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Man Encountered by the Command of God: The Ethics of Karl Barth

Michael Parsons

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Any study of the theology of Karl Barth is confronted with several initial problems. The sheer quantity of published works is, perhaps, the most obvious. During his prolific career Barth published over five hundred and fifty books, sermons, tracts, addresses and letters. His major work, *Church Dogmatics*, extends to thirteen volumes and over six million words. Generally, he wrote nothing on specifically ethical lines but included his teaching on morality within, and as an integral part of, his theological writing. It is clear that a detailed study of his theology would be a formidable task, beyond the scope of this present short study.

A. second problem is his theological development which has to be taken into account. McLean outlines four phases in the process of a lifetime.¹ In Barth's early career² he moved from a liberal basis to that of a dialectical one in which he proclaimed God as the 'Wholly Other'. By this he meant to point men to 'the Godness of God', and to make God the starting point and centre of theological investigation. In his work, *The Epistle to the Romans* (1911), for example, he stresses 'the infinite qualitative distinction between God and man'. His essay, 'The Righteousness of God' states that 'reason sees what is human but not what is divine'. The third phase was that of dogmatic thought; the fourth, that in which he emphasized 'the humanity of God', that is, God with and for man. These 'extraordinary sharp curves in theological development'³ are, surprisingly perhaps, consistent with Barth's idea of theology. It was never, for him, an objective exhibition and analysis of a datum of 'truth', but 'a conversation, a process, an active struggle, an act of guidance'.⁴ John Webster, rightly, sees this development which continued through the writing of *Church Dogmatics* as a clue to Barth's theological consistency. 'For his concern is always to measure human thinking against revelation, to judge the word of the church and the word of the theologian against God's self-disclosure.'⁵

A third difficulty is the fact that scholars are not agreed on the intention and central motif of Barth's major work. This is something which we will need to take account of later in the study. Whilst van Til, for example, seeks to outline and ultimately to criticize an ultimate Neo-Protestant presupposition which he finds inherent in *Church Dogmatics*, Berkouwer finds an overruling concept in the idea of the triumph of God's grace.⁶ Both of these studies focus on a basic principle as central to Barth's thought which in itself seems, to me, somewhat opposed to

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¹ S. D. McLean, *Humanity in the Thought of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh, 1981) 1ff. This is outlined with different emphases in, eg, C. Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message* (London, 1967) 14-30; H. Hartwell, *The Theology of Karl Barth* (London, 1964) 1 ff.

² See T. F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to his Early Theology, 1910-1930* (London, 1962).

³ H. Thielicke, *Theological Ethics* 1 (ET Grand Rapids, 1979) 107.

⁴ *CD*, 1/2, 861.

⁵ J. Webster, 'The Legacy of Barth and Bultmann' *Evangel* 1 (1983) 11.

⁶ C. Van Til, *The New Modernism: An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner* (London, 1946); G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (ET London, 1965).

Barth's obviously concrete and relational theology. Neither work seems satisfactorily sensitive to Barth's approach. Barth, himself, in acknowledging the latter's contribution speaks of this alternative but says, 'I prefer not to choose it.' He continues, 'If I am in a sense understood by ... [Berkouwer] ... yet in the last resort cannot think that I am genuinely understood for all his care and honesty, this is connected with the fact that he tries to understand me under this title.' But then, significantly, he adds, 'I underline, however, that we are not dealing with a Christ-principle, but with Jesus Christ himself by Holy Scripture.'⁷

Some scholars make man, himself, the focal point of Barth's theology—and there is an element of truth in that, as we shall discover. McLean, for example, reasons that Barth sought to 'capture the dynamics of the God-man and man-man relationship'. Wingren, similarly, points to the antithesis, *Gott-Mensch*, as evidently the framework inside which all Barth's theology is written. 'Man is the obvious centre,' he states. 'The question about man's knowledge is the axis around which the whole subject matter moves.'⁸

Perhaps the majority of scholars speak of Barth's emphasis on Christ as the focus of his work, as the constant point of departure.⁹ Bromiley suggests this in his short study in *Creative Minds in Contemporary Theology*, but in a later work qualifies this statement by adding that 'Barth makes no single doctrine the centre. He focuses constantly on the trinitarian work that comes to expression in the person and work of Christ.' He further underlines this by saying, 'to say Christ is to say God in all his fulness for Barth'.¹⁰ Barth, himself, states that 'a church dogmatics must be christologically determined as a whole'.¹¹

Although Christ is the key to the understanding of God, the universe and man in Barth's thought, and the bridge between God and man in every respect,¹² Barth seeks, theoretically at least, to gain a balance. In his own words: 'The object and theme of theology, and the content of the Christian message is neither a subjective nor an objective element in isolation, but God and man in their encounter and communion, God's dealings with the Christian and the Christian's dealings with God.'¹³ Perhaps, on this basis, Colin Brown is correct when he states that the underlying theme of Barth's theology is 'God's dealings with man in and through the person of Jesus Christ'.¹⁴

With these problems and the limitations of a short study recognized, we need to move now to consider the place of ethics in Barth's theological thinking; and more specifically the place of the command of God in his ethics.

⁷ CD, IV/3, 173-180.

⁸ McLean, *Humanity* 6, 14; G. Wingren, *Theology in Conflict* (ET London, 1958) 34; see also 23, 28, 108.

