt as to the legitimacy of this act seems almost unavoidable, especially as this rival is in no position to behave peacefully as one partner in discussion among many others. But, modest though its entry may be formally, and primitive though its intellectual equipment may perhaps appear, it advances the claim that it is the one that with its investigation has the last word which absorbs all others.<sup>104</sup>

He then examines the consequences of his position in relation to the position of his three dialogue partners:

1. The theological existentialism of Schleiermacher and his follower Herrmann.
2. The Neo-Kantian philosophical ethics of Heinrich Barth.
3. The thinking of the Catholic group, which includes Erich Przywara.

Barth rejects the first case as apologetics, the second as partnership and the third as the Roman Catholic position. The objection is similar in each case; because of the fall

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<sup>103</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 19.

*reason* is in no position to judge *revelation*. There is therefore no knowledge before revelation:

There are Christians only in Christ and not in themselves, only as seen from above and not from below, only in faith and not in sight, and not therefore as there are Mohammedans, Buddhists, and atheists, or Roman Catholics and Protestants.<sup>105</sup>

Having defined his relationship to his dialogue partners Barth continues discussing four foundational problems:

1. Ethics as an auxiliary science.
2. Ethics as the doctrine of sanctification.
3. Revelation as the source, form and content of knowledge about God.
4. Distinguishing dogmatics from ethics and the forming of the right relationship between dogmatics and ethics.

As we have previously seen that he defines ethics as a science: 'Ethics as a theological discipline is the auxiliary science.'<sup>106</sup> This opening definition illustrates the influence of Herrmann who wanted to protect theology from attack by scientific critical biblical scholarship. Barth achieves this by claiming that theology is a science in which the object of study defines the methodology. God is the object of theological study and as God is unique the theological method is unique. Comparisons of methodologies are appropriate between other sciences, because they have similar objects, whereas theology's object is unique and its methodology is beyond contrast.

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<sup>104</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 20.

<sup>105</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 14.

<sup>106</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 3.

Barth says therefore, that theological method is necessarily self-validating. This is the point of difference between his scientific method and that of Herrmann. A further contrast, which has already been discussed is in the object of study of theological ethics, which is the study of, 'the question of the goodness of human conduct', and the answer to the question, 'is sought in the Word of God', whereas, Herrmann sought the answer in religious experience.<sup>107</sup> Barth rejects Herrmann's opinion that religious experience is the source of the knowledge of the goodness of human conduct and establishes it in the Word of God. However, it must be stressed, that Herrmann's influence on Barth is frequently underestimated in an all too frequent desire to distant him from existentialism but his influence, as a dialogue partner, is apparent throughout the *Ethics*.

The task of the reader of Barth's ethics is to criticise from inside the methodology, and not to import methodologies that are inappropriate to the object of study. His definition of the relationship between ethics and the doctrine of sanctification gives a broader context for the methodology of theological ethics:

As a special elucidation of the doctrine of sanctification, it is a reflection on how far the Word of God proclaimed and accepted in Christian preaching effects a definite claiming of man.<sup>108</sup>

Discussing the definition of theological ethics, Barth is in discussion with his dialogue partners. He continues his definition of ethics by saying that, 'ethics is equivalent to morals', which he defines as the philosophy, science or discipline of the modes of human conduct or the constancy of human action. However, in defining ethics in this way he says it is not distinguishable from the study of the psychology of the will, or

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<sup>107</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p.3.

<sup>108</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p.3.



the habits of the science of law.<sup>109</sup> Then follows an example of his method of exposition, he says what ethics is *not*, and having rejected all opposite positions says what ethics *must be*. In his argument the negative precedes the positive. The definitions of ethics given by his Catholic dialogue partners provide the content of the negative; ethics is not custom, habit or law. His own position reflects his belief that the negative precedes God's revelation and is, therefore, unreality:

Whenever the task of ethics is undertaken as a real task, however, it is understood as one that differs from tasks of these other disciplines.

The insertion of 'real' is important because in Barth's methodology the negative does not follow from God's revelation. He continues with the positive statement which is the 'real', since it does follow from God's revelation:

The morality or goodness of human conduct which ethics investigates has to do with the validity of what is valid for all human action, the origin of constancies, the worth of everything universal, the rightness of all rules. With such concepts as validity, origin, worth, and rightness we denote provisionally and generally that which transcends the inquiries of psychology, cultural history, and jurisprudence – the transcendent factor which in contrast is the theme of ethical inquiry.<sup>110</sup>

This example of Barth's method of structuring and conducting the debate with his dialogue partners in Münster is indicative of his more general style of argument in the *Ethics* and later in the *Church Dogmatics*. One by one he sinks his opponents' ships until only his is left. To remain afloat the reader must climb aboard and accept that only Barth's ship is seaworthy. His method is persuasive but it isolates him and his theological ethics.

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<sup>109</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p.3

<sup>110</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p.5.

Barth continues by defining ethics as transcendental, validating and universal, and in so doing points out that ethics, defined in this way, has not always been recognised as a *theological* task.<sup>111</sup> He says that even though Tertullian thought Christians should accept the demands of a perfect Christian life and realise them, later writers such as Basil and Ambrose, thought it necessary to describe ethics only for those living the religious life.<sup>112</sup> Even the ethical section of Aquinas's *Summa theologia* has its basis in Aristotle and is concerned only with the life of the clergyman and the monk.<sup>113</sup> Of the reformers, he says Luther does not give a good reformation example of independent ethics<sup>114</sup> and that even Calvin's strong interest in the ethical question does not prevent him from embodying in his dogmatics his discussion of the regenerative significance of the Holy Spirit and of faith and the law and obedience to it.<sup>115</sup>

Phil Butin says of Barth's study of the historical sources:

Too often the seriousness and intentionality with which Barth immersed himself in the historical sources of both the broader Christian and specifically Reformed traditions, especially in the programmatic and formative years after the publication of the Romans commentaries, is overlooked.<sup>116</sup>

Barth says it was in the seventeenth century that the followers of the reformers began to make explicit what the reformers had taken for granted: that theology is not only a theoretical, but also a practical task and he cites the Lutherans, Thomas Venatorius and George Calixt.<sup>117</sup> Christian morality at that time began to acquire a new importance among Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed theologians. Barth says

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<sup>111</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 5.

<sup>112</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 6.

<sup>113</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 6.

<sup>114</sup> Luther, *Sermon on Good Works* (1520)

<sup>115</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 7.

<sup>116</sup> Phil Butin, 'Review of the Theology of John Calvin', in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51, 1998, pp. 511-514.



that in the eighteenth century moral theology took the lead from dogmatics and claims that Schleiermacher brought doctrine and moral teaching into a mutual relationship but within a framework built on a superior discipline called ethics. He points out that Herrmann and Troeltsch, with some modifications, confirmed and readopted Schleiermacher's view of ethics one hundred years later.<sup>118</sup> In the nineteenth century there were attempts to swallow up dogmatics in ethics in accordance with theories that the church would gradually disappear into the state.

Barth pointed to the possibility that the renewal of interest in the ethical task, and the determining of theology resulting from the Kierkegaardian renaissance, might work itself out in the direction of the gradual disappearance of the church in the state.

Theological ethics, conducted in this way, would finally destroy the church not build it up.<sup>119</sup> Klaus Scholder's influential work on the relationship between the Third Reich and the German churches shows this to have been a prophetic statement:

As early as March [1933] the new Chancellor [Hitler] had established contact with the two great churches. The aim of the negotiations which he had energetically pressed forward during the summer of 1933 was a Reich concordat for the German Catholics and a single Reich Church for the German Protestants. This was in order to bind both great churches to the Third Reich, each in its own way, and to rule out any attempt at opposition from this quarter. The passing of both plans at the cabinet meeting on 14 July 1933 underlined the basic political significance of these developments.<sup>120</sup>

Having reviewed the historical development of ethics, Barth moves on to establish the foundation of ethics in dogmatics and establishes a dialectic relationship between them in which each remains distinctive and distinguishable. He later strengthened this

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<sup>117</sup> Thomas Venatorius, *Three Books on Christian Virtue* (1529), George Calixt, *Epitome of Moral Theology* (1634)

<sup>118</sup> Barth, *Ethics* pp. 8/9.

<sup>119</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 19.



argument, but in the *Ethics*, the establishing of theological ethics in dogmatics is not yet fully realised, because he retains the doctrine of the Orders of Creation.<sup>121</sup>

However, he has set up the basis for finding the knowledge of God in revelation. He also begins distinguishing dogmatics from ethics that enables him to begin placing ethics within dogmatics.

Barth frequently uses concepts drawn from Euclidean geometry to structure the content of his lectures. For example, he uses the image of four overlapping circles to describe the orders of creation in the following way:

We shall now proceed in four circles. It is divine order that we must understand and live out our life-act as *work*. It is a divine order that our sexual life should have its place and limit and fulfilment in the relation of *marriage*. It is a divine order that our life with others should have its basic form in the life of the *family*. And it is divine order that all other fellowship among men should take place under the guidance of the other two inseparable principles of *quality* and *leadership*.<sup>122</sup>

He is fond of such illustrations and they appear throughout his work. However they often constrain the thinking by imposing a static form on a dynamic content which can make the content seem two-dimensional.

In his first lecture, Barth speaks about the relative newness of the independence of ethics in theology being a problem for establishing the foundations of theological ethics in dogmatics. He suggests that the independence of ethics in theology causes the problem by creating a tendency for ethics to swallow up dogmatics.<sup>123</sup> This problem points to a question: assuming that in some sense and context theology has to

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<sup>120</sup> Klaus Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich* Volume Two: 'The Year of Disillusionment 1934 Barmen and Rome,' trans. by John Bowden, (London: SCM Press, 1988) p. 1.

<sup>121</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2 § 36

<sup>122</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 216.

discuss the goodness of human conduct, is it appropriate or advisable to do this in the form of a separate discipline from dogmatics? Those who advocate the positive results of separating ethics from dogmatics usually try to show how far different inquiries and methodologies really underlie the two. However, separating dogmatics from ethics has the negative result of placing dogmatics under the suspicion of being an idle intellectual game. Barth thought all attempts at methodological separation between dogmatics and ethics are ethically suspect because, with great regularity, there takes place in all such attempts a suspicious change in direction and a suspicious change of subjects, namely, that God is transplanted by man.<sup>124</sup> He thought it vitally important to point out the consequences of this change of subject for the development of social ethics, he says:

It is not true that pious man has to work at the coming of the kingdom of God. [He has to pray for the coming of the kingdom of God – but this is something different.] It is not true that he is related to God's Word, as subject is to object. All these are notions that are possible only on the basis of an idea of synthesis and continuity between nature and supernature – an idea which ruined the ancient Catholic Church and which signified a repenetration of the church by paganism.<sup>125</sup>

Barth rejects any attempt to describe the synthesis of God and man as the basis of the goodness of human conduct. He says obedience to God's Command is the *only* basis of good human conduct. The Biblical accounts of those who witnessed the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ *reveal* God's command.

For the purposes of expression, he has to discuss each aspect of these accounts separately but understanding depends on seeing each section of his lectures as part of the other. The method, as discussed earlier, is more like seeing a film than reading a

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<sup>123</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 9.

<sup>124</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 12.



text: although each frame is fixed it can only be understood by seeing the whole film. He asks what questions the revelation of God as creator elicit. Of course, some of the questions he asks, and the answers he gives relate specifically to his time. However, some have a universal relevance. An example is Barth's insight, mentioned earlier, that life is a gift:

We do not live any kind of life according to our own caprice. As we know ourselves in God's Word, we are oriented to our fellows and we live a life whose specific ends are totally determined and which actualises that orientation in a particular way. As thus determined our life has a necessity by creation. Our life itself then becomes for us the divine command.<sup>126</sup>

Here Barth discusses the questions: What is the divine command, and how does it reveal itself?<sup>127</sup> He also discusses the knowledge of the Truth, which is the object shared by theology and philosophy. This debate is at the core of his lectures on ethics and he is in dialogue with Kant and Hegel establishing the grounds for making knowledge claims and the means of assessing their validity. The argument is about the formation of an appropriate epistemology for the *science* of theological ethics. He is developing a theological claim about the knowledge of the Truth against the background of the philosophical claims made by Kant and Hegel. Their epistemologies provided the foundation for the resurgence of interest in existentialism. This renaissance led, in theology, to ethics swallowing dogmatics. To show the importance of Barth's arguments it is necessary to consider the questions Hegel discussed in relation to knowledge of the Truth.

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<sup>125</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 14.

<sup>126</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 57.

<sup>127</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, pp. 62-73.



When he began his work Hegel was conducting a dialogue with Kant with a discussion of “sense certainty” as the source of all “knowledge claims”.<sup>128</sup> He takes his readers from the certainty they have of the truth of the knowledge gained by their sense experience, shows them the confusions and misunderstandings of this knowledge, and leads them to a philosophical point of view from where they may begin to understand the Truth.

Hegel challenges the reader’s confidence in Kant’s certainty of the senses as the source of Truth. He begins the pursuit of the knowledge of the Truth with consciousness becoming aware of itself in self-consciousness. His claim is that objects of knowledge which present themselves as sense experience, in feelings, and in thought, are real only as consciousness becomes aware of them. Of course, self-consciousness is the awareness of consciousness as an object. This is the process of thinking about thinking which Hegel calls philosophy. Hegel thus shows that Kant’s certainty of sense is misleading and confusing. He says the knowledge of Truth begins at the point when what is rational is actual, and what is actual is rational.<sup>129</sup>

Of course, Hegel was not saying what *exists* is real or rational but rather, by *actuality* he means the synthesis of essence and existence that takes place in thinking. He is claiming that thinking unites ontology and epistemology, and that *this* is the *rational*, which is the *actual*.

When discussing the Reality of the Divine Command Barth enters the dialogue and begins by considering Hegel’s self-conscious consciousness as the source of

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<sup>128</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 58.

<sup>129</sup> Hegel, *Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, trans. by T.M.Knox, (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1952) p. 10.

empirical, speculative and metaphysical truth and then takes the foundation of the discussion from philosophy to theology. He points out that the non-participant spectator *is* the shadow side of knowledge and that this shadow is the ineradicable remnant of subjectivity. Therefore, the question of *us*, questions the truth of all truths. Barth's description, "the shadow side of knowledge" is a reference to Hegel's philosophical discussion of what the world ought to be.<sup>130</sup> Hegel says philosophy always comes on to the scene too late to *describe* how the world ought to be. The thought about the world appears only when actuality is already there cut and dried after its process of formation is complete. Hegel says, "The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk."<sup>131</sup> Barth takes Hegel's argument further saying that, theologically, the description of consciousness becoming aware of itself in self-conscience and in the process forming actuality is in shadow even in bright daylight. He describes the problem the shadow casts over scientific knowledge, which is the problem of objectivity. He follows his usual methodology, firstly explaining the defect in present thinking, and secondly describing the truth.

He reminds his audience that in scientific knowledge the content of a general truth may be either correct or incorrect. A truth is general as far as the specific person who asserts it is of no significance, which means, as far as possible, ignoring subjectivity. In addition, general truth is theoretical if *any* onlooker can assert it. It is therefore a theoretical truth that I am a spectator of my own life. Scientific knowledge however, assumes truth will not be hurt if I, as observer, am a condition of it. This shadow side of subjectivity conditions the criteria of truth as *true* criteria of Truth. He claims subjectivity cannot be disregarded for it is *the question*, he says:

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<sup>130</sup> Hegel *Philosophy of Right*, p. 13.

<sup>131</sup> Hegel *Philosophy of Right*, p. 13.



But no matter what our view of it may be, all these truths are in fact challenged as such by the question which we would like to exclude as much as possible when we think generally and theoretically but which includes within itself our general and theoretical thinking. Whether we pay attention to it or not, this question is posed and it is the *ethical* question.<sup>132</sup>

General truths are true only as far as the life of the observer is part of the truth of a higher order. Barth is claiming that general truth relies on the ethical question, the question of *us*, because the subjective observer brings *being* to the general truth.

*Being* for Barth is only true when it is determined in the event of God's act; *being* is with the creator, and it is not possible to investigate the creator, as a further general truth of a higher order. This solves the problem of subjectivity in theological ethics.

General, theoretical and conditioned truths contain being and non-being because the observer brings the universal to the observation. Hegel described this universal as the 'I' that gives the 'Here' and 'Now' to the sensible world.<sup>133</sup> The universal 'I' through consciousness brings into being both *being* and *non-being*:

Negation is inherent in a property as a *determinateness*, which is immediately one with the immediacy of being, an immediacy that, through this unity with negation, is universality.<sup>134</sup>

For Barth being and non-being only become united in the universal as far as the observer's life is lived in response to the divine command. Only then, do general truths, whatever their content, whether internally correct or false, become true. In Hegel's discussion of the Universal, it is the 'I' that gives the 'Here' and 'Now' to the sensible world and the universal is the Spirit manifest in consciousness becoming aware of itself in self-conscious. Applying the thinking to religion Hegel says:

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<sup>132</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 64.

<sup>133</sup> Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* § 95-99 pp.59-61.

<sup>134</sup> Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* p. 69.



Religion, for example, has its absolute value within itself, but other purposes are supported and upheld at the same time. Christ said, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added unto you" [Matt.6:33]. Our particular purposes can be attained only insofar as what is in and for itself attained.<sup>135</sup>

Barth takes Hegel's position and places it not in the gift of the Spirit, but in the revelation of Christ. It is because of the *incarnation* that non-being becomes being as the universal is in the covenant relationship of God with humanity in Jesus Christ. Barth achieves what Hegel never could, which is a separating of God and man, but a separation united in the incarnation. He says of this position:

It is as one who is unconditionally loved, as one whom a decision *has been* made, that I am summoned to move on to a decision that the very next moment, i.e., to be the one I am, not to elect but to be elected and to confirm my election, to fulfil my decision the decision that has been *made* about me, to be the one whom God loves in *my own* decision in virtue of God's decision.<sup>136</sup>

He establishes the question of being in our ethical response to the three-fold command of God, as the command of God the creator, God the reconciler and God the redeemer. He unites ethics with the otherness of God in and through the command of God.

The Truth of all general truths, including the Here and Now of space and time are true only insofar as the subjective onlooker, spectator or non-participant observer stand in the question whether my life and therefore my action and my *theōrein* has a part in the truth of a basically different and higher order, in the truth of the good.<sup>137</sup>

Here we can see the influence of Herrmann, and Kierkegaard. As we have seen before the command, as Barth is using the concept, comes from Kierkegaard's interpretation

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<sup>135</sup> Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic* p. 52.

<sup>136</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 92.

<sup>137</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 81.

of Lutheran theology.<sup>138</sup> The command of God makes a “claim”. A claim is something lasting, its *justification* is the *primary* thing, and because it lasts it is enforceable at any time. A claim is not abstract it always exists against someone and is therefore always enforceable. Unlike a contract, a claim is not a fixed demand agreed on by both sides, but is the ground for future action. The claim of faith begins in the preaching of the gospel, which reinforces it. It has a “contemporaneity” and to be present at the claim of God’s command is to take part in the redemptive act. The command as claim is analogous to the “contemporaneity” of the Mass as both are redemptive acts.<sup>139</sup> Gadamer makes the following observation about Kierkegaard’s interpretation of the claim:

What unfolds before us is so much lifted out of the ongoing course of the ordinary world and so much enclosed in its own autonomous circle of meaning that no one is prompted to see some other future or reality behind it.<sup>140</sup>

Barth later develops the concept of “contemporaneity” into the idea of God’s determination of our self-determination by saying we live in unreality until our response to the Command of God orders our lives.<sup>141</sup> The claim against us made by God’s command determines all Truth. Barth says that even the *words* we use do not have any meaning until they become part of God’s claim. Truth creates truth, but it is not another general truth, which can be challenged by a higher order truth. Without God’s gift, we are in unbelief, unreality and untruth. This is a strange new world:

The determination our existence by the command, our new life in sanctification in which we move on from the decision of this moment to that of the next, is a being in relation to this reality. We have no control over the

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<sup>138</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical fragments; or a fragment of philosophy by Johannes Climacus*, Chapter 4 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1962)

<sup>139</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p 127.

<sup>140</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.128.

<sup>141</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/4 pp. 116-59



reality, nor have we, therefore, over its relation to our existence. --- The new life cannot be abstracted from the free giving act of God: "in him we live and move and have our being" [Acts 17:28].<sup>142</sup>

Barth describes the principles that guide human action as the first orders of creation; these are work, marriage and the family. He also includes 'equality and leadership' as orders.<sup>143</sup>

In *Ethics I*, Barth is reading back into the orders of creation the contextual values of his time about work, marriage and family, equality and leadership and applies the prevailing social principles to assess human actions. Two questions arise from his thinking: firstly, are work, marriage and the family universal ethical criteria, or are they requirements only for Christians? Secondly, do these criteria apply over all time, or are they relative to a specific historical moment? Their solution poses two problems for Barth: the first, is the place and significance of history, and the second, is the status, future and salvation of those who he places outside God's divine command.

We can now consider the two problems as Barth explores *work* as the first order of creation. He knew about the problem of unemployment. As early as 1925, Thurneysen wrote to him about its effects among his congregation:

The whole situation here is bleaker than ever. The embroidery industry goes more and more to pieces and unemployment is the order of the day. I no longer know what it is like and how things go in a congregation with normal working conditions. Almost everyday one is surrounded with distress,

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<sup>142</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 112.

<sup>143</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 117.



hardship, sighing on all sides. And one is helpless. Also it becomes clear how little modern man is equipped in his character to endure hardship.<sup>144</sup>

By 1928 unemployment in Germany had reached appalling numbers, inflation was out of control, and the German economy was bankrupt. The Great Depression gripped America and the New York stock exchange collapsed on 24<sup>th</sup> October 1929, known as Black Thursday. As a result, the investment of foreign capital in Germany fell from five thousand million Deutsch Marks in 1928 to two and half thousand million in 1929 and by 1930, it was just seven hundred million. Germany was both military and financially disarmed.

Hitler's National Socialist Party took advantage of this situation by making promises of employment, promises that in the main they kept. As a result the Nazis gained a remarkable increase in seats in Parliament; rising from twelve in 1928 to one hundred and seven in 1930, making them second to the Social Democrats.

Against this background, Barth lectured that work is the first order of creation. He says nothing about those who are unemployed, and his silence on the subject appears to place them outside the orders of creation. By making work the first order of God's creation, he makes full-employment a necessity for all states, which requires a constant and sustainable growth in the economy. Along with most others in Germany, he seemed unaware of the true political situation and the significance of Hitler's rise to power. Scholder emphasises Barth's apparent ignorance:

Since he had come to Germany in 1921, the Swiss theologian had not been much bothered about political questions, whether outside or inside the church. He had devoted all his energies and passion towards developing his theology.

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<sup>144</sup> Barth, *Revolutionary theology in the making, Barth Thurneysen correspondence, 1914-1925* (London: Epworth Press, 1964) letter dated November 25<sup>th</sup> 1925 p. 248.

It is extremely significant that in his lively correspondence with Eduard Thurneysen, which kept his friend in Switzerland regularly up to date with all important developments, the name 'Hitler' appears only once between 1921 and 1930.<sup>145</sup>

Barth acknowledged criticisms of the orders of creation and as a result refused to allow the publication of the lectures during his lifetime. Therefore, it is not necessary in this thesis to make a prolonged criticism of his use of the doctrine of the orders of creation. However, his frequently quoted comment that the theologian should act with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other does not appear to have guided his thinking in Münster. His lectures do raise wider questions about the relationship between the system and ethics in his theology. He is systematic, but does he offer a system for answering individual ethical questions? A discussion of the remaining lectures now follows, explores that question.

It has to be recognised that Barth's *Ethics* are both historically and culturally conditioned. For example, he places a discussion of trans-oceanic air flight in the section on suicide, arguing that putting oneself in danger by taking such flights is in the same moral category as suicide. Improvements in technology have dramatically diminished the level of risk in flying, and so Barth's statement that trans-oceanic flying can be compared to suicide does not apply to us. However, his recognition that life is a gift from God and not a personal possession is a *universal* claim and is the foundation from which man can evaluate his actions. From this position putting one's life in danger can be compared to suicide.

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<sup>145</sup> Scholder *The Churches and the Third Reich* Volume One, p. 122.



Barth also uses the topical discussion of trans-oceanic flights in a section on calling in which he claims no calling is neutral saying even technology, which is thought to be a pure action, threatens the lives of others. He says:

Now that the Atlantic has just been flown for the first time from east to west, in Germany the fact that a German did it, not an Englishman or a Frenchman, is what has stimulated the enthusiasm with which this event has been hailed.<sup>146</sup>

He goes on to explain that theological ethics does not speak an ultimate word but only a series of penultimate words, and that the necessity of *life* is one such penultimate word. It is, he says, one unavoidable and general valid standpoint. The command of God the Creator includes more than life. Life is only a component of the command. However as something commanded, life is not something over which we have control. He says, 'Life is a gift',<sup>147</sup> and as such 'Life belongs primarily to God, secondarily to us.'<sup>148</sup>

Since life is a part of the command of God it follows that to live is both necessary and good, and is in obedience to God the creator. Barth's position relativises the will to live and to do good acts. Since an individual's work is not good just because he wills his life and because he wills and does good acts his actions are only good if willed in obedience to the Will of God the Creator. As a result, Barth's position on suicide is very different to most other ethical judgements. As life is a gift, necessary and good,

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<sup>146</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 171 also see Editor's note 'Charles Lindberg flew west to east on May 20/2, and, with a following wind, took 33½ hrs. from New York to Paris. On April 12, 1928, the Germans Köhl and von Hünfeld and the Irishman Fitzmaurice flew a Junkers W33 for the first time in the opposite direction, taking 35½ hrs. from Baldonnell in Ireland to Greenly Island.

<sup>147</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, pp. 117/72.

<sup>148</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 119.



and willed in obedience to the Creator, then suicide is the most striking negation of life. It is, he says, 'a wrong decision on the threshold of eternity'.<sup>149</sup>

He rejects materialism and spiritualism because life is willed with both body and soul as a whole, a totality. He warns against materialism particularly the excesses of capitalism and he has some harsh words for the owners of stocks and shares. The latter seems somewhat surprising from a Swiss middle-class gentleman!

He says that although the command of God is to an individual person at a specific place and time there are also universal demands, due to the necessity of *metabolism*, *sexuality* and *sleep*.<sup>150</sup> Therefore, it is obedience to the command to for us to will these necessities. Here he hesitates: the mode of speech changes from the imperative to the questioning and he asks, 'are there not aberrant forms and corruption of this will for satisfaction which, far from really satisfying the needs of hunger and love, threaten the life-act itself?'<sup>151</sup> He then tells us 'We have in mind alcoholism and prostitution, and also the puzzling dilemma of so called homosexuality'.

When Barth discusses the relationship between men and women he begins with the Genesis account of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. His use of the Bible in this way is a form of natural theology. This biblical foundation allows him to criticise voluntary celibacy saying, 'even though he does it for the kingdom of heaven's sake' the celibate cannot avoid asking how this relates to the command of creation regarding human life.<sup>152</sup> Similarly, he sees hunger strikes as negations of the

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<sup>149</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 126.

<sup>150</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 128.

<sup>151</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 129.

<sup>152</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 129.

command. However, he is restricted; he cannot judge by saying what is right or wrong, but believes he can interpret God's decision:

If ethics is to keep to the point, then even in the face of the most striking impossibilities it must keep on putting questions, or rather showing they are already put. It should not hand out good or bad testimonies. It should not judge. Knowing the radical antithesis of good and bad, it should point to the command of God which alone can really and properly judge, and which will tell each of us what is good and bad.<sup>153</sup>

It is an unhappy prospect for suicides, alcoholics, prostitutes, homosexuals, celibates, and hunger strikers, because it seems only married heterosexuals can be obedient to the command. However, he adds an important codicil to these injunctions, reminding us that we are not to judge who is obedient to the command of God the Creator.

Obedience to the command includes the will to be healthy, the will to be happy and the will to be individual. The will to be individual applies not only to each of us but also to the individuality of nations and families and voluntary societies.<sup>154</sup>

He radically revised his opinion of the orders of creation seeing them as a form of natural theology. This limits the need for criticisms of his requirement for the necessity of family, work and marriage as orders. However, in his sexual ethics the necessary requirements of a biblical foundation remain under the command of God. His use of the Bible as a form of natural theology limits his understanding of the relationships possible between men and women to the ideal of Adam and Eve.

The next section of the thesis will discuss how Barth works out obedience to the command of God in social ethics. He makes a surprising statement when he claims

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<sup>153</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 129.



that the study and pursuit of theological ethics is not an obvious task, which is neither original nor self-evident, because there has not always been a theological ethics. Augustine, Aquinas, Herrmann and many other theologians believed they were writing theological ethics. He claims all these previous ethics had their foundations in philosophy: Augustine in Plotinus, Aquinas in Aristotle and Herrmann in Kierkegaard.<sup>155</sup> When Barth's theological ethics comes on the scene it does so, he says, as a newcomer, which faces an already well-established, confident and acknowledged authority. Theological ethics, he says, has only one possible foundation which is obedience to the Command of the Word of God as revealed to the church in the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. He describes the situation as:

A kind of annexation comparable to the entry of the children of Israel, against which objections can obviously be made, into the land of Canaan, where other nations claimed to have, if not an original, at least a very ancient right of domicile.<sup>156</sup>

He repeats the biblical illustration latter in the *Church Dogmatics*, making more explicit the theme begun in Münster. Again, he emphasises the newness of theological ethics, its incompatibility with philosophical ethics and predicts a hostile reception.<sup>157</sup>

This reaction is not surprising when he says:

We have to realize how far-reaching is this change in the conception of ethics. From the point of view of general history of ethics, it means an annexation of the kind that took place on the entry of the children of Israel into Palestine. Other peoples had for a long time maintained they had a very old, if not the oldest right of domicile in this country. But, according to Josh. 9<sup>27</sup>, they could

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<sup>154</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 133.

<sup>155</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, see p. 23 for Barth's discussion of the philosophical basis of the ethics of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. The basis of Wilhelm Herrmann's *Ethik* in the work of Schleiermacher is discussed on p. 8.

<sup>156</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, see the section on, 'Theological and Philosophical Ethics' the section on, 'Theological and Philosophical Ethics' p. 19.

<sup>157</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2 in the section, 'The Command of God and the Ethical Problem'.



now at best exist only as hewers of wood and drawers of water. On no account had the Israelites to adopt or take part in their cultus and culture. Their liveliest resistance, therefore, could be expected, and their existence would necessarily be for the Israelites an almost invincible temptation. Ethics in the sense of that general conception is something entirely different from what alone the Christian doctrine of God can be as a doctrine of God's command. Whatever form the relationship between the two may take, there can be no question either of positive recognition of Christian ethics by that conception or of an attachment of Christian ethics to it. Christian ethics cannot possibly be its continuation, development and enrichment. It is not one disputant in debater with others. It is the final word of the original chairman – only discussed, of course, in Christian ethics – which puts an end to the discussion and involves necessarily a choice and separation.<sup>158</sup>

Barth's seemingly surprising position follows logically from the statement that he makes at the beginning of his lectures: 'The truth of God is not a general and theoretical and consequently a conditioned truth'. He points again to the stark contrast between the truth of God and statements of fact which are general, theoretical and conditioned truths. He explains that factual statements are general to the extent that, as far as possible, they ignore individual subjectivity and that such statements are theoretical only as far as onlookers assert them, who as far as possible are non-participants. The observer's *knowledge* conditions the truth of factual statements. The ineradicable remnant of subjectivity without which there can be no objectivity is present in the truth of all factual statements.

Therefore, theological ethics cannot begin its discussion in personal experience, nor with the concepts of classical virtues, nor in naive interpretations of the categorical imperative, which are *all* general, conditioned and theoretical truths.<sup>159</sup> Equally for the

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<sup>158</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2 p. 518.

<sup>159</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 78.

same reason conscience, as ‘the totality of our self-conscience’, cannot take the role of arbiter in theological ethics.<sup>160</sup>

However, he does allow a place for the informed conscience, which he discusses at the end of the lectures. Unfortunately, it is clear that he was running out of time because the pace quickens and the subjects, including conscience, receive less detailed treatment and his position on the informed conscience is not as clear as we might wish.

He rejects the view that conscience is part of the natural order. Conscience is not part of the command of God the creator therefore it cannot be part of created order.

Theological ethics cannot contain a natural theology, which appeals to conscience as the arbiter of God’s command. There *is* a place for conscience in theological ethics, as an eschatological concept, under the command of God the Redeemer. Conscience, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, brings future happenings into present possibilities. However at this point, at the beginning of the lectures where he is discussing the command of God the Creator, he dismisses conscience as a concept that has a primary position and rejects the concept of conscience as a detached arbiter, or moral conscience.

Barth insists that there is no place for Biblicism as a foundation for theological ethics. The Biblical imperatives, he says, including the Sermon on the Mount are specific to the time, place and people who received the Command. They were concrete then but are now relative commands to be understood as witness to revelation. The command

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<sup>160</sup> *Ethics*, p. 79.

not to kill,<sup>161</sup> or the command to love one's enemies,<sup>162</sup> are *orientated* towards the *absolutely* concrete command but are themselves only *relatively* concrete.<sup>163</sup>

Theological ethics has its foundation in the command as it is revealed in the *present* as the Word of God the Creator, God the Reconciler and God the Redeemer, which is specific, absolute and unconditioned truth. Barth, in the lectures, then continues by explaining how this revelation is received.

In the third lecture, he explains that judgment is the form in which God reveals his command.<sup>164</sup> Judgment is the work of sanctification. In earlier lectures he argued that the doctrine of God contains ethics, but now he takes the further important step in arguing that ethics is also more precisely contained within the doctrine of sanctification as the expression of God's chosen relationship with his creation. To express this relationship he introduces the subject of God's covenant relationship which is the theme that dominates all his future theology:

The command is not given to us without the promise that we are God's elected covenant-partners whom he loves.<sup>165</sup>

He proceeds cautiously, carefully explaining that as a theologian he is not alone in his view that the gift of faith justifies God's elected covenant partners. He wants to establish, and strongly emphasises, the point that he is following the teachings and the tradition of Reformed theology; 'to confess that not alone but in the consensus of the Christian church do I adopt the position I do'.<sup>166</sup> He wants to emphasise the gift of grace as being a freely given gift in which we are judged, forgiven and sanctified, a

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<sup>161</sup> Exod. 20. 3

<sup>162</sup> Matt. 5. 44

<sup>163</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 81.

<sup>164</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, section § 6, 'The Command of God as the Judgment of God' p. 87.

<sup>165</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 96.



gift which we can neither grasp for ourselves or believe for another. It is, he reminds us, that in taking our baptism seriously we remember it as a sign of the promise, 'which is given to each of us personally, and truly, as a sign of promise for our thinking, and therefore with epistemological significance.'<sup>167</sup> He then describes God's covenant relationship, the gift of faith and our subsequent baptism, as having an epistemological significance. He means that it is only within the covenant relationship that our knowledge becomes real, and that previously we were in unreality. Our present sinful unreality becomes real in as much as we see that we are in unreality, the negative is not *removed*, but *illuminated* by the promise received in baptism. This is why, in later works, he speaks of baptism as our first act of obedience to God's command describing it as the first ethical act, because it is our public acknowledgement of God's gift of faith.<sup>168</sup> However, we would not be able to make this act if we had not received the gift of faith through grace; therefore, infant baptism is to be discarded as part of the Roman Catholic doctrine that grace perfects nature. For Barth baptism is the first ethical action, and is the *event*, which arises from *actions* that determine *being*. Hence, baptism has both ontological and epistemological significance.

This is why he says theological ethics cannot speak out of human understanding but only from bearing witness to the concrete action of the Holy Spirit through our baptism and membership of the church. He describes the event of baptism as the human "yes" which coincides with the divine "yes", and becomes an eschatological

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<sup>166</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 104.

<sup>167</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 105.

<sup>168</sup> Barth, *The Foundation of the Christian Life, The Christian Life Church Dogmatics* Volume IV, Part 4 Lecture Fragments p. 47.

reality in Jesus Christ.<sup>169</sup> The covenant relationship establishes that holiness is an eschatological concept, and not a perfecting of human nature through grace and works. Therefore, theological ethics cannot be a means of achieving holiness.

He rejects what he describes as the two extreme positions: the Protestant theology of the cross, and the Roman Catholic theology that grace perfects nature. Both, he says, lead to a judicial conception of salvation in the Western *Ordo Salutis* with undesirable consequences for the understanding of revelation, the self and the place of conscience.<sup>170</sup>

He continues by discussing how the Command of God the Creator as part of the three-fold command, of God the Creator, God the Reconciler and God the Redeemer, applies to our existence as human.<sup>171</sup> His position contrasts sharply with those he has just rejected:

We should not weaken the significance of the command by forgetting that it is always the command of God the Creator and always applies to us also as creatures. It does not begin to apply to us as transgressors and as those who are reconciled again to God; it applies to us also already as those who exist. Our existence as such is not a hiding place where, appealing to our ignorance of good and evil and free from God's command we think we can be left alone. The command obviously comes already to Adam and Eve in paradise before the fall.<sup>172</sup>

Although life is included in the command of God the Creator to his creatures the command is more than just life; it is a component of the Command. Therefore life as such, is not something to which the individual has a claim, nor is it something over

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<sup>169</sup> Barth, *Ethics* p. 115.

<sup>170</sup> See Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, (1996) for a discussion of the further exploration of this theme as it is worked out in more detail in *Church Dogmatics* I/1.

