

**A Theological Assessment of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer
on the Christological Foundation of Ethics**

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

This thesis aims to contribute to an answer to the question, “What would a philosophy, and more specifically, an ethics, based on Christ, look like?” My first contention is that we find, in the ethical thinking of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, two particularly radical and complementary attempts to point toward Christ as the basis or foundation of any genuine ethics. What sets the views of Barth and Bonhoeffer apart from many of the other philosophical and theological approaches to ethics, is the extent to which they seek to take seriously the ethical implications of the *gospel* – the revelation of God's grace in the Word and work of Jesus Christ – for ethics. My second contention is that, even if we follow neither Barth nor Bonhoeffer in the detailed outworking of the *character* of a Christologically grounded ethics, we nevertheless cannot avoid facing the radical challenge each of these men poses, in their own related but distinct ways, that in thinking about ethics we must take Christ as our standard and foundation. In the first two chapters, on Barth and Bonhoeffer respectively, I identify the structure and content of their arguments and display their textual basis in the texts most relevant to the topic, namely Barth's *Church Dogmatics* and Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*. I also present an outline of the character of a Christologically-grounded ethics as each of these theologians derives it from its Christological basis. In the third chapter I examine the cogency of their arguments.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Karl Barth and the Christological Basis of Ethics	5
Introduction: The Imperative of the Gospel	5
Barth's Arguments for the Christological Basis of Ethics	10
Barth's Negative Argument	10
Barth's Positive Argument	23
Barth on the Character of a Christologically Grounded Ethics.....	30
Chapter 2: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Christological Foundations of Ethics	41
Bonhoeffer on the Foundations of Ethics	41
Christ as Ultimate Reality: The Reconciliation of God and World	43
Christ as Origin, Essence, and Goal of Life	47
Christ as Life in Union with the Origin	50
Bonhoeffer's Arguments for the Christological Basis of Ethics.....	54
The Positive Argument:.....	54
The Negative Argument:	56
The Character of a Christologically-Based Ethics in Bonhoeffer	57
Creaturely Human Life as Established in Christ: The Texts	58
Creaturely Human Life as Established in Christ: The Arguments.....	73
Chapter 3: Assessing Barth and Bonhoeffer's Position	76
Introduction	76
Differences and Similarities in Barth and Bonhoeffer's Approach to Ethics.....	79
Differences in Method	80
Differences in Content.....	82
The Challenge of Barth and Bonhoeffer's Approach to Ethics.....	87
Assessing the Arguments for the Christological Basis of Ethics	91
Objection Class A: Questionable Assumptions	94
Objection Class B: Counter-considerations.....	100
Conclusion	104
Bibliography	106

Introduction

“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.” (Col. 2:6-10, NIV 1984)

Ethics, as the study of the normative domain of human behaviour, traditionally forms one of the main branches of philosophy, alongside logic, metaphysics, and epistemology. In the passage from Paul’s letter to the Colossian church quoted above, Paul warns against a certain “hollow and deceptive philosophy” capable of taking people captive, a philosophy which rests not on Christ but on “human tradition and the basic principles of this world.” This leads us to imagine a philosophy, implied in the contrast Paul draws, that *is* based on Christ, a philosophy that rests or “depends” on the “fullness” that we have been given in Christ, a fullness that is “all the fullness of the Deity... in bodily form.” The broad question with which this thesis concerns itself asks, “What would a philosophy, and more specifically, an ethics, based on Christ, look like?” My first contention is that we find, in the ethical thought of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, two particularly radical and complementary attempts to point toward Christ as the basis or foundation of any genuine ethics. It could be fairly said that Barth and Bonhoeffer turn ethics on its head by refusing the terms in which

traditional ethics poses and answers its question. Consider the following claim made by Bonhoeffer:

The knowledge of good and evil appears to be the goal of all ethical reflection. The first task of Christian ethics is to supersede that knowledge. This attack on the presupposition of all other ethics is so unique that it is questionable whether it even makes sense to speak of Christian ethics at all.¹

What sets the views of Barth and Bonhoeffer apart from many of the other philosophical and theological approaches to ethics, is the extent to which they seek to take seriously the ethical implications of the *gospel* – the revelation of God's grace in the Word and work of Jesus Christ – for ethics. My second contention is that, even if we follow neither Barth nor Bonhoeffer in the detailed outworking of the *character* of a Christologically grounded ethics, we nevertheless cannot avoid facing the challenge each of these men poses, in their own related but distinct ways, that in thinking about ethics we must always take Christ as our standard and foundation. “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11).²

As a theological *assessment* of the position of Barth and Bonhoeffer, this thesis asks whether Barth and Bonhoeffer are correct in claiming that any genuine (read: consistently Christian) ethics must explicitly or (at least) implicitly involve a Christological foundation. In other words, must a genuine ethics resist being determined by factors other than the gospel in as rigorous a fashion as Barth and Bonhoeffer suggest they must? I proceed by identifying as clearly as possible the structure and content of the arguments for the conclusions drawn by Barth and Bonhoeffer, and then by exploring the cogency of those arguments in order to determine whether those conclusions do in fact follow from the premises these two

¹ *DWBE* 6, 299.

² I am relying on a “theological” and not a properly “exegetical” reading of the verses in question. That is, I am not attempting to discern carefully the historical and linguistic context of the words and thoughts expressed in these verses, but rather to hear the Word of God as it speaks to us in the present through Scripture. I am assuming, of course, that my theological reading would prove consistent with a proper exegesis, but I am not myself going to undertake such exegesis or such proof of consistency here.

theologians present. Insofar as my work consists in a simple application of the criterion of logical validity to the arguments of Barth and Bonhoeffer, and there is nothing distinctively theological about such an exercise. The *theological* aspect of my work consists in the conclusions I draw about the extent to which an ethics that desires to be Christian in identity must follow the lines laid out by Barth and Bonhoeffer. My project is therefore theologically motivated – it asks about the extent to which a conception of ethics compatible with Christian theology will be bound to the determinations Barth and Bonhoeffer propose, and conversely, about the extent of the theoretical space that exists between the shared starting points of Barth and Bonhoeffer, and the ethical conclusions they draw.

This essay cannot offer more than a *sketch* of a theological assessment. A comprehensive treatment of the topic would go into much greater detail and specificity concerning the alternative approaches to ethics which exist in abundance, even under the narrower heading of "Christian Ethics." Furthermore, a thorough investigation of the topic would require paying much more careful attention to the secondary literature than I do here. I focus on analysis of the primary sources and as a result make relatively minimal consultation of the secondary literature. In spite of the necessary limitations of the present project, it makes a distinct academic contribution in at least the following three ways:

- (1) Given the complexity and subtlety of their thinking, and the sheer quantity of their writing, it is notoriously difficult to express the essence of Barth's or of Bonhoeffer's thought on many particular topics in a straightforward and simple form. This essay offers such a focused examination of a topic central to the thinking of both, namely the Christological basis of ethics. To that extent it will contribute to Barth and Bonhoeffer scholarship.
- (2) I am not aware of any other work in the literature in the English-speaking world that treats together the thinking of Barth and Bonhoeffer on this particular topic in a sustained and thorough way. This essay presents the possibility of breaking some ground in the areas of Barth and Bonhoeffer studies.
- (3) This essay draws attention to a pointed question facing any Christian moral theologian desiring to speak of the basis of ethics: *Is your moral theology based on Christ?* By bringing into focus the core features of the approaches of Barth and Bonhoeffer and the criteria for a Christocentric ethics they offer, this essay provides

an excellent framework for the discussion of this crucially important question. This essay seeks to contribute, via its examination of these two prominent 20th century theologians, toward an answer to the question of how to arrive at an adequate conception of the basis of Ethics in the person of Jesus Christ.

The essay divides into three chapters, the first two of which – concerning, respectively, the thought of Barth and Bonhoeffer on the basis and general character of ethics – draw attention to key places in the texts of each of the two theologians from which their views concerning the foundations or basis of ethics can be drawn. Following this, I present, in as concise a form as possible, the reasoning by which Barth and Bonhoeffer, again respectively, reach the conclusion that a Christological ethics is the only genuine ethics. The final chapter begins with a section on the challenge posed by the basic position of the two thinkers, followed by my evaluation of that position.

Chapter 1: Karl Barth and the Christological Basis of Ethics

Introduction: The Imperative of the Gospel

The central concept of Karl Barth's ethics is the command of God. We can see this immediately from the title of his "general ethics" in *CD II/2*, "The Command of God," the bulk of whose 274 pages divides into sections on the command of God as the claim, decision and judgment of God, respectively. When Barth turns from general ethics, from the general characterization of the command of God and of good human action in its "objective" aspect, to special ethics, he confronts the further problem of how the command of God actually and effectively sanctifies human beings and their action (the "subjective" aspect of the command and human action). Barth's ethics of creation (*CD III/4*) considers the command of God as the command of God the Creator; he planned to deal, in his (incomplete) ethics of reconciliation (*CD IV/4*), with the command as the command of God the Reconciler; his ethics of redemption, had Barth been able to write these sections, would almost certainly have discussed the command of God the Redeemer, filling out the Trinitarian schema according to which Barth organized the ethics, in accordance with the dogmatics of which they form a part.³ It is fair to say that Barth's ethics, in their entirety, are governed by the dominating concept of the command of God.