⁹ For example, G. Bromiley, 'Karl Barth' in P. E. Hughes (ed) *Creative Minds in Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1969); idem, *Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh, 1979) 179; Hartwell, *Theology*, 154; A. I. C. Heron, *A Century of Protestant Theology* (London, 1980) 88; C. O'Grady, *The Church in the Theology of Karl Barth* (London, 1968) 338; R. L. Reymond, *Barth's Soteriology* (Philadelphia, 1967) 22.

¹⁰ Bromiley, *Introduction*, 179.

¹¹ CD, I/2, 123.

¹² Cf CD, I/2, 883; CD, II/2, 4; CD, IV/3i, 69.

¹³ CD, IV/3i, 498.

¹⁴ Brown, *Karl Barth*, 150.

THEOLOGY AND ETHICS IN BARTH

Barth moved very clearly to his own distinctive idea of what the discipline of theology entailed, as we have seen. It was, for Barth, 'a

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logia, logic, or language bound to the theos, which both makes it possible and also determines it'.¹⁵ That is, theology is speech about God and is accordingly only possible on the basis of speech from God himself. The theologian's task is a close, active and living scrutiny and analysis of the revelation of God. It is in this way, then, genuine contact with and understanding of God. For the theologian this should present no initial problems: Barth stresses that 'God has made himself so clear and certain to us.'¹⁶ The giving of knowledge is seen to be the prerogative and action of God's free grace; without God's activity in this area no real knowledge is possible.

It is well-documented, of course, that according to Barth, God's word comes to man in three forms—all interrelated, all a unity.¹⁷ The primary form of the word is Jesus Christ himself. He is the word of God. This is, perhaps, 'the pivot of all Barth's thinking', as Brown claims.¹⁸ The secondary form of the word is said to be the scriptures. In this Barth departs from the older tendency to identify God's revelation with the actual words of the Bible, and comes to describe these words as means by which God himself conveys his word. It 'is God's Word so far as God lets it be his Word.'¹⁹ This will be touched upon below in consideration of the subject of command: the word of God to man as ethical compulsion. The tertiary form of the word is the preaching, the proclamation, of the church. The word of God, defined in this way, is the foundation of Barth's theology and of his ethical thinking: it determines its nature.

That, in brief, is Barth's view of theology. So what of the relation of theology and ethics? This can be summed up in his basic premise: 'Theology is Ethics.'²⁰ Meeks states that more than any other theologian 'Barth attempted methodologically to bring ethics totally into theology.'²¹ Stanley Hauerwas, on the other hand, identifying the same tendency, seems to overstate his case when he writes that Barth's work is a theological denial of ethics. It is significant that later he qualifies this remark: Barth, he says, 'maintains a radical denial of the importance of any independent ethics'. He adds, 'Thus the real concern of theological ethics for Barth is not to describe man's behaviour but "to understand the Word of God as the Command of God".'²² In this he is certainly close to the truth, but it must be added that for Barth ethics describes, not only the command of God, but also man's response to the command of God. This is because knowing him entails doing his will; it involves obedient response to the God of obligation. This is in line with Barth's basic relational view of theology: man is confronted by God in living encounter. Barth emphasizes this: the content of

¹⁵ Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (ET London, 1968). For an earlier view see Barth's *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (ET London, 1935) 51-96. 179.

¹⁶ *CD*, II/1, 3. Cf *CD*, I/1, 141; *CD*, II/1, 3-4; *Evangelical Theology*, 15-59, 96-105, 159-170.

¹⁷ *CD*, I/1, 135.

¹⁸ Brown, *Karl Barth*, 31.

¹⁹ *CD*, I/1, 123, 124. Cf Barth's *Ethics* (ET Edinburgh, 1978) 85.

²⁰ *CD*, I/2, 371—emphasis added. Cf *CD*, I/1, xiv.

²¹ M. D. Meeks, *Origins of the Theology of Hope* (Philadelphia, 1974) 43.

²² S. Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics* (San Antonio, 1979) 136-139. Cf. *CD*, III/4iv.

ethics 'is the Word and work of God in Christ' as it challenges man.²³ In fact, Barth believes that a separation of ethics and dogmatics would be harmful to both, for dogmatics would become intellectualistic without ethics, while ethics would adopt the wrong approach to conduct without a dogmatic

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foundation on which to build.²⁴ Here, I believe, we need to follow Barth's reasoning and to come to a similar conclusion. At times ethical thinking has been divorced from systematic understanding of theology and has become subjective—not anchored in any objective reality, but rather the prey to individual feeling. Is the thinking of the subjectivism in the liberal tradition prior to Barth and that of situationism and the 'New Morality' of a later generation not a good instance of the very problem that Barth thus seeks to avoid? More recently, the move by ethicists to marry critical method with ethical enquiry without due recourse to dogmatic thinking seems to be producing similarly subjective analyses of the subject.²⁵

It is essential, then, to understand that theology, for Barth, viewed, 'the creature relative to the Creator'.²⁶ Because he reasons in this way the idea of God's word as command becomes, very naturally, important in his thought. 'Ethics' he writes, 'I regard as the doctrine of God's Commands.'²⁷ His ethic arises 'out of man's living encounter in every sphere of his existence with the Command of the living God'.²⁸ In line with this conclusion, the structure of his lectures on ethics is based on the idea of command. It deals with the command of God the creator, the command of God the reconciler and the command of God the redeemer—a structure which also pervades his later work *Church Dogmatics*. Bromiley brings out the relationship between these two works in a comment in the preface of Barth's *Ethics*: he calls the former work 'a first draft of the ethical sections of *Church Dogmatics*'.²⁹ Apart from the fact that later Barth drops the concept of orders (seen also in his *The Holy Ghost and the Christian Life*) *Ethics* forms a good, if early, portrayal of his views on the subject. Most of the material developed, yet remained basically intact, in the later work. That which permeates all of Barth's ethical thought, however, is the idea of encounter, of man standing 'in decision' claimed by the command of God. The contents of *Ethics* forms the following schema (see Figure 1) and shows clearly the importance of the idea of command and the dependence of everything else on it.