<sup>171</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, Chapter 2, 'The Command of God the Creator.'

<sup>172</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 118.

which the individual has control, because life belongs primarily and originally to God, and only secondarily to the individual life, it is only a component of what is commanded and cannot be made the *only* standpoint of theological ethics.<sup>173</sup> He criticises Herrmann on this point because in protecting theology against naturalism he made life the only standpoint of theological ethics. In doing this, Barth says, Herrmann turned from Christian theology to protecting idealism.<sup>174</sup> Barth wants to insist that under the Command of God the Creator, life is a *penultimate* word not the *final* word.

Life, as defined by Barth, is a broad idea, which defines humanity and establishes reality. Human autonomy, integrity and freedom express life, and this domain constitutes theological ethics.

To explore this domain theologically, he firstly explains the true meaning of human autonomy. Life, as created by God, is separate and distinct from God and we are, therefore, only real and autonomous in relation to God and the belief in an independent position apart from God is unreality.

Secondly, God creates life specifically as individuals. Distinctness and individuality are the realities of life.

Thirdly, God creates life in time, which means existence is identical with itself in the flow of moments, the same before and after, through movement and change. Although

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<sup>173</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 120.

<sup>174</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 121.



life shares with God qualities of immutability and actuality it also takes part in continuity and change.

Fourthly, it follows from the above that created life takes part within the qualities of God, which are on loan to us.

Fifthly, life, which exists through God, begins in and with itself and therefore life is freedom, because it has no dependence outside its creator.

The concepts of autonomy, actuality, and freedom as defined by Barth are the foundations of his theological ethics, and they also delineate what it is to be human. Life, says Barth, ‘is obviously *placed* in the command of God that is issued to me, whatever it may be’.<sup>175</sup>

Individuality, as described above in the five aspects of created life, is the most salient thing about the foundation of Barth’s ethics. Theological ethics begins with the individual who is required, by the command, to affirm life whilst realising that it is only relative, and that death should not be brought on or hastened. There is a created will to live. Although, Barth points out, life under the command of God may have to be sacrificed, but even so death would continue to be an affirmation of life.<sup>176</sup> He says, Jesus chose this possibility when he went up to Jerusalem in opposition to the wish of his disciples who said, “this will never happen to you”<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 123.

<sup>176</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 126.

<sup>177</sup> Matt 16. 22

We have previously heard that Barth thinks that theological ethics under the command of God the creator must consider suicide differently to most other ethics. Here he expands on his position by saying that both the created will to live and the possibility of the sacrifice of life, under the command makes the judgement of suicide radically different to that of most ethics. In relation to the possibility of suicide, the church has to consider the divine command. Its task is two-fold, whilst not propagating the doctrine that suicide is reprehensible and forbidden, it must also not advance the opposing doctrine, that of permitting suicide.<sup>178</sup> His discussion of suicide is typical of his method. He examines both extremes of behaviour and rejects them with the important qualification that the command of God is the source and judgement of theological ethics. He asks, how can others judge if an act suicide is under the command of God?

It is precisely when we stand by the position that we should not judge people and actions but consider the command of God that, in the face of the possibility of suicide, we cannot see too clearly that even a voluntary death, if it is to be right, must not rest on permission – for what does permission mean if we ourselves have to decide? – but must be done in conformity with the command.<sup>179</sup>

Barth has argued that God creates life and gives it as an individual specific gift. He says God loans the attributes of life with constancy over space and time. He now describes the conditions under which life is lived; the necessities of metabolism and sexuality. Created life is characterised by hunger, love and tiredness, and the will for their satisfaction. He says theological ethics has no guidance to offer the exercise of the created will:

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<sup>178</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 127.

<sup>179</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 127.

We need not answer the question in what circumstances it is good to will and act in accordance with these conditions, to care for the satisfaction of the needs of hunger, sex and sleep. God's command<sup>d</sup> tells us when and how and how far this is good, and no ethics must interrupt at this point'<sup>180</sup>

Again, his methodology is similar to that which he used in the discussion on suicide. He offers two extremes, rejects them and chooses a middle path with the qualification that God's command is the judge of good conduct. He chooses Lucullus the glutton and Don Juan the seducer at the extreme of over satisfying needs, and the Indian hunger-virtuoso and the celibate monk as example of the under satisfaction of primitive needs. He suggests again a middle path of 'sensible' consumption and again says we cannot judge, saying:

But if ethics is to keep the point, then even in the face of the most striking impossibilities it must keep on putting the questions, or rather showing they are already put. It should not hand out good or bad testimonies. It should not judge. Knowing the radical antithesis of good and bad, it should point to the command of God which alone can really and properly judge, and which will tell each of us what is good and bad.<sup>181</sup>

The command of life enters into our actions in relation to the created needs of life.

There is a requirement to maintain good health by considering the possibility of particular diets, sporting activity or the need for a physician, and to take all necessary action to avoid sickness is a requirement of the command of life. He reminded his audience that:

Jesus constantly thought it necessary to set up against sickness the sign of the immanent kingdom of God in the form of his miracles of healing.<sup>182</sup>

Again, as with previous discussions, theological ethics cannot become prescriptive or offer universal solutions but only raise questions in obedient response to the command

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<sup>180</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 128.

<sup>181</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 129.



of life. He says, God commands the affirmation of life not only by the creation but also by the hope of the resurrection. Nevertheless, concerns about our health are not to become benevolent demons to which we bring worship and belief and serve with a concentration and enthusiasm which make it seem dubious whether it really is a matter of the health of the real man. By the phrase “the real man”, he means that the body is not our totality. God creates us with a body and a mind. Therefore, we need to be aware of the requirement to nourish our minds keeping them healthy and free from disease. He says health is unequivocally present when the life that is not our own is at the disposal of its creator. Therefore, either the extreme position of resignation in the face of sickness or the will to be healthy at all costs are equally impossible in relation to the command; we are to seek a middle way.

It is the task of theological ethics to describe the reality of created life in all its fullness, remembering that the created will to live contains the affirmation of pleasure. As created life we want to be happy but this is problematic, because there is good pleasure and bad pleasure. We are unable to draw the line between them, but theological ethics points out we have a warning when the will to enjoy life collides with the affirmation of its primitive needs or the will to be healthy.<sup>183</sup> However, he says, the will to live in this form finds its criteria within itself, because real life belongs to God and our joy in life is according to his good pleasure and not ours.<sup>184</sup>

Lack of character, lack of the courage to confess oneself, the sloth of making less of oneself than one should, the torment of making oneself other than one is—all these are threatened by the question whether there is any will to take seriously the life that one has been loaned.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 130.

<sup>183</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 131.

<sup>184</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 133.

<sup>185</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 133.

Barth has been discussing the meaning of the command of God the Creator for the individually created life but, of course, this life is lived in relationships. How is the individual life understood within the command of God the creator, as a life affirmed in the determinations of other created life around it? How are we to exercise our needs in relationship to others? The asserting of our will to live in relationships is the will for power,<sup>186</sup> and the will has its roots in eighteenth century German expressionism, Herder's '*Kräfte*'.<sup>187</sup>

The simple affirmation of life expresses the will for power and the will to satisfy natural needs originating in the command for life. They are health, happiness and individuality. The will to be healthy, the will to be happy, and the will to be individual all mean that I also have the will for power. The will to power is required to achieve what is necessary in all these matters, and demands lordship over the possibilities that arise in all three areas.

In discussing the will to power Barth is conducting a dialogue with Nietzsche, of whom he says:

He hated the morality of Christianity as a slave morality because in it he seemed to recognise the epitome of the impotence or indolence of the far too many – something he had first hated in the by no means Christian morality of the German cultural philistine of the seventies.<sup>188</sup>

Whilst he accepts Nietzsche's criticism of Germany he warns against Nietzsche's approval of the French spirit for he believes that no society is exempt from the desire for absolute power. The will for absolute power is always manifesting itself in

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<sup>186</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 134.

<sup>187</sup> Taylor *Hegel*, pp. 13-5.

<sup>188</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 135.



society, and he gives the example of the rise of Roman imperialism with its reincarnation in certain popes. It is interesting to wonder if he was aware of the rise of imperialism in the Roman Catholic Church of his time in the relationship forged between the papal nuncio, Eugenio Pacelli, and Adolf Hitler

Klaus Scholder, whose work is considered the definitive history of the relationship between the Third Reich and the German Churches, says Pope Benedict XV's action in May 1917 in sending Eugenio Pacelli, their most gifted young diplomat, expressed the Curia's special relationship with German Catholics:

At the time, however, no one could have had any inkling what importance this decision was to have. In fact, first as Nuncio in Munich and Berlin, then as Cardinal and Secretary of State in Rome, and finally as Pope Pius XII, Pacelli became increasingly the key figure of the German church.<sup>189</sup>

The agreements reached between Pacelli and Hitler were imperialistic and in direct opposition to the will of the German bishops, clergy and laity. During this period as we have seen, Barth was in discussion with a group of leading Roman Catholics laity in Münster, and also is recorded as having had a private two-hour discussion with the Roman Catholic theologian, Przywara in February 1929. Evidence is now available of the extent and the effect of imperialism in the Roman Catholic Church in its relationship with the Third Reich. Cornwall in his recent biography of Pope Pius XII, says:

The acquiescence of the German people in the face of Nazism cannot be understood in its entirety without taking into account the long path, beginning as early as 1920, to the Reich Concordat of 1933, Pacelli's crucial role in it, and Hitler's reasons for signing it. The negotiations were conducted exclusively by Pacelli on behalf of the Pope over the heads of the faithful, the clergy, and the German bishops. When Hitler became Pacelli's partner in

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<sup>189</sup> Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich*, Volume One, p. 13.



negotiations, the concordat thus became the supreme act of two authoritarians, while the supposed beneficiaries were correspondingly weakened, undermined, and neutralized.<sup>190</sup>

It is reasonable to assume that Barth, through his contacts with German Roman Catholics, *did* know about the problem of imperialism in his own time, and may not have been referring only to the past in his reference to the imperialism of certain popes. Barth also cites as the will to power, the cases of Mussolini, and the desire for absolute power, leading to the destruction of life, which drove the technological achievements of the First World War. He also reminds his audience of the power of money at both an individual and a national level.<sup>191</sup>

Theological ethics has to remind its listeners that only God has absolute power and that all human power is relative. The true life of the creature shows in weakness. Whether individual power demonstrates strength or weakness is, Barth reminds his listeners due to God's good pleasure the real power of our lives is not bound up with our victory or triumph.<sup>192</sup> The criterion of a true will to power is whether an individual or nation can live with the breaking of its will. The will for absolute power may be broken without causing a disaster for life, the lion is just as well able to be a lamb. This is the possibility of the power of Jesus Christ.<sup>193</sup>

Barth's ethics discuss the actions of the individual, not of groups or nations. The individual's response to the Word of God is the foundation of his ethics, and baptism is the first ethical act. It is difficult to see how these individual descriptions apply to nations. Does God speak his Word to nations? Who receives and witnesses to it?

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<sup>190</sup> John Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII*, (Harmondsworth: Viking: 1999) p. 84.

<sup>191</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 136.

<sup>192</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 137.

Presumably, the church receives the Word and witnesses to the nation. He does not work out the details of the relationship between church and state and, without this discussion; the next stage of his argument is weak.

In a development of Hegel's master and slave argument, he says that the criterion of the will to power applies to individual relationships. Now he argues it also applies to relationships between nations. However, is it possible to move from an individual ethic to a social philosophy, which describes the actions and relationships of nations? He does not answer these questions in the lectures but discusses the relationship later in three essays, which receive close attention in Chapter 6.

There is however a further important condition to his argument about the relationship between individual and social ethics, which is that the command of God the creator is part of the threefold command of God the creator, God the reconciler and God the redeemer. Consequently, he argues that the created will to power, as the command of God the creator, is a penultimate word, not the final word. Therefore, he rejects naturalistic ethics, which claims life as the criteria, as exemplified in Albert Schweitzer's work. He says of Schweitzer:

His concept of reverence or respect for life expresses very beautifully and carefully what is at issue here. It is not a question of our relation to our fellows or neighbours as such. Our fellows become an ethical problem through the command of God the Reconciler, and this problem cannot simply be subsumed under the concept of the life of others.<sup>194</sup>

Barth says life is not an overarching concept that demands reverence for the other.

The common relationship creatures have with God their creator evokes respect for

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<sup>193</sup> Rev.5. 5f.

<sup>194</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 140.

life, and not a reverence for life itself. Therefore Barth views all forms of life with respect, 'awe', 'piety' and 'sympathy', because the divine command of God can mean life or death at any time. This is true not only for us but also for the *other*. Life is a gift from God that is on loan to us and is not possessed as our life. Life is not a primary principle of ethics because it is not ours.

He argues that our responsibility is to recognise that what we do or fail to do can mean the life or death of the other. Our acts thus represent God's action towards creation. We have solidarity with all creatures because we realise they are in the same relation to the Creator as we are, not because of a primary principle of life:

To act in that awe in face of the threatened nature of all creaturely life, and in that responsibility for what our own inaction or action means for it is to act with respect for life.<sup>195</sup>

He says theological ethics must ask the question, has the command been heard when the slaughterhouse and vivisection, the chase, and the pitiless locking up of all kinds of forest animals and birds behind the bars of zoological gardens, present *no* questions.<sup>196</sup> He asks do we have a commission from God to do these things to creation. He again warns against taking extreme positions of either extreme sentimentality or extreme brutality. He wants to point out that respect for the life of other creatures does not begin in discussions about human relationships but with hearing the claim when it addresses us in the silence of "the groaning of creation."<sup>197</sup>

On the other hand, Barth recognises that the problem of plant and animal life can only have propaedeutic significance in relation to the problem of human life. Life is lived

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<sup>195</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 140.

<sup>196</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 141.



in relationship with the *other*. Theological ethics must raise questions about this relationship. However, these questions must arise from the context of Barth's views about the gift of life and the mutuality of the relationship all creatures have with God their creator. The question of the command of God the creator is the question of human beings living together. 'Mutual responsibility of the promotion and restriction of life, which in fact we constantly cause one another'.<sup>198</sup>

It has to be remembered that there is also much more to be considered about humanity under the command of God the reconciler and God the redeemer. Barth's theological ethics do not follow a linear path. He considers each of the threefold relationships of God as God the creator, God the redeemer and God the reconciler in turn. His geometrical illustration describes each relationship as a circle with its centre within the circumference of the other two circles. Theological ethics needs, in addition to considering of the command of God the creator, to recognise the commands of God the redeemer and of God the reconciler. It is not the responsibility of men and women to redeem the world or to judge it.

Under the command of God the creator, Barth discusses the questions of killing in self-defence, capital punishment and war. It is interesting that within the Command of God the Creator Barth begins his consideration of these questions of the absolute will to power not with scripture but with the "plank" argument. The point is worth emphasising, because of the accusation made against him in an earlier section of this thesis of using the Bible as a form of natural theology.

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<sup>197</sup> Rom.8. 22

<sup>198</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 143.

He discusses the will to power of two people, stranded on a plank in the middle of the ocean, as the foundation of a discussion about killing. The plank will only support one person; neither will drown voluntarily to save the other. He says the person who wants to kill me, and against whom I am defending myself, is already fundamentally in the position of defending himself against *me*.<sup>199</sup> This is how Barth understands the situation on the plank, albeit transposed to the use of pistols:

Since my defence was successful, he not I, had to die, and I murdered the murderer before he murdered me, the problem in the situation has been complicated, for in fact – I do not know unconditionally whether he would have gone to extremes, for I took from him the chance to decide – in fact, then, *I* am the one who first and alone willed and did the decisive thing, the killing of another – he was not yet my murderer when I killed him – and it is I who must see to it how *I* can justify myself for shooting and by what commission I did it notwithstanding the awe and responsibility that were commanded of me in relation to his life.<sup>200</sup>

Discussions about killing in self-defence must face the problem of assuming the role of the judge, because of this problem; there can be no general permission to kill in self-defence in spite of the naïve view that it is self-evident. He also discusses duelling and tyrannicide as examples of the “plank” problem and of the latter gives a current example. With the “plank” example, Barth creates the basis, which enables him to take up the question of capital punishment. He approaches the question as a problem for the individual saying, ‘If I simply ask in general about the possibility of capital punishment instead of asking very concretely whether I myself would be prepared to carry it out, my question is not to the point’.<sup>201</sup> After discussing theories of retributive justice, which he dismisses, he returns at the end of his argument to the question of individual responsibility in the context of the command of God the creator. The test of the Christian supporter of capital punishment is for the individual

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<sup>199</sup> Barth, *Ethics* p. 146.



to be able to do what the state demands at the peril of his own soul's peace and salvation. He says, 'Justice will then be done to respect for life whether the death penalty be abolished or upheld, and that alone is the final issue in ethical reflection on this matter'.<sup>202</sup>

Again Barth's social ethics, within the command of God the Creator, are based entirely on individual responsibility. His approach to the discussion of war and conscientious objection remains consistent; if we want to accept the possibility of war then we must accept that it stands close to the position of executioner.<sup>203</sup> The aim of war is killing, and arguments about fighting for the king, laying down one's life for friends, the *volk*, or the *f hrerprinzip* all avoid the moral issue. They seek the ethical subject in a hypostasis which represents and magnifies the individual. The "plank" argument continues to apply. There is the distinction however to be made between capital punishment and war, in the latter the affair is not the individual's in a general sense, but as a member of a group. However, Barth continues to apply the individual argument by saying, 'War is my people's emergency and therefore it is my emergency too'. Of conscientious objection he says:

Ethics can as little condemn conscientious objection to military service as it can to any other possibility of human action, but it has to remind the objector that he cannot possibly have clean hands in relation to the coming war of his country if he thinks he does not share the responsibility of his country because he does not bear arms.<sup>204</sup>

As with the argument about killing in self-defence the question is about the created will to power, but in this case of a people:

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<sup>200</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 147.

<sup>201</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 151.

<sup>202</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 154.



We will because we need and we need because we will: we will coal and potash, iron and petroleum, market outlets, commercial treaties, transportation routes, colonies, and as security in a future war, frontiers which form natural defence lines, and, finally, as the crown and sum of all else, we will and need prestige, world status, respect for our colours as the presupposition of future and wider actualisation of the will for power. --- To realize soberly and realistically the actualisation of the will to power is what politics and especially war is all about, is the first concrete task of ethical reflection on war. That does not mean war is ethically condemned but that it is seen in its true reality.<sup>205</sup>

Barth draws attention to the true cost of those that take part in war in contrast to those who remain at home, ‘the idealists, romantics and the professors of theology who were along way away from the shooting that had to be directed at other men’.<sup>206</sup> His ethical argument about war is the same as his argument about killing in self-defence: it is the plank argument. Again we hear that theological ethics cannot forbid or promote war but must point to the command and say, that in peace and war we humans are measured by this command. Our lives are a gift, our attributes are a loan and our judgements are not the final word, in killing in self-defence, we are murderers.

He discusses other forms of taking of human life, abortion and euthanasia, in a similar way. All these discussions about the taking of human life are examples of a general point; they fall within the common concept of competition. This idea implies a contest between the will to live of one person and the will to live of another person. The living of life is a game, a serious game. The “plank” argument again applies. ‘If I beat a rival in this contest, he is not just beaten comparatively but struck in his very will to

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<sup>203</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 154.

<sup>204</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 158.

<sup>205</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 159.

<sup>206</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 160. This is a reference to Barth’s teachers, Wilhelm Herrmann and other professors of theology who gave their public support to the Kaiser’s war policy.

live, in his being, his will, his ability'.<sup>207</sup> Our struggle for being does not begin with events, but events show the true state in which human life together exists. Therefore, life is lived as appropriation.<sup>208</sup> 'I live as I grasp after this or that which I need to satisfy my needs or to give me pleasure or simply to test and prove my strength, or which I want to lay by, perhaps, as a reserve for future use'.<sup>209</sup> The will to live is not oriented to need as in capitalism and imperialism, but takes the form of appropriation, and a natural limit cannot be set for this form of appropriation. Action becomes competition. 'As I live for myself, I necessarily live against others'.<sup>210</sup> The subject of competitiveness is too large for a thorough treatment within the time Barth has available in the lectures. He therefore, gives six general points as indicators to the form of theological ethics, which are quoted in full:

A first point is that the question is put no less sharply when I *do not consider* that my seeking, taking, and appropriating in accordance with the will to live implies fighting, upsetting, and robbing others than when I expressly find for it some explanation and motivation.

Assuming that we are acting with less naïve vitality, that we now *know* more or less clearly what we are doing, we must still be on guard against a whole series of mystifications, obscurations, and exculpations by which we constantly try to escape responsibility for the militant character of the actualisation of our will to live.<sup>211</sup>

Responsibility will also be no less if my competing is not perhaps an expression of my individual egoism but a *collective* egoism. (Relationship between the individual and the state.)

Another mystification is to try to evade responsibility for the militant character of our actions by appealing to *good intentions* in performing them. The end does not sanctify the means.

We have also to realize that the responsibility for our part in the struggle for existence is not lessened by the fact that as a rule it probably takes place in

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<sup>207</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 162.

<sup>208</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 163.

<sup>209</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 163.

<sup>210</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 163.

<sup>211</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 164.



certain generally recognised forms of tradition, custom and law. (Property) (Privilege)(Equal pay) a morality that has practical success, as its reward could finally be one which also makes this reward its goal.

We have to point out finally that there also seems to be in life a series of possibilities that have nothing to do with the struggle for existence, so that the question of the command of the respect for the life of others does not apply to them. (Technology, scholarship, church, literature, art and sport) Is love exempt from the problems of competition? 1 Corinthians 13 eschatological concept.<sup>212</sup>

He moves on to discuss how these commands are carried out in the life of the individual Christian, using the concept of calling, which he develops into individual vocations. We each have a vocation into which we are called. Our vocation is a claim upon us. We cannot judge if another has fulfilled their vocation, nor can we know if we have fulfilled our own. The possibility of following one's vocation is given in God's grace and cannot be appropriated. Prayer is the appropriate response to the gift of one's particular calling. Discrimination and discernment take place in prayer and are guided by the general pointers that Barth has given. Extreme position must be taken only after certain knowledge that this is God's will. All acts are taken in full awareness that life is a gift, as are possessions, and that in our acts we become ourselves. On this point Barth is strangely near the Catholic position, which Aquinas takes from Aristotle, that our habits make us, and which Dante so vividly portrays in *The Divine Comedy*. Yet, there are important differences because Barth is saying more. He means that our very being only becomes so in our acts, and does not exist without action. He also believes that the gift of our vocation is not a given, but is constantly renewed and, of course, is open to change under God's free decision. The gift must be prayed for and received with grateful thanks. Again, Barth unfolds what must be the case if God has chosen to reveal himself in Jesus Christ. There is no

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<sup>212</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 163.



possibility of an inherent quality through which individuals express themselves.

Charles Taylor in his outstanding work on Hegel traces the roots of this form of individuality to Herder, Taylor says:

The Herderian idea that my humanity is something unique, not equivalent to yours, and this unique quality can only be revealed in my life itself, 'Each man has his own measure, as it were an accord peculiar to him of all his feelings to each other'. The idea is not just that men are different; this was hardly new; it was rather that the differences take on a moral import; so that the question could arise for the first time whether a given life was an authentic expression of certain individuals or people.<sup>213</sup>

Barth has taken this idea from the reformed tradition and given it a theological basis in the command of the gift of life of God the creator. His understanding of the individual's relationship with God is the basis of his ethics. Barth's theological ethics are not discovered and worked out primarily as a member of society, but through the individual life of prayer as it takes place within the church. We should understand ourselves as those who seek to be self-enclosed, and whose seriousness and supposed scrupulosity would drop away, if only we would keep to the promise and let ourselves be told that we are the children of God.<sup>214</sup> As children, we should do what is appropriate and play and all seriousness should fall away:

The rigidity of our obedience which is no true obedience, the strictness anxiety with which we observe, watch, and harass ourselves and others, sincerely supposing it to be for the best, the hardness of thought, speech and will which now usually characterize what are thought to be the best of people, the far too self-conscious and self-assertive of those who want to be Christians in earnest – all this, if it would not become nothing and certainly would not change into its opposite, would at least become inwardly different, because good Christians would be what they are voluntarily and joyfully, and their obedience, attitude, work, relation to others, and whole responsibility to God would be like children's play. Need I say that repentance before God and service to ones neighbour are possible only on this basis, in the light of the eschatological reality of our existence? Without this light we always take

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<sup>213</sup> Taylor, *Hegel*, p. 17.

<sup>214</sup> Barth, *Ethics* p. 505-6.

ourselves much too seriously to be able to ready to seek forgiveness of our sins from God and to forgive others their sins from our hearts. To be obedient and not just to seem to be so obviously have to be engaged in that change, in putting off the old man and putting on the new [cf. Eph. 4:22-24]. But what does this mean except that we ought to do we now want to do? What can it mean except that we play instead of trying to work with the seriousness which is appropriate only in face of that strange and hostile command? How can we obey if we will not learn that before God we can only play?<sup>215</sup>

Here Barth is using play, an important term in German expressionism, theologically.

Schiller says that:

Man only plays when he is human in the fullest sense of the word, and he is only fully human when he plays.<sup>216</sup>

Having discussed the contents of the Münster *Ethics*, the influences on Barth at the time and the background against which he was working, we move on in the next chapter to consider the accusation, frequently made, that his ethics are so dominated by the command of God that there is no room for the work and action of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>215</sup> Barth, *Ethics* p. 505-6.

<sup>216</sup> Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* 'der Mensch spielt nur, wo er in voller Bedeutung der Wortes Mensch ist, und er ist nur da ganz Mensch, wo er spielt', (15<sup>th</sup> letter, para 9)

## Chapter 4 The Christian Life

This chapter investigates the role, function and purpose of the Holy Spirit in Barth's theological ethics. He gave a lecture on the subject in 1929, a significant date, because he delivered it between the lectures on ethics given in Münster in 1928/29 and those given in Bonn in 1930/31. The occasion was a "theological week," for pastors, and students to catch-up on new developments in theology. The programme for the week included a lecture by Barth's brother on "The Concept of the 'Spirit' in German Idealism."

It would have been a reasonable expectation at the time to expect the brothers to mount an attack on German idealism. Indeed, Heinrich Barth's lecture called for a return to a proper foundation to philosophy and to the work of Kant. Karl Barth's lecture, given the following day, contained a radically different approach, not a return to Kant, saying nothing of that of which we cannot speak, but directly facing and confronting the problems of Christian theology which Kant and Hegel raised. His claim being we can, and must, speak of that which we hear revealed.

All references in this chapter are to Birch Hoyle's translation of the lectures with the English title *The Holy Ghost and the Christian Life*.<sup>1</sup> A new edition with minor amendments and with a foreword by the editor Robin W. Lovin, appeared in 1993.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *The Holy Ghost and the Christian Life*. trans by R.Birch Hoyle, (London: Fredrick Muller 1938)



Barth delivered the lecture at Elberfeld in Germany on October 9<sup>th</sup> 1929. I repeat the timing of the lecture is significant. He gave it at the end of a long summer holiday of study and rest during which he had made the important decision to move from Münster to Bonn, where he would remain from early 1930 until he was expelled from Germany, by the Nazis, after their rise to power. This lecture is the summary of his mature thought and all the concepts, themes and central ideas, which were to be used in *Church Dogmatics*, are in place. It is, therefore, important for the study of Barth's thinking about the relationship between the Doctrine of the Trinity and Christian ethics.

The lecture answers two criticisms made against Barth's work: the first is that he had no place for the Holy Spirit in his theology; the second is that he had Catholic leanings. He carries his argument forward on two fronts: firstly, he refutes the liberal Protestant theologies of his time of immanence; and secondly, he argues that the *analogia entis*, the foundation of natural theology's knowledge of God, is fundamentally wrong.

He conducts a critical debate with Augustine's theology, whose sanctification by works, he says, secretly introduced into Protestant theology the 'sweet poison of grace.' By this he means Augustine's introduction of justification by works in his prayer that his will to will be strengthened so that he might grow in holiness.<sup>3</sup> Barth bases his position on the theologies of the Reformers: Luther and Calvin.

The lecture is in three sections, which are:

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Barth, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life: The Theological Basis of Ethics*, trans. by R. Birch Hoyle, with a 'Forward' by Robin W. Lovin, (Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1993)

<sup>3</sup> See also Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 38.

1. The Holy Spirit as Creator.
2. The Holy Spirit as Reconciler.
3. The Holy Spirit as Redeemer.

The translator Birch Hoyle, in the 1938 edition, further sub-divides each section, which Lovin maintains in the 1993 edition. These divisions are not in the original lecture document.

Barth's structuring is critically important, because it reflects the content of the lecture.

The structure, and its content, is in a dynamic relationship, as the method expresses the truth of the content. There are three sections to the discourse, because the Holy Spirit reveals itself in threefold form as the Holy Spirit as Creator, the Holy Spirit as Reconciler and the Holy Spirit as Redeemer. However, the whole text expresses the meaning, to which each section contributes and reflects. Further, it needs pointing out, that the form and content express a second dynamic relationship as the text contains a further tripartite layering which reflects the Trinity, and the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity.

God reveals Himself in the actions of the Holy Spirit and when Barth is discussing these actions we are to understand that he is also thinking about the Holy Spirit's unity within the Trinity, whose actions are as one.

Barth's writing endeavours to express the revealing and unfolding of this central idea: the dynamic internal relationships of the tripartite structure give the form of the text, which in turn expresses the Trinitarian content. The lecture is in the Hegelian tradition

of combining form and content dialectically that continues in the writings of Gadamer and Habermas.

He begins with his central idea: a definition of the Holy Spirit<sup>4</sup>:

The Holy Ghost is the God the Lord in the fullness of Deity, in the total sovereignty and condescension, in the complete hiddenness and revealedness, of God.<sup>5</sup>

Section 1 is a discussion of the separateness and the distinctness between the *creator* Spirit and the *created* Spirit within the concept of the Holy Spirit as creator. He rejects all positions that follow in the tradition of German idealism particularly Hegelian thought in which the Holy Spirit takes form in human reason.

He supports Augustine's argument against Pelagian and semi-Pelagian ideas.

Augustine, who was aware that the Holy Spirit is not identical with the created life of the spirit or soul, says:

You are not the mind (spirit) itself. For you are the Lord God of the mind.<sup>6</sup>

To boast of the soul as *summum bonum* ("highest good") he calls "a carnal seeking after the soul (*animam*) and a carnal flight from the flesh."<sup>7</sup>

However, Augustine believes there is an image of God which is: 'Primarily *in* the soul, but forgotten, and can be called to memory with the help of grace.' Therefore, the process of discerning happiness is the seeking of this forgotten image. When recovered it is the good that teleologically defines all good human action. Augustine says:

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<sup>4</sup> Through out this chapter Holy Spirit replaces Barth's Holy Ghost.

<sup>5</sup> Barth, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life. The Theological Basis of Ethics*, p. 3.



How then am I to seek you, Lord? When I seek for you, my God, my God, my quest is for the happy life.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, he says, that everyone desires the happy life:

That would not be the case unless the thing itself, to which this term refers, was being held in the memory.<sup>9</sup>

Augustine believes that knowledge of God is a universal inborn trait available to us before revelation. He says God is *in* the soul, which is its proper origin, but is now forgotten. He thought, therefore, that we could both know and do the good because memory contains knowledge of right actions. Memory is not immediately accessible to us and growth in our knowledge of God is a long ascent, which happens by the strengthening of our will to want-to-want God. Therefore, sanctification is by human works which Barth describes as, “The sweet poison of Augustinian grace” that has entered Protestant theology. He says: ‘The great opponent of Pelagianism did not realise that righteousness by works as such was contained in this idea of God.’

Opposition to Augustine’s views, on this point, is fundamental to Barth’s entire theology, as he is clear that there is no knowledge of God before revelation. He also believes that there is a radical discontinuity between the creator and the created revelation. There is a gap in knowledge, which we cannot bridge from our side. We can have no knowledge before it is given. God’s revelation is something really and utterly new. No innate awareness of beauty on man’s part has ever enabled him objectively to see the good. It is only God’s revelation that creates the continuity between his uncreated spirit and his created spirit.

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<sup>6</sup> Augustine: *Confessions* X.xxv (36) p. 201.

<sup>7</sup> Augustine: “It thinks this by human vanity not by divine truth” *De civit. Dei*, xiv. 5.

In opposition to Augustine's position, he says that the continuity between God and His relation to the creature is the true *analogia entis*. This relationship he calls the *analogia fidei*. He says human life does not have an original endowment in its make-up but only as a second marvel of God's love, as the inconceivable, undeserved divine bestowed on his creature. 'For a Christian life exists wholly in practicing and experiencing the thing which one hears and reads from God's Word daily'<sup>10</sup> In addition, he says, this is not a fact of revelation which we have once made our own. It does not become part of us but we must understand it as a process, revelation is not a fulfilment but a promise because we are in the between times created, reconciled, promised but not redeemed.

If we do not find the good in the Augustinian theology of *analogia entis*, but in God's gift of revelation what then is the Christian Life? Answering this question Barth, building his comments on quotations from Luther, says of the Christian life:

It runs thus: then, and just then, when God wills to be and is gracious to man and makes His grace manifest to him. Therefore then, and just then, when God speaks His Word to him, when Christ, as the crucified and Risen One, is present there for him, indeed on his behalf.<sup>11</sup>

He says there is no *analogia entis*, no pre-existing image of the good, nor anything in our human qualities that could equip us for this revelation. For, he says, it does not enter into consideration that we somehow open, prepare and equip ourselves for

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<sup>8</sup> Augustine *Confessions* p. 195.

<sup>9</sup> Augustine *Confessions* p. 197.

<sup>10</sup> Barth, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life: The Theological Basis of Ethics* p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther, *Sermon on Rom. viii. 18f.* Erl. Ed., ix. 95.

taking part in this event at all.<sup>12</sup> It is the creating action of the Holy Spirit which takes us into participation within the divine life. He says:

The fundamental significance of the Holy Ghost for the Christian life is, that this, our participation in the occurrence which is in effect the *Divine* action.<sup>13</sup>

So that the, 'Christian life is now also the *created life*.'<sup>14</sup>

Human knowledge of God is not one of our qualities, and, therefore, it is God who makes us ready for God. This act is the creating action of the Holy Spirit in which God makes the individual human creature fit for God. He says, God creates us out of nothing, and although we know our immediate circumstances we are unable to understand our own existence. We do not know if our practical effort is in accordance with the truth or whether it is good. This, says Barth, has nothing to do with sin. This state of affairs is "given", 'Living as God's creature I do not know what is good, especially "good" as God views it.'<sup>15</sup>

Barth criticises all appeals to inner mystical states that claim to be foundational knowledge of God. Equally, he rejects all demands that use the Bible as the foundation for ethical action. He says both ideas presume continuity between the spirit of the creature and the creator, while on the other hand, theological ethics is the process of becoming through divine speech. He says, we do not know directly what God's command is and therefore no appeal should be made to either the truths of nature, or the truths of the Bible.

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<sup>12</sup> Barth, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life*, p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> Barth, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life*, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> Barth, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life*, p. 20.

<sup>15</sup> Barth, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life*, p. 22.



He insists that the foundations of theological ethics are God's work, and that they are part of the creative work of the Holy Spirit, he says:

Hearing the Word of God the creator, which makes human life to become Christian life, is not man's work, but God's: the Holy Ghost's work. Just as our spirit cannot produce the Word of God, so too, it cannot receive it...it is incapable, unassisted, of hearing God's Word.<sup>16</sup>

Augustine believes the fall created a great chasm or division within every created being. Hence he describes humans as having two wills. As has already been discussed he said the process of sanctification is the creation of the will to want to will the good. The external world also expresses this divided state, as there are two cities in the spiritual church, the City of God and, in the secular world, the city of Rome. He says, both are God's creation and He uses both for His purposes and both should profit from secular philosophy, which, in its own way, is a kind of revelation.<sup>17</sup>

Barth, on the other hand, believes that the great chasm, or division, is not within the creature but between creator and created, which the creator heals in the direction of the created, for Barth this process is nothing to do with the fall, or sin, but is simply given.

How then does Barth know the form and content of the Christian life? This question is not a question for him but a miracle, for he says:

A sheer miracle must happen to him, a second miracle in addition to the miracle of his own existence, if his life shall be a true Christian life, which is a life within the hearing of God's Word. The miracle is the office of the Holy Ghost.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Barth, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life: the Theological Basis of Ethics* pp.24-5.

<sup>17</sup> St Augustine, *City of God*, p. ix.

<sup>18</sup> St Augustine, *City of God*, pp. 26-7.

This miracle occurs as we pray, for we only hear as we pray. Yet of course we only pray when we have heard. This is the second miracle of our creation and is the work of the Holy Spirit, which is God's work.

In the second section of the lecture, Barth discusses holiness and the work of the Holy Spirit in overcoming our resistance; he argues that the Creator and Created Spirit are always in conflict. The holiness of the Holy Spirit is not in '*difference*', but in '*opposition*' to the radical perversion and sin of the created spirit. The holiness of the Holy Spirit is seen in humanity's ability to oppose the 'grace of God, the Word and of his Creation.' This, Barth says, is the 'Mystery of iniquity'. This is the real sin, '*we who do evil. We do not allow the work of the Word and the Spirit to befall us.*'<sup>19</sup>

The boundary between Creator and Created fixed by creation is a 'frontier between Him who deals with us in truth and righteousness as our King, and ourselves who are like rebels within His realm.'<sup>20</sup> Barth wants us to understand the enormity of the task. The Holy Spirit is not some sort of spirit, like the spirit of the true, the good, the beautiful, but for the first time is to be seen as the incomprehensible Holy Spirit who is struggling with humanity's hostility in this battle and victory of grace.