³ For Barth, ethics must be included as part of dogmatic theology, since the content of the church's proclamation, the Word of God, or the gospel of Jesus Christ, always has an imperative component that is ultimately inseparable from its indicative content. Hence Barth has no separate treatment of ethics or moral theology in the *Church Dogmatics*, but instead concludes each of the dogmatic *topoi* with an ethical section. This does not imply that Barth did not take ethics seriously as a topic worthy of consideration in its own right (hence the publication of his 1928 lectures under the title *Ethics*), but only that he felt that in the end Christian ethics had no right to independence from dogmatics.

But based on what we have just said, we cannot say simply that Barth's ethics is grounded in the commandment of God, if we understand by the term "commandment" the individual pronouncement of an ethical imperative issuing forth from the darkness (arbitrary will) of some abstractly conceived God – e.g. God as pure power or as simply "the Absolute." God can only be known as He is, and for Barth that means as He is known in His self-revelation as Jesus Christ. Barth sees the command of God itself (the Word of God considered as it claims human beings), in its basis, content and form, as *identical* to the person of Jesus Christ. As such, we can only properly understand the command of God when we see it as the form of the gospel, the imperative power of the grace of God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Once we see this, it is only a short step to the realization how thoroughly ethics is, for Barth, grounded in and determined by the person of Jesus Christ. We can present this as a preliminary and truncated form of the positive argument to be discussed below:

- (1) Jesus Christ is the gospel of God's grace.⁴
- (2) The command of God is the imperative force of the gospel.
- (3) The command of God is the basis of ethics.

Therefore,

- (4) Jesus Christ is the basis of ethics. [*from (1)-(3)*]

We will have to spell out more fully in what follows the relation between these claims, in order to make intelligible how the reasoning suggested here unfolds. For instance, (3) undergirds Barth's entire presentation of ethics, and yet in a sense (3) itself derives from (2), which in a sense derives from (1). The reason why ethics begins from the command of God is because when the grace of God reaches us it claims us. And the reason why the grace of God claims us is because of the significance of what God has done for us and revealed about Himself to us in Jesus Christ. The reason why Jesus Christ is the gospel (good news) of God's grace is ultimately grounded in the person of Jesus Himself. It is because of who He is and what God has done in Him, as "the beginning of all God's works and ways," that we

⁴ *CD* II/2, 557.

recognize what good news it is that God has come to us in Jesus Christ.⁵ (1) itself derives not from some other proposition but from the reality given to us in God's self-revelation.

Barth presents the "way of theological ethics," as he understands it, as an approach to ethics fundamentally distinct from other ways, whether secular, religious or even (liberal) Christian. The difference is a matter of starting points. From where do we begin our ethical thinking? On what principles or basis will the ethical claims we make rest? For Barth, properly Christian ethical thought has to start from the object of theology, namely God, and (again) God conceived not abstractly but concretely, that is, as preeminently revealed in Jesus Christ, the gracious Word and work of God.⁶ But what does it mean in practice for one's ethical thought to start from God, that is, from the gracious God revealed in Jesus Christ? For one thing, it means that we begin from revelation, and hence Barth's doctrine of revelation is inextricably involved here. Barth's ultimate evaluative standard is the gospel of God's grace, the Word and Work of God in Jesus Christ. He does not go any further in defending this basic stance than to assert, in line with the apostolic proclamation of the church, that God has spoken it. Dogmatics, as a discipline, is bound by what God has spoken in the sense that it can ultimately only attest to that Word. It cannot operate outside of the boundaries of the Word of God. Hence, his entire argument can be cast as a hypothetical one: *If* the gospel of God's grace is true, then such and such follows for how we must conceive of ethics.

⁵ In his discussion of the interconnectedness of the concepts of obligation and permission as they characterize the command of God, Barth provides an explicit statement of the methodological effects of the uniqueness of an ethics that operates within Christian dogmatics: "as with all the other propositions of dogmatics the truth in [the propositions of Christian ethics] is contained and lies in the Word of God..., can be known only in the Word of God, and must again and again be sought and caught in the Word of God and therefore in faith. Their truth is spiritual truth, i.e., truth which is revealed and operative in the presence and work of the Holy Spirit" (*CD II/2*, 603).

⁶ Barth sees both Roman Catholic moral theology and liberal Protestant ethics (e.g. Schleiermacher etc.) as both failing on this criterion, and as ultimately starting from some other beginning point - whether from an abstract God-concept in the case of the former, or from the human subject considered in itself (hence similarly abstract) in the case of the latter. While further examination of Barth's discussion of these alternative possibilities is worthwhile, it has been done elsewhere and space does not permit me to elaborate on them here.

Let us consider this crucial methodological point in a slightly different way. Barth does not argue for the legitimacy of making the Word of God his starting point. Indeed, from Barth's perspective, the facts of the matter make this impossible, since to attempt to justify the Word of God as one's starting point would be to set up some criterion or standard other than the Word of God as the ultimate evaluative principle. But a true Christian ethics cannot take such a route, since it knows that there is no higher principle than the Word of God by which to evaluate that Word.⁷ For this reason, Barth's reasoning cannot help but to run in a circle: The Word of God is the starting point of all our thinking about truth, including ethical truth. The Word of God testifies that the Word of God is the basis of ethics. Therefore, the Word of God is the basis of ethics. We have to note, however, that whatever epistemological starting point one takes (one might, for instance, appeal to the faculty of human reason, or more broadly human experience, as the epistemological basis of all truth), one runs into the same sort of problem, so that identifying the ultimately circular nature of Barth's thinking here does not pose a unique problem for him. And further, we might add, since the starting point for Barth is *God*, we *do* break out of the circle of justification, and in the most powerful possible way, assuming, of course, assumes that God does exist and has given His Word. It is an assumption that any Christian ethics will have to make if it is to be what it is. And if Barth is right in stating that the knowledge of God is already actual (we do in fact possess knowledge of God via revelation) and not only a theoretical possibility, then we have a circle with roots – roots in Reality itself.

Although we cannot seek to derive or deduce the command of God that forms the basis of ethics from any other principles, we can (as Barth exhaustively does) descriptively elaborate on its nature and indicate various points at which the witness of Scripture presents things as

⁷ *CD* II/2, 537.

Barth describes them. We can also make some inroads toward relating what human beings commonly experience to the reality under discussion. The gospel, in Barth's view, demands a radical reorientation of the very project of ethics itself, as a discipline. We will see the same sense of the necessity of a radical reorientation of our view of what is at stake in ethics at various points in Bonhoeffer. We are forced to undergo this radical shift in perspective, Barth (with Bonhoeffer) believes, if we are taking the gospel – the revelation of God's grace in Jesus Christ – seriously. What we are forbidden to do then, is to seek out some way of grounding ethics in a way that is distinct from the way ethics is already actually grounded in Christ – by, for instance, locating a categorical imperative in the very structure of reason itself, or by constructing an axiomatic notion of "utility" which one equates with the good and from which one can then proceed to employ one's calculus of the positive and negative consequences of human actions, or even by treating the text of the Bible as a sourcebook of moral rules and regulations (sometimes couched in narrative accounts and other times not) which in the end possess the same content as the universal natural law which one might otherwise (putting aside practical constraints and the impairment of the fall) have been able to access via reasoned reflection on created existence.

The remainder of the present chapter consists of two further sections. The first concerns Barth's two arguments for the Christological foundation of ethics, and sub-divides into two parts, one dealing with the negative, and the other with the positive argument. Each sub-section divides into two further parts, the first of which presents the textual basis for the argument considered in that sub-section, and the second of which provides a statement of the argument drawn from the texts that aims to be as clear and concise as possible. After considering the arguments for the Christological basis of ethics, the second section of the present chapter takes up, in a very general way, the character of the ethics that rests on this

foundation.⁸ After doing the same with Bonhoeffer in chapter two, the third and final chapter of this essay will assess the arguments for the Christological basis of ethics in the two theologians.

Barth's Arguments for the Christological Basis of Ethics

The arguments I present cannot be found, as I lay them out in this section, anywhere in the *Church Dogmatics*, though parts of them are present, explicitly or implicitly, in various places in that work. These arguments, I contend, make up some of the central pillars of the entire edifice of Barth's *magnum opus*. In order to focus attention on the key developments of the argument, I will provide, in the following two sub-sections, both a concise presentation of the two main arguments by which Barth seeks to demonstrate his conclusion (that only a Christologically-grounded ethics can be a legitimate ethics), and a detailed indication of where I locate the premises of these arguments within the *Church Dogmatics*.

Correspondingly, there will be a parallel presentation of the key moves of Bonhoeffer's arguments and their basis in his *Ethics* in Chapter Two. This presentation of Barth's and of Bonhoeffer's arguments for the distinctly Christological basis of ethics will facilitate both the reader's consideration of the arguments, as well as my own discussion of them in Chapter Three.

Barth's Negative Argument

⁸ Given the way Barth and Bonhoeffer's understanding of the character of ethics emerges organically from their thinking about the basis of ethics, a clear and detailed presentation of both will be necessary.

The conclusion of what I am calling Barth's "negative" argument for the Christological basis of ethics asserts that any human attempt to establish a non-Christological basis of ethics is equivalent to the biblical concept of sin. It is common in the literature to observe that Barth asserts this. But what reasons does he provide for it? To answer this question I draw out the premises that make up the substance of Barth's argument from the ethical chapters in the doctrine of God (*CD* II/2, §§36 and 37), and from his Christological treatment of sin in the doctrine of reconciliation (*CD* IV/1, §60). In both places, Barth places a great deal of emphasis on his interpretation of the account of the sin and fall of human beings in the Eden narrative in Genesis 3. Yet he believes that sin cannot be seen for what it truly is apart from the light given by the Word of God, as this shines forth in the revelation of Jesus Christ. Since sin itself cannot be properly understood except from the standpoint of Christology, neither can the claim that ethics as a general human practice amounts to sin be understood apart from that standpoint.