It is necessary to note again that Barth does not believe so much in a static body of truth and command, but that the command becomes that of God when he desires it to have effect. In Barth's words: 'The good, the Command, is not true but *becomes* true as it is *spoken* to us as the truth, as it meets us speaking as truth.... Where the real Command is, there is absolute, personal, living will distinct from ours.'³⁰

²³ *CD*, II/2, 543.

²⁴ *CD*, I/2, 787-789.

²⁵ Eg A. Verhey, *The Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, 1984).

²⁶ *CD*, III/1, ix-xi.

²⁷ *CD*, I/1, xiv. Cf *CD*, II/2, 2-4.

²⁸ Hartwell, *Theology*, 154.

²⁹ See Bromiley's preface to Barth's *Ethics* vi; also 117, 261, 461. Barth calls creation, reconciliation and redemption 'the great orientation points of the whole course of Christian dogmatics'. *Ethics*, 52.

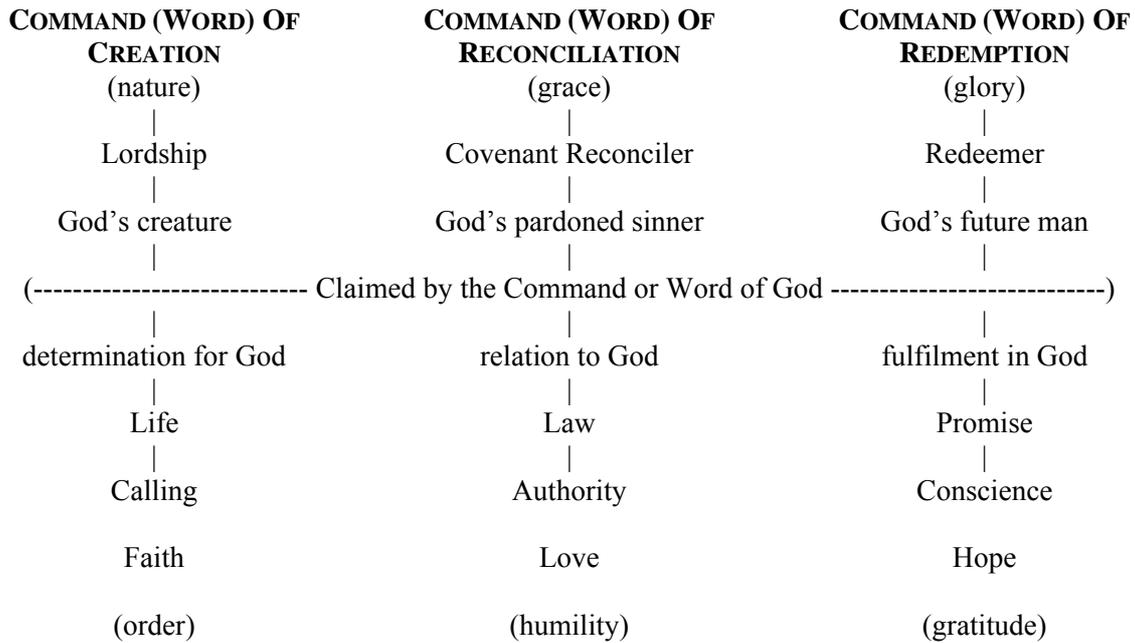
³⁰ *Ethics*, 87—emphasis original.

ETHICS: MAN AND THE COMMAND OF GOD

Barth's thinking works within a framework of creation, reconciliation and redemption, as we have already noted. This is true, not only of *Ethics* and of *Church Dogmatics*, but also of relatively minor works such

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Figure 1



as *The Gift of Freedom* with its structure of creature, partner, child; and also *The Holy Ghost and the Christian Life*. Inherent in this are his concepts of 'authentic man', 'reconciled man' and 'future man'. It needs to be borne in mind that Barth insists that these terms constitute one and the same being. They denote man in the entirety of his relationship with God and in his response to God's initiative. These ideas in turn are the foundation of his theological-ethical discussion: each has its own significance in the basic idea of the command of God and the decision of man. The last two have important eschatological connotations attaching to them, to which we will return below.

Authentic man: his creatureliness

God first addresses man as creature; indeed it is because man is creature that God's command applies to him. It is as 'authentic man' that he is termed by Barth as essentially a creature of God the creator. By this concept of creatureliness he speaks of man's relationship to God, and of God's to, with and for man.³¹ 'Authentic man' is man in the image of God; man responding to the command of his creator in free and unrestrained obedience. It is noteworthy, however, that Barth teaches that actual man does not correspond with authentic man. Sin has put him at variance with this, altering and distorting his creatureliness—but not necessarily destroying it. How can we know what true authentic man

³¹ See for example *CD*, III/2.