At this point Barth again takes up his critical dialogue with Augustinian thought, 'the secret poison of grace.' The final content of Augustine's doctrine is that the effect of sinful man's fellowship with God is conditional upon the power of God's grace to bring about a gradually increasing transformation of the sinner into non-sinner.

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<sup>19</sup> Barth, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life*, p. 28.

<sup>20</sup> Barth, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life*, p. 28.

In the Augustinian doctrine of holiness the sinner has the continuous tranquil assurance of knowing beforehand about holiness, and the source and substance of their own truth and goodness. 'This is the fundamental error of the Augustinian, the Catholic and all catholicising doctrine that say justification means sanctification'.<sup>21</sup>

Barth says that it is only in the actions of the Holy Spirit, which is the spirit of holiness, that we see holiness. The following two quotations from Augustine's *Confessions* enable us to see more clearly the distinction Barth is making between his position and Augustine's when he claims that Augustine has introduced the "sweet poison of grace" into Western Protestant theology:

I will therefore rise above that natural capacity in a step-by-step ascent to him who made me. I come to the fields and vast palaces of memory where are the treasure of innumerable images of all kinds of objects brought in by sense - perception.<sup>22</sup>

Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you. And see, you were within and I was in the external world and sort you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things, which you made.<sup>23</sup>

Barth says, that in his doctrine of Grace, which despite the efforts of the Reformers has crept into Protestant theology, Augustine believed that sin was a wound that could be cured, whereas Barth wants us to understand that sin is not a sickness, not a wound to be cured, but death. The only possible answer is resurrection, and unlike a cure, we cannot achieve our own resurrection.<sup>24</sup>

Here we see Barth battling on two fronts: the first is his disagreement with Augustine's theology of Grace, and the second is his disagreement with liberal

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<sup>21</sup> Barth, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life*, p. 33.

<sup>22</sup> Augustine *Confessions* X. viii (12) p. 185.

<sup>23</sup> Augustine *Confessions* X. xxvii (38) p. 201.

<sup>24</sup> Barth, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life*. p. 33.



Protestant theology. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's phrase, 'cheap grace', aptly describes the latter.<sup>25</sup> Barth points to the foundations of the Reformers' arguments saying, that they named the righteousness that is imputed to us as, 'alien, external righteousness', and by that phrase they meant, with emphasis and without qualification, a righteousness or justification that comes to us from without. He quotes Luther and Calvin to establish his point, firstly Luther, "We do not need to send a messenger to Him: on the contrary, He has come to us and come in person."<sup>26</sup> Secondly Calvin "God cares for it in such a way that there is nothing from our side"<sup>27</sup> 'Put briefly their understanding of what alone constitutes Christian life in the Holy Ghost was their affirmation, *that man becomes justified for Christ's sake only through faith.*'<sup>28</sup>

Barth wants us to understand that his view is firmly established and grounded in the authority of the foundations of the Reformers' thought. He is calling the church back to a true understanding of the Christian life. As this understanding unfolds in his lecture we see how far the church has moved from the Reformers' teaching, and in consequence, the degree to which Barth's view of the Christian life appears so radical.

The office of the Holy Ghost must be pre-eminently, a *reproving, convicting* office, not although but, indeed, because He is the Spirit of God the Reconciler.<sup>29</sup> He wants again to draw our attention to Luther to show how the foundations were in place and how far the church has deviated from Luther's teaching. To establish his authority, and strengthen his argument, he quotes Luther:

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<sup>25</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 35.

<sup>26</sup> Luther, Sermon on Lk. I. 26 f.: in Erlangen Edition, II. 2, quoted by Barth in *The Holy Ghost and the Christian Life*, p. 40.

<sup>27</sup> Luther, Sermon on Gen. xv. 6 : in the Latin of the *Corpus Reformatorum*, 23. 706, quoted by Barth in *The Holy Ghost and the Christian Life*, p. 41.

<sup>28</sup> Barth, *The Holy Ghost and the Christian Life*, p. 40.

<sup>29</sup> Barth, *The Holy Ghost and the Christian Life*, p. 43.

Therefore the grace that fosters divine salvation shines forth not only to help us, but to teach us to know we need it. Meanwhile, with His coming we are shewn that our whole nature is ungodly, graceless, condemned.<sup>30</sup>

Barth means that without the work of the Holy Spirit as reconciler we would know neither sin, nor righteousness. We are unable, as a benefit of our creation, to know if an act is sinful or righteous in God's eyes unless it is revealed to us. There is no *a priori* knowledge of the good available to us. 'What an unreflecting ethics might simply call sin, can, in the sight of God be repeatedly righteousness, and *vice versa*.'<sup>31</sup>

He argues that our sin is unbelief, and self-esteem. The following words show how his idea conflicts with Modernist concepts of human identity, autonomy and freedom:

In the sphere where the term "sin" is ambiguous, i.e. in the sphere of our own inner and outer action, there is no doubt but that we can acquire a relative sinlessness and righteousness. What comes closer to us than our self-esteem as regards this? And it is just this self-reliance and self-presumption with regard to this relative sinlessness and righteousness, using it as a safeguard against the accusations made by God's Word; this refusal to be those who have always to live by God's forgiving mercy: *this* unbelief: this is really sin. In comparison with this sin, all the rest do not matter so much, for this unbelief is the most critical sin of all sins.<sup>32</sup>

Having discussed the place of the Holy Spirit and reconciliation as the second miracle of creation, which is the action of the Holy Spirit that makes humanity ready for God, he moves on to the other aspect of that miracle which is the Holy Spirit and the miracle of Faith, which is the other phase of the Christian life.

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<sup>30</sup> Luther, *Serm. Tit. ii. 11 f.*, *Erl.Ed.*, vii. 133, quoted by Barth in *The Holy Ghost and the Christian Life*, p. 43.

<sup>31</sup> Barth, *The Holy Ghost and the Christian Life*, p. 45.

<sup>32</sup> Barth, *The Holy Ghost and the Christian Life*, p. 46.



He points out that we do not have or possess faith as an object, because there is no given of faith. We receive faith in the divine act of continually giving.<sup>33</sup> God gives it and we should receive it gratefully without appropriation.

Faith, which is the subject of God's activity, is a gift. Both the form and the content of the gift of faith are within God Himself. It is impossible for us to receive the form and content of faith. Thus, faith hides itself, even from itself. The point Barth is establishing with such certainty is that, 'If we *are* justified, we are so simply in *Christ* and not in ourselves.'<sup>34</sup>

Barth's argument is that the miracle of faith conceals the Holy Spirit in both its form and its content, and it remains hidden from us, until God reveals it to us in and through His Word. 'That it is really *we* who are yet and indeed in *that state* (ie. of justification), is and remains undisclosed to us, because it becomes revealed to us in and through the Word of God.'<sup>35</sup> God continually renews the gift of faith, and there is no possibility of us accumulating or appropriating it.

In this way, Barth relates his central ideas about the Holy Spirit and faith in Luther's work. He wants to show that his ideas are the true development of the Reformers' views. He argues that his central ideas not only have a classical antecedent but also in contrast to liberal Protestant ideas are the present expression of that tradition. He also emphasises the 'counter-intuitiveness' of faith in both its form and content. He says, 'The experience of faith is in conflict with all other experiences we have, with all

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<sup>33</sup> Barth, *The Holy Ghost and the Christian Life*, p. 49.

<sup>34</sup> Barth, *The Holy Ghost and the Christian Life*, p. 49.

<sup>35</sup> Barth, *The Holy Ghost and the Christian Life*, p. 50.



practical experiences'.<sup>36</sup> Barth quotes Luther to emphasise that his argument is within the tradition:

Reason does not understand or do this, viz. that a man should have a joy beneath the Cross, peace in the midst of dis-peace. It is a work of God which no one has known save he who has experienced it<sup>37</sup>

The hiddenness of the miracle of faith, of course, reflects the dialectic relationship between God and man. Man's "no" hides God's "yes". Barth again points out Luther's contribution to this argument by quoting him as saying, 'This *Yes!* is fundamentally hidden beneath this *No!*' We saw earlier that man cannot provide the synthesis of this thesis and antithesis. A continual paradox holds the dialectic in the tension. Jesus Christ, true God and true man in the miracle of the Incarnation of God is the only synthesis.<sup>38</sup>

This hiddenness of faith is seen too in the fact that the man convinced by the word, into belief, into his righteousness in Christ, will never cease to acknowledge and confess, in all seriousness, that his having been justified is utterly not in himself, and consequently not in his human unbelief.<sup>39</sup>

Another quotation from Luther further establishes his traditional credentials:

Sin is truly sin, whether committed before or after Christ has been known, and *God always hates sin*: indeed every sin is mortal that comes into actual reality. But what is not mortal sin to the man becomes such on account of Christ.<sup>40</sup>

Barth tells his audience that the Christian is indeed *simul peccator et justus* and the surmounting of this irreconcilable contradiction does not lie in the Christian not even in the most secret sanctum of his existence, and neither does it happen in any of the

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<sup>36</sup> Barth, *The Holy Ghost and the Christian Life*, p. 51.

<sup>37</sup> Luther, *Sermon on Phil. iv. 4 f.*, *Erl. Ed.*, vii. 126.

<sup>38</sup> Luther, *Sermon on Phil. iv. 4 f.*, *Erl. Ed.*, vii. 126. p. 51.

<sup>39</sup> Barth, *The Holy Ghost and The Christian Life*. P. 52.

<sup>40</sup> Luther *Gal.*, *Erl. Ed.*, iii. 24 f.

hours of his life's journey. Again he quotes Luther, 'in death the Christian becomes "healed"' by this statement he deliberately made clear the great difference between the fulfilment of the promise and the promise itself.<sup>41</sup>

Barth develops his argument by unfolding the consequences of this gift of faith. He describes other aspects of the gift and always holds together the paradox of faith the Creator's gift and its reception. It is a further example of his consistent methodology of holding form and content together as is appropriate to the truth of the subject.

He says the problem of Christian *obedience* is contained within faith. He then in unfolding this aspect develops the statement by discussing our responsibility, which is another aspect of the miracle of faith he says:

Although faith can only be understood as the work of the Holy Ghost, and in the secrecy of faith is characterised as repentance and trust, it is still *our own* faith.<sup>42</sup>

Because reconciliation cuts against the grain of our existence all through, and is never at all to be comprehended or apprehended by our existence, it is a matter of importance to us, it claims us, it upsets us and disquiets the whole round of our existence enclosed in itself.' 'This is the reality of *sanctification*, or the problem of Christian *obedience*.'<sup>43</sup>

He explains how our action is our being, and how it is *ours*, by saying that faith, like obedience is active which means that I *exist* in believing. He says of this actuality of faith:

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<sup>41</sup> Barth, *The Holy Ghost and The Christian Life*, p 53.

<sup>42</sup> Barth, *The Holy Ghost and The Christian Life*, p 56.

<sup>43</sup> Barth, *The Holy Ghost and The Christian Life*, p 56.

Faith, together with its experience of judgement and of justification, is God's work: totally hidden and pure miracle. But on this account it is no hypostasis, hovering over or in front of or behind the actual man.<sup>44</sup>

Faith cannot stand-alone: it is always in this and that action self-authenticating, or it is simply not authenticating faith.<sup>45</sup>

That faith has *action* alongside of it, means identically the same thing, viz. that faith is *active*. And this being active takes place in the Holy Ghost-in the judgement and in the justification of the Holy Ghost. So far as the Holy Ghost is in the action, He is the Spirit of Holiness.<sup>46</sup>

He insists that the source of holiness is truly other. He says, the Holy Spirit gives it as a miracle of our reconciliation, and indeed that our actions, as far as they are good in God's eyes, are the work of the Holy Spirit. Yet, he also insists that they are *our* actions because they are our existence. He claims that previously we lived in untruth and expresses this idea as:

I have every occasion to know that my existing, as such, is not my believing: that I can only believe that my existing-in-faith is God's work and not mine.<sup>47</sup> But so far as I believe I *exist* in faith.<sup>48</sup>

Here again we see his critical dialogue with Augustine and his reinforcement of his disagreement about the source of holiness. Barth establishes that holiness is wholly given and does not having givenness or prior ontology. He means that the concept of holiness cannot tell us *what* grace is, as in Catholic doctrine, and that Grace does not perfect nature. Barth sees this is a serious error of Catholic and catholicising doctrine, which has its origins in Augustine's theology.

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<sup>44</sup> Barth, *The Holy Ghost and the Christian Life*, 'Hypostasis is subsistent entity in itself', p. 57.

<sup>45</sup> Barth, *The Holy Ghost and The Christian Life*, p. 58.

<sup>46</sup> Barth, *The Holy Ghost and The Christian Life*, p. 58.

<sup>47</sup> Barth, *The Holy Ghost and The Christian Life*, p. 57.

<sup>48</sup> Barth, *The Holy Ghost and The Christian Life*, p. 57.



At this point Barth introduces what becomes one of his central ideas, which is a theological description of the philosophical problem of how God acts in time. He describes how God's action is a vertical intervention, which intersects with the horizontal of humanity at a point. Of course mathematically in Barth's Euclidian geometry a point has no magnitude in either space or time. He says:

the *reality* of our sanctification consists in this vertical line falling and cutting the horizontal line of our existence. The point where our horizontal way becomes-nay, *is cut* into by-this vertical line, there arises the problem of obedience.<sup>49</sup>

Although this idea replicates Augustine's view of how an eternal God acts in time Barth does not refer to the discussion in *The Confessions*. Augustine's argument of the relationship between time and eternity is that God sees all things as eternally present but in sequence. This is called time A, whereas created time, time B has a past, a present and a future. Augustine uses the recitation of a psalm as an analogy of time A. The person reciting the psalm remembers the section just said which is the past present. The section being recited is the present present and the section held in memory that is about to be recited is the future present. The past present, the present present, and the future present are all available simultaneously in memory and this is how God "sees" time.

Barth follows a similar argument when he uses the Euclidian concept that two planes intersect at a point that has no magnitude in time or space, to describe the action of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, at the point of intersection, the *a priori* Kantian categories of space and time are irrelevant. In this way, Barth avoids having an epistemology before revelation.

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<sup>49</sup> Barth, *The Holy Ghost and The Christian Life*, p. 59.

Since the action of the Holy Spirit occurs at a point, and is ever renewed, it exists at an infinite number of points. Therefore although acting in space and time it is not bounded by their constraints. Being is forever renewed. Time and space do not appropriate it. Therefore, the vertical Word of the Holy Spirit is not a relative but an absolute Word. It is absolute but not abstract. It is concrete and is the ethical imperative:

It is absolute because it binds us to *God*: and it is concrete because it binds us to our *neighbour*.<sup>50</sup>

He rejects any ideas that suggest that by anamneses memory can draw forth the good and says the good is our acting in our created existence at each point of intersection of the vertical Word of God in the Holy Spirit with our horizontal lives in space and time. In this way, we become forfeit to God and bound to our duty to our neighbour through sanctification:

Our sanctification is actual in the fact that we are challenged as responsible beings by a summons that is never suspended, but which is to the effect that we are appointed to establish the orders of creation that apply to our existence as such: for example, marriage, race etc.; in the Church and in the State, as in the spiritual and secular order of life implied in the Kingdom of grace: i.e. of our existence as *simul peccatores et justi*.<sup>51</sup>

Here we see Barth introduce the important idea that by sanctification, the good is part of the doctrine of God, albeit that at this stage in his thinking it is the orders of creation which express the good. He argues that he grounds his thinking on Lutheran foundations saying that the good is the hidden action of the Holy Spirit which separates the Christian and quotes Luther in support:

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<sup>50</sup> Barth, *The Holy Ghost and The Christian Life*, p. 60.

<sup>51</sup> Barth, *The Holy Ghost and The Christian Life*, p. 61.



He who has been born of God must be a man different from a rational pagan or a smart man of the world. Faith remains through all works and callings quite anonymous. For this reason it makes disciples whom Christ loves.<sup>52</sup>

To which Barth, to underline his connection with the tradition exclaims:

To be sure! But for this reason, it remains hidden in all works and stations in life: particularly in that the activity of the disciples is now actual obedience to God's word and commandment. Only in the Holy Ghost is it decided whether it is obedience and not disobedience.

He reminds us that disobedience is the other aspect the Christian Life. He repeats the methodology of unfolding the dialectic by giving one aspect and then the other; and leaving us with the paradox. Since because of sin we are unable to judge we do not know if our actions are obedient or disobedient. The paradox is not resolved because synthesis is not possible for us. His argument follows directly from the writings not only of Luther but also of Calvin. Barth is determined to be seen as reintroducing their teachings to the church, and not as introducing something radically different, he says:

We have to view our "imperfect" obedience as put in God's judgement, and then, and to that degree, understand it as disobedience, as sin. Calvin reminds us perhaps more forcefully than Luther, that at the question as to the reality of our *obedience*, even at the supposed highest pitch of all seriousness, not only are we always at the beginning, but we have been flung back to nothingness.<sup>53</sup> The Holy Ghost is absolutely and alone the umpire with reference to what is or is not a Christian life. For this reason our sanctification is reality, but our obedience is a problem that we cannot solve, into the darkness of which we can but enter again and again, and be thrown utterly and alone on God.<sup>54</sup>

In the final section of the lecture Barth discusses the Holy Spirit as the *eschatological* one.<sup>55</sup> It is in an eschatological sense that the Holy Spirit is the Holy Spirit the Creator, the Holy Spirit the Reconciler and the Holy Spirit the Redeemer. Theological

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<sup>52</sup> Luther: *Serm. On 1 Jno. V. 4 f.*, *Erl. Ed.*, viii. 220.

<sup>53</sup> Barth, *The Holy Ghost and The Christian Life*, p. 66.

<sup>54</sup> Barth, *The Holy Ghost and The Christian Life*, p. 69.

<sup>55</sup> Printed as chapter three, 'The Holy Ghost as Redeemer'



ethics has to be understood from the perspective that Christians are a people of the promise and live eschatologically in the now but not yet. They are a people who are reconciled, but not yet redeemed and who live in the in-between times, the time of promise, and await its fulfilment.

The eschatological promise changes both the boundary lines and the relationship between God and us. God's revelation promises us something that is ultimate and in the future and which is his characteristic purpose with us.<sup>56</sup> This promise he says is something that is "absolutely final" which makes it not only a future event but also a present starting point. He says:

Finality and futurity from the Beyond of our existence is the peculiar quality to our redemption, to resurrection and to eternal life. As the Word of God is the Word of the promise too, so the Holy Ghost is "the Spirit of the Promise," by whom we are "sealed unto the day of redemption".<sup>57</sup>

He says that "Being redeemed," means being a child of God at the veil of partition that remains on this side of death. Therefore, theological ethics describes the life that is lived in the attitude of receiving the promise but not possessing the promise of its fulfilment.<sup>58</sup>

Christian ethics understands that the eschatological promise means that in the Holy Ghost we have a *conscience*. However he stresses that this conscience is not a given conscience in the Augustinian sense but a conscience that the Holy Spirit gives and continually renews. Therefore he says emphatically:

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<sup>56</sup> Barth, *The Holy Ghost and The Christian Life* (Luke 14. 49 : Ephes. 1. 13-14 : iv. 30) p. 72.

<sup>57</sup> Barth, *The Holy Ghost and The Christian Life*, p. 73.

<sup>58</sup> Barth, *The Holy Ghost and The Christian Life*, p. 73.

This child of God will speak out and be a missionary whether he will or no, and will not allow himself to be muzzled by any tactics of the Church or State manoeuvring and manipulation, in the midst of which he lives.' 'He speaks because he must speak.'<sup>59</sup>

He expands on what this means for theological ethics by pointing out that the eschatological promise also means that in the Holy Ghost life is lived in *gratitude* because God the Reconciler freely gives life and salvation. Theological ethics also points out that he who is truly grateful does not think he has to pay back what he receives. Therefore theological ethics must describe the gift in freedom not compulsion which means describing gratitude and freedom.

He quickly reminds us of the other pole of the dialectic that we do not know ourselves as free children of God or daughters and sons of the promise that is already fulfilled because we live in unbelief that is sin and he describes the first task of Christian ethics as prayer. In prayer the Holy Spirit groans within making the Christian a "groaner":

The wonder of prayer -and this is a quite different from the "infused grace" of the ability to pray aright -is the incoming of the Holy Ghost to help the man who is praying.' 'Because it had pleased God to take this groaning, sighing man, together with his burden, upon *Himself*.' 'This grave circumstance is the presence of the Holy Spirit of Promise.'<sup>60</sup>

In conclusion, in his important lecture, *The Holy Ghost and the Christian Life* Barth discusses his central ideas about the part played by the Holy Spirit in theological ethics and these ideas remain in an expanded form in *Church Dogmatics*. However, the essential features of his thinking on the place of the Holy Spirit in theological ethics are already in place as early as 1929. There are three aspects to these features, which are:

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<sup>59</sup> Barth, *The Holy Ghost and The Christian Life*, p. 82.

<sup>60</sup> Barth, *The Holy Ghost and The Christian Life*, p. 85.

1. The Trinity is the foundation of theological ethics.
2. Luther and Calvin are the fathers of theological ethics.
3. Theological ethics is part of dogmatics.

Barth expanded these three points, describing them in more detail in 1938, which the following quotations illustrate:<sup>61</sup>

The theology of the Reformers, at any rate Luther and Calvin, represents an outlook which makes independent ethics inherently impossible<sup>62</sup>

The attempts methodically to separate dogmatics and ethics are dubious even from the point of view of ethics itself, because in the process there regularly occurs a change of focus, a fatal interchange of the subjects of God and man, which, though impossible in theology, becomes the true constitutive principle of ethics. Appealing to the supposed consequences of dogmatics as the revelation or work of God to man, in ethics we suddenly allow ourselves to open a new book: the book of the holy man which is the sequel to that of the holy God.<sup>63</sup>

Dogmatics itself is ethics; and ethics is also dogmatics.<sup>64</sup>

The lecture illustrates how Barth brilliantly builds complex theological structures on a relatively few central ideas. We see the central importance Barth gives to the Holy Spirit in theological ethics, which contradicts those critics who claim Barth grounds his work entirely in Christology. It also illustrates the further and most important point that this was Barth's position in 1929 in the semester following the first presentation of his lecture series on ethics at the University of Münster.

The lecture shows the growing complexity of Barth's thinking as he develops the consequences of his theological ideas. The layering of ideas must be kept in mind

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<sup>61</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2 pp. 782-796.

<sup>62</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2 p. 783.

<sup>63</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2 p. 790.



because at any point in the discussion when Barth is discussing the Holy Spirit he is considering one person of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is the Holy Spirit the creator, the Holy Spirit the redeemer and the Holy Spirit the reconciler. Barth is also discussing the actions of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit as all Barth's theological ideas are expositions of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

Any interpretation of Barth's work requires holding together the whole and the part: only the whole film reveals the meaning of a single frame. Although his initial ideas are simple, the task of interpretation is complex. In Barth's 1929 lecture *The Holy Ghost and the Christian Life* we see him revisit and rework Calvin's doctrine of sanctification. He has repeatedly insists that grace alone makes theological ethics possible arguing that theological ethics describes the moral space for human action. Theological ethics is part of the doctrine of God the creator, God the redeemer and God the reconciler, and more specifically the doctrine of sanctification.

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<sup>64</sup> *Church Dogmatics*, I/2 p. 793.

## Chapter 5 Church Dogmatics III/4, 116/59

### 5.1 Freedom in Fellowship

This chapter is an investigation of the relationship between the general and the particular in Karl Barth's moral philosophy and is a close examination of part 1, section 54 of *Church Dogmatics* III/4. This section of Barth's magnum opus is called 'Freedom in Fellowship', and is divided into two sections. The first discusses the relationship between man and woman. The second discusses the relationship between parents and children.<sup>1</sup> It is the discussion of man and woman that forms the basis of the investigation.

Three preliminary points need to be made before the exploration of this small section from *Church Dogmatics* can begin. The first is that its description of the relationship between man and woman is not the only criterion on which to judge a moral philosophy or ethical system. The second point is a warning from Barth, 'Therefore let it be said as a definite warning that the man who in reading or hearing ethics begins to pay attention only at this point incurs the suspicion of being a doubtful character.'<sup>2</sup> The third point is that this selection is just forty pages taken from a work over six thousand pages.

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<sup>1</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, pp. 116–59.

<sup>2</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, p. 119.

This final point raises the methodological question of how it is that at whatever point you enter Barth's system the beginning of the scheme is revealed. The reason is that the structure of the text reflects its Trinitarian content. The exposition, although written serially, expresses three circles, which both overlap and intersect in numerous planes. The centre of each circle is within the circumference of all the other circles. The circles have central focal points, which as the text unfolds constantly reappear. In addition all the circles are developments of the initial and central focal point. Beginning at section fifty-eight and reading forty pages is sufficient to encompass the central locus and the focal points of the extending circles.

Having considered the geometrical form of Barth's text, as three overlapping and intersecting circles, it is now possible to consider his three presuppositions within the geometry of those circles.

The central locus expresses the first and most important of Barth's three presuppositions, which is that God is wholly other. This seemingly simple statement is the basis of his work and for this he is indebted to Kierkegaard. Certainly, Kierkegaard's vehement criticism of Hegel was a strong influence on Barth. This is apparent in the 1919 edition of a commentary on *The Epistle to the Romans*. In it he says he has a debt to Kierkegaard for the recognition of the 'infinite qualitative distinction' between time and eternity. The positive significance that followed from this, Barth says, is Kierkegaard's statement, 'God is in heaven, and though art on earth.'<sup>3</sup> This declaration means that man cannot become God. He has the freedom to remain man, and the freedom not to take on the tasks and responsibilities of God. Although the importance of the statement, God is wholly other, needs stressing it is



equally important to remember that Barth definitely rejects both Kierkegaard's theological leap of faith from man to God and his ethical position.

It should be noted that Hegel has a complete chapter in Barth's history of nineteenth century theology whereas there are only three minor references to Kierkegaard.<sup>4</sup> It is also important to note that Hegel's dialectic shapes Barth's method.

Barth's second presupposition, or principle, is that man lives in response to God his maker. The consequence of this principle is that man did not create himself, but is a creature of God. That is real man does not live a godless life without God. Real man lives with God as his covenant partner.<sup>5</sup>

That this is the case, that the man determined by God for life with God is real man, is determined by the existence of the man Jesus. Apart from anything else, this is the standard of what his reality is and what it is not. It reveals originally and definitively why God has created man.<sup>6</sup>

In creating man to be his covenant partner God determines man's existence and defines his limits. God's creative act prescribes man's freedom as a creature of God. This second presupposition is that creation is the outward sign of God's covenant with man. The relationship between man and woman mirrors God's covenant relationship with man. God's act of covenant determines their relationship. The dialectic form of the content of Barth's textual exposition reflects, the duality, which is that neither woman nor man is a unity alone their unity is in God, who has created them in mutual duality.

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<sup>3</sup> Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p.10. [The Preface to the Second Edition.]

<sup>4</sup> Barth, *Protestant theology in the nineteenth century: its background & history*.

<sup>5</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/2, p. 203.

<sup>6</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/2, p. 203.

The third presupposition is that it is the entry of Christianity into the world through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that defines the relationship between God and man, and men and women. Barth stresses the newness and unpredictability of this event. In this section, he expands his ideas on the relationship between man and woman as a mirror of the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ. Again, the dialectic expresses the form of which the duality of the divinity and humanity is the content. The incarnation of Jesus Christ completes the dialect, the synthesis is in Jesus Christ in his humanity and his divinity completes his humanity. Prophecy reveals this event, which human reason cannot predict. Its occurrence makes all things new. That is, God does a new thing so that humankind may do a new thing, which expresses God's free desire to be in covenant partnership with humankind. Therefore, we read in the Book of Acts of those who were privileged witnesses to God's new act themselves doing "a new thing". A fact not concealed from the rabble that denounced the Christians as, 'these that have turned the world upside down', who, 'do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus.'<sup>7</sup> There is, so Barth claimed, a form of life - a turning "the world upside down"- which corresponds to, and is established by, the action of God. Barth's aphorism, 'Dogmatics itself is ethics; and ethics is also dogmatics,' expresses this correspondence between divine and human action.<sup>8</sup> For Barth, to give an account of the action of God it is also necessarily to give a corresponding account of human action. In addition, human action, properly and necessarily refers to God who evinces it.

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<sup>7</sup> Acts 17. 6-7

<sup>8</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, p. 793.

Having the three initial presuppositions with their three concentric circles, moving in different planes but having their centres within in each other, in place we turn to a description of what this 'dogmatics' necessarily means for 'ethics'.

God's covenant relationship with humankind necessarily determines the relationships between people as *beings* in encounter. The encounter with the other, as fellow-human, determines each individual necessarily reflecting God's covenant relationship with humankind and this is the reality of humankind. Barth says:

God takes man so seriously in his vocation to be in covenant with Him that He calls him to freedom in fellowship, i.e., to freedom in fellowship with others. He calls him to find himself by affirming the other, to know joy by comforting the other, and self-expression by honouring the other.<sup>9</sup>

The first and typical sphere of this fellow humanity, the relationship between man and man, is that between male and female. This relationship, says Barth, 'alone rests on a structural and functional distinction.' Both male and female are human. Man never exists as such but only as the human male or the human female. This is necessarily the case and man cannot seek to liberate himself, or herself, from this position, 'Nor can he wish to liberate himself from the relationship and be without woman or woman without man.'<sup>10</sup>

What does this mean for the encounter between man and woman? How is their action to mirror the action of God? Barth explains that our human actions need to accept and reflect both that God is our creator and that we are His creatures. He goes on to explore how the relationship between men and women expresses God's covenant relationship. The first of the human circles is the necessary establishment of

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<sup>9</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, p. 117.



humankind as male and female, and the centre of this circle is marriage, which is the focal point of the relationship between man and woman. If marriage is to be a human action that reflects, confirms and evinces God's action then it needs to be seen as the action of God's creatures within their created and creaturely being. For this reason he rejects any idea of marriage as a state that transcends humanity. This includes any concept that marriage has a metaphysical teleology. He therefore rejects the Roman Catholic sacramental view of marriage, which, he says, is a means of grace belonging not only to the natural order, but to also the supernatural order. God, he says, creates male and female as his partners not as potential gods. For similar reasons Barth rejects Schleiermacher's neo-Protestant view of marriage as the metaphysical absolute as an extreme of Romanticism.<sup>11</sup> Barth says, marriage is an earthly act, 'they will not be given in marriage in heaven,' and as such is determined and should be understood without embarrassment.

Although marriage is the focal point and the centre of the circle of the relationship between man and woman it is not the entire circle. 'The sphere of male and female is far wider than marriage.'<sup>12</sup> Marriage is not the *telos* of the encounter between male and female, because it has no metaphysical component. It is not the means of an ascent or transcendence from the natural to the supernatural sphere. He calls this idea of marriage, placing its focus in another world, as the decentralisation of the relationship. He says the circle is more than the centre and the male is still male and the female still female at all other points within the circumference a refusal to understand this is:

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<sup>10</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, p. 118.

<sup>11</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, pp. 121/2.

<sup>12</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, p. 140.

As though we had to abandon to their own problems all those who do not have the freedom to approach the centre, or who have the freedom not to approach it, as if there were no other estate but matrimony; as though the command of God were to be understood in a limited sense.<sup>13</sup>

Again, we see the dialectic giving reality to the position of marriage, for he says that the affirmation of marriage depends upon the serious possibility of its accompanying denial. Marriage is a command of God who created man as male and female but it is *not* a universally obligatory and binding order of creation:

They are also man and woman, and as such stand under the command of God, when they are unmarried and have not yet attained this special concrete form of the sexual encounter, when they are widowed or divorced and no longer realise it, and especially for some reason when they can never realise it at all.<sup>14</sup>

In removing marriage from the orders of creation in *Church Dogmatics* he has taken a wider view than he took in the Münster and Bonn lectures. His new position provides space within the relationship between man and woman for those who are unmarried and removes from them the requirement of inadequacy. He lifts the burdens placed upon men and women by the orders of creation, because the particular, which is the relationship between man and woman, follows from and expresses the general, which is the doctrine of God.

He moves on to discuss the disgraceful state accorded the unmarried in Israel, where the procreation of children was the decisive issue. Abraham's holy seed carries on Israel's hope from one generation to another. The truth of the promise depended upon marriage and the unmarried could have no share in the salvation of the chosen people.

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<sup>13</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, p. 141.

<sup>14</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, p. 140.

The new life that entered the world with Jesus Christ removes the burden that made marriage a necessity. 'Marriage is no longer an absolute but a relative necessity.'<sup>15</sup>

Here again Barth makes the significance of the general point apparent in the historical particular. For with the birth of Jesus Christ the holy sequence of generations has reached its goal. In Barth's doctrine of God marriage is a matter of special gift and vocation, which express God's covenant relationship. However, humankind can receive the special gift and vocation in forms other than marriage. In mirroring the covenant, marriage, because it receives a new consecration, retains its dignity and validity.

However, he says, this also enables an understanding and appreciation of the possibility of abstention from marriage; reminding us both of:

The glad affirmation of marriage in Protestant ethics over and against the conflict with Catholic priestly and monastic celibacy.

And of the words of Jesus which:

Indicate the vicissitudes of life may make it incumbent upon a man to remain unmarried and to express the relationship between Christ and His community this way.<sup>16</sup>

He says the latter is a fact that Protestant ethics too often ignores. He points out that we learn from 1 Corinthians 7 that Peter, the prince of apostles and the first pope did not take the way of celibacy although Paul did and recommended it to others. The point is that the very affirmation of marriage depends on its denial. Again we see the dialectic shaping the argument, one thing, marriage, cannot exist in isolation it requires its negation to achieve unity. In this way the particular the married and the

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<sup>15</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4 p. 143.



unmarried state achieve a unity in their mirroring of the more general, the covenant relationship between God and man. This argument is part of Barth's unfolding of the concepts that dogmatics is ethics and ethics is dogmatics. Therefore, 'the Christian enters upon marriage not on a basis of natural necessity, but on that of a special spiritual gift and vocation within his life history and the history of salvation.'<sup>17</sup>

He continues with a discussion about how are we to decide on good and evil within the sphere of male and female. Again, the discussion proceeds from the general to the particular. Firstly, the general is the doctrine of God and what we know of God's actions. Secondly, the particular is man's ethical response. The particular: man's action, reflects the general: God's action. So Barth begins with, 'Man in his divinely created sexuality is a similitude of the covenant.' God in the covenant relationship decided he did not wish to be alone but in a duality, and man and woman reflect that decision. However, just as there is an infinite qualitative difference between God and man so there is a reflecting, although incomparable difference in the relationship between man and woman. This distinction shows us that human action is good only as far as it maintains the qualitative distinction man and woman. Human action becomes evil, in this context, as soon as man does not accept being male, and woman does not accept being female. He says at this point:

Just as in this covenant God remains true to His Godhead, and man and the people can only confess their Creatureliness and in this way accept their position as His partners, so man and woman – and this is the deepest root of the command – must acknowledge their sex.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, p. 144.

<sup>17</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, p. 148.

<sup>18</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, pp. 149/50.

Barth's position is that God's description of the relationship between man and woman, because of its reflexive character is the prototype *I and Thou* relationship. It is not possible from Barth's theology to describe completely man and woman, because it is unlikely there can be either any description given by man that can wholly describe woman, or any description that can be given by woman that can wholly describe man. It is, he says, important to remember that we cannot predetermine what God chooses, because:

The command of God, will find man and woman as they are in themselves. It may coincide with what they know but equally it may disclose something completely new. In no event is it bound to any scheme we know.<sup>19</sup>

This means that ideas and opinions of man and woman, although of interest, are not definitive or final. 'Therefore not every apparent offence is a real one.' Although there are offences, he says that arise if one sex refuses to acknowledge that it exists in right and dignity *only* in relation and in distinction to the opposite sex. Within the church another temptation is the desire to be neither sex, but to take-up a third position and aspire to a higher mode of being as an idealistic solution to the problems of the single man or woman, and in so doing lead a sexually lonely life.<sup>20</sup>

Here we see Barth claiming man and woman must have a proper respect for, and be obedient to, God's command. He means that male and female are constrained by the limits of their created being and should act accordingly. He believes both that these limits should be accepted, and that they should be responded to in a positive, hopeful and joyful way. In which case, humankind should accept and rejoice in being a duality having been created male and female and not attempt to escape this duality by

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<sup>19</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, p. 151.

<sup>20</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, p. 157.



attempting to become the One. The task of God is to be the One and the source of unity for the duality of man and woman, and this task is not to be usurped. This is the meaning of being obedient to the will and purposes of God. We can see Barth explaining that male and female is the actualisation of humanity. This actualisation, he says, must take place, 'in the realisation of the fact that they belong indissolubly together and are necessary one to the other for their mutual completion.'<sup>21</sup>

In this section of *Church Dogmatics*, Barth has formulated the foundation for a proper Christian understanding of the relationship of man to himself and to woman, and of woman to herself, and to man. The content of specific action has to remain open. With this foundation in place humankind must be open to the dynamic of possibilities, not yet thought of but known to God. These possibilities become revealed as together man and woman are attentive to the command of God in hearing the Word and receiving the sacrament:

All is well so long and so far as man and woman, as they seek to be man individually and together whether in or outside the union of love and marriage, are not merely fully aware of their sexuality, but honestly glad of it, thanking God that they are allowed to be members of their particular sex and therefore soberly and with a good conscience going the way marked out for them by this distinction.<sup>22</sup>

This chapter is not an attempt to evaluate or assess Barth sexual ethics, but to examine a specific example of the relationship between the general and the particular. The section, 'Freedom in Fellowship' was chosen to examine this relationship, because *any* moral philosophy is at its most vulnerable when discussing gender and sexuality.<sup>23</sup> It is not so difficult to make abstract hypothesis on questions of social ethics and claim

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<sup>21</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, p. 158.