The Textual Basis of the Negative Argument

Barth begins §36 of the *Church Dogmatics* with a consideration of the relation of the command of God to "the ethical problem." No human being can avoid the ethical problem, which is the problem of man's existence, the quest for the good, the supremely critical question which calls into question all proposed norms and laws of behavior and action, the question that Barth frequently formulates simply as the question "What should we do?"

For it is as he acts that man exists as a person. Therefore the question of the goodness and value and rightness, of the genuine continuity of his activity, the ethical question, is no more and no less than the question about the goodness, value, rightness and genuine continuity of his existence, of himself. It is his life-question, the question by whose answer he stands or falls.⁹

⁹ *CD* II/2, 516. See also 535: "To exist as a man means to act. And action means choosing, deciding. What is the right choice? What ought I to do? What ought we to do? This is the question before which every man is objectively placed. And whatever may be the results of his examination of the question as a question, it is the question to which he never ceases even for a moment objectively to give an answer."

Because the ethical question is *the* human question, we find all through human history and across human cultures various attempts to answer it. The problem with all these efforts, according to Barth, is that they constitute various expressions of man's desire

to be like God. He wants to know of himself (as God does) what is good and evil. He therefore wants to *give* this answer himself and of himself. So, then, as a result and in prolongation of the fall, we have 'ethics,' or, rather, the multifarious ethical systems, the attempted human answers to the ethical question.¹⁰

Even if other ethical approaches take this path, theological ethics, which operates in the light of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, never can. To do so would be to ignore the reality that has been revealed.

The grace of God protests against all man-made ethics as such.... [I]t does so by completing its own answer to the ethical problem in active refutation, conquest and destruction of all human answers to it. It does this by revealing in Jesus Christ the human image with which Adam was created to correspond and could no longer do so when he sinned, when he became ethical man.¹¹

According to Christian theological ethics, Barth says, the doctrine of God (and, more truly, the object of that doctrine – namely the God revealed in Jesus Christ) is the *answer* to the problem of ethics. It points us toward the good as a reality already given to us by God and by which we in turn are questioned. "We cannot act," Barth writes, "as if the command of God, issued by God's grace to the elect man Jesus Christ, and again by God's grace already fulfilled by this man, were not already known to us as the sum total of the good."¹² But ethics, under the general conception Barth is discussing here, bypasses the grace of God in order to work out some other answer to the ethical question. Because of this, Barth states that "[s]trange as it may seem, that general conception of ethics coincides exactly with the conception of sin."¹³ Again, "the question of good and evil has been decided and settled once and for all in the decree of God, by the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Now that

¹⁰ CD II/2, 517.

¹¹ CD II/2, 517.

¹² CD II/2, 518.

¹³ CD II/2, 518.

this decision has been made, theological ethics cannot go back on it.”¹⁴ It does not remain for us to pose the question anew and produce an answer to it of ourselves.

On the basis of the discussion so far, we can formulate the following propositions:

- (5) Any approach to ethics that attempts to raise and answer the ethical question apart from the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ involves an attempt to become like God in knowing good and evil.
- (6) The attempt to become like God in knowing good and evil is the paradigmatic expression of human sin. [*assumed fairly uncontroversially on the basis of Gen. 3:5*]
- (7) Any approach to ethics that attempts to raise and answer the ethical question apart from the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ is inherently sinful. [*from (5), (6)*]

Given its universal scope, we can see immediately that (7) implies, in a negative form, the conclusion that only a Christologically-grounded ethics will be legitimate, and rules out all other approaches. But why follow Barth in identifying the various human attempts to know good and evil, pursued in order to discern what is right and wrong in motives, conduct and consequences, necessarily involves us in the project of trying to be like God? The short answer to this question can be culled from some of the further points Barth makes in the rest of his chapter on the Command of God. After this we will look at a somewhat more in-depth and direct answer on the basis of his treatment of sin in *CD IV/1*. In the discussion that follows we will be looking for premises in support of the particularly controversial (5) above.

To understand Barth’s rejection of non-Christologically-grounded ethics, we have to reckon with the seriousness he reads in Jesus’ assertion that only God is good (Mk. 10:18). As a result, he believes, any goodness we might find in our own action must derive from God’s own goodness. In other words, when we ask about the good we ought to do, in the light of the revelation of God’s grace we find the answer in what Jesus Christ has already done for

¹⁴ *CD II/2*, 536.

us, so that we are diverted from any independent sanctity or righteousness of our own to the sanctity and righteousness that God fulfills in Him. “In Him,” Barth says,

the realisation of the good corresponding to divine election has already taken place – and so completely that we, for our part, have actually nothing to add, but have only to endorse this event by our action. The ethical problem of Church Dogmatics can consist only in the question whether and to what extent human action is a glorification of the grace of Jesus Christ.¹⁵

Human goodness, then, consists in the human answer to God’s grace, expressed in our action, as this answer is “determined by the divine command.”¹⁶ But what kind of response must we give, when our action has been determined by the command of the grace of God? Barth characterizes the appropriate response as living in conformity, correspondence, or analogy to grace, as (in this correspondence) being the image of God,¹⁷ and more concretely, as accepting, acknowledging and acquiescing in the fact that what God has done (in showing us such kindness and grace) is right.¹⁸ In this way we fulfill our role as the covenant partner God has elected us to be, by glorifying God’s grace in our lives. But to accept that what God has done is right is to admit that Jesus Christ has mercifully taken our place and justified us. It is to accept, then, that He has become our righteousness and in doing so has claimed us as His own so that we no longer belong to ourselves but are His possession. He has also glorified us, hiding our life in Christ, so that to accept what He has done as right is to “accept and maintain what He regards as true of our life against our own opposition and to let our action be illumined and ruled by this acceptance.”¹⁹

¹⁵ *CD II/2*, 540. “It is ethics of grace or it is not theological ethics. For it is in grace – the grace of God in Jesus Christ – that even the command of God is established and fulfilled and revealed as such. Therefore ‘to become obedient,’ ‘to act rightly,’ ‘to realize the good,’ never means anything other than to become obedient to the revelation of the grace of God; to live as a man to whom grace has come in Jesus Christ.” (538-39)

¹⁶ *CD II/2*, 547.

¹⁷ “Image” for Barth does not indicate equality, but rather “the reflection which represents, although in itself it is completely different from, God and His action; the reflection in which God recognises Himself and His action. It is in this determination of man that his peace with God consists, his righteousness before Him, his holiness... Eternal life is God’s own life, and the life of the creature when it is uniform with God’s own life” (575).

¹⁸ *CD II/2*, 575.

¹⁹ *CD II/2*, 581.

Ethical approaches that start from a place other than the revelation of Jesus Christ, by setting up and answering their own questions, ignore the reality in which we stand in virtue of the command of God's grace. Instead of responding in obedience to God's questioning, they evade this responsibility with their own project. Given the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, to do this can only be to oppose and contradict the purposes of God at the most fundamental level. It is to refuse to *be* the correspondence to grace, the image of God and the covenant partner we were created to be.²⁰ But this opposition to God, which appears as the attempt to know good and evil independently of God, is precisely what God has rejected in the cross of Jesus Christ, where Jesus Christ took the place of Adam, the disobedient and sinful man, and thus set him aside. For this reason the attempt to know good and evil independently of God is not only forbidden by God, but is actually an impossibility that has been ruled out by the grace of God which sets us free and in which our sin has been forgiven.²¹ To live in disobedience is to live in the unreality and "impossibility of the sin of Adam, who in Jesus Christ is already killed and made alive for the service of righteousness."²²

The previous two paragraphs cover a lot of ground, without being entirely sensitive to the nuances of meaning Barth painstakingly draws out in the actual text. Nevertheless, our overview gives us enough contact with Barth's writing to draw out the following statements in supplement to the condensed argument presented above (in assertions (5)-(7)). After presenting that version of the argument, we asked about the link between the attempt to discern and apply the knowledge of good and evil and the sinful attempt to be like God; in

²⁰ See *CD II/2*, 586, where Barth characterizes "the man who disobeys God," as the one "who, instead of living according to his determination to be the image of God, and therefore in conformity with the grace of God, has succumbed and succumbs to the temptation to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which is forbidden him for his own good, and in this way to exalt himself to a spurious divine likeness."

²¹ *CD II/2*, 587.

²² *CD II/2*, 611.

other words, we asked about the support Barth provides for (5). The first reason for thinking that (5) is true, comes from the following:

- (8) God created us to exist as His covenant partners in correspondence to His grace.
- (9) We exist in correspondence to grace by responding to the command of God in such a way that we accept that what God does (in being gracious to us) is right.
- (10) When we attempt to set up and answer the ethical question independently from God, we necessarily evade our responsibility to the grace of God and oppose the grace of God.
- (11) To evade responsibility to the grace of God by setting up and answering the ethical question independently from God is to attempt to take the place of God.

Furthermore,

- (12) Any ethical approach that attempts to raise and answer the ethical question apart from the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ involves an attempt to locate the goodness of our being and action in ourselves rather than in God.
- (13) To locate the goodness of our being and action in ourselves rather than in God is to attempt to take the place of God.