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is, then? What is the measure by which we tell? For Barth, Christ is central to the answer to this kind of question. The basic idea of real human nature, Barth suggests, could be inferred from Christ's humanity. This, of course, is in keeping with his christological foundation for theological thinking that we noticed above. Christ's humanity means that he was the true creaturely form of man. R. L. Reymond objects to this. He rejects the idea that true humanity can be inferred from Christ's life on the grounds that his life was lived for the elect only.³² Even though the latter statement may be correct this is unhelpful reasoning at this point. After all Christ was truly man—this is a central doctrine of scripture. To follow Reymond's conclusions would lead us into other problems: for example, how are we to imitate the Lord, how do we follow his example as true man, and so on. For Barth, however, two significant differences between Christ's humanity and ours are to be kept in mind. First the sin of men was not shared by Jesus; second men do not share in Jesus' identification with God. It follows from Barth's thinking, then, that all men are truly human, thus defined with its distortion by sin; but that most are unaware or unconscious of it; or, rather, of their creaturely relationship to God. The command of God the creator must come to men to reaffirm their creatureliness in relational terms; thereby reaffirming the image of God in men, which for Barth is to be seen, primarily, in their relationship with both God and their fellow men. This, then, is the context of the importance of the command of God and takes us into Barth's ethical thinking. That man is to live in an ethical way is directly related to the command of God the creator to his creature. In this idea Barth is pointing us to something which is of primary importance to our ethical thinking and consideration. While the concern of kingdom ethics, for example, is with New Testament believers seeking their moral principles and institutional and personal norms with the teaching of Jesus,³³ it should be of paramount concern to see man as first and foremost a creature under the authority and sovereignty of the creator God. Barth indicates one way of doing this. His conclusions may not be ours-but his burden at this juncture ought to be if we want to take into account the whole of biblical teaching in the area of ethics. For Barth, then, 'Man has the character of responsibility... man is, and is human, as he performs this act of responsibility, offering himself as the response to the word of God, and conducting, shaping and expressing himself as an answer to it.'³⁴

Obedience 'is the precise creaturely counterpart of the grace of God'.³⁵ The responsibility of man will be expressed in his relationship with other men for man is, in Barth's thought, structurally and essentially related with other men, so much so that in *Against the Stream*, for example, Barth comments that 'an isolated man on his own is not a man'.³⁶ Man needs relationship with others. This is fundamentally straightforward. McLean points out that, according to Barth, man

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as a being in encounter is, first, a being which looks the other in the eye; second, a being that consists in the fact that there is mutual speech and hearing; third, a being that renders mutual

³² Reymond, Barth's *Soteriology*, 23.

³³ See for example J. H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, 1972).

³⁴ *CD*, III/2, 174, 175.

³⁵ *CD*, III/2, 207. See also 164-166.

³⁶ Barth, *Against the Stream* (ET London, 1954) 187. See also *CD* III/4, 1-2; 116ff; *CD*, III/2, 222-223; *Ethics*, 23.

assistance; fourth, a being in which this is done with gladness.³⁷ He concludes that 'our humanity cannot be less than giving and receiving assistance'. Therefore, not to help or to assist others, for Barth, is unreal, unnatural or inauthentic.

The conclusion that we can draw at this point, then, is that for Barth ethics begins from an understanding of who we are. Man, as a creature, conscious of the fact, will, or at least ought to, respond to the command of God the creator. What of man in the church?

Reconciled man: ethics in the community

In line with his belief that isolation is not an alternative for man if he wishes to express his real humanity, Barth teaches that individual Christians could *not* be understood outside the community of the church. Barth stresses the word 'community', rather than using the more usual term 'church', because he seeks to escape the idea of a static institution. The community is an event. Hartwell defines this as 'the earthly-historical form of existence of Jesus Christ himself, his body, created by him and continually renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit'.³⁸

The community, then, has a dynamic quality of its own. It exists as Christ exists. 'He is within it creating and enabling it to follow his life, to imitate, reflect, illustrate and attest it.'³⁹ 'In its very human and historical doing and non-doing... the community is continually confronted with Christ's presence, continually jolted by his activity, continually asked whether and to what extent it corresponds in its visible existence to the fact that it is his body, his earthly-historical existence.'⁴⁰

The dynamic of the community is mainly given impetus by the fact that Christ's work is still moving towards its consummation: the consummation in which the community will, of course, share. On this point O'Grady lists three historical reasons given by Barth for the eschatological orientation of the community: first the Old Testament foretold the second advent of Christ; second Christ himself promised his future coming again; and third the Holy Spirit's lordship here and now gives the community a real sense of expectation.⁴¹ The work, then, has a goal which has not yet been attained, namely coming to the faith (Eph 4:12-15). The community is directed towards that goal—this will have consequences in the life of the individual believer.

The eschatological context of Christ's work is seen by Barth to be the parousia, which he redefined in his theology.⁴² The parousia, thus redefined, takes three successive stages or forms, although they are, in fact, said to be the same in substance, scope and content.⁴³ The first form of the parousia is that of Christ's resurrection. This was

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provisional, transitory and a particular form. It included and indicated the final parousia. The second form is that of Pentecost when Jesus came in his Holy Spirit. This was 'no less

³⁷ McLean, *Humanity*, 40-43.

³⁸ Hartwell, *Theology*, 41. See *CD*, III/2, 301-303; *CD*, IV/1, 660-663; 725-726; *CD*, IV/3ii; 357-359.

³⁹ *CD*, IV/3ii, 754.

⁴⁰ O'Grady, *The Church*, 275-276.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 343. See *CD*, IV/3i, 327.

⁴² See *CD*, IV/3ii. See also T. F. Torrance, 'The Modern Eschatological Debate' *EQ* 25 (1953) 45-54, 94-106, 167-178, 224-232.