<sup>22</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, p. 159.

<sup>23</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, section 54, Freedom in Fellowship.



cohesion between the general and the particular, but it is an altogether more difficult task to achieve this cohesion in the field of sexual ethics.

Barth has brilliantly achieved a coherent and a cohesive statement in his exploration of the general, the doctrine of God, and the particular, the actions of humankind. He also lifts the burden imposed by the belief that sacramental marriage is the pathway to sanctification of the relationship between men and women. He reminds men and women of their creaturely existence and of the true significance of their sexuality within creation, which is of its actuality and its necessity. He closes the door on a third way, which is the transcending of humanity in a search for individual unity, but also rescues those outside the 'sanctification' of the marriage partnership.

## Chapter 6 Community, State, and Church

Chapter 6 discusses Barth's three essays, published as, *Community State and Church*. Two questions are examined. First, is Barth's theological ethics properly grounded in the doctrine of the Trinity? Second, is it a universally applicable individual ethic, or is he guilty of remaining narrowly sectarian in his ethical position? The first essay, 'Gospel and Law', is on individual acts, the second, 'Church and State', is on the relationship between Church and State, and the third, 'The Christian Community and the Civil Community', and is on society.

### 6.1 Gospel and Law

The first of the essays, "Gospel and Law", he intended to deliver himself at Barmen in Germany in 1935. It had to be read for him, because the German police were escorting him over the border into Switzerland. The government had suspended him from his Bonn professorship for refusing to take the oath of obedience to Hitler without the reservation: "So far as I can responsibly do so as an evangelical Christian."<sup>1</sup>

'Gospel and Law' discusses the question of how, and on what basis an individual should act? The essay's title immediately establishes two important points: firstly, Gospel and Law are united and not a duality; and secondly, that the Gospel precedes

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<sup>1</sup> Barth, "Das Evangelium in der Gegenwart," *Theologische Existenz heute* 25, Munich (1935) extract in *A Karl Barth Reader*, p. 53.

the Law. He says we must understand the Gospel in order that we can understand the Law.<sup>2</sup> The order is important because it establishes their relationship. The Gospel hides the Law, as does the ark.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the title points to the Promise which remained concealed, and which God expresses in a covenant relationship with his people. Barth as we have seen describes God's relationship as a covenant and not as a contract, because God unilaterally establishes the divine covenant with humanity. Unlike a legal contract, it is not a mutual, bilateral arrangement. God's covenant is free, and unconditional. It is unconditioned by considerations of human worth. Yahweh's covenant commitment carries equally unconditional obligations. They are the apodictic obligations summarised in the 'ten words' of the Torah. 'The indicatives of grace precede and sustain the imperatives of law'.<sup>4</sup>

The content of the Gospel is God's *grace*. Therefore, he says, to speak of Gospel and Law is to speak of God's Word. Barth does not provide a precise definition of the Word of God for the following reason, which Hartwell illustrates:

The reason for this restraint is not so much that in his teaching the Word of God appears in three different forms and has many aspects, but that an actualistic quality is peculiar to it according to which the Word of God is never a *datum*, something static which man can handle, scrutinise, define and classify like an object that is at his disposal but is always a concrete act of God, an event, a miracle, the materialisation of which in each individual case is entirely dependent on the sovereign and free grace of God and, consequently, cannot be anticipated by any definition of man's making.<sup>5</sup>

The Word is the Truth and combines the Gospel and the Law in unity. It is Grace, which is free, non-obligatory, and undeserved, and in which, form and content, are the

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<sup>2</sup> Barth, "Gospel and Law" in *Community, State and Church*, p.71.

<sup>3</sup> Barth, "Gospel and Law" in *Community, State and Church*, p.73.

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Alan Torrance for these observations on the covenant see, 'On Deriving' Ought' from 'Is': *Jesus Christ, Covenant and Koinonia*. p. 5

<sup>5</sup> Hartwell, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, pp. 60-61.



same. Jesus Christ establishes the unity of the three aspects of this concept of the Word:

For this is God's grace that the eternal Word *became flesh*. It is above all necessary that we speak of this content of the Gospel. God's *grace*, which is this content-which also includes the Law, if it really is *God's Word and Law*-this grace is called, and is, *Jesus Christ*.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, he claims that if we wish to know how to act we should look to Jesus Christ, who, in his particularity, establishes these things both ontologically and eternally. He has done it for all time. Therefore, it is not a contingent reality, which is born of necessity. His incarnation, born of the Virgin Mary, caused a discontinuity in history. God breaks into the world from above whilst maintaining the continuity of history, but causing an ontological change for all time. Sin is no longer an ontological necessity, although it remains an epistemological necessity. Therefore, Barth does not believe that evil is an absence of good, or the expression of any external force. Rather, he defines the source of sin as humanity's refusal to accept its limitations and to insist upon the autocracy of its own decisions. His constant prophetic exclamation is that only Jesus Christ is the truth of our creation, reconciliation and redemption. It is this dogmatic, which determines what is a proper ethical response:

That this is true becomes apparent in man's aversion and flight precisely from the grace of God. God's answer to sin-this is also grace-is our being in the flesh: we must die. If we would *hear* this answer, this would be our *salvation*. .... repent and, our autocracy destroyed, inherit eternal life.<sup>7</sup>

Human hostility meets God's freely given undeserved gift of Grace. Whereas Jesus, in his obedience, said yes to Grace, and continues to intercede for us with our humanity, employing his divine power to utilise love. He expects no love in return, and, of

course, finds none, but he continues to intercede for us because he knows humanity has neither the willingness nor the ability to believe. The urgency and insistence of this message he expresses in his prophetic call to the Confessing Churches at Barmen to return to their one Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup> For Barth this is the only position from which action can be understood and begin. It is always with grateful acceptance of the dependence on grace, and never from human autocracy. Men and women have become participants in divinity, not as divinisation, but as active participants in God's creation. Christ lives in us, and we have the mind of Christ.

How then should the individual act as a result? He tells us that we should start with Jesus Christ, because we see, in his obedience, that he has fulfilled all the requirements of the Law. We must remember that the Law is the will of God, and not a manifestation of our own theories or philosophical presuppositions. This is why we cannot base Christian social ethics on a philosophical foundation. However, because the life of Jesus Christ manifests the will of God we have both knowledge, and guidance, about how to act. He explains further, from what God does we can infer what God wants from us, "You *shall* be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect" Matthew 5. 48. The use of the future tense indicates, "You *shall* be!" Jesus Christ establishes us, and it is this validity, which establishes, "the *Ten Commandments*, together with its exposition in the *Sermon on the Mount*, and its application in the *apostolic instructions*."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Barth, 'Gospel and Law' in *Community, State and Church*, p. Barth, "Gospel and Law" in *Community, State and Church* p. 73.

<sup>7</sup> Barth, "Gospel and Law" in *Community, State and Church*, p. 75.

<sup>8</sup> Jüngel, *Christ, Justice and Peace*, "Barmen Thesis Number One." pp. xx. ff.

<sup>9</sup> Barth, "Gospel and Law" in *Community, State and Church*, p. Barth, "Gospel and Law" in *Community, State and Church* 78.



Barth explains that the message of the New Testament looks back to the fulfilment of the promise, by repentance. John the Baptist is the mid-point between Moses and Paul, who points to the present Messiah, and testifies to participation in the use of the future tense, “You *will* be perfect”.

The Law meets the members of the Church in its preaching, sacraments and confessions, which proclaim the demand for self-denial, obedience, and the following of the Cross for purification, sanctification and renewal. ‘He who says, “I know him” but disobeys his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him.’<sup>10</sup>

Yes, and further, the Church would not be the Church if, in her very existence, but also in her teaching and keeping of the Law of God, its *commands*, its *questions*, its *admonitions*, and its *accusations* would not become visible and apprehensible also for the world, for state and society.<sup>11</sup>

How then do men and women respond to this gift? What should we do? Does this mean our individual ethic is to imitate Christ? “Certainly not”, thunders back Barth by establishing and emphasising his point that God is wholly other. He says, imitation is impossible, and reminds his audience they must always remember that they are men and that Jesus Christ is God. He refutes any form of a Kantian ethic that bases individual moral modelling on the life of Christ. He reminds us that Christ’s fulfilment of the Law was a unique act, just as His belief was a unique belief. The Law for us is that we believe in Jesus Christ, who commanded his disciples to, “Love your enemies! Be careful how you give alms! Do not be anxious! Do not judge!” This, he reminds us, is what the disciples wanted from their congregations, and which gives the Church the authority to confront its members and the world. ‘There can never be claims and demands, which would have legal validity from another source or

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<sup>10</sup> I John 2. 3f.



in themselves, there can only be witnesses.’<sup>12</sup> He says, our works as ethical acts, whether as internal thoughts or external actions have validity only in so far as they are works of faith. This faith is the work of the Holy Spirit, which we cannot appropriate but for which we can pray.

Barth goes on to discuss the negative use of the Law. He says, human sin demands autocracy and insists on representing itself before God, rejecting Grace, and choosing self-assertion, which creates our self-separation from God, and makes a claim that we can justify ourselves by our own efforts. He explains why this is disobedience:

It is disobedience because God’s claim bears witness to what is promised to us and fulfilled in Christ, our justification through this very Christ. *Christ* is indeed the goal of the Law and is so for our justification. It would be obedience for us to subordinate ourselves to this justification, to live a life in this subordination. But our lust shoots past this very thing.<sup>13</sup>

He says that in this way, sin triumphs more so than in the sins we think we know: idolatry, blasphemy and murder, adultery and robbery. He points out that each person chooses that portion of the Law with which he decides to assert himself in self-righteousness, and says, for example one becomes pious, and another follows the academic life. He gives a long and colourful list of types and the vividness of his descriptive writing, at this point, expresses his pleasure in his creation. He is making the point that the sin of human autocracy misuses the Law, making it a vehicle for

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<sup>11</sup> Barth, “Gospel and Law” in *Community, State and Church*, p. 79.

<sup>12</sup> Barth, “Gospel and Law” in *Community, State and Church*, p. 83.

<sup>13</sup> Barth, “Gospel and Law” in *Community, State and Church*, p. 87.

natural law, abstract reason, history and ‘*Volksnomoi*’.<sup>14</sup> This is exactly the position adopted by “German Christians.” It produces nomianism<sup>15</sup> and antinomianism.<sup>16</sup>

Against the background of the third section, which describes the negative and the positive elements of the Law, which are God’s gift of his Word, the Gospel and the Law, against which we rebel and which we corrupt, the final section of the essay tells of God’s victory over sin and rebellion. He describes this from three points of view:

1. Through the grace of God.
2. Through the content of the Gospel.
3. Through the gift of faith.

Of these points, he says it is ‘through the Grace of God’ that Jesus Christ, himself, converts the *judgement*, under which the misused, and yet valid law of God places us into our *justification*. He says that, Jesus Christ ‘through the content of the Gospel’ gives himself to do what we cannot do for ourselves, because we have neither what it takes, nor the ability to give it to ourselves. It comes from outside, and it is only ‘through the gift of faith’ that we receive what it is we need.

In this essay, Barth unites Gospel and Law in Christ, which secures a proper Christian foundation for his theological ethic. He expands on the implications for theological

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<sup>14</sup> ‘*Volksnomoi*’ people’s law.

<sup>15</sup> Nomianism, should submit to these or those observances and disciplines. Barth, “Gospel and Law” in *Community, State and Church*, p. 91.

<sup>16</sup> Antinomianism, pure inwardness, adverse to every concrete command and tie. Barth, “Gospel and Law” in *Community, State and Church*, p. 91.

ethics by saying that through the gift of the Holy Spirit given to us at baptism, Christ is the source of our life, and our reality. Living in Christ, we have the knowledge we shall be perfect. Therefore, he says, our response to this covenant gift is obedience to God's will as shown in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and as revealed to us through the mediation of the Gospel. He says therefore that we know what to do. Our own abilities can give neither the knowledge nor act upon it. It is God as the covenant-God, and therefore God in Jesus Christ in whom that covenant was instituted and fulfilled that is for man the criterion of the rightness or wrongness of man's being and acting.<sup>17</sup> Barth's theological ethics, therefore, as an ethics of grace, is by necessity an ethics of freedom.

Barth, in this essay, has begun, continued and ended his discussion of how the individual should act within the Trinity. Neither philosophy nor social anthropology provided any pre-suppositions to his discussion. In his theological ethics, God gives everything. His theological ethics is applicable to all, not through a set of rules provided for all possible circumstances, but by a given paradigm, which is the knowledge of how to act, and the means with which to act. On these grounds his individual ethics are a universal and not a sectarian ethics. He says, the Christian serves God not in order to be saved, but because he has been saved in Jesus Christ. He obeys God's Law in recognition and acceptance of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

Barth says, the foundation of the Decalogue and the Sermon on the Mount provide the ethic for a love of neighbour, which is the basis of a universal and global ethic. He has provided a rational position for a theological ethic by placing ethics within God's covenantal relationship. Our response is to be obedient in the gift of faith in which all

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<sup>17</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, pp. 509 f.



is given. Barth establishes ethics as part of dogmatics for it speaks of God's Will as it is revealed through God's Word, and the revelation of God mediated through Jesus Christ as proclaimed in word and sacrament by the Church, and witnessed to by its members in their individual and social ethic. Barth has a high expectation of both individual, and Church action: they are to be perfect. However, this is not perfection achieved through human effort because God gives everything. In addition, our ethical response is to be obedient to the command.

At this point, we return to the question posed initially: is Barth guilty of a sectarian ethic? In this essay, he, shows the relationship of the individual not to a universal as an ethic, but to the absolute, which is Jesus Christ. Barth continues, with Kierkegaard, to use a dialectic method, but differs radically with him in content. Kierkegaard thinks God gives faith to all as a universal human attribute, agreeing with Lessing that faith is available as a passion to both King and commoner. Kierkegaard ontologically unites all people with God:

The individual determines his relationship to the universal through his relationship with the absolute not his relation to the absolute through his relationship to the universal.<sup>18</sup>

Kierkegaard suspends the ethical as universal putting it aside, and establishes it beyond the universal in the absolute. Whereas Barth insists that faith is God's gift, we do not know why some have it and others do not. God's gift incorporates the ethical ontologically; it is no longer an external act. The ethical has become man's response to the covenant relationship with God. For Barth the paradox of faith is that the universal is not the final judge, but is itself under judgement. It is then the universal,

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<sup>18</sup> Soren Kierkegaard. *Fear and Trembling*, trans. by A. Hannay, (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1985) p. 97.

which may be accused of sectarianism, by not bowing to the absolute. Barth is never guilty of this error.

## 6.2 Church and State

Unlike, writings on social philosophy which often open with a principle or a set of premises, Barth begins his essay on the relationship between church and state with an historical particularity. He starts with a set of recorded events: the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and continues with a discussion of Christian social ethics and with the relationship of men and women to these events as the Gospels recount them. His beginning defines his methodology. He therefore starts his essay by asking, what is the reconciled individual's relationship to human law? He says:

Is there a connection between justification of the sinner through faith alone, completed once for all by God through Jesus Christ, and the problem of human law?<sup>19</sup>

In addition, he asks the related question: what is the State's relationship to God's Kingdom?

What is the connection between *order*, *peace* and *freedom*, the peace order and freedom of the Kingdom: the no longer and the not yet, and present existence in the state?<sup>20</sup>

He asks, are the peace order and freedom of the kingdom connected to the existence of the state, or are they always to remain separate? We need to know more than that they are not in conflict, and we need to know the way in which they are connected. His essay explores these questions from within the Reformed Church's tradition and

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<sup>19</sup> Barth, 'Church and State' in *Community, State and Church*, p. 101.

<sup>20</sup> Barth, 'Church and State' in *Community, State and Church*, p. 110.

proposes, firstly, an engagement with its roots, and secondly, an expansion of its position.

Barth points out that the gap in the Reformers' teaching at this point allows human justice to be considered as an afterthought, and not part of divine justice. The consequence was the development of two alternatives: either, the Church becomes very spiritual claiming to expect everything from God, but excluding human justice; or it constructs a secular gospel of human law leading to a secular church. These two possibilities Barth sees as becoming the sterility of the Pious Church, or the sterility of the Church of Enlightenment. The question was, therefore, is there an actual, and therefore inward, and vital connection between the two realms? In 1938, this question was of the greatest importance, and the need for an answer was presented to Barth by the ethical crises of his times. He believed that the 'German Christians' had followed the path that led to Enlightenment sterility. His answer remains of the greatest significance for the ordering of a proper relationship between the church and the state.

Only a properly grounded theological answer would have the power and authority to resolve the consequences that had arisen in the relationship between the German Church and State. The problem Barth set out to tackle had a four hundred year history, and his answer gave a new Reformation to the understanding of the relationship between Church and State. In all three essays discussed in this chapter, Barth establishes the foundation of the relationship in Christ, which gives a proper Trinitarian understanding to the relationship, and establishes a correct direction for the development of a theology of the State.



Of all the significant Gospel passages about the relationship between Church and State, the Reformation writers were only interested in the words of John [18:36]: “My kingdom is not of this world.” Barth however, starts at the point where Church and State confront each other in the encounter between Jesus and Pilate described in John 19. 2. Here Jesus confirms Pilate’s claim to have power over Him, which is power given “from above.” This is power given by God; its source is neither demonic nor at enmity with Jesus. Pilate, at this point, was carrying out the will of God, showing that the State, even in her demonic form, cannot help rendering the service it is meant to render. From this encounter, it is clear that the State is included within the order of Redemption. Having established this connection between Church and State, Barth moves the argument on by considering the essence of the State. He does this by an exegesis of Romans 13. 1-7, and is particularly concerned with the interpretations that have been given to the concept of the subjection of Christians by earthly rulers.

When the Church of the New Testament speaks of the State, the emperor or king their representatives and activities, it had in mind an “angelic power,” which is represented by the State and active within it. Barth, however, claims that the State, as represented by Pilate in the encounter with Jesus had become demonic. Jesus was not condemned as an ‘enemy of the State.’ The State did not assert itself too much, but not enough. He says, ‘it is a State which at the decisive moment fails to be true to itself.’<sup>21</sup> It was, therefore, no longer a State. Demons are not to be annihilated, but forced into the service and the glorification of Christ, as indeed was Pilate. ‘In Christ the angelic powers are called to order and, so far as they need it, they are restored to their original order.’<sup>22</sup> It follows from this that the power of the State primarily belongs to Christ.

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<sup>21</sup> Barth, ‘Church and State’ in *Community, State and Church*, p. 114.

<sup>22</sup> Barth, ‘Church and State’ in *Community, State and Church*, p. 120.

In, and through Christ, Church and State are linked. This is the first of Barth's major contributions to a theology of the State: that Church and State are united ontologically in the Trinity.

Emphasis rightly, has often been quite rightly placed on the fact that the State should not be sought here, in the "present age", but in that "which is to come", and it is in this future State that Christians have their citizenship now although they are not yet able to inhabit it. It is not an imaginary ideal, but a real State and it is the citizenship of it and not the rejection of the imperfections of the present State which makes Christians strangers within the present worldly State. Barth emphasises that it is this future hope, lived in the present, which separates the Church from the States of this world, and not their imperfections. There is to be no separation of the two kingdoms of Church and State.

Barth reminds us that in the New Testament the description of the new age is of a *political* order.<sup>23</sup> 'The Church sees its future not in any heavenly image of its own existence but in the real heavenly *State*.' Therefore, the Church holds the State in the highest of esteem when it sees in that State its heavenly reality into which its terrestrial experience will be absorbed. On this point, Barth strongly disagrees with Augustine. Saying the State is not to be defined as the City of Cain, because whatever its present condition, 'it will one day contribute to the glory of the heavenly Jerusalem.'<sup>24</sup> The focus of his argument is that the true system of law and State are founded upon the preaching of the Kingdom of God. Therefore the Church is precluded from either taking on the role of the heavenly State, because only God can

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<sup>23</sup> Barth, 'Church and State' in *Community, State and Church*, p. 124.

<sup>24</sup> Barth, 'Church and State' in *Community, State and Church*, p. 125.



bring that into being, or from becoming a State within a State, or a State above the State, as claimed by the papal State. This last point was painfully illustrated in Germany in 1934. The Roman Catholic Church negotiated directly from Rome with the Third Reich about the integration of the Catholic Youth into the Hitler Youth. The opinions and strong opposition of the German Bishops, priests and people were ignored. The Roman Catholic Church acted as a State, the Catholic Nuncio and the Third Reich agreed on assimilation, although there was very strong local opposition among German Catholics.

Barth has presented a very different conception of the city to those of the ancient world. He insists that the heavenly State remains the heavenly State, established by God and not man, and it is not to be realised in this age, not even in the Church.<sup>25</sup> Throughout Barth maintains his strong Christological position and, on this point, agrees with Augustine, who said, 'True justice is not to be found only in that commonwealth whose founder and ruler is Christ'.<sup>26</sup>

Barth will not have us waiting patiently and passively for the arrival of the heavenly city, as we are to proclaim the message to the world. 'God has gathered up sinful man in the Person of Jesus, that he has made sin and death his own, and thus that He has set him free for the enjoyment of life which he had lost.'<sup>27</sup> The message includes the admonition that we should pray for all people, including kings and rulers so that we may lead a quiet and peaceful life, not because we wish for a 'bucolic existence,' nor

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<sup>25</sup> Barth, 'Church and State' in *Community, State and Church*, p. 127.

<sup>26</sup> Saint Augustine. *The City of God*, trans. by Henry Bettenson, (Harmondsworth: Penquin, 1972) Book II, Chapter 21 p.75.

<sup>27</sup> Barth, 'Church and State' in *Community, State and Church*, p. 127.



for the achievement of an ideal, but for the whole community, so that the freedom of the Church can be guaranteed.<sup>28</sup>

This is a penultimate condition of the relationship of the State to the Church, which is only temporary and restricted to this world. Nor, Barth emphasises, is the State required to validate or assess the effectiveness of the Gospel. The prayers of the Church for the State are the very essence of its own existence. If the Church forgets this it will have forgotten its apostolic calling to proclaim the promised justification to all people. Therefore, the Christian attitude to the State cannot be affected by the activities of the State, because that attitude is founded on Jesus Christ. The Church in its support of the Law is a “good” of the State.

Of all those services, that the Christian should offer the State intercession should have a central position. The Church is called to the worship of God on behalf of all people including those who cannot and will not accomplish it themselves, and the Church also worships on the State’s behalf. The State obviously cannot become an object of worship, because it needs prayers on its behalf. This essential service reminds the State of its limits, and reminds the Church of its freedom. The Church must freely give the service of intercession, and its prayers on behalf of the State cannot result from the worthiness of the State. The less worthy the State the more the intercession is needed. The Church’s intercession for the State puts a limitation on the injunction in Romans 13:1. “Be in subjection . . .” It is within the framework of divine ordinance that respect is to be shown. The Church should expect the best from the State, and has to suffer any injustice coming from an acceptance and acknowledgement of the State’s power to be God given. To oppose the State according to Romans verse 2 is to

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid. p. 129.

oppose the will of God. However, this respect for authority must not be separated from the priestly function of the Church, as the State may oppose the divine source of its power. If the State attempts to impose limitations on the Church's right to proclaim the Word then its Christian subjects cannot continue to conceal their opposition for the possibility of intercession for the State stands or falls on the freedom of God's Word.

The necessity of the prayers of the Church on behalf of the State is the second of Barth's major contributions to the defining of a proper relationship between Church and State.

There is a limit to what may be understood *directly* from the New Testament about the relationship of the Church to the State, and some questions which one wishes to ask remain unanswered. Having made two important definitions concerning the relationship between Church and State, Barth, in the final section of his essay, asks and answers a series of the questions that remain concerning the relationship. He follows the path of his exegesis of the New Testament:

1. Is the swearing of an oath one of the duties that must be fulfilled? Barth's answer is:

A "totalitarian" oath (that is, if it is rendered to a name which actually claims divine functions). Such an oath would indeed imply those who swear it place themselves at the disposition of a power which threatens the freedom of the Word of God for Christians; therefore, this would mean the betrayal of the Church and of its Lord.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Barth, 'Church and State' in *Community, State and Church*, p. 142.

Barth himself followed the logic of his thinking in 1936 when he was forced out of his professorship at Bonn for refusing to make an oath to Hitler without qualification. As a result, German students were forbidden to go and study with him in Basle, Switzerland.

## 2. Is military service a self-evident duty?

The Christian must have very real grounds for distrusting the State if he is to be entitled to refuse the State his service, and if the Church as such is to be entitled and called to say “No” at this point. A fundamental Christian “No” cannot be given here because it would in fact be a fundamental “No” to the earthly State as such, which is impossible from the Christian point of view.<sup>30</sup>

Obviously, the grounds, for distrust, would include cases where the State had ceased to be a State. The Third Reich is just such a case.

## 3. Can the State make any legitimate inward claim on its subjects that is the demand of any particular philosophy of life?

Barth replies:

According to the New Testament, the only answer to this question is an unhesitating “No”! Claims of this kind can in no way be inferred from Romans 13; they have no legal justification whatsoever. On the contrary, here we are very near the menace of “the Beast out of the abyss”; a just State will not require to make such claims.<sup>31</sup>

The demands of the *Volk* as a teleological ideal for ‘German Christians’ are examples of the State demanding a particular philosophy of life.

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<sup>30</sup> Barth, ‘Church and State’ in *Community, State and Church*, pp. 142-143.

<sup>31</sup> Barth, ‘Church and State’ in *Community, State and Church*, p. 143.



Barth points out that the New Testament writers understood the State as authoritarian and saw themselves as subjects, not citizens. A citizen exercises more responsibility for the activities of the State than a subject does. Paying taxes and remaining passive is insufficient. Responsible citizenship requires political duties, political action is necessary, which may and must also mean political struggle.

In this essay, "Church and State" Barth has established the foundation of his Christian social ethic. He began with Jesus Christ. His inspiration came from Romans 13 together with the exhortation to intercession in I Timothy 2. Is his extrapolation from New Testament exegesis to the Germany of 1938 valid and accurate? This depends on the interpretation placed on "subjection." Barth gives this answer:

If the prayer of Christians for the State constitutes the norm of their "subjection," which would only be an "annexe" of the priestly function of the Church, and if this prayer is taken seriously as the responsible intercession of the Christians for the State, then the scheme of purely passive subjection which apparently - but only apparently - governs the thought of Romans is broken.<sup>32</sup>

Serious prayer requires the corresponding action. Responsible politically active citizens produce democratic states, for every Christian is responsible for the justness of the State. The Church must have the freedom to proclaim divine justification, and the State will be a just State in the proportion it actively grants this freedom to the Church. This ensures a proper relationship between Church and State.

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<sup>32</sup> 'Church and State' in *Community, State and Church*, p. 144.

### 6.3 The Christian Community and the Civil Community

The third essay, 'The Christian Community and the Civil Community' was published in 1946. In it, Barth directs the Confessional Churches back to the fifth thesis of the Barmen Declaration, which they had signed twelve years earlier. This prophetic recalling of the Churches back to their one Lord is the foundation of the essay. It is a theological statement and not a prescriptive political demand to the State.

Each of the essay's thirty-five paragraphs is a statement or theses. The form of each statement follows a consistent pattern beginning with a statement about the Church.

There are no systems and no criteria, which apply to every situation, but only a way of looking at things. Therefore, the thirty-five paragraphs give only examples, which are not definitive and are only prolegomena.

Barth describes the relationship between Church and State in a theory of "community". This concept is a development of his thinking in the earlier essay, 'Church and State', in which the Church and State were united in their source Jesus Christ, but continue to exist as parallel institutions. Now, Barth no longer refers to the Church and the State, but to the Christian Community and the Civil Community, thus Church and State are now fully integrated within the wider concept of community.

This concept of community allows for a greater differentiation within each group, as the boundaries of Church and State have been extended to become wider so that they are now fully inclusive.

Previously, Barth used the word Church to mean those called by Jesus Christ. The entire community Christian is included in his new concept and it has become

ecumenical. All are included in the Christian Community, because the Gospel applies to all. In addition, this concept of community recognises that the goal is not in an eternal Church but a *polis* built by God.

Barth defines the civil community as all those living in a geographical area, under one constitutional government. This is a wider concept than he used in “Church and State,” which he defined the State as government, the institution that exercises power in the maintenance of law and order. The Civil Community, Barth says shares no common awareness of God with the Christian Community, but they are both bounded by the State as their physical authority.

However, although they share no common awareness of God, the comparison between the Church Community and the Civil Community should not be over emphasised, because each needs the other.<sup>33</sup> The Christian community should take the State seriously, because it needs the order of law. Christians know of the dangers of human presumption, and of their need for protection from chaos. Without civil order, there would be no Christian order.

Barth also develops the statement he made in 1934, about the relationship between the Church and State:

Fear God, honour the King! (I Pet. 2:17). Scripture tell us that by divine appointment the State, in this still unredeemed world in which also the Church is situated, has the task of maintaining justice and peace, so far as human discernment and human ability make this possible, by means of the threat and the use of force. The Church acknowledges with gratitude and reverence toward God the benefit of this, his appointment. It draws attention to God's Kingdom. God's commandments and justice, and those who rule and those

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<sup>33</sup> Barth, ‘Christian Community and Civil Community,’ in *Community, State and Church*, p. 145.



who are ruled. It trusts and obeys the power of the Word, by which God upholds all things.<sup>34</sup>

Again, Barth, in contrast with Augustine, emphasises that the State is not a product of sin.<sup>35</sup> The State is an instrument of divine grace and through the protection of human law gives the Church time to preach the gospel. The State does this “according to the measure of human insight and human capacity,” and “under the threat and exercise of force.”<sup>36</sup> As the State acts with divine “powers”, the Christian community acknowledges, “The benefaction of this ordinance of His with thankful, reverent hearts.”<sup>37</sup> The Church has a message to proclaim, whereas the State has no message, and depends on insights from elsewhere. The importance of the Christian community is to give these insights to the State. They are:

1. Prayer for the civil community.
2. To be responsible before God for the civil community; to work actively on behalf of the civil community.
3. To recognise civil power binding on Christians.<sup>38</sup>

Barth continues by discussing how Christians are to respond to the recognition that civil power is binding on them. He translates Romans 13.1 as the Christian community subordinating itself to the State, and not as in Luther’s translation as

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<sup>34</sup> Barth, Barmen Thesis No 5, quoted in Jüngel, *Christ, Justice and Peace*, p. xxvii.

<sup>35</sup> The State is used throughout ‘Christian Community and Civil Community’ as a synonym for the Civil Community. In doing this Barth does not intend the reader to understand any limitation in the concept of community.

<sup>36</sup> Barmen Thesis No 5.

<sup>37</sup> Barmen Thesis No 5.

<sup>38</sup> Barth, Statement VIII ‘Christian Community and Civil Community,’ in *Community, State and Church*, p. 158.

subjecting itself.<sup>39</sup> There is a fundamental difference, as subordination does not imply blind obedience. The Christian community subordinates itself to the demands of the civil power “for conscience sake,”<sup>40</sup> Barth illustrates this relationship with concentric-circles. Christians, he says, are the centre of the circles, the inner circle is the Church, and the outer the State. The two circles have the same centre in Jesus Christ. This geometric illustration replaces the image of two parallel institutions united in Jesus Christ as their source, which he used in ‘Church and State’. The image of concentric-circles completely integrates the Christian and Civil Communities, whereas the image of parallel lines differentiates the two communities. This integration, Barth says, is necessary because both the Christian and the civil cause are the same cause, which is the one God.

The Church community makes itself jointly responsible for the civil community, but it has no exclusive political theories, because there is no Christian political system. The Christian community because of its belief in revelation looks for the best of the political forms available, whilst recognizing that they are all are limited because they are formed, “according to the measures of human insight and human capacity.”<sup>41</sup> It is concerned with politics, and “subordinates” itself to the civil community by making use of its knowledge of the Lord, which enables it to distinguish between the just and the unjust State; that is between the State in Romans 13 and the State in Revelation 13. Thus by choosing political alternatives, which flow from its centre in Jesus Christ, and in this way the Christian community expresses its ‘subordination.’

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<sup>39</sup> Barth says Luther’s translation of Romans 13.1 is ‘subject,’ “which is something dangerously different from what is meant here.” ‘Christian Community and Civil Community,’ in *Community, State and Church*, p. 159.

<sup>40</sup> Romans 13. 5

<sup>41</sup> Barmen Declaration, Thesis 5.



The Christian community looks to the centre of the concentric circles, Jesus Christ, to find a direction and a line in making political decisions. There can be no appeal to 'natural law', as this would be taking a direction from and using the methods of the pagan State.<sup>42</sup> The Church can support the civil community with honesty and calmness, because it does not seek power and influence; these are not applicable goals. The Church, says Barth, should be grateful for the gifts of the State, such as a share in education, broadcasting and financial relief. He makes the point that if the State refuses the Church on these issues the Church will look to itself for reasons and not to the State. The Church must first establish a claim before it is considered as a factor of importance. Barth describes how this claim is to be made. He does this not by using abstract principles, but by giving concrete examples.

At this point Barth introduces a powerful allegory to describe the relationship between the Civil Community, the State, and the Kingdom of God. The State is an allegory, 'as a correspondence and an analogue to the Kingdom of God.'<sup>43</sup> As the outer circle it is capable of reflecting the inner circle of the Church, but as this reflection has not been fixed at one historical moment it needs continually to be reinterpreted by the Church on behalf of the State. This continual interpretation moulds the State into an 'allegory of the Kingdom of God and the fulfilment of its righteousness'.<sup>44</sup> The initiative for this "moulding" has to come from the Church, because the State knows nothing of the mystery of the Kingdom of God, or the mystery at its own centre. Barth has now established how the Church can speak to the State, but it must constantly remember

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<sup>42</sup> Natural Law, 'By "natural law" we mean the embodiment of what man is alleged to regard as universally right and wrong, as necessary, permissible and forbidden "by nature," that is on any conceivable premise. Barth, Statement XI, 'Christian Community and Civil Community,' in *Community, State and Church*, p. 163.

<sup>43</sup> See Statement XIV 'Christian Community and Civil Community,' in *Community, State and Church* p. 168.

<sup>44</sup> Barth, 'Christian Community and Civil Community,' in *Community, State and Church* p. 169.



that it is not yet redeemed, and therefore, the Church is a penultimate and not an ultimate. It can never become an ultimate, as the Kingdom of God is the task of the State. Of course, the State neither knows nor understands its task, but the Church knows of the Word of God, and receives the Word of God through Christ in the Scriptures, in its own preaching and through the sacraments. The Church speaks from its interpretation of the Word as it is revealed to it, and must speak of this Word to the State. By doing this honestly and sincerely, the Church fulfils its task of moulding the State, and does so by choosing from among the political options, those that most closely suggest a “correspondence” to the “analogue”.

Barth consistently maintains that there is no theological system guiding the choice of political options. Therefore, it is not, and never will be, possible to provide a model of Christian political order as there is no definitive blueprint held in the human mind, because all human thought is but a prolegomena. However, he does give some provisional but not definitive examples:

We need examples because we are concerned to illuminate the analogical, but extremely concrete relationship between the Christian Gospel and certain political decisions and modes of behaviour.<sup>45</sup>

Of the political forms available, a democracy offers the best analogy. However, there can never be a Christian political party, because it would be in opposition to other parties and the Gospel message is for all. Thus, Barth excludes any possibility of the Christian message becoming a sectarian ideal.

These three essays are most unusual, because they are not defending one position over against another form of social ethics. If all is a prolegomena is it possible to extract a

coherent social philosophy from them? Yes it is, if one remembers that for Barth dogmatics is ethics. The Word of God revealed through the mediation of Jesus Christ establishes a covenant relationship with all people through their creation, reconciliation and the promise of redemption in Jesus Christ as Lord. The response to this gift is obedience to God's Will, made possible by the gift of Grace through the Holy Spirit. So to speak of ethics is to speak of dogmatics: the Word of God. This Barth has done very successfully in the three essays considered in this chapter.

In these essays, Barth rejects any appeal to 'natural law' as the foundation for a definition of the State, and he rejects the traditional Augustinian-Reformation view of the State as only a means of preservation and order, because it separates creation from redemption. He has developed a doctrine of the State centred on Christ. In which there is a correspondence, through analogy, between the heavenly *polis* and the earthly *polis*. All political action, for Barth, is guided by this analogy, for it is not an *analogia entis*, an image from man to God, but an *analogia fidei*, an image from God to man.

Brunner attacked Barth for his use of analogy as content, saying his argument could as well support other states than democracy.<sup>45</sup> Christ the King can support the idea of a monarchy; Christ the Lord can support a totalitarian state and Barth's final analogy carries the possibility of Christ the servant supporting a slave State. However, this attack misses the point of Barth's analogy, as in the Kingdom of God there is no sin, human autocracy does not exist, and all mankind is equal before the Lord. The closest approximation to this State is one moulded in the form of a democracy, because

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<sup>45</sup> Barth, 'Church and State' in *Community, State and Church*, p. 179.