So,

- (5) Any approach to ethics that attempts to raise and answer the ethical question apart from the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ involves an attempt to become like God in knowing good and evil. [*from (10), (11) and from (12), (13)*]

If the sub-argument just outlined for premise (5) of the main argument fails to satisfy, the reason is most likely that one fails to see why opposing the grace of God and attempting to locate our goodness in our own action amount to attempting to take the place of God. In other words, one feels that there is room to question premises (11) and/or (13). Here we have to take stock of an important point Barth makes elsewhere, which will lead us into a second sub-argument for (5) based on his Christological account of sin in *CD IV/1*. The point in question is that in attempting to take the place of God (the paradigmatic sin) we need not be conscious that we are doing so. In fact, Barth holds that we cannot even know what sin is apart from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. So it is only to be expected that we are unaware of our evasion of and opposition to the grace of God and our attempt to take the place of God as we undertake our non-Christological approach to ethics.

Barth's treatment of the dogmatic locus of sin affords a more direct contribution to what I am calling his "negative" argument for the Christological basis of ethics by providing a more direct argument for premise (5). As he states in the first part of §60, our very understanding of sin itself can only be drawn from the knowledge of Christ. Otherwise we would be assuming or constructing a standard of goodness against which man might be measured that is independent of the source and sum of goodness as revealed to us by God in Christ. The three aspects under which Barth considers the sin of humanity in the *Church Dogmatics*, then, derive from three aspects of the knowledge of Jesus Christ: We know humanity's sin as pride in light of our knowledge of Jesus Christ as the Lord who in humility became a servant (Jesus' high priestly work, §60); we know humanity's sin as sloth in light of our knowledge of Jesus Christ the servant exalted as Lord (Jesus' kingly work, §65); we know humanity's sin as false self-assertion in light of our knowledge of Jesus Christ as the true self-revealing witness (Jesus' prophetic work, §70). In each case, the "person of sin" becomes known as the one who was set aside and overcome in the death of Jesus Christ.²³ In the present sub-section I focus on Barth's treatment of sin as pride, in part due to the space constraints of this essay, but also because the identification of ethics ungrounded in Christ with sin comes across particularly clearly in §60.

From the discussion so far we can already state the main outline of Barth's second sub-argument for premise (5) of the main argument:

- (14) We know the essential nature of sin only in the light of the revelation of Jesus Christ, as what has been set aside in His death.

²³ See the section summaries on p. 358 of *CD IV/1* and p. 369 of *CD IV/2*. See also p. 369 of *CD IV 3/1.1*, where Barth confirms that "Sin may be known in its nature, reality, implications and consequences as it is opposed, vanquished and done away by Him."

(15) In view of the revelation of Jesus Christ we know sin as essentially humanity's pride, self-exaltation and false self-assertion. [from (14) and the work Barth does in the three places where he treats the doctrine of sin]

(16) Pride, self-exaltation and self-assertion are distinct ways of characterizing the essential nature of sin. [from (14), (15)]

(17) The essential nature of sin (as depicted in the three characterizations in (16)) can be summarized as the desire to be like God, knowing good and evil. [from Gen. 3:5]²⁴

(18) Any attempt to do ethics apart from the grace of God stems from human pride, self-exaltation and false self-assertion.

Therefore,

(5) Any approach to ethics that attempts to raise and answer the ethical question apart from the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ involves an attempt to become like God in knowing good and evil. [from (17), (18)]

Our next step is to show the textual basis for premises (15) and (18) from Barth's texts. Since I am only covering his treatment of sin as pride in any detail here, I will only be able to present explicit support for the presence of *part* of these two premises in Barth's thinking. But the three characterizations of sin are intricately connected, so that to prove one of them is in a sense to prove the rest. And at any rate it takes only a cursory glance at the relevant sections to see that the rest of (15) and (18) (concerning self-exaltation and false self-assertion) are uncontroversially substantiated by the texts in ways that parallel Barth's treatment of pride.

Although Barth says, in agreement with Calvin, that sin in general can be equated with disobedience and with unbelief, it manifests concretely – that is, in the human being's encounter with Jesus Christ – as pride.²⁵ Barth presents the pride of humanity from four angles, knowable in each case from a corresponding angle on the humility of God in Jesus Christ. First, where Jesus Christ, being God, actually becomes human for us, human beings

²⁴ Note that premise (17) is merely a restatement of premise (6) above. For this reason I combine these two premises in the final formulation of the argument.

²⁵ *CD IV/1*, 414-15. The truly biblical perspective on sin, according to Barth, sees sin as what gets excluded and condemned in Jesus Christ crucified.

in futility desire to be God. Second, where Jesus Christ, being the Lord, actually becomes the servant of all servants for us, human beings, whose freedom and dignity rests in being the servant of God, absurdly desire to be lord. Third, where Jesus Christ, the divine Judge actually passes judgment on us by bearing our guilt and being judged in our place, the human being wants to be his own judge even while his freedom and life can consist only in accepting God's judgment, that God is in the right against him. Finally, where Jesus Christ the strong helper became utterly helpless in death for us, relying completely on the help of God, the human being, who is in no way capable of helping himself, rejects the help of God and attempts, tragically, to help himself.²⁶ In each case, the attitude of humanity not only fails to "correspond to the attitude of God as revealed and active in Jesus Christ, but contradicts it and actively opposes it."²⁷ In this last point we have a link to the claim we noted earlier, to the effect that human sin is essentially opposition to the grace of God (see premise (10) above).

In his discussion of each aspect of pride, Barth reflects on the "wisdom of the serpent" of Gen. 3 as it relates to the various errors and delusions concerning himself and God in which man becomes entangled in his pride.²⁸ The speech of the serpent, Barth tells us, is "an interpretation of human existence... [as] formally autonomous, self-governing and self-sufficient."²⁹ It involves an appeal to man to realize his need "to be enlightened and to come of age," to take the necessary step toward his human development from which the limit set

²⁶ These four treatments of pride begin on pages 418, 432, 445 and 458 of *CD IV/1*, respectively.

²⁷ *CD IV/1*, 418.

²⁸ In his exegetical excursion on the incident of the golden calf in Ex. 32 Barth suggests that the account of the fall of man in Gen. 3 is itself hermeneutically controlled by the transgression of Israel which marks the beginning of the chosen people of God. See *CD IV/1*, 427. "It is quite understandable that the tradition which viewed the beginning of the history of Israel in this way – as indelibly blotted in this way – should only be able to view the beginning of the whole race, of history, as it is, in fact, viewed in Gen. 3." Seeing the essence of sin - man's desire to be God – as manifested in the Ex. 32 account depends on agreeing with Barth that the calf represents the people of Israel itself, taken to be the true form of Yahweh. Without going into the validity of this interpretive move, we can simply note the great depth and vast spread of the roots of this idea of sin as Barth claims to find it in the biblical narrative at large, and as expressed paradigmatically in Gen. 3.

²⁹ *CD IV/1*, 420.

for him by God could only hold him back, to undergo emancipation and “exaltation from servant to lord.”³⁰ This autonomy, enlightenment and coming of age that man desires in desiring the knowledge of good and evil, can be summed up by saying that man desires to judge himself and others rather than submitting to God’s judgment.³¹ Desiring to take the place of God in this way, man plays at the role of judge which in reality he has no capacity to fill.³² Barth admits that discerning between good and evil is obviously necessary, but adamantly refuses to allow that this decision is up to human beings. Only God can know and decide and judge with regard to good and evil themselves; man’s good consists in accepting God’s knowledge and decision and judgment. Human beings simply do not have the ability to do this. The reality of the situation, according to Barth, is that

[i]t is an unleashing of evil when the man to whom it does not belong to distinguish evil from good and good from evil, who is not asked to do so, who cannot, who is prevented and forbidden, still wants to be the man who can and pretends that he is this strong man. The truth is that when man thinks that he can hold the front against the devil in his own strength and by his own invention and intention, the devil has already gained his point.

This should suffice as a presentation of the textual evidence for premise (15) in Barth.

³⁰ *CD IV/1*, 434-35.

³¹ We can supplement Barth’s emphasis on the fact that what motivates the desire for good and evil is the desire to judge oneself and others by referring to two other places in *CD* where Barth takes up the same theme. The first is in *II/2* in his discussion of the command of God as the decision of God. There Barth depicts legitimate ethical self-examination as the preparation for the encounter with God’s decision as to our good or evil as it comes to them in the command of God, as opposed to the arrogant human attempt to judge themselves. In this legitimate self-examination, human beings “know that God alone is their Judge and not they themselves, and that because God is their Judge they have every reason to remember Him in all their willing and doing, to keep Him before their minds’ eye, and in their own self-examination continually to move towards their examination by Him” (636). The second comes from his rejection of casuistic ethics on the grounds that such an approach involves the moralist’s wishing “to set himself on God’s throne, to distinguish good and evil, and always to judge things as the one or the other, not only in relation to others but also to himself. He makes himself lord, king and judge at the place where only God can be this” (*CD III/4*, 10).

³² In this context Barth gives a compelling existential characterization of human life: “To live as a man means to be at some point on the long road from the passionate search for a standard by which to judge our own human affairs and those of others, to the discovery of such a standard, its affirmation in the conviction that it is right, the first attempt to apply it to ourselves and to those around, the first successes and failures of this attempt, the hardening of the certainty that this and this alone is the real standard, the more or less happy or bitter experience of the unavoidable conflict with others and the standards that they have discovered and applied....” This leads to “human life in society” as “the emergence and conflict, the more or less tolerable harmony and conjunction, of the different judges with their different rights, the battle of the ideas formed and the principles affirmed and the standpoints adopted and the various universal or individual systems, in which at bottom no one understands the language of the others because he is too much convinced of the soundness of his own seriously to want to understand the others, in which, therefore, what will be right as thought and spoken by one will be wrong as received by the others. The battle is between what is supposed to be good and what is supposed to be evil, but in this battle all parties – how can it be otherwise? – think that they are the friends of what is good and the enemies of what is evil.”