⁴³ *CD*, III/2, 490. See P. J. Rosato, *The Spirit as Lord: The Pneumatology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh, 1981) 116.

genuinely his own parousia'.⁴⁴ The third form is to be the goal (*telos*) of history—the perfect, final and universal form. The first and second forms were the beginning of the community. In this context, eternal life is already an event in the life of the believers together. The community becomes, for Barth, the eschatological fact par excellence.⁴⁵

As we have seen, to say 'community' for Barth is to speak of movement. The community lives between the second and third forms of the parousia: that is, between the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost and the return of the Lord Jesus Christ at the end of the world's history. The community is a church *in transition*, living, as it does, in 'the time between the times'. O'Grady assesses this in the following words: 'It possesses a teleology, a meaning, a purpose, a power. It knows what time it is. It knows that its time is the time between the times. In all this is its strength.'⁴⁶ During this time of community it is given the task of gathering, upbuilding and mission: this is the fundamental nature of its ethics. It is to be a time of response to Christ's work, obedience to the command of God, keeping in line with the Holy Spirit.⁴⁷ In this context the Spirit of God is crucial to the ethics of the community. He is seen to be the link between the parousia and the life-style of the church. Rosato describes Barth's thinking on the Holy Spirit as 'soterio-eschatological pneumatology' with some justification, for the three strands of teaching—salvation, eschatology and the work of the Holy Spirit—are closely interrelated.⁴⁸ He continues, 'The perfect likeness of the Creator, which the Spirit fostered in the freedom and loving obedience of Jesus Christ, he now fosters in the analogous existence of the Christian.' We have noted before that as a creature man should seek to be more like his creator—the fact is, that for Barth the believer has no radically different task. His call is to be like God, his redeemer; but, now, in and by the work of the Holy Spirit conforming him to Jesus Christ through the command of God.

The work of the Holy Spirit is both negative and positive. By the Spirit reconciled man is liberated from disobedience. Positively, on the other hand, the believer is given performative faith—that is, faith as an impulse to ethical action. In Barth's thinking, man is made free to become what he is and actively to do those things which correspond to his role as co-partner in the new covenant. The Holy Spirit establishes genuine human life lived in harmony with the will and the command of God;⁴⁹ human life in its totality which is the dynamic basis of the community in Christ.

We can see that Barth's doctrine of freedom is very important in his structure of ethics. To be free is to be asked to conform decisions to the divine decision. Paradoxically, it puts man under the obligation, and

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⁴⁴ *CD*, IV/3i, 356. See also *The Holy Ghost*, 72; *Against the Stream*, 71-73.

⁴⁵ *CD*, IV/3i, 321. We have strong reservations about Barth's redefining of the concept of the parousia but his intention seems to me laudable. By it he seeks to show that in Christ's death and resurrection, for example, is the real hope of his people. Paul expresses this in 1 Cor 15:20-21. Barth also seeks to indicate that in the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost God has given the first instalment and the first fruits of heaven itself. The New Testament gives us every indication that the church is an eschatological community moving towards the consummation with these assurances that it has begun.

⁴⁶ O'Grady, *The Church*, 341.

⁴⁷ *CD*, IV/3i, 360.

⁴⁸ Rosato, *The Spirit*, 107.

⁴⁹ *CD*, II/2, 552; *CD*, III/1, 195, 263; *CD*, III/4, 579-584; *CD*, IV/1, 43. For a detailed and thorough account of Barth's teaching on the Spirit's work in ethics see R. Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth* (Leiden, 1971) 240-272. See also *CD*, III/2, 210, 238-240, 264.

with the responsibility, to interpret the word of God correctly and to live accordingly.⁵⁰ Freedom does not indicate licence—but rather, it denotes man in true relation to God. In his significant minor work *The Gift of Freedom*⁵¹ Barth outlines the following three propositions. First God's freedom is his very own, his by nature (essentially his). Second man's freedom is his only as a gift of God: total, unequivocal, irrevocable. It means choice to act in the right way—that is, responsibly under the command of God. And third, freedom is the foundation of evangelical ethics. Man does that which is good when he acts according to the imperative inherent in the gift of freedom.⁵² 'Every single step,' Barth stresses, 'involves a man in specific and direct responsibility towards God, who reached out for man in specific and direct encounter.'⁵³ This responsibility, as we have seen, is to be lived out in obedience. Again, the vital significance of command comes to the fore in Barth's thinking. But how is the believer to respond to that command?

In answer to this, Barth emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit as crucial. The Spirit helps in confronting man by the word of God in three ways. First as indication (*Einweisung*) of the believer's living relationship to Jesus Christ (cf Col 2:12-13; Eph 2:5; 1 Cor 6:11). This is the dynamic and eschatological relationship of reconciliation on which ethics depends. Second the Spirit helps in warning and in correction (*Zurechtweisung*); in directing man from (and against) unfreedom and disobedience (cf Gal 5:16-17; Rom 6). Third the Spirit of God assists in teaching and in instruction (*Unterweisung*); in showing the will of God here and now in its correspondence with freedom in Jesus Christ (cf Phil 3:12-13). Despite its dependence on command and obligation, the sum and substance of the ethic which originates in the Holy Spirit is love. Love binds, builds and sustains community. 'It is the *conditio sine qua non* of all Christian service.'⁵⁴ It is in love that the reconciled man is to respond to God's command and to declare the divine 'Yes' to the world in his ethical activity.⁵⁵

Future man: ethics in the light of the future

'God is not content with man living as a reverent creature before him, or a grateful partner alongside him. He wants him to be a man with him, and to enjoy the glorious assurance of belonging to God.'⁵⁶ It is in this way, in one particular place, that Barth moves through his three anthropological ideas or categories: that is, the concepts of 'authentic man', 'reconciled man' and 'future (or redeemed) man'. The third and final idea is that of 'future man' or, more usually, 'redeemed man'.⁵⁷ The term 'redeemed' denotes the eschatological reality of man; it applies to him as the child of God, as heir of eternal life; that is, as he is seen in the future history of Jesus Christ. For Barth, eschatology is a very positive thing: it means above all the final—that is, the conclusive,

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⁵⁰ *CD*, IV/3ii, 599-614.