<sup>46</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption* (Westminster, 1952) p. 319.

within it all will be equal before the law and all will be offered equal protection under the law.

The Church is central to Barth's social ethic, because the two communities are under the Kingship of Christ. The Church reveals the Word of God, mediated through scripture, preaching and sacraments. This Word is God's Word, and not a human voice peddling rival philosophies. It is the Word, which creates, reconciles and redeems. It is the source of unity and reality, and in this, Barth has grounded his social philosophy for there is no other ground upon which Christian social ethics can stand.



## Chapter 7 Critical readings of Karl Barth's ethics

Criticism of Barth's ethics began very early; disapproval occurred soon after the publication of the first edition of *The Epistle to the Romans* in 1919. Paul Althaus writing in 1923 said, rather sadly, that Barth's work was 'a renunciation of Christian ethics with any content'.<sup>1</sup>

In 1938, Cullberg said of Barth's ethical writings, 'the obvious suspicion is that the "Theo-centricity" of Christianity could be defined in such a way that the problem of ethics is completely eliminated'.<sup>2</sup>

von Balthasar's *Karl Barth: Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie* (1951) is the most substantial and influential, and became the definitive map of the territory of Barth's ethics for over forty years.<sup>3</sup> He describes two turning points in Barth's theology. The first, he says, occurs in the second edition of Barth's *The Epistle to the Romans* (1922). In this work he describes Barth rejecting the more liberal theology of his teachers, and of his moving to a dialectic form. The second movement he identifies as happening in Barth's work on *Anselm* (1931), which von Balthasar describes as moving from the dialectic form to analogy. He says the 'turn to analogy' took place between 1927 and 1938, and it appeared in its 'fully developed form' in the *Church Dogmatics*. Of the second change in Barth's thinking von Balthasar says that

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<sup>1</sup> Althaus, 'Theologie und Geschichte', *Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie* 1 (1923), p. 741.

<sup>2</sup> Cullberg, J. *Das Problem der Ethik in der dialektischen Theologie*, (Uppsala: A.B.Lundequistska, 1938) p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> von Balthasar, *Karl Barth: Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie*. (Köln: J.Hegner, 1951)

Barth replaced the “Word of God,” as his central concept with “Jesus Christ, God and man”, and this development allowed analogy in Barth’s theology to come to full expression.

Critics, mainly because of the map provided by von Balthasar’s reading, described Barth’s theology as neo-orthodox, grounding man’s relationship with God on doctrine. Thus, his opponents are able to accuse Barth of denying the place of human experience in man’s relationship with God.

### 7.1 Cornelius van Til

Cornelius van Til, a Reformed Orthodox Presbyterian theologian, in a work published in 1946, and rarely quoted in the literature, is far more outspoken in his criticism of Barth.<sup>4</sup> He makes a far stronger claim than those who say Barth has no ethics, arguing that Barth’s theology is not in the tradition of orthodox historic Christianity, but is a form of philosophical modernism. In opposition to previous critics, who claim Barth based his work on doctrine van Til believes Barth has completely ignored Christian doctrine in favour of philosophy.

In using the phrase, ‘philosophical modernism’ and by calling his critique *The New Modernists* van Til reads Barth and Brunner’s theologies as part of the philosophical tradition of modernity. He defines the tradition by its representative members: Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger, and says that belonging to this “tradition” places Barth among those who are, ‘opponents of the truths of the Gospel’, as the “New

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<sup>4</sup> Cornelius van Til. *The new modernism: an appraisal of the theology of Barth and Brunner*, (London: J. Clarke, 1946)

Modernists” pursue ideas and not the facts of the Gospel. He describes these “ideas” as the increasing autonomy of reason, and their establishment as the source of the universal with the subsequent denial of a metaphysical God.

Of course, all theology begins from a position and none is neutral. In relation to his criticism of Barth, van Til's theological position is interesting, as it became part of the foundation and purposes of the Westminster Theological Seminary, in Philadelphia. This seminary broke away from the Princeton Theological Seminary in 1926, as a response to the wider conflict in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., which became known as the Presbyterian Controversy.<sup>5</sup> The roots of the discord are in the fundamentalist - modernist controversy of the 1920's. The disagreement was primarily about the place and role of history in theology, and variant views of history eventually split the American church.<sup>6</sup>

Princeton Seminary was at the centre of the conflict J. Gresham Machen and Henry Sloane Coffin, who represent the opposing views of the Fundamentalists and the Moderates, were on its board.<sup>7</sup> Both were pastors in the Presbyterian Church and both had studied in Marburg with Herrmann, Barth's teacher.<sup>8</sup> Herrmann, in seeking "certainty" for his faith, argues that, ‘the experience of the inner life of Jesus, and not the scriptural record, provides assurance for Christians’.<sup>9</sup> There are two reasons why it is instructive and illuminative, to understand Herrmann's theology. The first is that his

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<sup>5</sup> See Bradley Longfield. *The Presbyterian Controversy, Fundamentalists, Modernists & Moderates*, (Oxford: OUP, 1991), pp. 1 -176 for a detailed discussion and analysis of the formation of Westminster Theological Seminary, and bibliographical details of the main participants in the split from Princeton Theological Seminary in September 1929.

<sup>6</sup> Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy*, p. 89.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Sloane Coffin was awarded several honorary degrees including one from the University of Glasgow, see Longfield, B.J. *The Presbyterian Controversy* p. 87.

<sup>8</sup> In 1957 Barth referred to Herrmann along with others as being, “not afraid to face modern man.” ‘Evangelical Theology in the Nineteenth Century’ in *The Humanity of God*. p. 16.



work focuses attention on the theological issues of the time; and secondly, it is the common theological foundation for Machen, Coffin, and Barth, and from which they developed so differently.

Responding to pressure from historical critical biblical scholarship Herrmann wanted to lessen the scriptural foundation of the Reformed faith. He said Luther, in his time, could assume all would agree with the truth of God's Word in Scripture, but this was not the case at the end of the nineteenth century. There is an interesting change in the subtitle to Herrmann's *The Communion of the Christian with God*. The first two editions are subtitled *A discussion in agreement with Luther*,<sup>10</sup> but in the 1903 edition this has been changed to, *Described on the basis of Luther's statements*.<sup>11</sup> Herrmann also says in the preface to the first two editions, 'I have sought to set forth and to justify that communion with God which Luther reached through his understanding of Jesus Christ.' This is removed from the later edition as Herrmann was under pressure, regarding the place of scripture, from more conservative theologians.

The second English edition<sup>12</sup> is based on the fourth German edition, and the editor draws the reader's attention to, "the numerous additions and alterations of the later German editions, amounting to nearly a tenth part of the whole book."<sup>13</sup> In the preface, Herrmann attacks his accusers:

They wish to see preserved the sacredness of the Scriptural tradition. They do not notice that they themselves are profaning it when they lay upon others as a ceremonial law what is in truth a gift of God's grace. Nor do they reflect that

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<sup>9</sup> Herrmann, *The Communion of the Christian with God*, second English edition 1906, pages 74-79

<sup>10</sup> Wilhelm Herrmann. *The Communion of the Christian with God : A discussion in agreement with the view of Luther*, translated by J.Sandys Stanton. From the second thoroughly revised edition of 1892 (1895).

<sup>11</sup> Wilhelm Herrmann. *The Communion of the Christian with God: Described on the basis of Luther's statements*, 2nd English edition translated by J.Sandys Stanton from the fourth German edition of 1903 (1906)

<sup>12</sup> Published in 1906.

<sup>13</sup> Published in 1903.

the Holy Scriptures are truly revered when they are, first of all, investigated in their historically determined reality; and when, in the second place, these books are used, just as they offer themselves to us, so that we may seek out the revelation of God.<sup>14</sup>

Herrmann, however, thinks historical criticism has overturned the inherent truth of the Bible. He wants to understand the Gospel stories as a response to the inner life of Jesus, as in his opinion the Church was born out of individual responses to the moral strength of Jesus. Jesus' behaviour, as seen by his followers, came from an inner strength unlike that found in any other human being. He believes that Jesus' inner strength gave birth to the Christian Church, and that it continues to live by it. He says that the witness of the *outward* life of the church witnessing to the *inner* life of Jesus attracts non-believers. This is why he thinks the preaching of the Word is so important. He says that the true importance of this inner significance is that it allows Christians to affirm the truth of doctrine. Without this inner significance Christians would not have begun affirming doctrine in their faith life. In addition, the inner experience of Jesus is accessible at any moment in history, and in this way, Herrmann avoids two problems: firstly, how an accident of history can become a universal truth and secondly, he avoids the historical critical attacks on the truth of scripture. His Christianity needs neither the historical Jesus nor the truth of scripture, and he expresses these opinions in the following passage:

Any conscientious reader of the gospels will be constantly questioning whether the events actually happened as they stand in the narrative. Of course we can forcibly suppress this doubt, and many a Christian will think it as inevitable necessity to do so. But such a suppression will not help him. Help lies for us, not in what we make of the story, but in what the contents of the story make of us. And the one thing which the gospels give us as an overpowering reality which allows no doubt is just the most tender part of all: it is the inner life of Jesus itself. Only he who yearns after an honest fullness

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<sup>14</sup> Herrmann. *The Communion of the Christian with God: Described on the basis of Luther's statements*, 2nd English edition. p. x.



for his own inner life can perceive the strength and fullness of that soul of Jesus, and whenever we come to see the Person of Jesus, then, under the impress of the inner life breaking through all the veils of the story, we ask no more as to the trustworthiness of the Evangelists.<sup>15</sup>

Neither Machen nor Coffin agreed with Herrmann, but neither did they agree with each other, about the place and significance of scripture for Christians, or about the ‘truths’ of history. They were divided on these issues and on their greater goal of the Christian ethical message.

Machen was from the Southern States, and secession, as a satisfactory way of resolving conflicts, had a definite place in his thoughts.<sup>16</sup> Although a little known professor at the end of World War I, by 1923, with the publication of *The Origin of Paul's Religion* (1921) and *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923), Machen had established himself as a respected scholar and polemicist.<sup>17</sup> Machen had a specific and definite view of the place of history. ‘He believed that the “facts” of the past were immediately available to people without “interpretation.”’<sup>18</sup> For Machen, the Gospels recorded facts unconditioned by their historical setting.<sup>19</sup>

Give up history, and you can retain some things. You can retain a belief in God ...you can retain a lofty ethical ideal. But be perfectly clear about one point - you can never retain a gospel. For gospel means 'good news,' tidings, information about something that has happened. In other words, it means history. A gospel independent of history is simply a contradiction in terms.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Herrmann, This passage appears in both English translations, first edition page 62 and second edition page 75. and shows that Herrmann's attempt at place Christian faith on the secure basis of the ‘inner’ life of Jesus remained his position throughout the other substantial changes in his work.

<sup>16</sup> Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy*, p. 52.

<sup>17</sup> Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy*, p. 53.

<sup>18</sup> Marsden, G.M. "J.Gresham Machen, History and Truth," *Westminster Theological Journal* 42 (Fall 1979): 157-75, quoted by Bradley Longfield, p. 48.

<sup>19</sup> Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy*, p. 102.

<sup>20</sup> J.Gresham Machen. "History and Faith," *Princeton Theological Review* 5 (July 1915): pp. 337-38, republished in Machen, *What is Christianity?* pp. 170-84.



In believing history to be facts, unconditioned by historical setting and immediately available without interpretation, Machen has maintained a position in opposition to his teacher Herrmann. It seems Machen's studies in Marburg had little effect upon his theology. His problem was the defence of Biblical fundamentalism against attacks from historical-critical Biblical study. His solution, developed by his pupil van Til, is to presuppose that ideas form history, and that they are ultimate truths and therefore not open to criticism from a higher authority.

Coffin had a very different view of the place of history. To Coffin and his allies, who had accepted historicist views, the Scriptures embodied timeless truths in historically limited language.<sup>21</sup> Coffin was a native of New York, whose father was a successful lawyer. He had studied liberal theology at New College, Edinburgh and at Marburg, and became pastor of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church and an associate professor of the Union Theology Seminary in New York. 'In 1924 no presbytery in the church was more aggressively liberal than the Presbytery of New York, and no Presbyterian liberal in New York was more prominent than Henry Sloane Coffin.'<sup>22</sup>

Although the foundation of the conflict was a disagreement about history as unconditioned fact, which is open to constant re-interpretation, there was more at risk for both conservatives and liberals: the moral argument.

Machen and his supporters founded Westminster Theological Seminary to "carry on and perpetuate the policies and traditions of the Princeton Theological Seminary, as it

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<sup>21</sup> Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy*, p. 102.

<sup>22</sup> Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy*, p. 79.

existed prior to the reorganisation thereof in the year 1929.”<sup>23</sup> However, their purposes were far more positive, for they believed in the power of *ideas* to change the world.

Machen said:

The really great moments of history are the moments which mark the first enunciation of great ideas. Ideas, after all, are the great conquerors: they cross the best dug trenches; they cut across the most intricate barbed wire; they move armies like puppets; they build empires and pull them down.<sup>24</sup>

Here, in Machen’s concept of “ideas” we see the reason for the foundation of the Westminster Theological Seminary: “Ideas, after all are the great conquerors,” he says and his “ideas” are the foundation for a renewal of a Biblical fundamentalist morality to be spread throughout America and the world. His “ideas” were to be disseminated through the preaching and teaching of the “facts” of Scripture, unconditioned by history or interpretation, by seminarians from Westminster Seminary. The “idea” comes first, that is Biblical fundamentalist morality, and the *medium* for its dissemination is the preaching of the unconditioned fact of the Gospel. In this way, the method of spreading the idea becomes the truth of the idea, whilst concealing the idea. Machen’s understanding of orthodox Christian doctrine becomes the true revelation of God, to be obeyed by all, and to be used to distinguish the true from the false Christian.

We need to keep Machen’s thoughts in mind, “Ideas, are after all, are the great conquerors of the world,” when considering van Til’s arguments, because he follows in the tradition of Machen and his supporters, and Conservative Biblical

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<sup>23</sup> Charter and Constitution of Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia, May 1930), 15 quoted by Longfield p. 177.

<sup>24</sup> Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy*, p. 179.



fundamentalists continue to be the most influential group in defining the agenda for the Christian ethical debate.

[Excursus: To underline this point, a single, simple, search of the internet revealed three hundred and sixty-nine sites dedicated to the views of Machen. These include copies of his writings, biographies, essays and reflections on the moral questions of today. His complete works are available on CD ROM with an audio of the author delivering his lectures. There is also an e-mail list for discussing van Til's theology. Members of the list must be in agreement with van Til's views before joining. On 1 January 2000, there were 253 subscribers. The introduction posted on the web site reads,

The van Til list is an email discussion forum devoted to the apologetics, philosophy and theology of Cornelius van Til, the former Professor of Apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary. Intended primarily for informed Christian laymen, the aim of the list is to increase the participants' understanding of Van Til's thought and subsequently to apply it to the various forms of unbelief manifested in contemporary non-Christian worldviews. Only relatively recently has Van Til's contribution been taken from the ivory towers of seminary classrooms and put into practice in the universities, offices and streets of the real world -- we hope that the list discussions will encourage that trend. Above all, the participants seek to glorify with their thinking the God in whom we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28), and without whom there would be no thinking whatsoever (Ps. 14:1; Rom. 1:21-22; 1 Cor. 1:20; Col. 2:3). All are welcome to join the discussion provided they abide by the list guidelines and generally uphold the purposes of the list. It will be assumed, however, that the active participants will affirm at least the major points of Van Til's teachings, i.e. Reformed theology and presuppositional apologetics. In other words, those who have an axe to grind against Christianity, Calvinism or presuppositionalism should find somewhere else to wield it!]

van Til's main criticism of Barth is that he follows ideas and not the truths of the gospel. There is circularity in thinking, which begins to appear and further develops as van Til's thesis unfolds.



van Til was Professor of Apologetics at Westminster. His theology is described as 'presuppositionalism' as it requires an ultimate category of thought or a conceptual framework to be assumed in order to make a sensible interpretation of reality.<sup>25</sup> For example in theological discussion the existence of God and the truth of the Bible are necessarily presupposed, since they are ultimate truths and can not be judged by any other truth. Ultimate truths are presupposed and required as a precondition for epistemology. Barth traces the foundations of the tradition of 'presuppositionalism' to a movement of rational orthodoxy in the 18th century.<sup>26</sup> He identifies its beginnings in the work of the Reformed theology of Salomon van Til (1643-1713).

What [he] achieved, and all the leading theologians of the time cooperated in the movement, can never be overestimated either in its basic significance or in the seriousness of its historical consequences. With these theologians there emerged clearly and logically what was perhaps the secret *telos* and *pathos* of the whole preceding development. Human religion, the relationship with God which we can and actually do have apart from revelation, is not an unknown but a very well known quantity both in form and content, and as such it is something which has to be reckoned with, as having a central importance for all theological thinking. It constitutes, in fact, the presupposition, the criterion, and the necessary framework for an understanding of revelation.<sup>27</sup>

Cornelius van Til's presuppositionalism is therefore the continuation of a theological tradition of natural religion as it reflects the tradition of Kant, Schleiermacher, Hegel, Strauss, Feuerbach, and Troeltsch. The means of receiving revelation are presumed, as are the methods of understanding the revelation, and all is prior to the event of God's revelation. This theological position stands on the same foundations as any other human knowledge as ontological and epistemological claims are grounded in reason. However, natural religion has a different content but the same form as all other knowledge.

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<sup>25</sup> *The New Dictionary of Theology* edited by Sinclair B. Ferguson, et al. Universities and Christian Colleges Fellowship, 1988.

Barth, as we have seen, opposed all forms of natural religion in his use of dialectics as a method.<sup>28</sup> He insists that there can be no presuppositions in theological discussion, for *all* follows from God's revelation, including the means of receiving that revelation:

All these more or less radical and destructive movements in the history of theology in the last two centuries are simply variations on one simple theme, and that theme was clearly introduced by van Til: that religion has not to be understood in the light of revelation, but revelation in the light of religion.<sup>29</sup> Natural religion in robbing theology of its object, revelation. In taking up its stand with other forms of knowledge looses its purpose. The newness, the recreation, and the reconciliation accomplished in the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is lost. Theology in loosing its object looses its abilities and becomes defenceless. It is no longer an instrument for turning the world upside down, which is the true task of Christian ethics. On this theme Barth makes what seems a surprising statement we are defenceless against the "German Christians" of our own time, unless we know how to guard against the development, which took place in van Til.<sup>30</sup>

Having considered van Til's presuppositionism as an expression of natural religion and having indicated the concerns it raises for Christian ethics, we turn to consider van Til's claim, that Barth's work is part of a philosophical tradition.<sup>31</sup> van Til says this necessarily excludes Barth's work from expressing historic orthodox Christian doctrine. He traces the line of this tradition from Kant, Hegel, and Kierkegaard to Barth and Brunner, who, he says, are "new modernists". However, Barth was most critical of the Modernist view, he says:

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<sup>26</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, p. 288.

<sup>27</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, p. 289.

<sup>28</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, section 17 "The Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion." p. 300.

<sup>29</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, p. 291.

<sup>30</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, pp. 290-2.

<sup>31</sup> van Til, *New Modernism*, (1946)



The Modernist view from which we must demarcate ourselves here goes back to the Renaissance philosopher Descartes with his proof of God from human self-certainty.<sup>32</sup>

van Til's parents emigrated from Holland to America in 1905, when he was aged ten, bringing with them the Dutch Reformed tradition, and this tradition colours his purposes. His thesis needs to be understood in the light of the treatment above of the Westminster Theological Seminary. He has a position to argue, and it supports the one set out in the Westminster constitution by Machen and his supporters. Presuppositionalism follows the tradition begun by Machen at Westminster of the interpretation of revelation through the precedent of ideas, but of course, it has a longer history, as has been discussed.

van Til describes Barth and Brunner as representatives of the 'Theology of Crisis' and he describes Barth as the primary figure, and he discusses Brunner's theology as it differs, or agrees, with Barth's work. He says Barth is more "modernistic" than Brunner, and this is apparent in the separating out of their differences in the "Barth Brunner debate", following the separation, "modernism", he says, becomes more marked in Barth's work. He describes the 'Theology of Crisis' as being a 'foe of historic Christianity':

It is in the interests of plain intellectual honesty, then that the Theology of Crisis should be seen for what it is. Both the liberal and the believer in historic Christianity should know who is friend and who is foe The Theology of Crisis is a friend of modernism and a foe of historic Christianity.<sup>33</sup>

In the introduction to *Then New Modernism*, van Til says, that Barth sets his theology against those who claim to have a system of truth. He is correct, because Barth says a

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<sup>32</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, p. 195.

<sup>33</sup> van Til, *The New Modernism*, p. 378.



true theology cannot be systematic, for God is transcendent and free and cannot be constrained by any system.

To support his view van Til quotes Barth's words 'A true theology must be activist<sup>34</sup>'; that is 'it must deal with the freely speaking God.'<sup>35</sup> In response to Barth's demand, that a true theology must be activist, van Til states, that Barth's theology is, 'informed by the principles of modern critical philosophy.' He argues that any theology that is moulded in accordance to the pattern of modern critical philosophy is bound to be hostile to the Christian faith. He analyses Barth's theology to show that, 'Barth's earliest writings are completely dominated by the principles of Criticism.'<sup>36</sup>

Barth made a valid and interesting response to those who criticise him for being too philosophical and giving insufficient attention to the Scriptures. He says:

In reading the Bible, as in all other reading and hearing, we use some sort of key or scheme of thought as a "vehicle" in which to "accompany" it. In an exploratory way we attribute to that which confronts us, to the image arising from our observation (we attribute this to it already as it emerges in the act of observation), one or other of the possibilities of meaning already known to us through our philosophy. In the process we think of something — something which we can think in terms of our philosophy — without regard to the fact that this something as such is not already there in the text and as such is not the object of our observation, but is very properly added in our mind if in the act of observation we are not to fail completely to find possible clues for interpretation — for after all it is us who observe. This process must certainly be undertaken with great care and circumspection. But it cannot as such be rejected with horror.<sup>37</sup>

van Til's argues that Barth and Brunner are foes of Christian doctrine, and he bases his thesis on Barth and Brunner's rejection of an antecedent God. van Til believes

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<sup>34</sup> Activistic, a doctrine or practices that emphasises direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue, adjective, first recorded use 1915.

<sup>35</sup> van Til, *The New Modernism*, p. xiii

<sup>36</sup> van Til, *The New Modernism*, p. xiii.

orthodox historic Christianity requires an antecedent God, who gives ontological foundation to reality, who is the cause of creation, whose acts are known through history, and that these acts are recorded in the scriptures. It is the rejection of this position, says van Til, that shows Barth and Brunner are expounding a phenomenological philosophy, and not Christian doctrine.

In his concluding chapter, having surveyed theological “modernism”, as represented by Barth and Brunner, van Til gives a vivid description of the extent of their crimes, saying:

There is perhaps no instance of greater intellectual confusion to be found in the annals of human error than that of the retention of orthodox Christian forms by the purely naturalistic theology such as Modernism is. It is as though carbolic acid were poured into water bottles without a change of label.<sup>38</sup>

As a post-Hegelian Barth keeps ontology and epistemology together in insisting that God’s being is the event of becoming. Therefore, in his theology there is no *a priori* ontology, described from the epistemology of a detached observer. van Til says it is these positions that make Barth a modernist and therefore an enemy.

When considering Barth and Brunner, van Til sees Barth as the more deadly foe. He describes Barth’s work as expressing more clearly the dialectic methodology of the phenomenological philosophers, and claims that Kierkegaard's dialectic method strongly influenced Barth's earliest work, *The Epistle to the Romans*.<sup>39</sup> He also argues that Kierkegaard's dialectic is a reaction to Hegel’s dialectics. Therefore, he says, it is necessary to investigate the relationship between these two forms of dialectic and

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<sup>37</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, p. 729.

<sup>38</sup> van Til, *The New Modernism*, p. 371.

<sup>39</sup> Published in 1919.



their relationship in general to the critical philosophy of Kant. He gives no details to substantiate his claim, nor does he describe exactly how Barth was influenced or where this influence may be seen in his writings.

In order to consider van Til's claim, that Barth is a "new modernist" discussion of Barth's intellectual debt to Kierkegaard needs to be considered before a discussion of his criticism of Barth's ethics can take place.

van Til's recognition of Kierkegaard's influence on Barth is certainly true. Barth clearly expressed his intellectual debt to Kierkegaard for the realisation that God is wholly other, and cannot be apprehended or known by any form of natural theology, and this position Barth maintained throughout his work, believing that the idea of natural theology was fundamentally wrong.<sup>40</sup> However, his appreciation of this point does not involve him in accepting Kierkegaard's dialectic, as can be shown by discussing Barth's theological method.

Two points about Barth's theological method need to be made as a consequence of the statement, 'God is wholly other.' They are, firstly that no human endeavour is definitive,<sup>41</sup> and secondly that there is no system,<sup>42</sup> as all theology is necessarily prolegomena, for there can be no standpoint, and the theologian has to start out anew each day. When asked to give an introduction to his theology Barth said:

'I must confess to you that that which I call 'my theology' consists finally – when I examine it closely – in a single point. And it is not a *standpoint*, as one might demand as the most minimal requirement of a proper theology. Rather,

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<sup>40</sup> A point Barth reaffirmed in 1957, see *The Humanity of God*, p. 24.

<sup>41</sup> Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p.10. [The Preface to the Second Edition.]

<sup>42</sup> Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p.10. [The Preface to the Second Edition.] p. 10.



it is a *mathematical* point on which one cannot stand. It is merely a viewpoint.<sup>43</sup>

A further influence on Barth by Kierkegaard is his refusal to accept the classical solution that all knowledge is but a bringing forth of that which is already known that is recollection through anamnesis, and he insists that knowledge of God is by God's unnecessitated self-revelation mediated through the Word, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.<sup>44</sup> Still with Kierkegaard Barth also rejects any possibility of the objective reality of God's existence being established in the mind, because God is the unknown God, and, precisely because He is unknown, He bestows life and breath on all things. Therefore, the power of God can be detected neither in the world of nature nor in the souls of men.<sup>45</sup>

van Til says Barth has used Kierkegaard's concept of the Individual in his Christology. This, "Individual" claims to understand a principle of combining unlimited diversity with a comprehensive unity that is combining the many and the one. van Til claims that Barth employed this unifying principle in his first major work.<sup>46</sup> However, Barth strongly refutes all claims that he is basing the Word of God on existentialist philosophy, and he rejects Sigfried's interpretation saying:<sup>47</sup>

In the section at issue, however, this misunderstanding was relatively close, and it arose immediately. To my horror T.Sigfried (p.36) interpreted the passage as follows: "On this foundation (i.e., the existential thinking

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<sup>43</sup> Karl Barth, 'Not und Verheißung der christlichen Verkündigung', in idem, *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie*, p. 99.

<sup>44</sup> Søren Kierkegaard. 'The God as Teacher and Saviour', Chapter II, in *Philosophical Fragments*, p.23.

<sup>45</sup> Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 36.

<sup>46</sup> *Commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans*.

<sup>47</sup> See second edition of *Church Dogmatics* I volume one. Barth in pp. 125 to 131, 'The Nature of the Word of God,' discusses the interpretation T.Sigfried, in *Das Wort und die Existenz*, I, 1930, pp. 35f. based on a reading of this section in the first edition, dated 1936.

introduced) he proposes to build his dogmatics.” This was not really my intention <sup>48</sup>

Even though Barth rejects the antecedent ontological basis of creation in the Trinity, van Til says, that in using Kierkegaard’s concept of the Individual he removes any place for the Holy Spirit.

The ‘combining of unlimited diversity with a comprehensive unity’ is the first stage of Kierkegaard’s development of the dialectic; this is ‘subjective actuality’. It is only part of the dialectic of Kierkegaard’s Individual. In rejecting, Hegel’s dialectic Kierkegaard imposed a finite limit on human self-consciousness, and in this determination, he understood faith as being the connection *from* man *to* God. In the “theology of crisis”, Barth reverses Kierkegaard’s movement from below to above. That is, the connection is *from* God *to* man as God acts vertically in time, creating a new event. Human beings are determined by this event and do not determine it. The individual is a finite circle within the infinite circle of God’s act, and in this way God, who is *being* determined, determines reality.

van Til's comments on Barth's methodology follow from his presupposition that Barth uses Kierkegaard's dialectic of "either/or". On this, point van Til has misread Barth, as he is wrong in thinking that Kierkegaard's dialectic influenced Barth, who was far more impressed with the Hegelian dialectic "both/and." This is clear from reading his

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<sup>48</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, p. 125.



chapter on Hegel<sup>49</sup> in *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*,<sup>50</sup> in which Kierkegaard<sup>51</sup> receives only three brief mentions.<sup>52</sup>

Boyd's insight on the philosophical influences on Barth is clear:

Barth's treatment of Hegel distorts its subject; but it also disguises the substantial similarities between Hegel's thought and Barth's own dialectical inversion of absolutism.<sup>53</sup>

Discussing the "Freedom under the Word" Barth, says of Kierkegaard's philosophy:

If we elevate the anti-Hegelianism of Kierkegaard into a principle, believing that the key to the mystery of the old and the new covenant is to be found in anxiety about the limitation of human existence by its subjection to death or in its relationship to the Thou stabilised in ordinances, we must remember that we are definitely ranging ourselves with those who "explain" the Bible, i.e., read it through the spectacles of a definite system of ideas, which has the character of a "world-view" and will in some way make itself felt as such when we read and explain the Bible. If we hold up hands of horror at the very idea, we must not forget that without such systems of explanation, without such spectacles, we cannot read the Bible at all.<sup>54</sup>

This comment, whilst not directly refuting van Til's criticism, shows both that Barth is acutely aware of the problem of using philosophical ideas to interpret Scripture, and that he recognises the inevitability of the process. His comments about Kierkegaard's worldview are not favourable, and do not suggest he used Kierkegaard's philosophy as an interpretative tool.

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<sup>49</sup> Hegel 1770-1831.

<sup>50</sup> Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*. See chapter 10 on Hegel p. 384, and see p. 666 for three references in the index to Kierkegaard.

<sup>51</sup> Kierkegaard 1813-1855.

<sup>52</sup> See also Barth's comment on Kierkegaard's influence on Nineteenth Century theology made in an address given at the meeting of the *Goethesellschaft* in Hanover, 8th January, 1957. "Kierkegaard in particular did not have the slightest influence on 19th-century theology, except, again, in the case of a few individuals'. English translation 'Evangelical Theology in the Nineteenth Century' in *The Humanity of God*, p. 13.

<sup>53</sup> Boyd, *Dogmatics Among the Ruins*.

<sup>54</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2, p. 728.



In addition, Barth's dialectic does not proceed in a linear form or make any attempt at a synthesis, but holds the paradox constantly in tension. However, the difference between Barth's dialectic and Kierkegaard's is greater than the means of synthesis. Barth proceeds from God's revelation in Christ, which is given, to a discussion of the possibilities that are required for such a revelation. Growth is not an unfolding of the dialectic, but rather a statement of possibilities that must now be the case. This is important, for Barth's work does not flow from a presupposition providing a potentiality that becomes actuality. God's being is in His becoming and Barth discusses what this tells us about God and what is an appropriate response to this knowledge. All this is part of God's proceeding. It is an incorrect interpretation of Barth's methodology to assume that these "possibilities" could be known outside the becoming of God's being. This *being* is the Holy Trinity, and *Church Dogmatics* is a theology of the Trinity. van Til's presuppositions do not allow him to see the consequences of his actions in trying to fit Barth into a template of what he believes is required from a Christian theology.

Questions about the "ought" of human behaviour are always predicated on prior metaphysical or ontological questions about reality. Disagreements about methodology can hide this fact, and it is important to recall that for van Til reality is *a priori*, whereas for Barth reality is determined *a posteriori*, and their ethics reflect this fundamental difference in ontology.

van Til says that following the Barth Brunner debate, 'the theologians emphasised that which separated them.' van Til is right to say that Barth places emphasis on the principle of the "freedom of God", which is God's freedom to become that which he is not. In the Incarnation God's being is in its becoming; that which is and that which

is not become *new* in Christ. Reality has an utterly unpredictable irrationality. God is free to choose how and when to reveal Himself in His being. van Til is right when he says that Barth puts aside the attributes, which, in orthodox Christian belief, give content by analogy to God's being.

Barth's use of the principle "the freedom of God" is, van Til says, 'virtually the same as that employed in his earlier writings. If a difference may be noted it may be suggested that as time has gone on Barth has become more activist and ever more anti-metaphysical.'<sup>55</sup> He claims:

The argument between Barth and Brunner has, proved that both theologians have been quite consistent with themselves at every stage of their work in virtually doing what the "consciousness-theologians" before them had been doing, namely, reducing the revelation of the God of historic Christianity to the ideals of self-sufficient man. Neither Barth nor Brunner has been able to offer a theology that is basically different from that of Schleiermacher. They have ultimately drawn their sustenance from the consciousness of man as such.<sup>56</sup>

Barth thought he was writing a theology fundamentally different to that of Schleiermacher. His position in accepting the truth of Kierkegaard's concept of the infinite qualitative difference between time and eternity and man and God, which places the infinite with God and the finite with man, is in direct opposition to Schleiermacher's view, which Barth describes in this way:

In contrast to the Enlightenment theology, the 19th-century theologians focused their attention on one particular point in relation to all the various world views of their time: man's supposedly innate and essential capacity to "sense and taste the infinite" as Schleiermacher said.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, page xvii.

<sup>56</sup> Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. xviii.

<sup>57</sup> Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, essay on Schleiermacher pp. 425-473.



It is doubtful that van Til's reading of Barth on this point is correct. Barth is not following Schleiermacher and the consciousness theologians, even if his writings of the time emphasise conscience as the mediator between God and man.<sup>58</sup> An appeal to *conscience* is not the same as claiming that reason possesses the infinite. This is Schleiermacher's view, but for Barth, God remained wholly other.<sup>59</sup>

van Til also claims that Barth's later work shows that his dialectic method was influenced and strengthened by Heidegger saying:<sup>60</sup>

Barth's insistence of beginning all theological discussion with the *de facto* existence of God must be understood in its full rationalistic import. With Criticism in general Barth wants to be anti-metaphysical, but with Criticism, too, he holds in reality to a definite theory of being. The theory of being to which he is committed is still very similar to that of Heidegger and the modern pragmatic philosophers in general, namely, that of the ultimacy of self-existent, brute factual change. He defends this theory of reality by means of his conception of a Rationality that is all-inclusive because wholly formal. And at the back of all lies the assumption of the autonomous man.<sup>61</sup>

In the Index to *Church Dogmatics*, the work van Til claims is influenced by Heidegger, there are thirteen references to Heidegger. Of these, seven are simply references to the name, the other six refer to a more explicit discussion. A refutation of van Til's claim, that *Church Dogmatics* shows Heidegger influenced Barth's dialectical method, requires a detailed analysis of these sections.<sup>62</sup> The first reference is insignificant, for the purposes as Barth refers to Heidegger in relation to his use by a third person.<sup>63</sup> The second reference makes it unnecessary to consider further van

<sup>58</sup> Barth opened his address, delivered in the Town Church of Aarau in January 1916 with an appeal to conscience.

<sup>59</sup> Barth, 'The Righteousness of God', in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*.

<sup>60</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and time* trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, (London: SCM Press, 1962)

<sup>61</sup> van Til, *The New Modernism*, p. 220

<sup>62</sup> They are: CD I/1 183, 192. I/2 45f. 874; III/2 605; IV/3 473.

<sup>63</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1 p. 183.



Til's criticism that Barth followed Schleiermacher and was influenced by Heidegger.<sup>64</sup>

The passage is quoted in full, because it shows most clearly Barth's view of

Schleiermacher and Heidegger's anthropological positions.

It is the same Schleiermacher who, for the first time, quite fundamentally connects this newly-discovered and independent reality of religion with a corresponding possibility generally demonstrable on anthropological grounds, and who for the first time quite fundamentally undertakes to interpret Christianity itself in the form of a concretely historical analysis of human existence along the lines of a general doctrine of man: 1. Man's meeting with God to be regarded as a human religious experience historically and psychologically fixable and 2. This experience to be regarded as the realisation of a religious potentiality in man generally demonstrable. Beginning with Schleiermacher, and notwithstanding the variety of types in particular interpretations, these are the two cardinal propositions in philosophy of religion in the 19th and the 20th centuries. The decisive one is naturally the second of these statements. If we apply it to what in our terminology we call the doctrine of the Word of God, it would mean that real knowledge of the Word of God is the realisation of a special potentiality of knowledge proper to man as such. If we affirm this statement, then we must acquiesce in the answer to the question of ability, with which we are occupied, being given from an anthropological point of view, where it is a matter of secondary importance, whether we close with the actual anthropology of Schleiermacher and his school or with one more congenial to our age like that of M. Heidegger.<sup>65</sup>

van Til outlines the basic requirements he considers necessary for any Christian ethic in three questions, which are:

1. What should be the goal of man's actions?
2. What should be the standard by which man conducts himself in seeking for his proper goal?
3. What should be the motive that impels him in seeking this goal?<sup>66</sup>

For van Til the goal is the primary consideration of any ethic. The goal, necessarily, defines the ethic teleologically. The goal is the target to be achieved, and the ethical

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<sup>64</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, p. 192.