Barth notes that the evil in wanting to distinguish good and evil in order to avoid evil and do good (that is, the evil in ethics) is a particularly noble variant of the sinful pride of humanity and hence requires, more than the other forms, the light of the Word of God in order to be seen for what it is. And here Barth's exegesis of Gen. 3 becomes particularly pertinent:

There is a definite content to the promise: *Eritis sicut Deus*, and to the concealed invitation to man to become the master of his own destiny. What the serpent has in mind is the establishment of ethics. Its teaching is that, far from there being any real menace in the warning in respect of the tree in the midst of the garden, the eating of the tree will mean that men's eyes are opened, that they will be as God, and that they will therefore be given to know good and evil (v. 5).

[But]...I can only live at unity with myself, and we can only live in fellowship with one another, when I and we subject ourselves to the right which does not dwell in us and is not manifested in us, but which is over me and us as the right of God above, and manifested to me and us only from God, the right of His Word and commandment alone, the sentence and judgment of His Spirit.... When man thinks that his eyes are opened, and therefore that he knows what is good and evil, when man sets himself on the seat of judgment, or even imagines that he can do so, war cannot be prevented but comes irresistibly.³³

That Barth indeed intends to identify the pursuit of the knowledge of good and evil sought in (non-Christologically grounded) ethics with the "evil desire" for such knowledge in Gen. 3 becomes clear when he asserts that it is what people are looking for when they appeal to "the Bible or... the rational nature of man or conscience."³⁴ Barth states here, as he also does in *CD II/2*, that without qualification the human impulse toward ethics, apart from the gospel, is a fundamentally sinful impulse. It is the impulse that we identify, by contrast to the humility of the Son of God who became man, as human pride. This gives us sufficient textual support for premise (18) of the sub-argument we are presently considering.³⁵

The person of sin set aside in the death of Jesus Christ is the man who desires to be his own judge. But the desire to be one's own judge and helper is the heart of pride, the very attitude

³³ *CD IV/1*, 450-51.

³⁴ *CD IV/1*, 449.

³⁵ For the sake of not dragging this out, I have left out the element of pride that involves man attempting to be his own helper instead of allowing himself to be helped by God (see *CD IV/1*, 464).

of the person of sin who opposes and contradicts the grace of God. This attitude is precisely what motivates the search for the knowledge of good and evil that constitutes the discipline of ethics, when practiced apart from a Christological basis in the answer to the ethical question already given in the gospel of God's grace. We conclude this section by pointing out that for Barth, just as the person of sin was judged and set aside in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, so his sinful actions are also set aside. They, like he himself, can no longer exist as such except as a shadow, an impossible possibility. Since ethics apart from the grace of God in Jesus Christ coincide with the biblical conception of sin, this sort of ethics has, therefore, been set aside and can persist only in this shadowy and unreal form. Reality, and hence real ethics, are to be found in Christ. But in Christ ethics have a completely different character from what was seen as ethics apart from Christ. This character of Barth's ethics as he derives it from the Christological basis on which he sees it resting will be our theme toward the end of the present chapter.

The Negative Argument Formulated: Any Other Foundation is Equivalent to Sin

Having examined some of the key places at which the premises involved in Barth's negative argument for the Christological foundation of ethics, we can now present the argument in a clear and concise way.

- (1) God has created us to exist as His covenant partners in correspondence to His grace.
- (2) We exist in correspondence to grace by responding to the command of God in such a way that we accept that what God does (in being gracious to us) is right.
- (3) When we attempt to set up and answer the ethical question independently from God, we necessarily evade our responsibility to the grace of God and oppose the grace of God.
- (4) To evade responsibility to the grace of God by setting up and answering the ethical question independently from God is to attempt to take the place of God.

Furthermore,

- (5) Any ethical approach that attempts to raise and answer the ethical question apart from the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ involves an attempt to locate the goodness of our being and action in ourselves rather than in God.
- (6) To locate the goodness of our being and action in ourselves rather than in God is to attempt to take the place of God.

Again,

- (7) We know the essential nature of sin only in the light of the revelation of Jesus Christ, as what has been set aside in His death.
- (8) In view of the revelation of Jesus Christ we know sin as essentially man's pride, self-exaltation and false self-assertion.
- (9) Pride, self-exaltation and self-assertion are distinct ways of characterizing the essential nature of sin.
- (10) The essential nature of sin can be summarized as the desire to be like God, knowing good and evil.
- (11) Any attempt to do ethics apart from the grace of God stems from human pride, self-exaltation and false self-assertion.

So,

- (12) Any approach to ethics that attempts to raise and answer the ethical question apart from the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ involves an attempt to become like God in knowing good and evil. [*from (9)-(11)*]

Thus,

- (13) Any approach to ethics that attempts to raise and answer the ethical question apart from the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ (that is, any non-Christologically-grounded approach to ethics) is inherently sinful (and hence illegitimate). [*from (10), (12)*]

Barth's Positive Argument

The conclusions of the negative and positive arguments are two ways of putting the same point. Where the negative argument concludes that any non-Christologically grounded approach to ethics is fatally flawed, what I am calling Barth's positive argument provides supportive reasons to think that a Christologically-grounded ethics is in fact the genuine

human ethics. Given the interconnectedness of the two arguments, we can afford to let this section be shorter than the last, since many of the key propositions in the positive argument are more or less the converse of premises we've already used to formulate the negative argument.

The Textual Basis of the Positive Argument

We began our demonstration of the textual basis of the negative argument by looking at Barth's general ethics in *CD II/2*, and to this part of his work we return at the outset of our investigation of the textual basis of the positive argument. Recall the truncated version of the positive argument canvassed in the introduction of the present chapter:

- (1) Jesus Christ is the gospel of God's grace.
- (2) The command of God is the imperative force of the gospel.
- (3) The command of God is the basis of ethics.

Therefore,

- (4) Jesus Christ is the basis of ethics. [*from (1)-(3)*]

The textual basis for premises (1)-(3) was already given preceding the earlier presentation of this preliminary version of the argument, so I will not rehearse it again here. What we need, in this section, is a filling out of the meaning of these premises, along with an indication of the other reasons Barth brings to bear in his justification of the positive conclusion that the only legitimate basis of ethics is the person of Jesus Christ.

The first additional premise to consider involves the absolutely radical conditioning of humanity by the Word of God. "Man derives from the grace of God," Barth writes.³⁶ Man is

³⁶ *CD II/2*, 516.

“actually determined by God’s command... altogether orientated by it objectively.”³⁷ The starting point of theological ethics “is that all ethical truth is enclosed in the command of the grace of God – no matter whether this is understood as rational or historical, secular or religious, ecclesiastical or universal ethico-social truth.”³⁸ For this reason theological ethics cannot remain content with speaking only in a particular (Christian) sphere instead of universally, it cannot refrain from laying its claim on all human beings (or rather witnessing to the claim that objectively is laid on all human beings) by the command of God’s grace. Again,

The grace of Jesus Christ itself and alone is the reality in which from the very start man himself has his reality... In virtue of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – whether he knows and believes it or not – it is simply not true that he belongs to himself and is left to himself, that he is thrown back on himself... He exists because Jesus Christ exists. He exists as a predicate of this Subject, i.e., that which has been decided and is real for man in this Subject is true for him.³⁹

All of these claims are ways of putting the same point, namely that

- (5) Human beings derive, ontologically speaking, from the command of the grace of God.

But given (1) and (2) above, it is a short inferential step to:

- (6) Human being derive, ontologically speaking, from Jesus Christ.

To say what (6) says is not to say anything more than what we find in John 1:3, or Col. 1:16. But what is the *ethical* significance of the fact that we have our very ontological basis in Jesus Christ, the command of the grace of God? Why think, in other words, that the facts about our ontological origin tell us anything interesting about the answer to the ethical question? Barth’s gospel-law thesis (a version of which we have already stated in (2) above) and his linking of the concepts of permission and obligation, help us to see how the distinctive origin we have in the Word of God speaks to what we ought to do.

³⁷ CD II/2, 523.

³⁸ CD II/2, 527.

³⁹ CD II/2, 539.

In his discussion of the basis of the command of God, Barth rejects several possible ways of understanding what it is that gives that command its imperative force,⁴⁰ in favour of his own distinctive understanding according to which only the command of God, the imperative of grace, is capable of truly claiming man and leading him to realize the good in his life and action (the true aim and the burning concern of ethics as Barth conceives of it).⁴¹ Conversely, any other normative basis will ultimately fail to genuinely claim man and hence will be insufficient as a basis for ethics in the sense that it will not move him toward the realization of the good. The basis of the divine claim is grace. But this divine claim on man is effective – it does in fact lead him to realize the human good in his own life and action. We also noted earlier that for Barth, only God is good, and that the goodness of human being and action derives completely from God, and hence from the Word of God which sanctifies man as it creates in him the response that corresponds to it (that is, as man hears the Word and obeys it).⁴² Man’s origination in the Word of God can, therefore, be seen as two-fold, so that the claim that the reality of our existence can only be found in Christ is ambiguous. His creaturely existence itself, as the presupposition for his life in covenant with God and in eternity, originates in the Word of God. For this reason we can restate (6) as follows:

(6) Human existence derives (ontologically speaking) from the eternal resolve of God to include a human covenant partner in His own Triune life.⁴³

⁴⁰ The claim of God’s command could be seen as based on (a) God’s sheer, overwhelming power, or on (b) man’s original inclination toward the good, or on (c) the fact that God completely satisfies man. But none of these provide the power to truly claim man *as man*, that is, to compel his free decision and subjection to the command.