⁵¹ This is included in Barth's *The Humanity of God* (ET London, 1971) 65-95.

⁵² Barth, *The Gift of Freedom*, 82.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 83.

⁵⁴ O'Grady, *The Church*, 248-249, 248-249.

⁵⁵ *CD*, II/2, 13; *CD*, III/1, 257-259; 330-335; 275-376; *CD*, IV/1, 409.

⁵⁶ *Barth's Gift*, 80.

⁵⁷ 'Redeemed man' was the more usual term. However, in Barth's *Ethics* and elsewhere he uses the term 'future man'. I have retained this in order to convey the eschatological distinctive which is implied by the words.

the definitive and the unsurpassable. Eschatological truth speaks of a 'future coming towards us (Romans 8:24; Philippians 4:5)'. But it refers to much more; it also speaks of the other world in this world, the incorruptible within the corruptible, eternal life in temporal, divine in human. Barth claims that 'We are citizens of the future world in the midst of the present'.⁵⁸ He stresses that the Christian is a future man in the sense that he is to recognize the Holy Spirit's power drawing him to be what he already is, a child of God. There is a profound unity and interrelation between pneumatology, soteriology and morality in Barth's theology.

Again, the concept of command is vital. Because the redeemed lives an eschatological existence as a child of God, Barth teaches clearly that God requires and demands obedience. 'It is required of us,' he says, 'that we should walk and act as those who have the promise... Do we really obey if we do not obey as Children?'⁵⁹ The obedience thus called for is then worked out in the three concepts of conscience, gratitude and hope.

Conscience is interpreted eschatologically by Barth. It is said to be God's voice (the Holy Spirit) encountering man. It is God's command striking the believer as his own 'strictly moment-by-moment co-knowledge of the necessity of what he should do and not do in its relation to his coming eternal kingdom',⁶⁰ It is 'the voice of the future "I" in the present; a reaching out of what is ahead (Philippians 3:13; 1 Corinthians 13:10)'.⁶¹ The character of the ensuing action is first that of gratitude, by which he means a cheerful, voluntary readiness to obey God's command in realization of divine sonship.⁶² This is part of the eschatological freedom which means that the redeemed stands under the command of God as his own will.⁶³ Second this action is characterized by the hope that God will one day reward his people for the things done in this life (cf Rom 2:6; 2 Cor 5:10).

A BRIEF ASSESSMENT

No short study can do anything like justice to Barth's comprehensiveness, thoroughness and significance as a theologian. Some of the areas of his greatest strength have become, for some, areas of question and doubt, however. It is well to indicate summarily one or two areas of concern related to the topic of this study.

Objectivity in Barth's theology and ethics

We have noted in this study that Barth's teaching is fundamentally based on the word of God and the command of God (the creator, the reconciler, the redeemer), together with the response of man as the creature (authentic man), the pardoned sinner (reconciled man) and God's child (future/redeemed man). This is very much in keeping with

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Barth's view of what theology is, of course. However, the idea and the subsequent construction has given rise to several objections.

⁵⁸ *Ethics*, 464-465, 584; *CD*, IV/3i, 295.

⁵⁹ *Ethics*, 469, 472; see also 466, 471, 482. Barth cites Phil 3:20; Gal 4:26 and 1 Cor 13:10.

⁶⁰ *Ethics*, 475.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 485, 495.

⁶² *Ibid*, 501, 503.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 501-502.

For instance, some, amongst them Emil Brunner, have complained that Barth's foundational premises lie too heavily on an objective base—that is, the word of God. McLean, for example, complains forcefully of this: he claims that Barth 'submitted himself to the tutelage of the objectivity of God's revelation'.⁶⁴ Others would, however, disagree with this assertion. Bromiley, for instance, speaks of this as Barth's 'excellent objectivity'.⁶⁵ It is true to say that Barth made the word of God the sole source and basis of his theology. But this does not complete the picture—as we have hinted above. We have seen that Barth's position seems to be somewhere in the balance of two poles of thought: the objective and the subjective. For Barth the truth seems to be that whilst stressing the objectivity of God's revelation it is also necessary to offset this with two further considerations: the subjectivity of faith and the work of the Holy Spirit.

First, he stresses the subjectivity of faith.⁶⁶ He speaks, in this context, of faith being 'the human aspect of revelation'.⁶⁷ By this he means that it is faith that requires the believer to think beyond his own self-consciousness and to think upon the truth of God as it is revealed to him. It is basically nothing less than utter reliance on God.⁶⁸ One particular passage from *Church Dogmatics* is of specific relevance here.⁶⁹ Barth makes the statement: 'We believe that the Bible is the Word of God', defining his intention subsequently. In this definition he speaks of faith or belief as recognition and assurance: 'it is a clear hearing, apperceiving, thinking and then speaking and doing. Believing is also a free human act... a free act which as such is conditioned and determined by encounter, a challenge, an act of lordship which confronts man, which man cannot bring about himself, which exists either as an event or not at all'.⁷⁰ It is ultimately this emphasis on the word as event that gives it the aspect of subjectivity to which we are referring. We notice again the importance of command—that is, encounter and decision: 'in faith we always have to do with a single event, an individual decision, in which I decide in conformity with the decision of the Word of God'.⁷¹

The objectivity of the word of God is offset, first then, by the subjective nature of faith which receives the word as truth and responds under the initiative of the command of God.