<sup>65</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, pp. 192-3.

life is directed towards achievement. Aiming at the target one's desires and motivations are goal directed. The goal determines the actions. The idea embodies the concepts of potentiality and actuality. A person by acting actualises their potential to achieve the goal. Their properly directed will directs their actions, and is the sum of the person's motivations and desires. He wants any ethics to follow this Aristotelian model.

van Til by describing orthodox Reformed answers to the above three questions creates a standard with which to judge Barth's ethics. van Til consistently applies the same standard to Barth's work. However, as van Til himself so strongly insists, his method requires a goal to be set before embarking on the task. van Til says the answers, given by orthodox Reformed theology to the three questions, are:

1. Man's goal is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.
2. The revealed will of God is the standard by which he is to reach this goal. God's will is revealed in Scripture.
3. Faith is the motive and only God can give this.<sup>67</sup>

Of these three points he says:

In these responses there is a presupposition of the old metaphysic, the ontological trinity, casual creation, direct revelation in nature and in Scripture as well as actual experiential knowledge of regeneration.<sup>68</sup>

These three requirements require a fixed body of knowledge in which God can be known by analogy, his works can be seen in creation and his will may be known from the Scriptures. The Christian, van Til believes, can know God's being, his attributes,

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<sup>66</sup> van Til, *New Modernism*, chapter twelve, 'The Christian Life', p. 306.

<sup>67</sup> van Til, *New Modernism*, p. 306.



and his will, and has the power of the Holy Spirit to provide the faith to motivate and empower him to achieve it.

Of course, van Til is right, in saying that Barth does not accept this position. Barth's ethics are not teleologically defined; they do not have a predetermined goal, but are a response to God's free act of creation. In an address, in Hanover, Barth told of the moment when his break with van Til's position and nineteenth century theology more generally took place:<sup>69</sup>

One day in early August 1914 stands out in my personal memory as a black day. Ninety-three German intellectuals impressed public opinion by their proclamation in support of the war policy of Wilhelm II and his counsellors. Among these intellectuals I discovered to my horror almost all of my theological teachers<sup>70</sup> whom I had greatly venerated. In despair over what this indicated about the signs of the time I suddenly realised I could no longer follow either their ethics and dogmatics or their understanding of the Bible and history. For me at least, 19th.Century theology no longer held any future.<sup>71</sup>

Barth at this time was a young pastor in Safenwil trying to preach and minister to the needs of the local working community. It was his inadequacy to speak from the basis of the theology Herrmann had taught him, which was the foundation of his rupture with nineteenth century theology. The break was a result of socio-political forces that could not be resolved, or even addressed, but only affirmed by the theology of the time. T.F.Torrance in a passage widely quoted in the literature, with admiration,

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<sup>68</sup> van Til, *The New Modernism*, p. 306.

<sup>69</sup> 'Evangelical Theology in the Nineteenth Century', given at the meeting of the *Goethegesellschaft* 8th. January 1957. This information in the form of Barth's reflection on the past was not available in 1941 when van Til was writing *New Modernism*.

<sup>70</sup> Wilhelm Herrmann was a signatory.

<sup>71</sup> Barth, 'Evangelical Theology in the Nineteenth Century', in, *The Humanity of God*, p. 14.



claims that Barth then went to his study to read his Bible and the Word of God came directly to him from above.<sup>72</sup>

Determined to hear the Word of God out of itself, as it came straight from above, unfettered by a masterful culture, uncontrolled by the needs and satisfactions of bourgeois society, and before it had been sifted and diluted by being passed through some general frame of thought already worked out by man.<sup>73</sup>

Torrance sees the theologian as having a detached scientific objectivity concentrating only on his object and deliberately removing himself from the affairs of the world.

Barth, in his reminiscence quoted above, says completely the opposite. It was from just such an engagement with the world that caused the emotional, spiritual and intellectual crisis that led to his break with the theology of his teachers. In a study full of insight, Boyd establishes the significance of context for Barth's work and the important point that Barth's time is the period in the history of ideas known as German expressionism.<sup>74</sup> He says, 'Attention to context does not presuppose hostility to Barth's theology but can yield better theological understanding'.<sup>75</sup>

From his position of Biblical Fundamentalism van Til describes Barth and Brunner as having rejected the historic orthodox Christian position in favour of the philosophical method of dialectic, and claims that the dialectic is in itself Christological. He understands it as a closed and static system in which the relationship between the One and the Many is founded in an abstract conception of Christ.

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<sup>72</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p. 11.

<sup>73</sup> Thomas Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology, 1910-1931*, (London: SCM Press, 1962) p. 35.

<sup>74</sup> 1909-1924

<sup>75</sup> Boyd, *Dogmatics among the ruins*, p. 148.

He tells us that, 'The dialectical theologians'<sup>76</sup> seek to be Christological in their ethics',<sup>77</sup> and uses the following quotation to support his argument that Barth 'seeks to be Christological in his doctrine of ethics as well as that of the church':<sup>78</sup>

The fact that ethics are presented to us as a problem means that the concepts which we make use of in our conversation are, as we have so often pointed out, existential concepts; and it provides us with a guarantee that, when we repeat, somewhat tediously perhaps, the formula 'God Himself, God alone,' we do not mean by it some divine thing, or some ideal world contrasted with the visible world. We mean by the formula that unsearchable, divine relationship in which we stand as men. It is in the actual tension and movement of human life, in the actual being and having and doing of men, that our ethical concepts and formulations emerge.<sup>79</sup>

These words do not support van Til's argument. van Til's argument as it is founded on the phrase 'ethics are presented to us as a problem.' He has taken the quotation above from the opening page of Barth's exegesis of Paul's *Epistle to the Romans*, chapter twelve, and verses one and two, in which Paul is exhorting the Christians in Rome to, 'present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God-which is your veritable worship of God! - And not to fashion yourself according to the present form of this world.' Ethics is a "problem" says Barth because it has no object. In the previous sentence, to the one quoted by van Til, Barth says:

The fact that ethics constitutes a problem reminds us that the object about which we are conversing has no objectivity, that is to say, it is not a concrete world existing above or behind our world; it is not a treasury of spiritual experiences; it is not even some transcendental vastness: for we are not metaphysicians. Our conversation is about men living in the world of nature and of civilisation; and moreover, we ourselves are also men living of necessity from minute to minute a quite concrete life.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>76</sup> van Til means Barth and Brunner.

<sup>77</sup> van Til, *New Modernism*, p. 306.

<sup>78</sup> van Til, *New Modernism*, p. 306.

<sup>79</sup> van Til p.306-7 quoting from Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 424f.

<sup>80</sup> Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (1933) p.424.



Barth's is discussing an ethic rooted in everyday concrete problems and not one grounded in abstract ideas. It is not an example of a theologian establishing a Christological doctrine of ethics. In assuming that the Christian life is a life lived in Christ Barth does not mean that his ethics are Christological, but rather they are part of the doctrine of God. For Barth 'Dogmatics is ethics and ethics is dogmatics.'<sup>81</sup> To establish his point van Til includes the following quotation from Barth:

Our ethical life, that is an event that centres on the presence of God with man through the saving work in Christ. Even more particularly, our ethical life is the life we live in Christ. The Christian life that is worth its name is not lived by us but is lived by God in Christ through the Holy Spirit.<sup>82</sup>

These words show that ethics is part of the doctrine of God.<sup>83</sup> Barth's ethics always come from his dogmatics and this is the case throughout the *Church Dogmatics*, each volume concludes with a section on ethics. Barth's dogmatics follows from what we know of God, and his method follows Anselm, proceeding from the known to the possible, which makes it quite impossible to consider Barth's ethics as having a goal. Yet, Van Til in his template against which ethics either must fit or be rejected asks the above three questions. In looking for the goal of Barth's ethics Van Til concludes that, 'Barth interprets it as lying in the world beyond.'<sup>84</sup> He quotes Barth to establish this point:

The child of God is to look for his goal of action, beyond the present, to the kingdom of his father.<sup>85</sup> 'If we hear the gospel of the kingdom, we realise that in it there is an end of our seeking and sighing, our expectation and our

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<sup>81</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, p. 793.

<sup>82</sup> Barth, *The Christian Life*, 1930 translation of *Vom Christlichen Leben*, München, 1926.

<sup>83</sup> The centrality of ethics in Barth's understanding of Christian doctrine is stressed in Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, 'the relation to itself which the Word of God establishes for its human recipient is not simply noetic, a matter of interpretation, but ethical, a matter of action,' and McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, pp. 274-80.

<sup>84</sup> van Til, *The New Modernism*, p. 307.

<sup>85</sup> Karl Barth and Heinrich Barth, *Zur Lehre vom heiligen Geist*, München, 1930.



striving.<sup>86</sup> 'We do not really seek this gospel. The gospel seeks us.'<sup>87</sup> "And when she has found us, she will distinguish herself with one stroke from all doctrines and sermons which we hear otherwise as heaven is separated from the earth, and the day from the night. Jesus Christ seeks us with this word, with this gospel of the kingdom."<sup>88</sup>

van Til interprets these words as evidence that Barth's ethical goal is otherworldly, but

Barth has no ethical goal, which can be found in this world or in any another world.

On the contrary, these words illustrate that for Barth ethical action is response to revelation; and that there can be *no* pre-existing goal. Had this point been true, it would make made van Til's argument against Barth much stronger, but van Til is forced to accommodate Barth in a Procrustean bed constructed from his three questions.

van Til does perceive an ethical goal in Barth's work saying, 'Dealing first with the goal of ethics, we find Barth interpreting it as lying in the world beyond'.<sup>89</sup> van Til quotes Barth to make his point:

The gospel of the kingdom, the ethical goal, is a gift of grace and as a gift must be received with thanksgiving. Gratitude is the sum of obedience that is well pleasing to God. But who can be truly grateful?<sup>90</sup>

This reference to Barth is not in quotation marks nor is the source given. It is an assumption that he is paraphrasing Barth. He further quotes from Barth:

I have not said there are no such men. I have not said that the Christian is thankful and *has* the freedom of the children of God; that would once more be Augustinian doctrine however Protestant it may be in form.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Quoted by van Til from an article *Das Evangelium von dem Reich* in *Zwischen den Zeiten*, 1932, p.287.

<sup>87</sup> These are van Til's words there is an ambiguity in the punctuation and they could be read as Barth's, which would strengthen van Til's position. See, *The New Modernism*, p. 307.

<sup>88</sup> Quoted by van Til from an article *Das Evangelium von dem Reich* in *Zwischen den Zeiten*, 1932, p. 287.

<sup>89</sup> van Til discusses this in the next section of chapter twelve.

<sup>90</sup> van Til, *New Modernism*, pp. 308-9.

The next quotation van Til uses is not put in quotation marks but there is a footnote to Barth's work. It is not clear therefore, if these are van Til's words or a paraphrase of Barth's work or a straight quotation from Barth, and as the section is part of van Til's argument it is important to know which of these three alternatives is correct:

If we are to understand the true nature of gratitude, we shall need to cut ourselves loose from the Augustinian *analogia entis* doctrine. God's relation to man cannot be that of an original gift of quality in man; it must be the active relationship of God continually giving Himself.<sup>92</sup>

The Holy Spirit in the activity of his being for man is the only reality of the image of God in man. This therefore is not and does not become the attribute of a created spirit; it is and remains a work of grace on the part of the creator with respect to the creature, a work understood only as a work of grace.<sup>93</sup>

True gratitude can, accordingly, never become the possession of man.<sup>94</sup>

The gratefulness and freedom of the children of God is truly our last, our future reality.<sup>95</sup>

van Til demands that ethics have a goal, he claims the goal of Barth's ethics is otherworldly, 'Throughout the various stages of his writings, Barth has consistently maintained that the ethical goal of man is wholly beyond our reach.'<sup>96</sup> Of course, van Til is correct, because Barth's ethics describe a human response to divine action. However, we must remember that Barth's ethics is an expression of God's covenant relationship and follows from this as a possibility. It does not *seek* for a goal, it *responds* to a gift.

van Til goes on to impose the same presuppositions on Barth's view of prayer, which in Barth's ethics is the primary human response to God's action. He says that for

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<sup>91</sup> *Zur Lehre vom heiligen Geist*, p. 103.

<sup>92</sup> van Til's footnote at this point refers to *Zur Lehre vom heiligen Geist*, p.43.

<sup>93</sup> Quoted by van Til from *Zur Lehre vom heiligen Geist*, p.39, in, *The New Modernism*, p.308.

<sup>94</sup> van Til, *The New Modernism*, p. 308.

<sup>95</sup> Quoted by van Til from *Zur Lehre vom heiligen Geist*, p.103, in, *The New Modernism*, p. 308.



Barth, 'What is true of gratitude is true also of prayer'. 'What he says in *Romans* he says, albeit in different ways, in later publications.' 'In *Church Dogmatics* Barth connects the Christian life with his teaching on the outpouring of the Spirit'.<sup>97</sup> van Til, to support his claim gives a long quotation from Barth. It is included here because it illustrates not only van Til's argument but also his methodology:

The freedom of God for us becomes our freedom for God through the work of the Holy Spirit. As God wholly denies His being to make Himself one with our state and fate, so we, through the Spirit become wholly one with the being of God. And the two ideas are involved in each other. As God does not exist except in His revelation to man, so we do not exist except in becoming part of the revelation of God to Himself. For our response to God's revelation constitutes an aspect of that revelation. This is Barth's notion of the outpouring of the Spirit. It is in accord with this when he speaks of love as being exclusively eschatological. Love is something, he says, that takes place only in the promise that the children of God exist.

In a footnote to this passage, van Til gives Barth's *Church Dogmatics* I/2 page 429 here, but no quotation marks.<sup>98</sup> Obviously, from the content, some words are van Til's, but it is not clear which are his, or which are a quote from Barth. The 1956 English translation of this passage contains part of a discussion on the neighbour. It is part of Chapter II in the section on, The life of the Children of God, in which Barth discusses the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and more particularly the Holy Spirit as the subjective possibility of revelation. Barth is here discussing the task of the Holy Spirit. This he will go on to expand in the sections of *Church Dogmatics* that discuss special ethics, but van Til takes this as evidence that Barth has a dialectical conception of *summum bonum*. van Til demands and seeks the *summum bonum* from all ethics and in his search misses the point of Barth's discussion. van Til sees the same evidence in Barth's exposition of the Scottish Confession, "Barth expresses

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<sup>96</sup> van Til, *New Modernism*, p. 309.

<sup>97</sup> van Til, *New Modernism*, p. 309.

<sup>98</sup> van Til, *New Modernism*, p. 309.



himself in a similar vein”.<sup>99</sup> From this discussion, he concludes that the goal of Barth's ethics is:

Built upon the general principle of Dialecticism as expressed in Barth's idea of the freedom of God. This implies therefore the critical idea of the negative instance. Man's *summum bonum* is wholly beyond man, says Barth. Man's life is hid with Christ in God. This is to say that reality has a brute factual aspect. As there is nowhere a direct revelation of God and a creed that gives us the essential system of doctrine of such a revelation, so there is nowhere a definitely given content of instruction that sets man's goal before him. All system is correlative to the utterly uninterpreted.<sup>100</sup>

What van Til sees as the absence of a goal in Barth's ethical thought he interprets as an attack on orthodoxy. He says, 'For Barth the Bible contains no direct revelation for action any more than for belief. This accounts for his opposition to every idea of Christian programme.'<sup>101</sup> van Til explains this is only one side of the story of Barth's attack on orthodoxy. The other side is the absence of an ethical goal as expressed in the Creed. van Til believes these show that Barth follows Schleiermacher. Barth, he says, gives conscience the role of the final interpreter of life:

As God's will for man's deeds is revealed nowhere, so it is revealed everywhere. The God who is exhaustively hidden is also exhaustively revealed. As no creed contains the system of truth, any creed may point to the truth. As God does not spurn revealing Himself through the contradictions of the Bible, so He does not spurn revealing Himself through the contradictory deeds of men. Indeed, God does realise Himself through His revelation, for His revelation is His being. Thus though it appears there is to be no natural theology, conscience is to be the final interpreter of life.<sup>102</sup>

van Til's second main question to be asked of any ethic is, what is the standard, how is it to be judged? He finds Barth's ethics completely lacking, as it has no standard.

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<sup>99</sup> van Til, *The New Modernism*, p.309.

<sup>100</sup> van Til, *The New Modernism*, p.309.

<sup>101</sup> van Til, *The New Modernism*, p.311.

<sup>102</sup> van Til, *The New Modernism*, p.311.

There is no creed nor any rule thus the imperative is reduced to the indicative, says van Til, he quotes from Barth to prove his point:

"But what is it possible for us to do," asks Barth, "in order that the sacrifice, by which men are overcome and God is glorified, may shine forth in our actions? How can we ensure that our deeds are fully ripened fruit and not mere empty husks?"<sup>103</sup> "What are we to demand of men? And to what are we to invite and exhort them?" And the answer is given, "Since the truth lies in the ambiguity of human existence, we must exhort them to affirm that ambiguity."<sup>104</sup>

van Til continues:

With respect to the standard of ethics, then, as with respect to its goal, Barth falls prey to his enemies. Each time he rejects their direct systematising tendency. He describes this as their immanentism. Over against it he would set the will of the absolutely other God. Then comes the question as to the content of this will. What is it and where may it be found? It cannot be by direct revelation, for if it were we should again fall back on system. The net result is that, for Barth, the will of God is really a pure form and nothing more. Its content depends upon what men put into it. And since this is true, every man may with equal right put his own content into it. With the best of will Barth's position cannot escape the ethical individualism he so rightly dreads.<sup>105</sup>

van Til has shown that Barth has neither a goal nor does he have a standard for his ethic, thus Barth's ethic has failed two of van Til's three requirements.

The third and last of van Til's measuring devices is the motive of ethics. He began by asking three questions about ethics, and the third of these was "What should be the motive that impels him in seeking this goal?" To this question, van Til gives the answer, "Faith is the motive and only God can give this." If we are to assume the discussion between van Til and Barth is taking place within the community of faith then we may move to the next stage of van Til's disagreement with Barth. The ethical

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<sup>103</sup> van Til, p. 313, quoting Barth, *Romans*, p. 436.

<sup>104</sup> van Til, p. 313, quoting Barth, *Romans*, p. 436.



imperative is to love our neighbour as ourselves. What then is the character of true self that is to be expressed by love of neighbour? It is on the character of self-love that van Til disagrees with Barth. He begins by laying out his requirements for a true self-love:

If the true self-love has been made one with God's being through the incarnation and the outpouring of the Spirit, the empirical self must lift itself in the scale of being until it reaches its high destination of identity with its ideal self.<sup>106</sup>

In his definition, he gives two selves: the empirical self, the ideal self, and the task of moving from one to the other. He describes the method of movement as, 'the empirical self must lift itself.' Again, in his methodology, we see *actuality*, (the empirical self), and *potentiality*, (the ideal self), and the ethical task is in moving from *actuality* to *potentiality*. This model, which van Til has taken from Aristotle and not the Bible, he applies to Barth's ethics.

van Til extracts from Barth's work two concepts to fit his model. Self-love is the first, and represents what earlier was described as *actuality* in van Til's methodology. Love of God and neighbour are the second, and represent what I have called *potentiality*. van Til correctly says Barth argues that self-love is inherently wrong. The next step in van Til's argument is problematic, because he then deduces that 'To reach the realm of the true self that has its identity with God, we must altogether deny the self as we now know it.' Thus, van Til's methodology has forced him to read conclusions into Barth's ethics, which are false.

van Til, elaborates his point, by quoting Barth:

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<sup>105</sup> van Til, page 314-5, paraphrasing Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, p. 420.



The love of God and the neighbour lie on a different level from this unholy affection. When we are told to love our neighbour as ourselves, we are not to take this as a justification for self-love. There is no commandment to love ourselves. Where self-love starts love of neighbour stops and where love of neighbour starts self-love stops.<sup>107</sup>

Finding that Barth does not fit the model of linear progress from *actuality* to *potentiality* van Til interprets Barth's phrase, "a different level" as problematic. The two levels for Van Til mean two worlds, the ideal world, and the empirical world, and his next step is to place his category, *potentiality*, in the ideal world. Having done this he then refers to Barth, critically, as an idealist, who is following the tradition of Kant and Hegel. 'In the true idealist fashion, Barth pictures man's ethical strife as being due to the fact that he is a member of two hostile worlds.'<sup>108</sup>

Having placed Barth's ethical goal in an abstract ideal world van Til can then say, that for Barth, self-love exists in an unreal, empirical world of non-being. Self-love is unreality, and in the unreal hostile, empirical world van Til says it is impossible for Barth to express love of neighbour, He quotes Barth, 'If I gave him what I give myself, I should give him destruction'. He then comes to the conclusion that, according to Barth, man's inability to love is not due to any historical fall, but to the basic determination of the two worlds. 'Man's being by himself alone is due to the fact that he is a member of the world of the entirely individual thing, the world of irrationality.'<sup>109</sup>

What is to be said about van Til's conclusion? Even if we restrict ourselves to the works of Barth that van Til quotes to come to his conclusion, it is impossible to agree

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<sup>106</sup> van Til, *The New Modernism*, p. 317.

<sup>107</sup> van Til, *The New Modernism*, p. 319, paraphrasing Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, p. 427.

<sup>108</sup> van Til, *The New Modernism*, p. 319.

<sup>109</sup> van Til, *The New Modernism*, p. 320.

with him. In the very section from *Church Dogmatics* from which van Til draws his quotations, Barth's exegesis of the Good Samaritan is a model of concrete practicality.<sup>110</sup> The man who fell among thieves received benefits enabling the actions of a benefactor:

My neighbour is the man who emerges from amongst all my fellow men as the one thing in particular, my benefactor. I myself, of course, must be summoned by Jesus Christ, and I must be ready to obey the summons to go and do likewise, that is to be myself a benefactor, if I am to experience as such the emergence of a fellow-man as my benefactor, and therefore to see and have him as my neighbour.<sup>111</sup>

Here Barth is being completely practical and concrete, and arrives at this ethical position on the solid basis of scriptural exegesis, and his method remains consistently dialectical. The benefactor requires an object to be complete, and the object requires a benefactor to become a benefactor, thus the truth is in the method. Of course van Til's truth is also in his method, but is van Til's criticism of Barth simply that they disagree about method? No, because as has already been stated van Til does not consider Barth to be a Christian, because he follows a philosophical tradition. Yet, in his criticism of Barth, van Til, the biblical fundamentalist, does not use a method of scriptural exegesis to ground his position, whereas for Barth the philosophical discourse is through scriptural exegesis. Is the disagreement between theology and philosophy? Is van Til the *theologian* opposed to Barth the *philosopher*? Again the answer is no. Although van Til, as a theologian, is most concerned to be true to Biblical foundation he begins his discussions with philosophy, and Barth, whom van Til claims is a philosopher begins with Biblical exegesis, thus the real problem is one of prolegomena.

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<sup>110</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, section eighteen, 'The Life of the Children of God'.

<sup>111</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, p. 420.



By discussing what must be said before theology can begin he requires from Barth a prolegomena, and reads Barth's theology as if it were an apologetics. Of course, Barth's theology is a prolegomena, but a prolegomena not of what must be said *before*, but of what must be said *first*. van Til discusses rational arguments that give evidence and proofs of the Christian religion, whereas Barth is speaks to the community of faith, and therefore refuses to talk of what must come *before*, but only of what comes *first*. van Til and Barth have different tasks, but both in Christian theology are referred to as prolegomena.

In concluding, in a section on the state, van Til pays tribute to Barth for his opposition to the Third Reich, but sees the opposition being in spite of Barth's incorrect theological position, not because of it. He says:

We may admire Barth for his brave stand in the political situation of the day. The only question that interests us at this time, however, is whether in the theology of Barth there is any foundation other than a personalist philosophy of a naturalist sort on the basis of which his views can have intelligible content. The answer must be negative. As has been shown, Barth has no right whatsoever to make distinctions in the empirical realm.<sup>112</sup>

Finally two points: the first, van Til's theological criticism of Barth is a philosophical disagreement, and the second is, that all theology begins from a position, thus there is no theology which is not intimately related to philosophy.

van Til's criticism of Barth is in the intellectual world of ideas. As a writer of apologetics, van Til is an expert in ideas, but, of course, the truth of the Christian faith is not to be found in ideas. Faith has its source and truth in the Holy Spirit in the revelation of the hiddenness of God. Those who receive it know of it, but do not know

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<sup>112</sup> van Til, *The New Modernism*, pp. 332-3.



how to convey it to others. Having received it they accept its truth, but could not have received its truth through rational argument. All this makes van Til's task somewhat meaningless. Barth's response to such criticism is:

There is not much point in theological criticism if it rests only on the affirmation that the theological statement under consideration betrays more or less obvious traces of the philosophical culture of its author, and that it makes use of a certain philosophical system of ideas. If a criticism of this kind invites the reader or hearer of the statement to beware and be on his guard, he will have to confess at once that he himself is very definitely involved in a similar system, and as an inhabitant of this glasshouse he certainly has no cause to throw stones.<sup>113</sup>

There must be some other way of proceeding than throwing stones inside a glasshouse. van Til did not have access to Barth's ethical writings published after 1945, and the way of proceeding now is with a close reading of those works.

As has been shown van Til criticises Barth's ethics by claiming that he is following in a philosophical tradition that necessarily rejects the foundations of the Christian ethics, which are the truth of the Bible, and Christian doctrine. Robinson takes an opposing view to van Til and claims that Barth has no ethics because he begins his theology with doctrine and not the human experience of God, and it is to him that we now turn.

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<sup>113</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, p. 729.

## 7.2 Norman H.G. Robinson

Norman H.G. Robinson, who was Professor of Systematic Theology in the University of St. Andrews, is representative of those who read Barth in such a way as to preclude any possibility of Barth having an ethic. His objections concentrate on problems of human experience, particularly as they relate to the concept of human freedom.<sup>114</sup>

He argues strongly that Barth allows no space for the 'I' of human experience: the person who receives and acts upon the divine revelation. Barth, in response to similar criticisms made by G. Wobbermin<sup>115</sup> who speaks from a Modernist viewpoint, says, 'the I-experience establishes for man the surest certainty of reality that he can conceive of or that is possible for him at all.'<sup>116</sup> Robinson's criticisms of Barth reflect Wobbermin's position, and the following response, which Barth made to Wobbermin, applies equally to Robinson:

One might ask whether this Cartesianism is really as impregnable as it usually purports to be even on the philosophical plane. But that is not our present concern and we must beware of opposing to it a philosophy more suited to our theological interest or of so wearying of Descartes that we throw ourselves into the arms of, e.g., Aristotle or Thomas. Suspicious of the other side too, we simply make the point that at any rate in theology one cannot think along Cartesian lines.<sup>117</sup>

Robinson says, Paul, Augustine and Aquinas in their conversions acted from direct personal experience of God. Paul was on the road to Damascus, Augustine was in a

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<sup>114</sup> Norman Robinson, *Christ and Conscience*, (London: Nisbet, 1956)

<sup>115</sup> *System. Theologie*, Vol. 2, 1921, p. 455.

<sup>116</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, p. 195.

Milanese garden and Aquinas in his monastery, who unlike the others kept his personal experiences veiled, because he followed monastic tradition.

From a reading of Barth, using Von Balthasar's map, supplemented by the influential work of T.F. Torrance, who supports the two-movement hypothesis, Robinson makes the claim that Barth has no ethics. He says:

It is maintained that Barthianism, while it is an evangelical theology, is to be more precisely characterised within that field as a type of evangelical theology that is non-ethical, metaphysical and radically empirical.<sup>118</sup>

He claims that Barth's description of the covenant relationship between God and man provides an inadequate account of human experience. He makes the further claim that all Christian theology necessarily begins with a personal experience of God. Speaking of Barth's concept of the relationship between God and man, he says:

From this point of view revelation must be understood as *in every way* creating its own response. This is a highly paradoxical position, and it does seem plain that it leaves no room at all for a personal relationship, for a relationship that is personal in something more than name.<sup>119</sup>

His second objection questions the nature and task of Barth's theology, for:

Even when the very method and principle of rationalism are condemned and firmly set to one side, and when the recognition of a personal relationship is allowed to come into its own, there are varying degrees of adequacy with which it is represented as a *personal relationship*. This in fact is the crucial question which confronts the most influential theological school of the present time, that of Barthianism, for it may well be doubted whether, in its way of regarding the personal relationship between God and man which it is so concerned to stress, this theology does conceive of it in a manner adequate to its personal character. And this doubt is only expressed in other words when it

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<sup>117</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, p. 195.

<sup>118</sup> Robinson, *Christ and Conscience*, p. ix

<sup>119</sup> Robinson, *Christ and Conscience*, p. 10.



is questioned, as it may well be questioned, whether the Barthian theology is an ethical theology.<sup>120</sup>

His argument, that Barth's ethics cannot be an ethic hangs on the central peg of human experience. The principal concern of this section of the thesis is to discuss the place and nature of human experience in the relationship between God and man and the place of human freedom within that relationship.

One of the most significant ideas of the movement known as the Enlightenment is the centrality of human moral freedom in any understanding of modern identity. If this conception of human autonomy is to be maintained then human experience has to be central to any understanding of the relationship between God and mankind. Taylor traces the ideas of the Reformers as one of three important strands that contributed to the formation of modern identity with its stress on moral freedom.<sup>121</sup> Therefore, in modern thought, the work of any theologian who attempts to deny human moral freedom, and therefore the place of human experience, is unlikely to receive serious consideration as a moral theology. This, as Robinson has so clearly stated, is the case against Barth's theology. The problem, as Robinson sees it, with Barth's work is that not only does God give the revelation but he also provides the only means of receiving that revelation, thus precluding any sense of the existing 'I' of human experience in the reception of that revelation. Barth responds:

We are asking how man, for whom it is impossible to begin the Christian life by human judgment, is nevertheless enabled by divine possibility, to will, commence and do this. The mystery and miracle of the event of which we speak consists in the fact that man himself is the free subject of this event on the basis of a possibility, which is present only with God.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Robinson, *Christ and Conscience*, p. 9.

<sup>121</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, see particularly, chapter 13 'God Loveth Adverbs' pp 211-233.

<sup>122</sup> Barth, *The Christian Life*, (1981) p. 5.

It seems from this statement that human autonomy, or freedom in the sense understood by modernity, is restricted by Barth's qualification, 'on the basis of a possibility, which is only present with God.' Therefore, there is no place for the conscious 'I' of human experience. Robinson argues that as there is no room for human responsibility then there can be no ethics in Barth's theology. He says if all is given how could anyone be responsible for an act over which he or she has no apparent control. Robinson defines self-consciousness as the origin of human self-determination, whilst Barth says self-consciousness is but *one aspect* of human determination and that revelation determines *all* of human existence. He says:

Human existence means human self-determination. If experience of God's Word involves the determination of human existence and hence also of human self-determination by the Word of God, then by self-determination we are to understand the exercise of all the faculties in whose exercise man is man without basic emphasis upon and also without basic repudiation of any specific human possibility. In this context all such emphasis and repudiations are to be resisted already on the score of method, since they are the results or presuppositions of a general philosophical anthropology by whose constrictions, however right or wrong they may be in their own sphere, we cannot allow to be influenced here. From different angles the determination of human existence by God's Word can be understood just as much as a determination of feeling, will, or intellect, and psychologically it may actually be more the one than the other in a given case. The decisive point materially, however, is that it is a determination of the whole self-determining man.<sup>123</sup>

Barth discusses the question of the determination of human self-determination in *Church Dogmatics*, a work that Robinson has not consulted, even though it has been available in English translation since nineteen-thirty six.<sup>124</sup> Here Barth responds specifically to the criticism, as exemplified in the writings of G.Wobbermin and E.Schaeder:

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<sup>123</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1 p. 204.

<sup>124</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1.



There cannot really be any dispute as to whether regard should be had to the “intimate personal experience of faith” or whether the nature of man should be “taken into account” or whether an exaggerated, i.e., an “absolute” protest should be made against the place and validity of the ego.<sup>125</sup>

Later in the same volume, Barth, discussing the place of faith in human self-determination, says:

The possibility of faith as it is given to man in the reality of faith can be understood only as one that is loaned to man by God, and loaned exclusively for use. The moment we regard it as a possibility which is in any sense man's own, the opposite statement regarding man's incapacity. But for this reason there can be no objection from the standpoint of man's possibilities when we say that in faith there takes place a conformity of man to God. We do not say a deification but a conformity to God, i.e., an adapting of man to the Word of God. In faith, as he really receives God's Word, man becomes apt to receive it. If one were to deny this one could no longer describe and understand faith as the act and experience of man nor man as the subject of faith. But if we ascribe to man this aptness which is not his own but is loaned to him from God, which is not to be contemplated but simply used in faith, an aptness to receive the word of God, then we cannot shrink from speaking of a conformity

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Robinson's work appeared in 1956 and since then material from Barth has been published that answers some, but not all, of Robinson's criticisms. In 1956 Barth gave a lecture on, “The Humanity of God,” which was published in an English translation in 1961. In this lecture he expresses clearly the development of his thinking about the relationship between God and humanity and between humanity and God. He also gives an explanation of his one sided treatment of the relationship in his earlier work, saying:

What began forcibly to press itself upon us about forty years ago was not so much the humanity of God as His *deity* — a God absolutely unique in His

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<sup>125</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1 p. 209.

<sup>126</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1 p. 243.



relation to man and the world, overpoweringly lofty and distant, strange, yes even wholly other.<sup>127</sup>

He goes on to say that he would have been embarrassed if in 1920 he had been asked to speak on the topic, “The Humanity of God.” At that time, all theological efforts were concentrated on changing the direction of theology, but he reminded his audience that *change* is part of theology. By 1956, he defined the theological task, as deriving ‘the knowledge of the humanity of God from the knowledge of His deity.’ Barth makes fun of his former seriousness and more illuminatingly makes fun of those who take him as the defining word. He says, talking of the period Robinson is criticising:

What expressions we used — in part taken over and in part newly invented! — above all, the famous “wholly other” breaking in on us “perpendicularly from above,” the not less famous “infinite qualitative distinction” between God and man, the vacuum, the mathematical point, and the tangent in which alone they must meet. “And as she warbled, a thousand voices in the field sang back.”<sup>128</sup>

Barth now wants to make the point clearly and forcefully about the development of Christology in his thinking saying: “Jesus Christ is in His one Person, as true *God*, *man*’s loyal partner, and as true *man*, *God*’s.”<sup>129</sup> The birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the defining reality, and Christian theology begins with what God has chosen to reveal of himself in becoming that which He was not and in so doing determining humanity’s freedom to be itself. Barth expresses these Christological ideas in the statement:

It is precisely God’s *deity*, which, rightly understood, includes his *humanity*. How do we come to know that? What permits and requires this statement? It

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<sup>127</sup> Barth, *The Humanity of God*, p.37 “This lecture translated by John Newton Thomas, was delivered at the meeting of the Swiss Reformed Ministers’ Association in Aarau, 25th September, 1956.

<sup>128</sup> Barth, *The Humanity of God*, p. 42.

<sup>129</sup> Barth, *The Humanity of God*, p. 46.

is a *Christological* statement, or rather one grounded in and to be unfolded from Christology.<sup>130</sup>

The point that Barth wants to emphasise is that the humanity of God is the start of theological and ethical reflection. ‘God is *human*.’<sup>131</sup> From this statement we must move to an affirmation of humanity, which recognises that ‘Nietzsche’s statement that man is something to be overcome is an impudent lie.’<sup>132</sup> All humanity is included in the affirmation that God is human, and that this affirmation is, therefore, an ethical statement:

On the basis of the eternal will of God we have to think of all humanity of *every human being*, even the oddest, most villainous or miserable, as one to whom Jesus Christ is Brother and God is Father; and we have to deal with him on this assumption.<sup>133</sup>

Barth theologically establishes the reality of human existence and human behaviour on a christological foundation, having its only foundation in Jesus Christ. An exploration of the strength of this position and the unfolding of its consequences are the purpose of this thesis. This brief discussion of Barth’s lecture does not resolve all the points made by Robinson, but it does point to a new and important development from which to begin to engage with the theological task of defining human freedom.

### 7.3 Robert E. Willis

Robert Willis presented his study, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, as a thesis at the San Francisco Theological Seminary, which trains pastors for the American Presbyterian

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<sup>130</sup> Barth, *The Humanity of God*, p. 46.

<sup>131</sup> Barth, *The Humanity of God*, p. 51.

<sup>132</sup> Barth, *The Humanity of God*, p. 51.

<sup>133</sup> Barth, *The Humanity of God*, p. 52.



Church.<sup>134</sup> The thesis was written during the late nineteen sixties which was a time of social upheaval in the United States of America, when responses from the civil rights movement to racism, conscription, and the Vietnam War, erupted into civil disobedience in many American cities. It was therefore a time ripe for Christian social ethicists to speak, and Willis, with a set of political requirements, turned to Barth for insights. He did not find what he sought, and his thesis ends in a disappointed and frustrated tone. Of the thesis Webster says:

The analysis gives a wider view of the place of human experience in Barth's ethical writings. However it is hard for Willis to continue to find room for this view as his work develops, and he continues in Cullberg's line when he says 'the total elimination of the world, including human action, so that one can speak only of the reality of God'.<sup>135</sup>

Willis quotes James Baldwin in his introduction:<sup>136</sup>

It is not too much to say that whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being (and let us not ask whether or not this is possible; I think we must *believe* that it is possible) must first divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church. If the concept of God has any validity or use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him.<sup>137</sup>

In opening an academic work on Christian social theological ethics with these words Willis is providing a context within which his investigation will take place. Two forces shape Willis's inquiry of Barth's ethical thought: racism and communism. Willis's ethical concerns are the struggle against racism and the fight against communism. James Baldwin is the focus for the first and the Vietnam War for the

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<sup>134</sup> Robert E. Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1971)

<sup>135</sup> Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology*, p. 16.