⁴¹ As discussed in the previous section, ethics as done within the purview of dogmatics, as Barth sees it at least, does not consider the ethical task to be that of discovering or constructing the good, but in hearing it and so receiving it from God as already fulfilled and given, and then asking how one’s life might correspond with it. He makes this point clearly in the following passage: “There are many answers to the question of the good, the question what man should do. If an answer to this question is to be effective, if it is really to call and win and convince, if it is not merely to instruct and interest man but to move him actually to do the good, this does not depend on the earnestness or weight or decisiveness with which it is given. On the contrary, it is only when it has a solid basis that it can be given with earnestness, weight and decisiveness. It is only when it is grounded in such a way that man cannot take up an attitude of reserve towards it – either by appealing to his freedom, or by appealing to his weakness, or above all by finally understanding himself as this answer, in which case the question of the good is certainly solved but no less certainly extinguished” (564).

⁴² In addition to the references listed in support of the same point made earlier on, see also *CD III/4*, 4.

⁴³ See e.g. *CD II/2*, 516.

But man's re-creation by the Holy Spirit also originates in the Word of God received by him in the act of revelation.⁴⁴ When we say, then, that human beings derive from Jesus Christ, noting that

- (7) Jesus Christ is the sum total of the good, that is, the gospel, in which the gracious God turns to man to sanctify him, and effectively does so,

we can see how it is possible to move inferentially from (6) to the further claim, more apparently relevant to ethics:

- (8) Human existence in Jesus Christ, and only in Jesus Christ, is sanctified (good) human existence.

But if the good is given to man in Jesus Christ, in whose reality man finds his own reality as sanctified and good before God, then we have already arrived at our conclusion, namely that Jesus Christ is the only legitimate basis for ethics. For since the good can be found only in Him, and can hence only come to man in Him, there is no other way for man to be good than by turning to and receiving Him, that is, by hearing and responding to Him. Even so, there is still more to say to render more precise our understanding of Barth's reasoning in this context.

I claimed that Barth's view of the relation between obligation and permission also helps us to see how our ontological origination in Jesus Christ speaks to our normative determination. Barth states that "Obligation – the obligation of the real command – means permission.... But... permission – the permission which is the proper inmost form of the divine command – also means obligation."⁴⁵ The obligation imposed on human beings by the command of God has the character of permission because, unlike any other command that confronts human beings, the command of God sets us free to be who we truly are, and hence to escape from

⁴⁴ See the only part of *CD IV/4* that Barth published, where he places the baptism of the Holy Spirit (in which the Word of God generates man as a new creation) at the head and fountain of the Christian life, that is, the life of man in faithfulness to the faithful God, and hence as God's covenant partner. This theme also constitutes the main concern of Barth's earlier work, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life: The Theological Basis of Ethics* (see for instance p. 26).

⁴⁵ *CD II/2*, 602.

slavery to what we truly are not. The command of God, Barth says, finds man “in the position of Adam... the creature whom amid the rest of creation He has determined to be His image” but also as “the sinner who perverted this determination of man by trying to determine himself for equality with God. The grace of God in Jesus Christ is the restoration of the first status and the negation of the second.”⁴⁶ In giving to man this freedom to be who he truly is in Jesus Christ, the command of God simultaneously binds him to this determination, rendering disobedience impossible.⁴⁷ So the command of God imposes obligation in its very granting of permission. This is only to state the gospel-law thesis in a different form. For Barth, the command of God ensures and guarantees our realization of the good, beyond all possible evasion and protestation on our part insofar as it is itself the grace of God in which God gives Himself to us purely out of His own compassion and kindness, the grace which we must ultimately identify with the person of Jesus Christ, who “is the basis on which we may believe in God, the Word in which dwell the light and force to move us to this event.”⁴⁸ Barth’s idea here seems to be that a person cannot truly encounter the reality of God’s love and grace without at the same time, and by that very fact, being moved to accept that love and grace for herself, along with the implication that to freely accept that love and grace is to become obedient to it, that is, to become a person who belongs to God and lives as His covenant partner.

We could make what is basically the same point once again, following Barth’s treatment of the commandment to love in the ethical portion of *CD I/2*, by pointing out that where the essence of good human action consists in love, our love emerges only on the basis of God’s love for us. In that context Barth makes much of 1 John 4:19, “We love because he first

⁴⁶ *CD II/2*, 560.

⁴⁷ “Where can we possibly escape when that decision is the eternal predestination, when it is our election resolved at the beginning of all God’s ways and works, and therefore our only real possibility, over against which there can, of course, be the real impossibility of disobedience, but not a third course” (*CD II/2*, 610).

⁴⁸ *CD II/2*, 557.

loved us.” This is indeed a centrally important section to consider, as it provides a summary of what Barth himself explicitly calls the basic principles of ethics. But because of the prominence I give to this portion of the *Church Dogmatics* in describing the character of a Christologically-based ethics according to Barth, I will not draw out the argument further here. The positive argument, like the negative one before it, is not comprehensive. Nevertheless, as was the case there, it is hoped that here again sufficient contact with Barth’s text has been made to assure the reader of the central place of the positive argument in Barth’s ethical thinking.

The Positive Argument Formulated

- (1) Jesus Christ is the sum total of the good, that is, the gospel of God’s grace.
- (2) The gospel of God’s grace is the turning of the gracious God to man to sanctify him.
- (3) The grace of God claims man, effectively sanctifying man. (The gospel is the form of the law and is inseparable from the law. The permission granted by the gospel places an obligation on us to be what we truly are in Christ. The command of God is the imperative force of the gospel.)

So,

- (4) The command of God is the basis of ethics.

Furthermore,

- (5) Human creaturely existence has its ontological basis in the eternal resolve of God to include a human covenant partner in His own Triune life.

Hence,

- (6) The existence of human beings derives, ontologically speaking, from the command of the grace of God which is identical to Jesus Christ.
- (7) What human beings are in God's eternal determination (covenant partners of God existing in fellowship with God) is normative for human existence. (We should be what God has determined that we are.)

Moreover,

(8) The goodness of human action derives from the goodness of God as the Word of God sanctifies man.

(9) The proper goal of ethics is the realization of the good in human being and action.

So,

(10) Human existence in Jesus Christ (and only in Jesus Christ) is sanctified (good) human existence.

Therefore,

(11) Jesus Christ is the (only) legitimate basis of ethics.

Barth on the Character of a Christologically Grounded Ethics

The enclosure of ethics within dogmatics, which we observed as a feature of Barth's ethics that sets it off from the majority of traditional and contemporary approaches, bears significant connections to another distinctive aspect of Barth's perspective, namely that the one Word of God is both Gospel and Law simultaneously, and in an indissoluble unity. The Gospel takes the form of Law in that the (correct) hearing of it always demands a response of obedience. We have already discussed both the relation of ethics and dogmatics and the relation of gospel and law in previous sections of this chapter. Now, as we turn to the character that a Christologically-grounded ethics must have, in Barth's view, we can begin to observe some of the ways such distinctive theses play out. Consider, to begin, the following

indicative (left column) and imperative (right column) readings of different formulations of the gospel.⁴⁹

- | | |
|--|---|
| (A) God is for us. | (B) We must be the ones God is for. ⁵⁰ |
| (C) God is with us. | (D) We must be the ones God is with. |
| (E) God loves us. | (F) We must be the ones God loves. ⁵¹ |
| (G) God is gracious to us.
grace. ⁵² | (H) We must be the ones who display God's |
| (I) God has taken our place.
taken. | (J) We must be the ones whose place God has |

What enables the inference from the statements on the left side to those on the right is the general principle that we must (or “may”) be what we truly are, along with the recognition that what we are (real or true humanity) is determined by God – the human being created to be God’s covenant partner, the human being as found in the humanity of Jesus Christ who took our place. *The very reason for our existence* is that God determined us to be His covenant partner in Jesus Christ when He determined Himself in eternity to be God as Jesus Christ, the God-man. In His own eternal determination of Himself, God already appropriated humanity into Himself. He then carried out the means of this appropriation in time, in the reconciliation He brought about in the incarnate Son of Man, Jesus Christ in the flesh, crucified and raised again. Since our very existence finds its ultimate source in this eternal decision of God, we can say that to be the faithful and obedient children and people of God is our *ontological ground*. We can, of course, in some sense, refuse to exist as the ones we truly are in Christ, resisting the grace of God. But to do this is to accomplish something Barth calls an “impossible possibility” since it is to choose to be what we really are not. In light of

⁴⁹ The statements that follow are drawn from the various characterizations of grace Barth offers at various points. See, for instance, *CD II/2*, pp. 557-558 for a detailed presentation of the content of the grace of God shown to us by God in Jesus Christ. Here Barth depicts the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as grace – as the unsurpassable and free goodness of God toward us.

⁵⁰ “He is to know and accept the fact that God is for him. He is to live as one whom God is for. Whatever the concrete content of the command of God may be, this is what God will have of man.” (*CD II/2*, 596)

⁵¹ See *CD II/2*, p. 735, for statements of both (D) and (F).

⁵² “What does it mean to be a man now that this decision has been reached by the grace of God? It obviously means to be one who stands and walks and lives and dies within the fact that God is gracious to him, that He has made him His own. It obviously means to be one for whom God has intervened in this way, with whom He has dealt in this way.” (558-59)

all this, we can express the first thing we should say about the character of a Christologically based ethics as Barth sees it in the following proposition:

- (1) Good human life and action is human life and action determined by Jesus Christ, corresponding to the gracious action of God in Jesus Christ.