Second, Barth emphasizes the activity of the work of the Holy Spirit in this area. The Spirit is seen as the mediator between objective revelation and subjective faith. Barth speaks of the Holy Spirit as the subjective reality of revelation⁷² and the subjective possibility of revelation.⁷³ By the former expression Barth signifies the present state of believers in the Holy Spirit as the children of God; by the latter he means the way in which the truth is conveyed to us by the Holy Spirit.

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⁶⁴ McLean, *Humanity*, 19. A similar complaint is made by Wingren, *Theology in Conflict*, 23-24, 108-109, 159.

⁶⁵ Bromiley, 'Karl Barth' in P. E. Hughes (ed) *Creative Minds*, 54.

⁶⁶ Rosato, *The Spirit*, 47-48. See also *CD*, I/2, 362-363, 515-517.

⁶⁷ *CD*, I/2, 284.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 331, 338.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 506ff.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 506.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 706. Barth, later, makes the following significant remark: 'Faith itself, obedient faith, but faith, and in the last resort obedient faith alone, is the activity which is demanded of us ... the exercise of the freedom which is granted to us under the Word.' *Ibid*, 740.

⁷² *CD*, I/2, 203-205.

⁷³ *CD*, I/2, 242-243.

This works out in Barth's ethical teaching in the practical consequences that are inherent in the idea: because of the Spirit's work and testimony to the truth the believer cannot withdraw from Christ. Rather, having discovered Christ's supreme authority the Christian is subject to his command which will form and direct him in freedom. This is true only where the objective 'Word of God is master by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit'.⁷⁴

Despite the many questions that we would raise concerning Barth's concept of revelation, had we time, it needs to be emphasized that the idea of the objectivity of the word of God, brought into the experience of the believer by the Holy Spirit, through faith, is central to his ethical teaching. It is the idea of the command of God being objective—above and beyond man, though in no way static and lifeless—that gives to Barth's practical thinking an authority which is so necessary if we are to take seriously the implications of the ethical teaching of God and of Christ.

Eschatology

Another problem which is often expressed about Barth's theology and ethics is concerned with his view of eschatology: a view which we outlined above. For example, McLean expresses the opinion that in Barth's work there is 'little eschatological consciousness'.⁷⁵ This criticism is fundamentally incorrect and needs a great deal of qualification.

Barth often writes of eschatology as the movement of history forwards⁷⁶ and in this he takes the time-concept seriously. He states, for example, that 'the New Testament looks forward, not merely to a better future, but to a future which sets a term to the whole time process'.⁷⁷ Faith is seen, consequently, to be essentially promissory. According to Rosato, 'Christian faith (for Barth) entails futurity... shrouded in hope'.⁷⁸ This present study has shown that, far from lacking eschatological consciousness, Barth's theology explicitly shows it at every turn. His anthropological belief and delineation is based on eschatological consideration. The concept of community, of reconciled man, for example, posits the idea of man living in, and directed by, the 'time between the times'. In the doctrine of redeemed man, similarly, the believer is incorporated into the eschatological work of Christ.

There is eschatological consciousness in Barth's theology. However, the problem that McLean raises is still significant. Perhaps it is not so much the problem that McLean expresses as the problem of the relationship between eschatology and the doctrine of Christ in Barth's thinking. Barth himself sets the context in *Church Dogmatics*: 'The New Testament always thinks eschatologically, but never with full logical consistence. Its only consistence is to think and speak in all dimensions and relations christologically'.⁷⁹

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Barth's work, it seems to me, lays itself open to the criticism of an over-emphasis on christology to the detriment and obscuring of other doctrines: at this particular point this is fairly obvious. Although Rosato claims that it is the pneumatological pole which guards the

⁷⁴ Ibid, 278—emphasis added.

⁷⁵ McLean, *Humanity*, 57.

⁷⁶ For example, *CD*, I/1, 486-A87; *CD*, III/2, 485-486; *Ethics*, 498, 514.

⁷⁷ *CD*, III/2, 486.

⁷⁸ Rosato, *The Spirit*, 73.

⁷⁹ *CD*, III/2, 485.

Church Dogmatics from exclusive christocentrism⁸⁰ the problem remains that there seems to be an overemphasis on the person of Christ. Whereas Bromiley is of the opinion that 'Christ's centrality is meant to point to the centrality of the triune God',⁸¹ this is not clear much of the time.

This christocentrism clouds the doctrine of eschatology, and this has consequences for Barth's ethical ideas. In this respect Barth seems so preoccupied with the eternal foundation of election in Christ, which of necessity points theology backwards, that the future becomes a matter of relatively little importance. It is significant that Moltmann points to the fact that it is the *later* writing of Barth which shows that the direction which the revision of his eschatology was leading to was a more future-orientated one. In commenting on Barth's words that Christ 'is still future to himself' Moltmann says, 'Whereas in Barth's doctrine of revelation the resurrection event stands under the head of the "pure presence of God", in his doctrine of reconciliation it comes to stand under the head of "anticipation" of the universal redemption and consummation.' The point is that this is not generally the tenor of Barth's work.⁸²

A corollary to this is the fact that history, itself, becomes somewhat void of any eschatological significance.⁸³ Because of Barth's doctrines of election and the parousia in its three forms nothing really new can occur; all has happened in the history of Jesus Christ. If it is true that the parousia is as much defined by the resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit as by the second coming of Christ then what more are we to expect? Eschatology is uniformly present at each moment of time. At most, that which does happen now is simply a signficatory demonstration of the eternal will of God. This takes from the biblical tension between 'the already' and 'the not yet' of salvation and Christian experience. It leads to a reduction of that eschatological drive so prominent in the New Testament.