<sup>136</sup> James Baldwin, 1924-1987, American essayist, novelist, and playwright whose eloquence and passion on the subject of race in America made him an important voice, for the civil rights movement, particularly in the late 1950s and early 1960s, in the United States and, later, through much of western Europe.

<sup>137</sup> Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, p. 1.



second. Willis is hoping to establish a foundation for autonomous human action in the first case and a theological statement against communism in the second. He assumes autonomous action is possible, desirable and necessary, for free and therefore responsible human action. He believes freedom to be the unconstrained choice between courses of action. Responsibility, for Willis, requires such a concept of freedom and this is what he means by autonomous behaviour. These are his presuppositions. He does not question that these assumptions might be problematic for an engagement with Barth's ethics. He assumes a subjective self that is the source of its own determination, and which acts to express itself. Barth, of course, assumes the *reverse*, that determination and expression are part of acting. Freedom for Barth is not an unconstrained choice between goods, but behaviour in conformity with God's action. Willis's position places his thinking in the Enlightenment tradition as part of modernity. He fails to recognise that Barth has faced the demands of Hegel, the apotheosis of Enlightenment thinking, and gone beyond, and through them to a new ontological and epistemological position as he incorporated these concepts within his thinking and expressed them theologically. Willis approaches Barth with a set of contextual presuppositions with which to fight racism and communism, as he believes these battles may be won by establishing individual and national freedom. His notion of freedom is expressed as individual responsible action within a democracy, and he wants to show sceptical American theologians that Barth has some thing to offer to the social conflicts of North America. Willis is a victim of old battles that arose from the reluctance of Anglo-American philosophers and theologians to step out of their analytical framework and consider the tradition of modern European thought.

Willis has organised his material on Barth's ethics historically beginning with Barth's writings from around 1911 and ending with *Church Dogmatics* IV/4. This method causes Willis to interpret Barth's later writings *through* his earlier writings, and thus his method restricts his reading, as early Barth needs to be read with the later Barth in mind, and the later with the earlier in mind, keeping the two in relationship. Without this understanding the temptation is to presuppose progress, which creates two problems: first, a tendency to look for changes or developments, such as the supposed move from dialectic to analogy that has caused so much confusion; and second, to assume our present position is more enlightened because it is later in time.

We now turn to consider racism, which is the first of Willis's political concerns. Until 1966, the Civil Rights Movement had united widely disparate elements in the black community along with their white supporters and sympathisers, but in that year signs of radicalism began to appear in the movement as younger blacks became impatient with the rate of change and dissatisfied with purely non-violent methods of protest. This new militancy split the ranks of the movement's leaders and alienated some white sympathisers, a process that was accelerated by a wave of rioting in the black ghettos of several major cities in 1965-67. After the assassination of Martin Luther King in April 1968 and further black rioting in the cities, the movement, as a cohesive effort disintegrated, and a broad spectrum of leadership emerged advocating different approaches and varying degrees of militancy. It is important to keep this political position in mind when assessing Willis's criticisms of Barth's ethics, particularly in his search for the autonomous self.

Willis's concerns about communism, his second political presupposition, take place against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, which ensured that discussions on the



justness of a war and of the legitimacy of conscription and civil disobedience were prominent in the early writings in the United States on applied ethics. There was considerable support for civil disobedience against unjust aggression and against unjust laws even in a democracy. This is the context in which Willis turns to Barth to seek, by his reading, to rescue Barth from the dismissed position his work had been placed by American theologians. Willis makes the following observation:

Within the context of American theological and cultural modes, the challenge of providing some indication of the viability of Barth's ethics is particularly acute. To be sure he has met with criticism from his own Continental brethren, but there is present in this country both a resolute and a tentative rejection of Barth which argue either that he is irrelevant to the complex issues confronting the Western world as a whole, or that the cultural peculiarities of the American scene render his high powered treatment of ethics within the context of dogmatics innocuous.<sup>138</sup>

Willis quotes hostile comments on Barth's ethics from Reinhold Niebuhr and William Hamilton and he recognises and acknowledges the criticism of Barth's ethics:

It is the ethical adequacy of Barth's theology and public utterances which is most often labelled deficient or irrelevant, the enterprise of getting clear what his ethics comes to is timely, appropriate, and well worth the effort.<sup>139</sup>

It is these negative readings that Willis sets out to redress and he begins on an optimistic note. Initially he is sure that his positive reading of Barth's ethics will bring the balance to equilibrium. He expresses this belief in the opening pages in claiming:

Barth's approach to theology, and the ethical thrust which is imparted to it, far from bypassing or transcending man and the world, are designed to lend structure and substance to both.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p 3.

<sup>139</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p 3.

<sup>140</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p 1.



He is meticulous in recognising the importance of Barth's methodology before beginning his own detailed analysis. He says of his approach:

It is imperative that Barth's own methodology be kept clearly in mind, at two points in particular: (i) his insistence on grounding the whole of dogmatics in Christology; (ii) his refusal to divide dogmatics and ethics into two separate disciplines.<sup>141</sup>

Whereas one wants to applaud Willis's for realising the importance of methodology one also wants to criticise him for not expanding on this insight. He accepts the maps given to Barth's methodological territory by the readings of Van Balthasar and Torrance.<sup>142</sup> He believes Barth to have moved methodologically from dialectics to analogy, and he sees the turning point taking place in Barth's work on Anselm. These incorrect readings, of both Balthasar and Barth, are motivated by his reluctance to accept the influence of Hegel and Schleiermacher, and thus Willis reads Barth in isolation from his German tradition, choosing to believe that Barth worked in a sacred vacuum. He praises Torrance for his understanding that the Word of God came directly to Barth from above unencumbered by social mediation.

We must now return to our discussion of Barth's engagement with the problematics of preaching, for it was this which finally drove him to a thorough reconsideration of the sources of all theology and preaching, the Bible.

Shortly after his withdrawal from the Socialist movement, Barth began a program of intensive biblical and theological study with Eduard Thurneysen, who was at the time pastor of a congregation in the neighbouring town of Lentwil. It was out of this activity of sustained exegetical and theological reflection that the way was cleared for a dramatic new awareness of the "strange new world" of the Bible, and of the sovereignty of God over against all human contrivance. As T.F. Torrance rightly observes, Barth at this time became, "determined to hear the Word of God out of itself, as it came straight from above, unfettered by masterful culture, uncontrolled by the needs and

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<sup>141</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p 4.

<sup>142</sup> Thomas Torrance, *Karl Barth :An Introduction to His Early Theology*, 1910-1931. (London: S.C.M. Press, 1962)

von Balthasar, *Karl Barth: Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie*, (Köln: Verlag, Jacob Hegner, 1951)

satisfactions of bourgeois society, and before it had been sifted and diluted by being passed through some general frame of thought already worked out by modern man.”<sup>143</sup>

This encourages and authenticates Willis's wish to disregard Barth's social context, and indeed his own. This is problematic, because Willis eliminates context in a work of social ethics, and predicable because he writes from the Anglo-American analytical perspective. For Willis, Barth's theology is an object that the detached observer, as subject, may study. These assumed and unstated presuppositions lead to his final disappointments in Barth's ethics. The disappointment due to his reading Barth from an analytical position, and yet he quotes from the political reflections that provoked Barth's turn from nineteenth century theology:

Barth placed the end of nineteenth century theology for him, personally, in a proclamation issued by a group of German intellectuals in August 1914, in support of the war policies of Kaiser Wilhelm.<sup>144</sup>

Willis persists with the view that the Word operates in a social vacuum. This allows him to see Barth moving from dialectic to analogy and the dismissal of what Willis describes as the Hegelian categories:

There is also discernible in the second of these lectures a motif which will become increasingly dominant, and which will attain its most intensive statement in the second edition of the Römerbrief: the utilisation of dialectic. This may be seen here, in somewhat germinal form, in the employment of Hegelian categories, in the tension between temporal and the external, and in the alternation between acceptance and the criticism of existing social forms, which in itself constitutes a mirroring of the activity of God.<sup>145</sup>

Willis connects dialectical method with Hegel and therefore sees the turn from dialectic to analogy, which he believes happened at the time of Barth's work on

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<sup>143</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p 11.

<sup>144</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p 10.

<sup>145</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p 19.



Anselm, as the end of Hegel's influence on Barth's methodology. Willis uses the phrase, 'Hegelian categories', without definition, but implies something unhelpful. Here is another example of Willis's refusal to see Barth as a follower of a tradition in the belief that the Word of God came unmediated by social context. The idea that Barth stands outside of his world is, in Willis's view, established by his use of the dialectic:

Ethically the emergence of dialectic in Barth's method will have two consequences; (1) It will enable him to approach the issue of the ethical without falling into or adopting a particular world-view or ideology. As we shall see, this has important consequences during the years of Barth's struggle with National Socialism, and it is not without importance for an understanding of his later shift from dialectic to analogy.<sup>146</sup>

Here Willis claims that dialectic has a positive use as it stands outside its social context. Earlier Willis had claimed that Barth had moved from dialectic to analogy before 1934, but at this point Willis is using *dialectic* as a foundation for proposing that Barth had a subject object relationship with his social context. In addition, dialectic is now being referred to positively by Willis with no mention of 'Hegelian categories'.

More recently, scholars have pointed to the importance of context in Barth's writing.<sup>147</sup> Richard Roberts says:

It is the understanding and positive interpretation of the function of Barth's theological agency, understood in its particular socio-cultural context, that remains a matter of continuing concern to us.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p 20.

<sup>147</sup> Timothy Gorringe. *Karl Barth against hegemony, Christian theology in context*, (Oxford: O.U.P. 1999)

<sup>148</sup> Roberts, *A Theology on Its Way?* See particularly, 'Barth and the Eschatology of Weimar: A Theology on its Way? pp. 169-99.



In a footnote to this comment Roberts expands:

We thus disagree with those commentators upon Barth who try to divorce his theology from its context, declaring the latter a virtual irrelevance. We wish to capture a fuller understanding of the socio-rhetorical function of theological texts in context and we regard this as a necessary step in the generation of *theological* argument itself.<sup>149</sup>

Willis in the discussion of Barth's 'early period', in chapter one, shows a confusing use of term dialectic, which is caused by not appreciating that truth and method are in symbiotic relationship causes confusion, and this misunderstanding is evident in these words:

We shall need to indicate the content of the *Krisis* under which man stands, and the methodological significance of dialectic as a vehicle for getting this expressed.<sup>150</sup>

Here dialectic is a 'vehicle' for expressing content, as Willis understands the dialectic as different in substance to the content. This is a misunderstanding as there is no separation, because dialectic *is* the content. Willis quotes from Torrance to support his view, but here, Torrance uses "dialogical" as a synonym for "dialectic" that further illustrates the confusion:

Theological thinking is inescapably dialectical because it must be thinking by *man* not from a centre in himself but from a centre in *God*, and yet never seeks to usurp God's own standpoint. It is dialogical thinking in which man remains man but in which he meets God, listens to him, answers him, and speaks of him in such a way that at every point he gives God the glory. Because it is dialogical, it can only be fragmented on his side, for it does not carry its coordinating principle in itself, but derives it from beyond itself in God's Word.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Roberts, *A Theology on Its Way*, p 170.

<sup>150</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p 22.

<sup>151</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p 23.

Willis further quotes Barth's well-known position on the absence of presuppositions, and the inability of humanity to appropriate revelation and thus build a body of knowledge, with the aim of applying it to other cases to support his views:

This does not mean that man is given the capacity to recognise and grasp this *as presupposition*, after which he independently deduces the appropriate consequences, making application of it in varying situations evoking decision and action.<sup>152</sup>

The opposite of this position applies to Willis's analysis of Barth's ethics, as Barth insists that ontology and epistemology is *given* in the event of revelation. The reasons for this decision are discussed elsewhere in the text. Willis assumes that both ontology and epistemology exist as given *before* revelation. Willis believes that he can as subject; examine Barth's ethics, as an object, without difficulties. Yet it is just this discredited position that Barth's theology addresses.

As a subject examining an object, Willis understands the 'method' of the dialectic to cause the problem of human autonomy. He anticipates the move from dialectic to analogy, and the resolution of the difficulties he believes Barth's early work raise about human responsibility:

The upshot of our discussion is that the almost exclusive emphasis which is placed on the priority and transcendence of God in his revelation, and the eschatological reality of the human as grounded in Christ, raise serious questions about the existential identity of man in his historicity, and thus about the possibility for there being meaningful ethical actions which move beyond the primary action of repentance. To be sure, Barth undertakes to speak to these points. The results, however, remain dubious. Whether his subsequent shift from the dialectical categories to a use of analogy allows a more convincing treatment of human remains to be seen.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p 29.

<sup>153</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p 38.



Willis defines what he believes to be the difficulty, and this definition becomes the test to apply to Barth's next work:

The difficulty now turns on whether, in addition to the *Krisis* inaugurated upon the world by God, and the ensuing eschatological transformation which results, there remains room for speaking convincingly of the existential structure and function of the human.<sup>154</sup>

Having set the problem, Willis reads back into the early work.<sup>155</sup> He finds the early period suffers from the dialectic as a method and claims Barth was looking for a new theological method as a vehicle to express his ideas, but he gives no evidence to support his argument:

The period from the publication of the second *Römerbrief* to the appearance of the first volume of the *Church Dogmatics* displays Barth's continued search for an adequate theological method.<sup>156</sup>

Again Willis uses the traditional map of the territory and approvingly quotes Torrance who believes that there was, 'a fundamental methodological weakness in *Christian Dogmatics* 1927'. This 'weakness' was, 'grounded in phenomenological and existential thinking'.<sup>157</sup> Willis takes this as established truth, but does not explain what he means by a methodological weakness, nor explain what he means by phenomenological and existential thinking. He assumes that the absence of an autonomous subject is a weakness in Barth's thinking, identifying Kierkegaard's influence in Barth's 'phenomenological and existential thinking'. Later, Willis expects Barth to give up this early position; yet, it is a position that Willis's reading creates. Willis says that the solution to the problem of theological method was in

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<sup>154</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p 38.

<sup>155</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, in a section with the heading, 'Toward the Church Dogmatics (1927-1931)

<sup>156</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p 39.

<sup>157</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p 40.



Barth's study of Anselm in 1929, and that it was the move to analogy.<sup>158</sup> In an aside, he says that dialectics allowed Barth sufficient distance to criticise National Socialism. There is no evidence that Kierkegaard's dialectic method influenced Barth, but Willis wants 1929 to be the date of transition from dialectic to analogy and as he wants dialectic to be means of Barth's criticism of National Socialism. The implication is that Barth moved from dialectic *before* the Barmen Declaration of 1934, but this dating does not fit with Willis's hypothesis.

Willis sees a hope for the autonomous human subject in a lecture delivered by Barth in 1927, but it is the smallest of hopes, as it is based only on the tense of a verb:

I wish to note the transition involved in moving from the *Römerbrief* to the *Christian Dogmatics*. Ethically, it is a bit difficult to determine precisely what this shift entailed. It is partly discernible in an address delivered by Barth at the conference of student Christians held at Aarau in 1927. The title of this, "Following the Command", is suggestive at two points. First, the verb employed, "following", is active, and thus contains at least the possibility of a positive delineation of the options open to man as an ethical agent.<sup>159</sup>

Willis does not discuss the Münster Ethics of 1928 in detail but does make some important observations. He says, 'This is especially interesting, since it approximates, in general outline, the development of ethics in the *Church Dogmatics*', and continues:<sup>160</sup>

This lecture, (Münster Ethics 1928), is significant, even in outline, for it provides a rather complete delineation of the way a theological ethic would be developed within the context of dogmatics. It is not too fanciful to suggest, in this respect, that this might eventually have found its way into the unfinished volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*. One major difference appears to be that in this outline the category of freedom is introduced only under the command of

<sup>158</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p 40.

<sup>159</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p 41.

<sup>160</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p 46.

redemption, whereas in the *Church Dogmatics* it plays a central role in the special ethic of creation.<sup>161</sup>

There are two points, which were discussed in chapter 6, to be made about Willis's comment: first, to recognise his affirmation of the importance of the Münster Ethics for an overall understanding of Barth's ethics; and second, to raise a question over freedom being restricted to the special ethic of creation.<sup>162</sup> Barth discusses the freedom to become baptised as the first Christian act.

It is disappointing that Willis has so little to say about the Münster *Ethics*. Of course, the material was not available to him as the lectures were first published in German in 1973 and 1978, and the English translation did not appear until 1981, whereas Willis's study was published in 1971. However, Willis does discuss a lecture that Barth gave in 1928, the year before the Münster Ethics, which was published in 1930.

Of *Zur Lehre vom Heiligen Geist* Willis writes:

This was written in 1930 in collaboration with his brother, Heinrich Barth, who contributed a discussion of "The Idea of the Spirit in German Idealism." Barth's discussion of "The Holy Spirit and Christian Life" marks an important stage in the development of his thinking about ethics. Here he concerns himself specifically with the relation between justification and sanctification, and the problem of obedience, which emerges within faith.<sup>163</sup>

Here Willis makes a serious misreading that resulting from his presuppositions. He says of the work that it was written with Heinrich Barth. This is a misunderstanding. The brothers produced two very different papers on the place of the Holy Spirit.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p 51.

<sup>162</sup> See *Church Dogmatics* IV, fragment, *The Christian Life*.

<sup>163</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p 54.

<sup>164</sup> For the details and a discussion of the disagreement between Karl and Heinrich see the Forward by Robin Lovin to Karl Barth's *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life The Theological Basis of Ethics*, (1993) pp xii –xiii. Also see Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth*, p.189, and Barth's letter to H.Scholz, 24 May 1953.



Willis's comments that Heinrich and Karl collaborated on this material is a serious misreading, because Willis claims *by implication* that Karl Barth shared Heinrich's desire to return to Kant. Of course, such a misreading is understandable given Willis's presuppositions. He sums up his thoughts about Barth's lecture by again drawing out the absence of human autonomy and believing this is caused by the faulty method of the dialectic. From his faulty reading, Willis make the following, rather sad, comment:

At this point one is left to wonder how far Barth has moved beyond the position of *Römerbrief*. To be sure, the stringent dialectic given expression there has ceased to dominate, and the distinction between reconciliation and redemption provides a sort of stability to the human that was not present earlier. The question remains, however, whether the shifts that mark Barth's thinking from the *Christian Dogmatics* to this present writing (and it should be recalled that this brings us within two years of the *Church Dogmatics*) result in any substantive revision of his ethics.<sup>165</sup>

Willis said, of the Münster ethics of two years earlier it was not fanciful to suggest it would have made the content of the unwritten ethical section of the *Church Dogmatics*. He now sees no substantial revision in Barth's ethics. The problems that Willis has delineated would, he predicts, have dominated *Church Dogmatics*. Given the opinion that Willis shares with Webster regarding the importance of this lecture for predicting the shape of the ethic in the section of the *Church Dogmatics*, which was never written, the misunderstanding is serious. It casts a shadow of doubt over Willis's reading of Barth's ethics, and therefore Willis's project. He moves on to discusses Barth's Dortmund lecture of 1929.<sup>166</sup> He says:

This lecture manifests a decisive movement towards the theological orientation of the *Church Dogmatics*. It rejects any immanent criterion, whether objective or subjective. It recognises the unavoidability of certain

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<sup>165</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p 59.

<sup>166</sup> *Schicksal und Idee in der Theologie*.

philosophical motifs within theology, but places these at all points under the word of God, that is under Jesus Christ. Finally, theology is understood to be essentially Christology. Indeed it is not too much to say that the definition of theology given here receives precise embodiment in the volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*.<sup>167</sup>

Having established that the form and content of the future *Church Dogmatics* was fixed by 1928 Willis has really established his own position in relation to Barth. Self-referring autonomous humanity, which Willis sees as a requirement for a Christian ethic, is missing from Barth's work at this point, and he predicts it will continue to be missing from the entire corpus:

An ethic grounded in the free electing grace of God, which encounters man as command in his particular givenness and determination, would be expected to exhibit a corresponding freedom from fixed categories of response and action. There is a problem in this, which has to do with those ordinary stabilities and orderings which surround man in his creaturely life. Barth has indicated an awareness of this in the 1928 outline of ethics, which included a section devoted to the place of order within an ethic of creation.

When the point about the freedom of grace in revelation and the implication that this carries for ethics has been, a further question presses for an answer. To what extent is man, as a creature enabled through the Holy Spirit to respond to God's gracious love, capable of realising the possibilities open to him as an ethical agent? Here I have suggested a certain lack of clarity. To be sure, there is discernible a somewhat more hopeful treatment of this issue in the writings after the *Römerbrief*. It still appears to be the case, however, that the eschatological reality of the human, as promise, even though a future *in* the present, is provided with no meaningful point of contact with man's givenness and his need to act now. It is possible that a subsequent deepening and extension of Christology in the *Church Dogmatics* will take us beyond what seems, at present, an impasse.<sup>168</sup>

It is not surprising that as Willis deepens his study of the ethical sections of *Church Dogmatics* that he becomes gradually less enthusiastic. He accuses Barth of misappropriating language and of having a disregard for philosophy. On the first point Willis chooses to express his disbelief that Barth in *Church Dogmatics* discusses the

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<sup>167</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p.63.



improper and pictorial function of language with the following footnote.<sup>169</sup> ‘Barth actually advances the astonishing assertion that such words as “arm” and “mouth” are to us, ‘as such, incomprehensible.’<sup>170</sup> This is an unreasonable comment from Willis, Barth obviously knew the meaning of these words, and used them in his daily life. On the second point, Willis criticises Barth for giving insufficient regard to philosophy. In *Church Dogmatics* there are pages of footnotes where Barth is in discussion with philosophers. In an interesting footnote Willis makes the following revealing comment:

Barth’s description of the common involvement of theology and philosophy with “the one, total Truth” indicates his reading of philosophy in terms of idealism, where a definite metaphysical concern of this sort (i.e., unity and inclusiveness) is expressed. It is interesting to speculate how Barth would view the decisive thrust in British and American philosophy away from this sort of concern toward an almost exclusive interest in empirical and linguistic analysis.<sup>171</sup>

At the end of his thesis Willis has a section of Questions and Issues in which he summarises his conclusions. In this section under the title, The Unity of Barth’s Ethics Willis comes to the core of his disagreement with Barth’s individual and political ethic. He says:

By insisting on virtually identifying dogmatics and ethics, Barth fails, at points, to make an effective transition out of the context of “divine ethics” and into the empirical framework where the stuff of *human* decision and action must be wrestled with. The motifs of transcendentalism and actualism that run through his presentation do not clearly make contact with the human, and such contact as they do manage is vitiated by the relation Barth sets up between created and reconciled human nature. The result of this is a certain ambiguity about the status and meaning of Christian ethics, and human action generally, beyond the one inclusive action of God in Christ. To this extent, at least, it would appear that the difficulties noted in the ethics of the *Römerbrief* and the

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<sup>168</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p 65.

<sup>169</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, p. 259.

<sup>170</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p 79.

<sup>171</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, footnote, 4, on p. 103

shorter writings that follow it, have not been completely overcome in the *Dogmatics*.<sup>172</sup>

The problems defined by Willis lead him to the conclusion that in specific cases of social ethics Barth does not give sufficient concern to individuals but concentrates on ideology. For example, Willis says of Barth's perspective on the State:

The major concern manifested in Barth's encounter with both National Socialism and Communism appears to lie more at the level on the ideological bearing these have on the self-understanding of the Church than the question of their impact on persons.<sup>173</sup>

Of course, it must be acknowledged that Willis did *not* have access to Barth's Münster and Bonn lectures. The quotation from Willis above suggests that access to the Münster *Ethics* would have made little difference as the problems persisted into the *Church Dogmatics*. It is as if Barth and Willis are from different worlds and speak different languages, Willis tries to judge Barth from an Anglo-American perspective, and although within this context he is scrupulously fair in his reading of Barth, his project is doomed to failure. Willis's study is an illustration of the lack of comprehension of Barth's work by Anglo-American theologians. How far Willis would have been able to temper his disappointment with Barth's ethics had he read the Münster ethics cannot be known. However Willis's meticulous work is a fine example of the work that needs to be done on a close study of Barth's writings that have become recently available. Such studies need to be aware of historical and contextual constraints. There is evidence, as has been suggested earlier in this thesis, that this task has begun, and indeed this work is intended as part of the process of reassessing Barth's contribution to theological social ethics.

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<sup>172</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p. 443.  
 Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p.417.



Part of this task, in relation to the criticisms of Wills and others is answering the question: is it possible to defend Barth against the charge that he has made his ethics immune from criticisms? In answering this question, there are two features of Barth's ethics to consider: they are foundation and method. The Münster and Bonn *Ethics* establish the foundations of theological ethics in the Word of God. Barth can be criticised for beginning ethics with dogmatics. However, it has to be remembered that he is discussing a *science* in which the method has to be appropriate to the object of study. The object defines the method. Unlike any other science, the object of theological study is unique. Judgments of Barth's ethics have to be made on whether the method of study is appropriate to the object. Therefore, it is not possible to evaluate Barth's method against the method used in other sciences. In this thesis, it has been argued that the use of orders of creation in the Münster and Bonn ethics is contrary to the method. It has also been pointed out that Barth emphasised the individual at the expense of wider political concerns. The use of the "plank" argument for disagreements between states needs further elaboration. Establishing theological ethics, as science is not beyond criticism, indeed the two ethicists discussed in the next section begin not in dogmatics but in historical narrative. As will be seen anthropological foundations assume the human capacity to make judgements about the object of study from a neutral position. Barth does not accept this position.

If theology is a science then criticism needs to focus on the appropriateness of the method, whereas, if it is *not* a science then the foundation of Barth's work is open to criticism. The foundation is in God's revelation, and so the criticism assumes a neutral position from which God might be judged. Again, this is exactly the position that Barth's work refuses to accept. The criticism that Barth's work is immune from

criticism assumes too high a regard for the traditional Enlightenment view of the detached observer, which assumes that theology is similar to all other areas of human knowledge and that God's revelation can be judged.

## 7.4 Alternative Ethical Projects

A brief discussion of the two alternative ethical projects by Donald Shriver and Miroslav Volf is included at this point, which focuses attention on two questions:

1. What foundations are proper for the discussion of theological ethics?
2. What methodology is appropriate to the articulation of the truth of theological ethics?

The focal point of the assessment of these alternative approaches is Barth's claim that theology is a science. From the previous discussion, we have seen that, for Barth, the foundations of a science have to be authenticated by the object of study. In addition, the truth of the object of study determines what is an appropriate methodology. These conditions establish that theological ethics is part of dogmatics. Barth is not so naive to believe that his theological ethics, although necessary, is also unique. He realises theological ethics may assume other possible forms and shapes. Shriver and Volf provide two alternative perspectives. However, the two questions above are the criteria by which the appropriateness of any theological ethics is judged.

The critiques of Shriver and Wolf are from the perspective of a reading of Barth's ethical writings, and the discussion of them draws attention to the need to establish suitable criteria for the foundations and the methodology of any theological ethic, and



Shriver and Volf's works illustrate problems concerning the foundations and methodology of theological ethics. The discussion shows, from the perspective of Barth's work, the importance of establishing the foundation of theological ethics in revelation. As a result, the discussion stresses the importance for Barth that theological ethics develops a methodology appropriate to its object of study. Therefore, there can be no presuppositions brought to the task from anthropology or any other human source.

#### 7.4.1 Donald Shriver

Shriver begins by quoting the poet Robert Frost's observation: "To be social is to be forgiving."<sup>174</sup> These words aptly express the first theme of the work in which Shriver argues for the reclaiming of forgiveness, from being an individualised concept, to its re-establishment as a social-political concept. Shriver, in the middle of his work states, 'Our past in your present threatens your future'. These words express the second theme under discussion and succinctly express the pragmatic reason Shriver gives for undertaking the study which is the healing of memories.

Shriver writes from his personal experiences as a pastor of a small congregation in North Carolina, and in his introduction says of his purpose in writing the book:

The principal purpose of the whole study is to identify both the need and the actual presence of forgiveness in political history, and thus to encourage readers, as citizens, to consider the political wisdom inherent in this neglected virtue.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies*, in the, "Acknowledgements".

<sup>175</sup> Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies*, p. 11.

His second purpose is to reclaim forgiveness as a social concept he further developed these ideas during his graduate work in a mental hospital. His interest developed further into the exploration of forgiveness as a political concept in the 1960's as an active participator in the civil rights movement.

Both the timing and the context are important for any understanding of Shriver's study. Although his work was published in 1995 Shriver's thoughts were germinating in the sixties in the seedbed of an evangelical community and a mental institution. The 1960's were a time of political upheaval and of hope. In 1960, Jürgen Moltmann was writing a theology of hope, but by the 1970's he was eloquently expressing the loss of that hope and expounding a theology of suffering.<sup>176</sup> The 1960's were also the time of the Cuban missile crisis and the heat of the Cold War. However, Shriver's study expresses the optimism of the 1960's and he seems unaware of the difficulties caused by the loss of this optimism, nor its interrelation with the wider world political scene.

The phenomenological studies of mental institutions by Erving Goffman profoundly affect our understanding of the social relationships within mental institutions, and Shriver implies that the socialisation of the concept of forgiveness would address these difficulties.<sup>177</sup> He appears to be unaware of the complications that were very much part of the seventies socio-political debate. This also suggests that the views he expressed in *An Ethic for Enemies* were formed in the nineteen sixties and express the

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<sup>176</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Theology of Hope*, (ET 1967), and *The Crucified God*, (ET 1974).

<sup>177</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*. (Doubleday: Mayflower, 1959) and Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968)



optimism of the time. Shriver also has a moral purpose, which is to call Americans to confession.

Shriver says that three questions underlie his study, they are:

1. What moral wrongs, and what memories of them, do we bring to our conflicts with other human beings?
2. What difference does a process of listening to other people's experience of hurt make to the building of some new communal relation between them?
3. And if the building of relationships is at the heart of *ethics*, how can that goal be served rather than frustrated by the moral judgements which hostile groups often make about each other?

Shriver's use of pronouns in the first two questions suggests he is speaking about individual transactions. However, moving from a particular experience to a general political statement is problematic. This problem persists throughout his study, and relates directly to his third question, which he begins with: 'if the building of relationships is at the heart of *ethics*'. For Shriver then the foundation of ethics is the building of relationships and his ethical reflections begin from historical events. For this methodology Shriver says he is indebted to H. Richard Niebuhr, who, he says, taught him the meaning of ethics focused on the mutuality of value and interests in the webs of history.

Shriver writes from his experiences as a pastor and a member of the Christian community. Of course, it is possible to begin ethical reflections from historical experiences, but he wants to write *Christian* social ethics. What is to distinguish Shriver's Christian social ethics from any other social ethics? What is it that makes it specifically Christian? Shriver does not address this question. Nor does he attempt to

justify his method. His work assumes his methodology is not problematic and this assumption leads him into difficulties when he tries to ground his work in the life of the early church and then transposes his reading to the twentieth century.

Forgiveness is the central concept in Shriver's study of reconciliation. He says:

The concept of forgiveness, which is customarily relegated to the realms of religion and personal ethics, belongs at the heart of reflection about how groups of humans can move to repair the damages that they have suffered from past conflicts with each other.

Forgiveness might be an element in achieving the aim of the reconciliation between groups, but, if Shriver wants to ground his Christian social ethics in the New Testament witness of the early church, then the concept of non-proprietary rights would have a stronger claim, as they are the major theme of the New Testament. Richard Hays says: 'the challenge of the New Testament is clear: from Matthew to Revelation, the New Testament writers bear witness passionately about the economic imperatives of discipleship'.<sup>178</sup> Certainly, non-proprietary rights are an outstanding feature of the early church as described in Acts. Property claims for land, goods, or people are the major source of conflict in and between societies, but Shriver does not consider such claims as a source either of conflict, or as a means of restoration and reconciliation of which forgiveness would be an element. Forgiveness as a concept, in his study, has been elevated above all other ideas, in the process of reconciliation. This is because of Shriver's underlying aim, which is to call Americans to make confession for racism.

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<sup>178</sup> Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, (T&T Clark: Edinburgh 1997) p.464.



He says of his task: 'Urgency compels communication, the narrative is fictional historical which seems to meet the requirements'. By basing his work in Christian social ethics on historical descriptions, he is conscious that the person who controls a society's stories controls their present and their future. He reports that South Africans reminded him that they had suffered already from *others* writing their history. In addition, Shriver's interpretation of historical events is open to question. Not all historians would agree with him that the economic effects of the Treaty of Versailles were the only foundation of the Third Reich. Nor indeed would all accept his views on the post War World II relationship between America and Germany. He chooses three stories, which he calls narrative history and asks, 'What do these stories tell us about forgiveness?' The stories are:

1. American hostility toward Germany.
2. America's confrontation with Japan.
3. American injustice upon African Americans.

Shriver first wants to establish that in the past forgiveness was central to the social and political life of communities. He later discusses how forgiveness, as a social concept, became forgiveness for individual acts, and he places much of the blame for this change on the Roman Catholic Church, who, he claims, institutionalised what he refers to as "the sacrament of penance", but which practising Catholics would call the "sacrament of reconciliation". This is a significant terminological change because the emphasis becomes one of repairing of the relationships with God and neighbour.

To construct his foundation Shriver uses Greek, Hebrew and Christian sources. The Greek source is the tales of Aeschylus and Thucydides. The Hebrew is the saga of

Joseph, which is an example of forgiveness in a political setting. The Christian narrative is the New Testament account of the internal life of the early church. In these stories Shriver shows how, in three different societies, forgiveness was practiced as a community activity, then, in reflecting on the three twentieth century stories that he has chosen, he asks, and answers, two questions:

1. How has forgiveness come to have such a minor place in political ethics?
2. In a pluralistic ethical culture, can we in our time agree on *any* ethical standards?

Shriver wants to be able to draw implications from his historical case studies for, ‘future thinking and behaviour of American political leaders and their constituents in the upcoming century.’

He uses his sources to illustrate that forgiveness is a community activity, and not a private one. However he is using diverse ancient texts and does not recognise the difference between them. He assumes they are all available to interpretation by the same hermeneutical process, as they are ancient historical sources and he assumes that each text has an equal force in proving his point. He makes no suggestion there may be some hermeneutic problems. He takes the sources and uses them as mirrors to reflect his three chosen twentieth century histories of conflict. This is a problematic way of grounding a Christian social ethic, because it begins in anthropology. Ethics can begin with these foundations, but what then makes it Christian ethics? How does it relate to church doctrine? How, for example, does it express a theology of Redemption? Shriver does not attempt to answer these questions from the perspective he has chosen, his foundations are problematic even if they were to be the source of any other form of social ethics.



In his first chapter, Shriver discusses revenge as the enemy of politics and gives as his first example the Treaty of Versailles, saying:

Almost every observer of that first half of our century acknowledges, ruefully, that the seeds of the “second round” were sown in the Versailles Treaty, as a clear illustration of vengeful international politics as the century was to yield.<sup>179</sup>

Many historians argue that the harsh economic penalties imposed on Germany as part of the Versailles Treaty led to World War II but not all historians agree. Others see the loss of territory as far more traumatic. Shriver assumes that the size of the reparation payments demanded by the Treaty caused the collapse of the German economy, but most of the payments were never made, and the amount given to Germany exceeded her reparation payments. The collapse had more to do with the huge debts accumulated during the First World War, and its cause is more open to debate than Shriver chooses to admit. To refer to it as, ‘a clear illustration of vengeful international politics as the century was to yield’ is somewhat disingenuous. It can be argued that propriatorial claims over lost territories were the greatest source of bitterness.

Shriver goes on to say, ‘Revenge destroys political community.’ Here Shriver has a strong argument for the supporting forgiveness as a political and social concept. The idea that the main function of Christian social ethics is the building of community is a strong argument, if it is grounded in the Doctrine of the Trinity. This, however, is not the path that Shriver has chosen to follow, because, as already stated, he wants to begin in history.

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<sup>179</sup> Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies*, p. 11.

Shriver's work may be thought of as a prolegomena: a beginning. The work of reconciliation between communities is, as he says, urgent. It is of the utmost importance but it needs a more detailed theological understanding if it is to provide a foundation from which to be in dialogue with others. For this is, what Shriver hopes to achieve, is finding an ethic that enemies that can be agree upon in a pluralistic world.

In his second chapter, Shriver discusses forgiveness in politics in the Christian tradition of the ethical teachings of Jesus, he says:

Jesus forgiveness has to be learned in a community that seems basic to the ethical teachings of Jesus.<sup>180</sup>

Secondly his comment on Paul's letter to the Corinthians is:

Here the early Christian community is a long way from institutionalising its repair of relations in formal rules and offices that one day would be called the sacrament of penance. Authority to forgive rests, as Jesus seems to have intended, in a body of people.