Premises similar to (1) here appeared already in premises (1) and (2) of the negative argument in the final formulation given of it at the end of the sub-section on Barth's negative argument for the Christological basis of ethics. And we could note that the premise just given here is intrinsically linked, in Barth's thought, with the claims that good human life and action consist in glorifying God, in acknowledging that God is right, in living as the covenant partner we were created by God to be and in being an obedient hearer of the Word of God. Again, good human being and action, for Barth, is human being and action sanctified by the Word of God, namely, Jesus Christ, who justifies and sanctifies us. The activity of making our action good, then, is accomplished primarily by God and not by us. Thus He is (and not "we are") our righteousness and our goodness. God alone is good. Good human action is primarily that which has been done by the human being Jesus Christ who fulfilled the will of God for us, on our behalf, in our place. But rather than include all of these (formal) points again here, I will instead move on to establish the major contours of the content of the character of a Christologically-based ethics as Barth conceives it. Nevertheless, each of the further claims made in this section can be seen as elucidations of (1) in its various forms.

Toward the end of the last section we noted the prominence of the commandment to love in §18, volume I/2, the first place in the *Church Dogmatics* where Barth considers the ethical implications of his dogmatic theology – in this case, the implications of the reality of the event of revelation as it reaches man in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Here, in this "first

and general outline” of theological ethics, Barth (a) identifies the “essence and totality” of the life of the children of God, or the Christian life, or good human conduct, with *love*. But (b) proper human love must be seen as a response to the love of God, which is its basis and in which it is grounded, as Barth explicitly states. And (c) the sum total of the love of God, when this concept is sought in the biblical witness, is the name of Jesus Christ and the event of vicarious self-giving and of the reconciliation of humanity to God that took place in Him. We see immediately and clearly then, from the very first treatment of ethics in the *Church Dogmatics*, the explicit grounding of the whole of ethics in Jesus Christ.

The character of good human action, grounded in the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ as it must be, for Barth, consists in creaturely human love as response to the love of God. The great deal which Barth has to say concerning this human response of love can be summed up in the two guiding concepts, which, taken together, Barth himself calls “*the principle of what we call theological ethics*: the love of God is our only remaining being and the praise of God is our necessary doing.”⁵³ It might appear as though we have just included “love” again along with “praise” under the heading of “love,” and hence as though we are repeating ourselves. But in Barth’s treatment, which derives from his exegesis of the response of the synoptic Jesus to the question concerning the greatest commandment in Mt. 22:37f., Mk. 12:29f. and Lk. 10:27f., “love” refers to “the love of God” and the “praise” or “praise of God” is the fulfillment of the second commandment which is “like” the first and greatest, that is the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself.” We can, then, state the first contentful characterization of a Christologically-based ethics as follows:

- (2) Good human action is the human response to the love of God for us (revealed in Jesus Christ), which manifests in human love for God and for neighbour.

⁵³ CD I/2, 371. My italics.

Barth sees our love for God as the inward aspect of good human being and doing, and the latter, the praise of God, as its outward or social aspect.

For Barth, we are made good (and made or created new) as we receive God's self-revelation in the gospel, in the proper hearing of which we cannot help but to also perform the doing of it. The fact that our love springs (in a sense necessarily)⁵⁴ from our being loved can be seen from both the "address" and the "presupposition" of the first and greatest commandment (see its Markan version), "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord." To hear (genuinely) that God is for us is to be people who are loved and who therefore love God. It is to choose the one Lord who has already chosen us. "The love with which we reply to the love of God for us can begin and grow only when we go beyond what we can claim as our own love, when we recognise that we the unloving are beloved by Him. In other words, it can begin and grow only in the recognition of Jesus Christ and therefore in Jesus Christ Himself."⁵⁵ This explains why Barth claims that love for God amounts to seeking God. The gospel-law thesis is already operative here since the demand made on human beings in the commandment to love is only the demand that they fulfill their own reality as it has graciously been fulfilled for them and given to them in Christ, and therefore that they should truly live.⁵⁶ Correspondingly, the obedience to the command that is demanded has completely the character of freedom.

But love of God "merges into the praise of God" because our love for God as a response to His love for us "is nothing more and does not wish to be anything more than the obedient

⁵⁴ See *CD I/2*, 382.

⁵⁵ *CD I/2*, 384. Elsewhere Barth writes, "The love of God and neighbor cannot be found in man, in the flesh, but only hatred of God and neighbor. The love of God is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit given to us" (*ibid*, 390).

⁵⁶ *CD I/2*, 386. Elsewhere, "as the Second Adam He has assumed our human nature, that He has united it to His divine person, so that our humanity, our existence in this nature, no longer has any particularity of its own, but belongs only to Him.... We cannot, therefore, seek our own being and activity, so far as they still remain to us, in ourselves but only in Him. Strictly speaking, our being and activity as such can only be this seeking" (*ibid*, 391).

erecting of the sign of divine grace,” and we do this in thankfully bearing witness to God’s work, and this bearing witness is identical to loving our neighbour.⁵⁷ In his discussion of the commandment to love the neighbour, Barth argues that this second commandment places a demand on man distinct from the one placed on him by the first commandment, even though in both cases we are dealing with “the one claim of the one God on the whole man.”⁵⁸ It does so because it addresses man in his incomplete condition living in the world that “now is and passes” away, whereas the first commandment addresses him as already complete in Christ by faith, and in the unity he has with Christ who adopted his human nature, as a member of the world which “comes and remains.” Love for the neighbour, then, springs from love for God and serves as a sign of love for God as “the inevitable outward side of that which inwardly is love to God,”⁵⁹ as the children of God seek to live out their faith in the present world.

Barth’s assessment of the biblical concept of ‘neighbour,’ stemming from his somewhat unique exegesis of the Lucan parable of the Good Samaritan, leads him to conclude that we encounter our neighbour firstly as our benefactor, as the bearer of the mercy of God toward us, who have “fallen among thieves and [are] lying helpless by the wayside.”⁶⁰ This neighbourly help, which points me to the mercy of the God who loves me first and whom I therefore love and praise, comes through the Church, that is, through other human beings, because “Jesus Christ... has become a neighbour to individual men who can as such be good neighbours to us, because in them Jesus Christ is present to us, and in hearing them, we hear Him (Lk. 10:16).” Barth’s Christologically-coloured notion of the neighbour carries with it also the aspect of our neighbour as afflicted and in need of help. My neighbour serves me by

⁵⁷ *CD I/2*, 401.

⁵⁸ *CD I/2*, 409.

⁵⁹ *CD I/2*, 412.

⁶⁰ *CD I/2*, 418.

challenging me to accept my own wretchedness and need for help and forgiveness as I see this reflected in *his/her* wretchedness and need, thereby leading me to affirm my utter dependence on the grace and help that can only come to me from Christ, who took on, in His incarnation and in His crucifixion, the actual misery, wretchedness and need of man. For this reason I love my neighbour and come together with him to the “fellowship of sin and misery” under the judgment of God, which points, through this misery, to “the fellowship of grace and forgiveness.”⁶¹

Only after stating all this about our neighbour, Barth says, can we speak, in a way conditioned by what has been said, also of the obligation and responsibility we have to help our neighbour. As always, for Barth the road leads not from Law to Gospel, but from Gospel to Law.⁶² I have been reminded of my own need, and thus have been driven back upon the help of Christ, by my neighbour. But I do not know whether my neighbour is aware of this help of Christ, and so I have an obligation to bear witness to this help which is also available for him. I bear witness not by urging my neighbour to love God (putting her under Law), but by praising God; I “bear witness to my neighbour of the love with which God in Jesus Christ has loved me and him.”⁶³ I bear this witness in words, in which I speak of my own sin and need and experience of help only as a way of “pointing to the help itself,” that is, as “a sign of the grace of God.” So the name of Jesus Christ, spoken in thankful adoration, will be the “theme and centre” of everything I say in this confession or witness, knowing that only God can make this witness efficacious.⁶⁴ But I also have to substantiate my words by a willingness to assist my neighbour concretely, “in the sicknesses, derangements and confusions of his psycho-physical existence,” and by my assistance set up a sign of the real assistance that is

⁶¹ *CD I/2*, 436.

⁶² *CD I/2*, 437-38.

⁶³ *CD I/2*, 440.

⁶⁴ *CD I/2*, 443.

available to him in Jesus Christ.⁶⁵ I substantiate both my words and my deeds by my attitude, which can be described as faith in Jesus Christ, or as the staking of our whole existence on him.

In another unique interpretive twist on the words “as thyself” in the second commandment, Barth asserts that we are commanded to love our neighbour in the full recognition that we ourselves are without love:

For this annihilating ‘as thyself’ invites us to put our trust simply in the fact that the commandment is given us.... The justification of our activity, the acceptability of the little praise we offer to God, the truth of the love we give our neighbour, we really have to leave to God. That we can do so, that as we are commanded to love we are invited to cast upon God all our care in respect of the fulfilling of the commandment is again, in this context, the Gospel within the commandment.⁶⁶

And so we act in obedience to the commandment with confidence and assurance, not in ourselves, but in Jesus Christ, and so our action takes the form of prayer. In our close reading of the first ethical section of the *Church Dogmatics*, we have already come across several major Barthian themes concerning the character of Christologically-grounded ethics. In what remains of the present section, I will state four of these themes explicitly, and indicate points at which they emerge in other parts of the work besides I/2.

- (3) Good human being and action consists in confession, or in bearing witness to God’s grace in Jesus Christ, or in giving praise to God.
- (4) Good human being and action consists in thankfulness, or in gratitude toward God.⁶⁷
- (5) Good human being and action consists in prayer.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ *CD* I/2, 445.