Ethics

Two further consequences of Barth's theology fall specifically at the base of his ethical teaching. First the only distinction that he is willing to admit as the difference between the church (community) and the world is that the former is equipped to look for and to move forward to Jesus Christ in his future form. This arises naturally from two ideas; first the concept of election in Christ for every man, and second from the teaching concerning the nature of man before God, that we have examined briefly above. As we have seen, Barth emphasizes that in

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dealing with authentic man, reconciled man and future man he is 'always dealing with one whole man'.⁸⁴ In one sense Barth is definitely correct in stressing that the fundamental point of theology is that of man's relationship with God—as creature, first and foremost; but also as a believer reconciled and redeemed by the grace of God. But stressing that the creature, the reconciled and the redeemed are always and necessarily one brings him to the position of

⁸⁰ Rosato, *The Spirit*, 127. Rosato here claims that the christological emphasis in Barth's theology is balanced fairly equally by his emphasis on the Holy Spirit's work in and for the believer—a point which we earlier noted in connection with the subject of faith.

⁸¹ Bromiley, *Introduction*, xi.

⁸² See J. Moltmann, *The Theology of Hope* (ET New York, 1967) 86-87; particularly 87, footnote 1. See also Rosato, *The Spirit*, 166; *CD*, IV/3i, 326-327, 334.

⁸³ Rosato, *The Spirit*, 167-168. See also Thielicke, *Theological Ethics* 1, 112-117.

⁸⁴ *Ethics*, 52; *CD*, III/1, 97.

saying that unbelievers are merely unwilling or non-willing to countenance their relationship to the creator and that sin is therefore simply a reaction against the covenant in which all men stand. Barth's teaching falls radically short of the biblical—more particularly, the New Testament-teaching of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit and the radical difference between the Christian and the unbeliever (see, for example, 2 Cor 5:17, 6:14-15; Gal 6:15; Eph 2:1-4, 4:17-18, 4:23-24; Phil 4:7-9; Col 1:21, 3:10) and, for example, the doctrine of the two ages (see Rom 8:18-19, 11:5, 13:11; 1 Cor 2:6, 10:11; Eph 1:21; Col 1:26). Christian ethics, true to the word of God, must call man as creature to obedience; but it must insist that that obedience comes from a God-given realization of sin (enmity against God and the breaking of his law) and a repentance and renewal by the Spirit of God in conversion. That is, Christian ethics must insist on the creation of a new being in Christ (Gal 6:15), able and willing now to obey the ethical implications and stipulations of the gospel of Christ.

The second consequence is pointed out by Wingren. He accuses Barth of identifying man's main problem as lack of knowledge and not sin and guilt.⁸⁵ He rightly speaks of 'a framework of... ignorance' in Barth's construct of the Christian message. He disagrees with Barth's contention that the gospel's chief aim is to impart knowledge. This is certainly a justified criticism in terms of the general impression created by Barth's theology. For Barth the gospel first dispels ignorance and imparts the knowledge of who man is—but since he already is not only a creature but also reconciled and redeemed in Christ it becomes impossible to regard evil, sin and rebelliousness as real elements of tension in the history between God and man. Evil, therefore, becomes nothingness and has only relative existence.⁸⁶ This, in turn, seems partially to account for Barth's unsatisfactory and unscriptural view of law and gospel which precludes any New Testament idea of the tension between the two.⁸⁷ Evangelical ethics, on the other hand, must assert the importance of the gospel's insistence that man is an enemy of God until the Lord, by his grace, transforms him in Christ to an object of love; to a child of God (see Eph 2:1-9; 1:13; Col 1:21-23). It is from this point of reconciliation through repentance and the forgiveness of sin that Christian ethics begins to make sense and the command of God to motivate a man in decision in the will of his redeemer. Barth's emphasis on command is important—but this must not be reduced to a command to knowledge; it should be fundamentally and primarily a command to

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repentance before God and then a command to work out that salvation in ethical activity, both in the community and in the world.

That these and other negative comments can be levelled at Barth's theology and ethical teaching in no way detracts from his basic strength. His grasp of New Testament teaching in certain areas is vigorous and thorough in its detailed analysis. His doctrines of the word, of Christ, of man and of the Spirit—although open to question—undergird his thinking and give it a consistency. One strength which should, perhaps, be singled out in this study is the way in which he insists that ethics is part of theology and that 'theology is ethics'. This indissoluble union gives direction and drive to his moral teaching, as well as authority to his conclusions in that area.

⁸⁵ Wingren, *Theology*, 38-39, 42-43, 71. See also Rosato, *The Spirit*, 169.

⁸⁶ *CD*, II/2, 270. Cf *CD*, III/2, 136; *CD*, III/3, 351-353, 363-364.

⁸⁷ *CD*, II/2, 511. See Wingren's comment on this: *Theology*, 34-35, 67-68, 110, 126, 159-160.

Perhaps we should allow Barth to have the final comment on the subject under discussion:

God's Command always means a liberation of my action. It claims me. It claims me, and I have to listen, as it wins me not only for the commanded orderliness and humility but also for the God to whom I owe my existence, my salvation, and my final relationship to him.⁸⁸

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⁸⁸ *Ethics*, 497.