He uses the qualifier "seems" in both quotations, and its use weakens his pronouncements. He tries to base his argument for forgiveness as a *political* concept by showing how the early church used it. It is important for establishing his point, but even though it is a central point he lets his argument slip away. He does not give any examples showing how Jesus understood forgiveness to be a political construct. He simply says forgiveness was learnt in the community. Learning forgiveness in a community is not the same thing as forgiveness being a political construct, which is used between communities. Shriver, of the latter, gives us no evidence. Shriver says, and surely, this is true, that forgiveness was given a new prominence in the teaching



of Jesus. However, a new prominence is not the same as making it a central point in the resolving of conflicts between groups. Shriver does explain his vagueness on this point:

The new prominence does not mean that “forgiveness” is the most important word in the vocabulary of the New Testament ethics or that forgiveness, divine or human, is the essence of the New Testament faith. In the sermons of Acts as in the writings of Paul, the new, transformed life of the Christian goes by many names – salvation, justification, life in the spirit. In this transformation, forgiveness has an indispensable place, but it is not the umbrella word for all things true and celebrated in the new faith and its churches.<sup>181</sup>

The question remains whether Shriver has shown that Jesus and his followers in the early church were practising forgiveness as a political ethic. That is, were the followers of Jesus practising forgiveness between groups in conflict? Shriver gives no evidence that during the first two centuries, the time of the parting of the ways of Christianity from Judaism, that the followers of Jesus were practicing such political forgiveness. He extracts this belief from his assertion that the followers of Jesus’ learnt of forgiveness within their community and practiced it there.

Assuming that forgiveness *was* part of the political life of the early church Shriver makes the following two points: the first is that forgiveness became institutionalised; and the second, that the Reformation individualised forgiveness. The first point is true, repentance, penance and absolution became expressions of the power of the institutionalised church after its fusion with the State in Western Christianity. The church administered this power for both good and ill, but this is not Shriver’s point as he is arguing that this process by becoming institutionalised *removed* forgiveness from political discourse. Forgiveness, he says, became an individualised concept. The

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<sup>180</sup> Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies*, p. 35.

church pardoned, reconciled, absolved and forgave individuals, and he claims that there were no possibilities for political or public forgiveness. Is this true? It may be that Shriver is choosing to ignore the place of forgiveness in the public domain, but the rules of engagement for war contained strict codes of behaviour for both sides. When, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1416, Henry V laid siege to Harfleur, Deuteronomy [20:10] provided his rules of engagement.

When you draw near to a town to fight against it, offer it terms of peace. If it accepts your terms of peace and surrenders to you all the people in it shall serve you at forced labour. (Deut. 20.13)

The French received Henry's ambassadors fed and entertained them, and returned them safely to Henry the following day. After receiving the acceptance of his terms of surrender Henry spared the town and the lives of its inhabitants and his words taken from Shakespeare's play reflect the influence of Deuteronomy:

Open your gates.  
                                   Come, Uncle Exeter,  
 Go and enter Harfleur. There remain,  
 And fortify it strongly against the French,  
 Use mercy on them all.<sup>182</sup>

Shakespeare's use of the word "mercy", a potent Christian concept, is central to medieval rules of engagement. Western Christianity became the global ethic from which theories of a just war were established. The rules provided for forgiveness as a political concept within certain parameters, and taking action outside the rules was unforgivable. In the twentieth century this remained the case. Many Americans could not forgive Japan for attacking Pearl Harbour *without first giving warning*, which

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<sup>181</sup> Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies*, p.45.

<sup>182</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Oxford Shakespeare: The complete works*, ed. by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor 'Henry V', (Oxford: OUP, 1998) Act 3 Scene 3, lines 133-7, p. 580.



suggests the concept of forgiveness is part of the political arena. Of course, all arenas have boundaries, and forgiveness like all other political concepts can only operate within limits. There is a need for a global ethic and this need is for defining international law. Political forgiveness may be part of that discourse. Shriver, however, fails to establish in his work that forgiveness was a political concept for the early church, and fails to show how the Roman Catholic Church institutionalised it.

The third part of his argument about the Reformation, is stronger:

Solidly at home in the personal and churchly realms, the Lutheran reformation left forgiveness more insulated than ever from legitimate political expression. It remained in captivity in the church and a stranger to politics.<sup>183</sup>

And:

The assurance of divine forgiveness of personal sin was the heart of the Protestant Reformation.<sup>184</sup>

This is true of the Lutheran Reformation individual conscience and not the rules of the Roman Catholic Church became the arbiter of morality. The “good” became an expression of an individual’s inner life and not an act in society. The separation of church and state is the main reason that the Confessing Churches theological statement in opposition to the rise of the *Führerprinzip* did not become political action following the Barmen Declaration. For this reason Shriver’s argument is extremely important as forgiveness needs to be transferred from the individual and returned to the public domain. However, this is part of a wider argument of establishing the proper relationship between the church and the state.

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<sup>183</sup> Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies*, p. 45.

<sup>184</sup> Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies*, p. 52.

Shriver says the Calvinists in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries abolished penance as a formal institution and located it once again in the life of the congregation, and that, ‘The good of the whole community’ was a constant theme of Calvinist ethics.<sup>185</sup> He reintroduced the Christian individual to a vocation for civic reform in a “political theory of church government.”<sup>186</sup> However, Calvin and his followers developed little explicit thinking on forgiveness as a public virtue.<sup>187</sup>

Shriver, discussing the consequences of the Enlightenment for a political concept of forgiveness, makes the important point that such a concept is relative to a belief in human autonomy and freedom. ‘Can a conflict prone society, proud of its personal freedoms, persist when individual consciences have no agreement on what the “common good” is?’<sup>188</sup>

He points out that more people were killed in war in the twentieth century than in the preceding five thousand years combined, and it is against this background that he calls for a globalisation of moral protest, claiming that, ‘the cry for ethics in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century is a cry for life.’<sup>189</sup> For, he says, ‘We can afford to dabble in ethical relativism only if we are not relativistic about the values of human life itself.’<sup>190</sup> However, how is this globalisation of moral protest to be established? He suggests through the shared belief that:

The preservation of our neighbour’s life is the first rule of politics, we might contribute to a new politics of life by accurately recollecting what the politics of death did to them or their ancestors. This painful study of pain-filled

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<sup>185</sup> Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies*, p. 55.

<sup>186</sup> Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies*, p. 56.

<sup>187</sup> Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies*, p. 57.

<sup>188</sup> Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies*, p. 61.

<sup>189</sup> Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies*, p. 66.

<sup>190</sup> Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies*, p. 67.



history is the beginning of forgiveness in politics. To begin to forgive one's political enemies past and present is, first of all, to identify what there is to forgive, and to identify it in the utmost possible detail. Three "exercises" in that sort of historical study – which I commend to fellow Americans – constitutes the rest of this book.<sup>191</sup>

In response, he makes two points: firstly, he asks can we and do we learn from history? Secondly, he says is speaking only to Americans although a few paragraphs earlier calls for a global response to the horrors of the twentieth century. His justification is that he is an American and is therefore only qualified, morally, to speak to other Americans. It is necessary to ask if he is reprimanding his fellow countrymen for their earlier behaviour and is he therefore calling them to repent and seek forgiveness? Even though he has limited his boundaries to America Shriver nevertheless begins the next section of his work with some universal questions:

Can Nations Remember, Repent and forgive? 'Can whole nations repent? Forgive? Engage in processes that eventuate in collective repentance and forgiveness?'<sup>192</sup>

He does not attempt to answer any of these questions on a universal or global basis, which he earlier demanded, but says:

Rather than arguing theoretically for an answer of "yes" to those crucial questions, the rest of this book will examine at length the history of three twentieth-century enmities that have profoundly shaped the lives of every living American: our wars with Germany and Japan and our centuries old internal struggle for just relations between African Americans and the country as a whole.<sup>193</sup>

Initially Shriver described the purpose of his study to, 'encourage readers, as citizens' At this point Shriver directs himself to Americans and spends the remainder of the his book recounting his version of the three American stories he has mentioned above. Is

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<sup>191</sup> Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies*, p. 68.

<sup>192</sup> Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies*, p. 71.

the book addressed to readers outside North America? Can a universal theological ethic be established on the base of a particular narrative? The answer initially was yes but having limited his position to that of an American talking to Americans his move to narrative history becomes a problem, because he also moves from a descriptive and historical account of forgiveness, which he sees as a political concept, to making a universal statement. Another reason that his turn to narrative history is a problem, and this is implicit throughout his work, is his desire to bring Americans to a state of repentance enabling them to seek forgiveness.

In the three histories Shriver goes on to recount that racism is the underlying source of both the conflict and of the creation of enemies. If his analysis is correct, his work serves as an excellent prolegomena to a future ethic, but much work remains to be done. Theological work is needed to provide a foundation for such an argument. Beginning Christian social ethics with history is unsatisfactory as it is not possible then to move from the many to the one, the problem of how a particular of history becomes a universal of reason. Philosophical work is needed to discuss the part and role of the other. Hegel's master and slave argument and subsequent forms of defining the self need exploring, such as Barth use of Hegel's concept in the "plank" argument.<sup>194</sup> As Shriver says work on an ethic for relating to enemies is vitally important and is needed urgently, and his work is immensely valuable because it directs us to these questions. His weakness is in analysis and in not providing a theoretical structure in which the concept of forgiveness can be explored, and what he has begun others must continue, for as he says:

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<sup>193</sup> Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies*, p. 71.

<sup>194</sup> See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, para. 192 p. 116.



Forgiveness in politics is a relatively new, fragile subject of investigation.<sup>195</sup>

#### 7.4.2 Miroslav Volf

Volf's work forms the second ethical project. Volf, who is a native Croatian, and the Henry B. Wright Professor in Theology at Yale Divinity School, writes from firsthand experience of teaching in the former Yugoslavia. His book on the ethics of reconciliation has been well received.<sup>196</sup> George Newlands describes it as 'an outstanding work'.<sup>197</sup> Volf identifies with Jürgen Moltmann's perspective of the theology of suffering.<sup>198</sup> Following in his tradition Volf engages in a theological discussion with current intellectual ideas of post-modern thought in an exciting and challenging way.

Using a dialectic form of methodology, he considers contrasting pairs of concepts and brings them to a synthesis through a narrative discourse founded on biblical theology. His thinking is dialectic analysing opposing concepts together for example, exclusion and embrace, distance and belonging, separating-and-binding.

He begins his discussion of the ethics of reconciliation with the concept of separation, which he makes a foundational concept. In the first part of his discussion he uses two Biblical narratives as illustrations of the concept, and these form the first half of his methodology. He defines Biblical theology as the use of biblical texts in relation to the theological themes of self-donation and the reception of the other. He is, he says, participating in the salutary revival of biblical theology within the field of systematic

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<sup>195</sup> Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies*, p. 71.

<sup>196</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1996)

<sup>197</sup> George Newlands, *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* Volume XX Number 2. 1999.

theology. Of course, as has been discussed earlier Barth, spent much of the Münster *Ethics*, and even more of the *Church Dogmatics* in an exegesis of Biblical passages. However, for Barth, unlike Volf, the passages are *pointers* to ethical action. Barth says biblical narratives are the accounts of those who witnessed the revelation, and were concrete events to them; whereas for those who have subsequently read the texts they may point to action, but do not define it. Here then is a disagreement between Volf and Barth about the use of biblical narratives as foundations for a concept of theological ethics.

In his second methodology Volf engages with modern thinkers. However, before discussing this methodology it is important to consider the use of biblical theology as a methodology for the foundation of theological social ethics. Using the story of Abraham and the revelation of Paul as his narratives Volf identifies *separation* as the central concept in both narratives. In the Abraham story the separation is geographical, and in describing the Abraham story as a departure, he says:

The narrative of Abraham's call underlines that stepping out of enmeshment in the network of inherited cultural relations is a correlate of faith in one God.<sup>199</sup>

He also refers to the Christian tradition as a departure saying that it is, 'part and parcel of Christian identity.'<sup>200</sup> His second biblical narrative is Paul's conversion which is the opposite of Abraham's; or rather, the stories are the two sides of the same coin. Volf says, for Paul the separation was not geographical but internal for Christ lives in him. The word Paul himself used to describe this act is "crucified". Here we see Volf's

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<sup>198</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life* (1992), *The Crucified God* (1972), *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (1980), *The Way of Jesus Christ* (1989), p.71.

<sup>199</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p. 39.

<sup>200</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p. 40.



method, which is the definition of the polarity of two events, in this case the external and the internal departures. Paul, in his particularity, relates internally to the absolute. The new, 'departed' life of the Christian has become the place where the One relates to the Many. In Abraham's story the relationship takes place externally. What exactly does Volf have in mind when he considers that Paul has undergone a separation analogous to that of Abraham? To explain Volf uses the concept of de-centering. He says faith and baptism both de-centre and re-centre the self. The centre is not erased, nor has it been replaced, for, if Christ lives in me, Volf says, then I must have a centre that is distinct from Christ the centre. After an internal departure in the new life, there is a synthesis of the I with the other. This process Volf calls re-centering, which entails no self-obliterating denial of the self.

Volf says there is no dissolving of the self in Christ. He compares the inner change of re-centering with other changes, such as the relationship of the "father," the "husband," the "nation," or the "church," these unlike re-centering are definitive role changes. He then claims that this difference indicates that re-centering does not legitimise other such dissolutions. On the contrary re-centering establishes the most proper and unassailable centre that allows the self to stand over against persons and institutions that may threaten to smother it.<sup>201</sup> Re-centering protects the self from losing itself in relationships. These roles, which are no longer determining, such as being a father, a husband, or a member of a nation and a church, become peripheral to identity. Volf suggests that individuals are separated from these roles as definitive of identity in an internal departure. This is an act of faith that has de-centered and re-centered them in Christ. Volf is discussing two changes: the first is the inner departure and separation in Christ, which is a real change, the second is a relational change for

example, becoming a father, a husband, a member of a nation, or a church. Volf points out that real change does not obliterate the self, whereas relational changes overwhelm identity.

The concept of bi-polarity expresses the departure of the self from the self to a new life in Christ. There is a *before*, followed by a *departure*, and arriving at a new *present*, which is the separation from the old self by the new self. Bi-polarity is the central concept in Volf's idea of departure, and he expresses it thus:

Christian children of Abraham can “depart” from their culture without having to leave it. Departure is no longer a spatial category; it can take place *within the cultural space one inhabits*.<sup>202</sup>

The experience of departure is not only a historical specific for Christian, but is also in Volf's description a universal. However, this is not the experience of all Christians, to have one foot in their culture and the other outside. For the Indian who becomes a Christian in the church of South India, conversion involves a departure and a separation from the culture that is both radical and total.

Volf's idea of departure as a bi-polarized concept restricts the development of different understandings of the way in which the self relates to the other. Assuming, that one can remain in one's culture, but not to be part of it is to underestimate how the self is determined. Volf describes the process of the Christian response to the call of the Gospel as, ‘they have stepped as it were, with one foot outside their culture while with the other remaining firmly planted in it.’ They are, to quote an oft-repeated phrase, ‘of the world but not in it.’ This suggests an internal separation in the self *and*

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<sup>202</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p. 71.



a separation of the self from the culture and both separations are a denial of how the self is determined. However, this concept leads to a bi-polarity between the self and the other. In Volf's model of separation and self, there is insufficient understanding of the relationship between the individual and society. His model reflects the behaviour of the American adolescent who rebels against the family leaves home and becomes an independent autonomous adult by rejecting the nest. Yet parents and society expect this rebellion it is a tradition an expected rebellion and it is a pattern of behaviour that has arisen from particularly Protestant readings of biblical narratives.<sup>203</sup> Miroslav Volf's concept of departure and separation, as illustrated in the biblical narratives of Abraham and Paul, follows in a long Christian tradition, from Augustine through to Luther and Calvin.

Shriver and Volf establish the foundations of Christian ethics in anthropological concepts. Shriver wants to take historical narrative as a starting point, and sees the biblical narratives and Greek myths as paradigmatic models for the foundation of a universal political ethic. He extrapolates, from his chosen narratives, forgiveness as the central concept, which then becomes the foundation of a theological ethic. He expresses this process within a desire that the United States of America make confession for its past actions against Germany, Japan and African-Americans. He believes that if forgiveness and reconciliation were re-instated as political concepts the healing of memories would be enabled, and differences resolved. Volf's analysis however, is more sophisticated in its discussion of the other. His work is part of the movement that wishes to integrate Biblical and systematic theology, and both of these aims are to be applauded. Even so, Volf begins his discussion with anthropological concepts, such as separation and embrace.

Karl Barth's work in theological ethics argues that the reconciling of divisions can only be accomplished if theological ethics begin from the doctrine of God. He says:

To understand God from man is either an impossibility or something one can do only in the form of Christology and anthropology (not even a Christology translated into anthropology). There is a way from Christology to anthropology, but there is no way from anthropology to Christology.<sup>204</sup>

In the opening lecture of the Münster and Bonn *Ethics* Barth explains why the foundations of theological ethics cannot begin in anthropology. He describes ethics as equivalent to morals, which traditionally has been the study of the psychology of the will, of habits and the law. However, he says that the real question of ethics points beyond the natural as the study of the psychology of will; the historical as the study of habits and legal possibilities lead to the question: are they valid?

The morality or goodness of human conduct which ethics investigates has to do with the validity of what is valid for all human action, the origin of all constancies, the worth of everything universal, the rightness of all rules.<sup>205</sup>

What is it that makes Shriver and Volf's positions valid? How are they to be judged? What makes them true? Are Shriver and Volf describing what is valid for all human action? In his fourth lecture, Barth gives criteria for answering these questions.<sup>206</sup> He opens with the statement that, 'the truth of God is not a general and theoretical and consequently a conditioned truth'. All other truths are general, conditioned and theoretical and are therefore constantly open to the question, what makes them valid? This is the question to be put to Shriver and Volf. What makes their ethics, which begin in anthropology concepts, valid? Any answer to the question is reiterative unless it can provide a universal validity for why something should be understood as

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<sup>203</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 39

<sup>204</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, p. 131.

<sup>205</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 5.



valid. The reiteration can only be avoided by beginning ethics with the universal truth of God, which has been revealed in Jesus Christ and continues to be revealed in and through the Word of God. Therefore, Barth *insists* in beginning theological ethics with God's Word as it has been revealed in the threefold form of creation, reconciliation and redemption. His lectures are an exposition of what this means for the Christian life.

He recognised that there are other forms of Christian ethics and at the beginning of his lectures gave a careful analysis of the three main types, paying particular attention to the Roman Catholic position on morals, which he believed to be the most serious reflection on the Christian life. However, it is not a position that Barth, following in the Reformed tradition wishes to accept because it does not take seriously enough the Christian doctrine of the fall, and states that reason is capable of knowing God and the good. Barth's position within the tradition is clear and did not need to be spelt out to his audience, so he concentrates his words on a philosophical discussion about universal truth.

Barth also rejects any appeal to the Bible as foundational. Since he thinks the Bible is a record of the witness of those who received the revelation, which was concrete command for them, but for us is relative. Barth does take Biblical exegesis extremely seriously, but he resists any attempt to extract concepts from Biblical narrative and make them foundational. Foundational positions, such as those of Shriver and Volf, presuppose human knowledge before revelation, and even though such knowledge obviously exists, it does not become true until determined by revelation.

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<sup>206</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, p. 63.

The works of Shriver and Volf are admirable attempts at Christian ethics because they take seriously the desire to further integrate biblical scholarship with systematic theology, but they have finally to be rejected because they begin with presuppositions. They have been included in the thesis to illustrate the problems that their methodologies create for a theological ethic that is true to the scientific study of its object.



## Chapter 8 Conclusion

The thesis has argued that the time is right for a reassessment of Barth's social philosophy, and two reasons have been given: the publication of new material from his early period, 1918–1933, and a change of attitude among a few theologians in the Anglo-American tradition.

The newly available material from Barth's collected works, which has been examined, is the posthumously published lectures on ethics, given at the University of Münster in 1929/30 and the University of Bonn in 1930/31. The lectures were published in English in 1981 as *Ethics*. It has been argued that, in the main, scholars, in the Anglo-American theological traditions have ignored this body of work. However, they are important for the study of Barth's social philosophy because they show him establishing theology as a science and ethics as a necessary part of dogmatics.

In addition, alongside the *Ethics* a previously published lecture, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life*, has also been considered and discussed. The lecture is important because it answers those critics who claim that Barth's ethical writings are so dominated by Christology that there is no room for pneumatology. In addition, in this lecture, Barth rejects all teleological goals for theological ethics. The timing of the lecture is important, it falls between the two semesters at Münster in which the lectures on ethics were delivered. It was given in October 1929. After Barth had spent a long summer at a retreat at Bergli. It has been pointed out that Charlotte von Kirschbaum was also among the guests and that after this holiday she joined Barth's

household. It has been argued in the thesis that von Kirschbaum knew of the content of both sets of lectures and that it is likely she had some influence both over the content and the decision not to publish them during Barth's lifetime. It is not possible to provide evidence for this suggestion, and it must remain as a speculation. There has recently been some recognition of von Kirschbaum's abilities as a theologian, and the thesis has suggested that her influence on, and contribution to Barth's work in the main has been disregarded. There is a need for her correspondence to be translated, edited and published so that she may receive recognition for her contribution.

The second reason given for the claim that the time is right for a reassessment of Barth's social philosophy is that in Anglo-Saxon theology interest in Barth's ethical writings has recently intensified. This interest has been generated by the publications of the scholars Nigel Biggar, John Webster, and to a lesser extent Bruce McCormack. Central to this renewal of interest has been John Webster's works, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, (1995) and *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought*, (1998). John Webster's work stimulated the examination of Barth's Münster and Bonn *Ethics*.

The structure of the thesis reflects the overall aim of the work which is a reassessment of Barth's social philosophy based on his work from the period 1918-1933. The thesis is in four main sections. The first two chapters form an introduction. Chapters three and four are an explanation and discussion of the *Ethics* and the lecture *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life*. It is in this section that the claim has been made, which has been substantiated with evidence from primary sources that Wilhelm Herrmann's influence remained throughout this period. The significance of this claim is apparent in two respects: the first is the continuation, as late as 1931, of natural theology as a



foundation for Barth's ethics, as the orders of creation are a form of natural theology. They are available to reason, and therefore presumably would have been accessible to the natives of New Holland. Yet they are specifically contextual: marriage, the family, work and leadership. The second respect is associated with Wilhelm Herrmann's continuing influence and individualism which is to say that *Ethics* is concerned with the individual's moral response. It may be remembered it was Herrmann who understood the individual's moral life as evidence of a relationship with the inner life of Jesus. Barth's arguments are about individuals as either men or women in the Genesis story or individuals confronting each other on a plank. States are treated as individuals. It is not until the essay on 'Church and Community' in 1946, which is discussed in chapter six, that Barth moves to the wider concept of community. Individualism is a severe restriction on Barth's thinking about social philosophy in *Ethics*. During the period under discussion, 1918-1933, his ethical writing appears detached from the surrounding social events. The letter about unemployment from his friend Eduard Thurneysen had little effect on Barth's view of work.<sup>1</sup> Unemployment and continuing inflation in Germany, during this period, also appeared to have little influence on Barth's thinking. In addition Barth's view of marriage during this period is idealistic and he does not develop it into a wider concept until the *Church Dogmatics*. Marriage, then, becomes the centre of the circle that describes the relationship between men and women, but not the whole circle. This again shows what now appears to be a detachment from both his context, and his relationship with Charlotte von Kirschbaum. This detachment it is suggested is, in part, caused by social ethics being grafted on to individual morality, which it has been claimed is evidence of Barth's inheritance from Herrmann. It must also be recognised that Barth

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<sup>1</sup> Barth, *Revolutionary Theology in the making: Barth-Thurneysen correspondence, 1914-1925*, 25th

was primarily interested, at this period, in establishing a new foundation for theology and theological ethics. This preoccupation appears to have excluded an engagement with the world and when such an engagement did begin in 1930 it was addressed to the internal life of the church. These two problems make Barth's ethics during this period somewhat abstract and detached, but for all that, they should not be dismissed for they have much of importance to say.

Chapter seven, which is the fourth section discusses three critical readings of Barth's ethics and two alternative ethical projects, with the intention of holding a mirror of criticism to the foundations of Barth's early ethical thought. The three critics particularly van Til, whose criticism of Barth has not previously been discussed in the literature, focus the sources of hostility and misunderstanding. Much of this criticism is about the relationship between theology and philosophy. Barth recognises these problems, and has been quoted earlier in the thesis as asking, 'which theology is not jostled by philosophy?' It has been suggested in the discussion of van Til's work that he shows little appreciation of the philosophical influences in his own criticism. All three critics have been unable to accept the idea that has been proposed in this thesis that a proper appreciation of Barth's work requires an understanding of the German theological tradition.

However, the central and most important work of the lectures on ethics is the achievement of the integration of dogmatics with ethics a symbiosis that remained throughout all Barth's theological work. It is at this point that they have their greatest significance. Ethics is part of the doctrine of God, because God chose to reveal himself in the revelation of Jesus Christ as creator, redeemer and reconciler. Here is



the brilliance of Barth's thought, which is both prophetic and poetic in what seems retrospectively such an obvious and simple move. It was a complete relocation of thought, yet it took place within the tradition of the intellectual structures of his time and this is Barth's brilliance.

The foundations of the ideas in the Münster and Bonn *Ethics*, which have been discussed in this thesis, are, in summary:

1. God's revelation in Christ is a new creation, which re-determines all things.
2. Theology is a science.
3. The object of study determines the method of study.
4. Theological ethics is necessarily part of the doctrine of God.
5. The Command of God is the sole content of theological ethics.
6. Theological ethics is the church's task.
7. Prayer is the first act of theological ethics.
8. Prayer involves action.

Barth, in both the Münster and Bonn *Ethics* and the lecture, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life*, follows the Reformed tradition of Luther and Calvin. This tradition Barth appropriates for his own purposes and at times he appeals to Luther and Calvin as authorities, giving added emphasis and weight to his argument. For example in the lecture, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life*, when he wants to reject the Augustinian ideas of grace perfecting nature he appeals to Luther's justification by faith. He uses a similar technique in the Münster and Bonn *Ethics* where he wants to reject the concept of amesis.

The two sets of lectures show Barth's ethical thought grounded in the Trinity. The foundation of his ethical discussion is the doctrine of sanctification, and his works show that at this point in his thinking he is closer to Luther's thought than to Calvin's. In following Luther's doctrine of justification by faith Barth rejects any possibility of making holiness private neither does he accept any form of elitism in the Christian life. Equally holiness is not to be based in an idea of other worlds or that its acquisition is a perilous ascent during which the slightest mistake will send the seeker to hell. Barth always insists that the holy person is also a sinner.

However, on other occasions Barth is ready to move away from well-established Reformed theology. As has been pointed out he does this by rejecting the four hundred-year-old Lutheran tradition of separating the Church and the State and in radically altering Calvin's doctrine of predestination. Whereas, it might be supposed that a theologian writing within the Reformed tradition would do the former the later move is surprising. These moves suggest that Barth uses the tradition both positively and negatively to develop his own system which although it falls loosely within the traditional framework is undoubtedly a unique structure.

In his opening lecture, Barth defined theology as a science, which like all other sciences has an object of study. In addition like all other sciences the form and the method of investigation must be appropriate to the object. Unlike all other sciences in theology the object defines the subject which is human experience, and that becomes the object of revelation as God provides both the revelation and the means of receiving it. Revelation defines itself. No pre-existing human presuppositions define it. Barth states that God's act of revelation determines human experience.



The concept of life being determined is central to any understanding of Barth's view of human freedom, and we have seen how he establishes human freedom as obedience. Of course, Jesus was obedient to the Father, but Barth forcefully reminds us that human obedience is not to be modelled on the life of Jesus. He continually reminds us that we are human and suffer from inherent sin, and that our actions only become obedient through the action of the Holy Spirit. The concepts discussed in this section are not to be understood separately. Barth describes God's action in the world as event, and an event is an act of God's revelation in which God's being is in his becoming. Human action is, by analogy, an event in which our being is in becoming. Therefore, our acts of will are constitutive of ourselves.

This means each action cannot be understood and examined for its ethical content in the abstract, but as an event that takes place as part of a sequence. Baptism, the first ethical response, is the first event, and to be baptised is to be born again in Christ and to become a member of the church. All subsequent action takes its orientation, significance and determination from this primary event. Our acts, in analogy, create our being in becoming. We are what we do. This may appear similar to the Aristotelian view so vividly expressed by Dante that our habits become our character, but this is not the case. The difference is that in Barth's account there can be no telos, no aim or goal, because sanctification has already taken place, and our lives must be ordered in acceptance of this reality. This is the life lived in freedom, and ethical acts take place within its boundaries and at its direction. We are our acts, therefore, our actions must be obedient to created reality if they are to be real and we are to be free.

Barth claims that the task of theological ethics is to raise questions about human existence and for these questions to provide a framework within which responsible

choices may be made. Some will say of Barth's approach that it lacks the ability to accumulate a body of ethical thought, which apply in other situations, and although this is true, two points are relevant. The first point is that time and context, to some extent, bind all ethics. The second point is that the questions generated by Barth's method provide not only a boundary to the moral space but give a direction for future action.

On the first point: Barth considered transatlantic flight as very dangerous and that to take such a flight places one's life in danger and that such an action can be compared to suicide. Such thoughts now seem quaint and amusing. On the second point: he deals with a broader framework that is not caught in the web of time. His theological insight that life is a gift, or perhaps even a loan, has enormous significance. If life is a gift which cannot be possessed it must be treated by its recipient and others with the greatest respect, and a proper consideration must be given to the concerns of life, and a balance of work recreation and rest must be available to all in differing proportions at the differing stages of life. Such a policy has obvious implications for the social policy of the state. The needs of the body, Barth lists, as metabolism, sleep, and sexuality and they must be given proper consideration. Therefore the means to maintain a health body must be generally available. There is an injunction not to injure the body but to nurture and care for it as a gift from God. This requirement arising from the observation that life is a gift is easily translated into specific and concrete examples, which are relevant to particular circumstances, although there is no body of ethical thought.

Barth, in the Münster and Bonn *Ethics*, establishes his position with regard to the content of theological ethics. He says, repeatedly, that the command of God is the sole



content of theological ethics; therefore, theological ethics for Barth cannot be concerned with discussions about the “good” or the balancing of outcomes. He does not deny the purpose and validity of such discussion and both recognises and applauds the long and distinguished history of such debates. He is also well aware that stated in this form theological ethics is a newcomer to the debate and will be regarded with hostility by some and disbelief by others that such an activity is possible. On these points, his view has been shown to be correct.

Barth explains that we know the command of God from the Sermon on the Mount and the Decalogue and by reading and meditating on the scriptures. However he is adamant that the Bible is the record of those who witnessed the revelation and was to those witnesses a concrete command. To us such records become relative. It is not possible to read ethical injunctions straight from these records and Barth refutes all attempts to establish Biblical fundamentalism. He also wants to establish a hermeneutic based on revelation. As we take part in the life of the church and in worship, and receiving the sacraments and meditating on the scriptures, the command of God comes to us in concrete form. The Holy Spirit informs conscience. God acts vertically in our horizontal passage of time. The Word is a sacrament and contains Kierkegaard’s concept of contemporaneity. Of course, as has already been discussed, this reception does not take place as an isolated action. It is part of the passage of a life and takes place within a series of actions, which are determining of the life.

Life is lived avoiding extremes, whilst realising that extremes of action may be commanded. Since the command comes to individuals, it is not possible to judge an individual’s response to God’s command. These seem extremely wise and useful ethical boundaries. Of course, the corollary is that it is not possible to build, or

presume to know, a body of knowledge, nor is it possible to speculate about what God's command might be in particular abstract cases, Barth's theological ethics is personal and concrete.

Some will find Barth's position difficult to accept for how, they might ask, do we know what to do in a given situation? Such questions implicitly assume the possibility of abstracting action from the situation and the individual. The action is considered in isolation from both individual life, and previous action, and has no significant part to play in future action. Barth refutes such abstraction he always speaks of the concrete Word of God spoken to the individual in their past, present, and future action. In addition, as Barth has pointed out, our lives are not lived in isolation, but in relationships. For Barth relationships take place within the context of the church, which is involved in the continuous process of discerning the command of God. Therefore, theological ethics is the task of the church, and it can undertake this task, because theological ethics is necessarily part of the doctrine of God. Barth provides the *whence* and the *whether* of theological ethics within the doctrine of God. It is only because we know whom God is, he says, that we know how to act, as the indicative precedes the imperative.

The following quotation from Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* II/2 appears on the title page of the thesis:

The enterprise of theological ethics is not one with which to trifle. It must be taken up properly – and this can mean only on the assumption that the command of the grace of God is its sole content – or it is better left alone.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, p. 533.



These words remind us that for Barth the task of theological ethics is undertaken in and from prayer. Serious prayer involves action, and together prayer and action become an event. Each event determines the actors and their future actions. A series of events determines the activity and life of the Christian community, in both church and university, and defines the self-determination of the participants and their institutions. Theological ethics established on these foundations cannot be seen as just another subject to be studied in university. It will not readily be recognised that theological ethics *is* the reason for the study and pursuit of knowledge within a university. This is Karl Barth's understanding of theological ethics and one that this thesis shares. The point is that Barth's theological ethics is undertaken with the understanding that its content is grace and that the context of its study is the life of the worshipping community. These points need making, because they are part of Barth's merit to point them out as they are neither obvious nor self-evident.

Serious prayer involves action, prayer and the resulting action becomes the *event*, in which prayer and action are united. Each *event* becomes the foundation for the next undertaking of prayer and action. In this way, Barth understands *event* as an ontological activity, which is the person. The task of theological ethics is to raise questions about events. It follows that prayer and thought are the activity of the life of the community in the church and in the study of theological ethics in the university.

Barth does not reject or disregard the power of reason but answers it theologically with the priority of revelation. In so doing, his ethics are established on the absolute and not on the universal. They are therefore an ethic for all men and women, for all are included in the revelation of God's love. It has been pointed out that there are methodological problems, because Barth assumes created order is known by reason

before revelation and is confirmed by revelation. The orders of work, marriage, family, state and leadership have already been criticised in the thesis and as is well known were firmly rejected by Barth. However, it has been pointed out this rejection did not occur until after 1931.

Barth in the lectures has established the foundations, methodology and given a preliminary content to a new subject: theological ethics. Clearly, it is possible to establish forms of Christian ethics on different foundations and the discussion of the work of the scholars Shriver and Volf illustrate this point. Obviously there are those who consider that Barth is not undertaking the task of a Christian theologian, van Til is one but there are many others. Others criticise Barth for not giving due consideration to human autonomy, freedom and responsibility and in this thesis Robinson represents such views. Therefore, it must be possible to compare and contrast these different approaches. However, it is not possible to assess the comparable merits of the differing structures from an external and independent position.

Having accepted Barth's starting point, God's revelation in Christ, then criticism of Barth can be undertaken from inside the unfolding of his system. The thesis has pointed out inconsistencies in the orders of creation, and an apparent lack of ethical engagement in society during the period 1918 to 1933. His use of the Genesis story as the foundation of the relationship between men and women has been criticised, because it is seen as a type of natural religion. However, the thesis wants to acknowledge that in the Münster and Bonn *Ethics* Barth has established the foundations and methodology of theological ethics. He has produced the finest work of moral theology since Thomas Aquinas, and his stature is directly comparable with



Hegel. Like Hegel, from a single standpoint, he has surveyed God's work, and has produced a theological ethic, which assimilates the concerns of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and redefines them in and through God's revelation.

There is a need for further research to be undertaken in relating the Münster and Bonn *Ethics* to the themes that emerge in the *Church Dogmatics*, which makes the development more explicit. It would be an enormous contribution to work in this area if von Kirschbaum's correspondence and papers could be studied, edited, translated and published. In addition, work needs to be undertaken on the concerns of the group of which Barth was a member during his time in Münster. The group may have kept minutes or notes of their meetings, one of their members was the editor of the local paper, and it would be of interest to know what was being discussed as local concerns at the time. Roman Catholic theologians made regular contributions to the group and it would be interesting and useful to know of their thoughts on the relationship with the Reich Church. Aspects of the Münster and Bonn *Ethics* suggest that Barth had some admiration for Catholic moral theology. Research is needed to discover if the group kept minutes or letters as there is much work that needs to be done on this aspect of the Barth's life in Münster. The thesis has tried to emphasise the intellectual debt that Karl Barth owes to Hegel. His essay on Hegel conceals rather than reveals their relationship, and there is much that needs to be done to establish the connections and make them explicit.

The Münster and Bonn *Ethics* show how the movement from a foundation in theological ethics to an acted out political theology might occur. Barth's discussion about the place of sin is in the Augustinian tradition, and finds expression in his illustration of the will to power in the plank argument. The implications of this

position for social policy are radical. His lectures do not make explicit, except in a few cases, how this position may be worked out, however that is a task for each Christian ethicist to undertake for his own time. Barth's description in his later work that the kingdom will be constituted from the redeemed *polis* not the *ecclesia* is an important message for all to hear, both inside and outside the church. His ethical demands upon the individual are extreme, and call for complete political involvement. He argues that no individual can disassociate themselves from the decisions and actions of their government.

In this thesis, the description of personal relationships in the *Ethics* has been criticised, because describing marriage as an order of creation limits the unmarried. Barth's later movement which describes marriage as the focus and not the whole circle that describes the relationship between men and women is important. He reminded his audience that marriage does not have teleological goals that it is not a sacrament and that there will be no marriage in heaven. Therefore, what might properly constitute the Christian life lived in relationship demands further exploration.

Although Barth's theological ethics are the task of the church they are not limited by the walls of the building. The *Ethics* show how Barth walks through the walls of the building he has created into the fresh air of the world beyond. The theological ethical task has to be undertaken afresh in every generation. Barth has provided a foundation and a method for carrying out this task.



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