⁶⁶ *CD* I/2, 452.

⁶⁷ “This service, and therefore the blessedness of the elect, consists in gratitude for the self-offering of God. God chooses him in order that there may be gratitude in his life (and therefore life in and by grace). God chooses him in order that his existence may become simply gratitude. That he may achieve this gratitude and be this gratitude in his whole person is the determination of the elect. It is for this that God gives Himself to him in the election of Jesus Christ, in the election of Israel and the Church, in his personal election. He may be grateful. That is the secret of the gracious election of the individual” (*CD* II/2, 413. See also III/2, 166-74; IV/1, 41-4. References taken from McKenny, *Analogy of Grace*, p. 17, note 39).

⁶⁸ *CD* II/2 contains a short, but significant passage on prayer and the faith from which true prayer issues (see p. 763).

In his 1929 lectures later published as *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life*, Barth presents (4) and (5) as two of the three main ethical implications of human life lived in response to the promise of God, that is, in response to the agency of the Holy Spirit considered as the Spirit of God the Redeemer.⁶⁹ In Barth's ethics of creation, the ethical section that concludes his doctrine of creation in *CD III/4*, we find Barth's investigation of the one command of God under its aspect as the command of God the Creator (the partially completed ethics of reconciliation and the projected but unwritten ethics of redemption consider [or would have considered] its aspects as the command of God the Reconciler and God the Redeemer respectively). The first set of these concern the human being's relationship with God, which Barth divides into three parts, covering the Holy Day (the Sabbath), confession and prayer. We have already included the last two of these points in the core propositions concerning the character of a Christologically-grounded ethics based on our reading of *CD I/2*. We can include the last of these in a final proposition:

(6) Good human action is observing the Sabbath by resting from your own work.⁷⁰

Barth places the command of God concerning the Sabbath day, with its rest from work and its joyful and free celebration in this rest, "at the beginning of our investigation of the command of the Creator and therefore at the beginning of special ethics as a whole."⁷¹ In its demand that human beings rest from their own work, it presents the priority of gospel over law in concrete form and serves as the "origin of all other activity."⁷² It points human beings away from what they themselves can accomplish toward what God does and has already

⁶⁹ See pp. 66-7.

⁷⁰ The propositions put on display here remain at a highly general level. If we think of Barth's Christologically-grounded ethics as a building, Christ, the gospel of God, would be the foundation, and propositions (2)-(6) here would compose the floor that rests on the foundation. Proposition (1) more or less asserts the need for any further floors to be securely fixed to the foundation. Barth, of course, in the massive bulk of the *Church Dogmatics*, goes much further than this first floor, even commenting on specific ethical issues like abortion, euthanasia, and the use of contraception. All of the further floors, however (at least insofar as Barth's ethics is consistent), rest on the lower ones, so that the lower floors mark out the general character that any further propositions must reflect, so that it will suffice here to treat only of the first floor.

⁷¹ *CD III/4*, 50.

⁷² *CD III/4*, 51.

done for them and on their behalf. And in doing this, it ensures that all of man's activity, on the six days of work that follow, will be determined by the character of joyful and grateful response to the goodness of God, and that man's whole life, whether on the days of work or on the Sabbath, will glorify God by bearing witness to His grace.

Each of (3)-(6) can be seen as flowing from (2), the ethical imperative to love, which in turn we have presented as the initial concretion of (1), the primary statement of the character a Christologically-based ethics must have, in Barth's view. All of these claims flow ultimately from what Barth sees as the heart of all normativity, namely the grace of God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. All of this goes, once again, to show the extent of the rootedness of Barthian ethics in Christology. In concluding this section, I wish to make one brief response to a common objection to Barthian ethics, to the effect that Barth's ethics remains overly abstract and fails to approach the level of concrete human decision and action. In light of the handful of action-determining principles we have seen emerging in the context of his ethics of creation (and elsewhere), according to which the command of the Creator orders us to keep the Sabbath holy, and to live a life of confession (witness) and prayer (petition), we cannot deny that much has been said already here about what a good human life must include. Obedience to the command of God under these determinations alone would surely result in a human life distinctly different from one lived out apart from them.

I have not here said anything about the further concretions of special ethics, for instance those in Barth's treatment of the command of God the Creator concerning good human action as freedom in fellowship (male and female, parent and child, near and distant neighbour); freedom for life; freedom in limitation. Nor have I said anything about the nature of the "ethical event" in which the concrete command of God is heard in the historical particularity of an individual person or group. For Barth, we can get a sense of the

will of God from covenant history, that is, from the way God has issued commands historically, and it is the task of ethics as subordinated to dogmatics to assist us in achieving this view of covenant history. Once we have this sense, although we can never say in advance with definitive authority what God will command, we will know the domains in which God commands and hence will be able to engage in ethical reflection that leads to the encounter with the concrete, particular command of God. This has to do with the radical self-examination enabled as we let the witness of Scripture to the Word / revelation of God work on us, thoroughly reevaluating all that we think and say in light of this as our norm and standard. A comprehensive treatment of Barth's ethics would have to say much more about these and many other themes. Given the scope of the present thesis, however, I will take it as sufficient to have provided a summary of some of the key features of Barth's Christologically-derived ethics.

Chapter 2: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Christological Foundations of Ethics

Following the same basic structure that served to organize the contents of Chapter 1, the present chapter seeks, following a brief introductory section, to distill the core principles and premises of Bonhoeffer's arguments for the Christological basis of ethics and to display their textual basis. The third section does the same for his arguments concerning the character a Christologically-grounded ethics should take.

Bonhoeffer on the Foundations of Ethics

Since Bonhoeffer concerns himself, in his unfinished *magnum opus*, his *Ethics*, primarily with the issue of the reality of Christ becoming real within creation in concrete human lives, we can trace throughout the work two distinct thematic threads which he treats as ultimately subject to an underlying unity. On the one hand Bonhoeffer expounds his view of the Christ-reality, which serves as the basis or foundation of creation and hence of creaturely human life and hence of ethics. On the other hand he seeks to be faithful to the genuine integrity of created human life, understood not as such, but as reconciled with God in Christ. In this reconciliation between God and the world in Christ, where God took on humanity, we find the unity of the two themes of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*. While always seeking to keep their unity in focus, certain of the manuscripts that make up the *Ethics* nevertheless lay emphasis on the former theme, and others on the latter (while still others seek mainly to make clear the

relatedness of the two themes). In what follows, then, rather than summarizing the *Ethics* according to the current ordering of the manuscripts or by constructing a perhaps more chronologically accurate ordering of the work, I aim to produce an overview of how the two themes span the various manuscripts. In other words, I will be asking of each manuscript in the *Ethics*, “how does the Christological basis of ethics crystallize in Bonhoeffer’s thinking here?” and “what is the character of the ethics Bonhoeffer derives from its Christological basis?” As in my treatment of Barth above, I aim here to provide the reader with a clear textual basis for the arguments concerning the Christological basis of ethics and its required character that I claim to find in Bonhoeffer. I then display these arguments in concise form with numbered premises and conclusions, for the sake of enabling the reader to see the flow of the reasoning at a glance, and to set up for the assessment of the arguments of Barth and Bonhoeffer which I undertake in the final chapter of this essay. The first subsection below considers Bonhoeffer’s arguments in favour of a Christological foundation for ethics; the second concerns the question of what an ethics founded on Christ will look like, in Bonhoeffer’s estimation.

In several places in the *Ethics* manuscripts, Bonhoeffer makes it clear that he believes a Christian ethic must take a stance diametrically opposed to all other approaches to ethics, at least when we restrict the scope of “all other approaches” to those within the Western tradition of that discipline. As we examine his reasons for claiming a radically distinct approach in Christian ethics, we see at the same time reasons for the indispensability of a specifically Christological foundation for ethics. Each of the following three subsections provides the textual basis for a key premise in the positive and negative arguments for a Christologically-based ethics.

Christ as Ultimate Reality: The Reconciliation of God and World

“Christ, Reality, and Good,” opens with the following lines:

Those who wish even to focus on the problem of a Christian ethic are faced with an outrageous demand – from the outset they must give up, as inappropriate to this topic, the very two questions that led them to deal with the ethical problem: ‘How can I be good?’ and ‘How can I do something good?’ Instead they must ask the wholly other, completely different question: what is the will of God? This demand is radical precisely because it presupposes a decision about ultimate reality, that is, a decision of faith.⁷³

Non-Christian ethical approaches tend to presuppose that the self and the world are the ultimate realities, that ethics aims at making the ethical agent good and the world good through her action, and that the main question that needs answering concerns the goodness of the self and its activity. What Bonhoeffer calls a “Christian” ethic, by contrast, presupposes an ultimate reality outside the self and the world (namely, the triune God) in which these other realities are situated. It aims at displaying the reality of God as the ultimate reality and at making this reality to be known as the good. And its primary question concerns the will of God. We can bring out the initial stage of Bonhoeffer’s argument, which lurks within these statements, as follows:

(1) [We know in faith that] God is the ultimate reality.

So,

(2) All created realities, including the self and the world (realities on which ethics typically focuses), exist only within the context of ultimate reality.

Thus,

(3) The self and the world can only be truly understood within the context of God.

(4) The good, which is the primary concern of ethics, depends on the ultimate reality.

So,

(5) A genuine ethics has to deal, first and foremost, with God (and, more specifically, with God’s will). [from (3) and (4)]

⁷³ *DWBE* 6, 47.

But the Christian perspective, for Bonhoeffer, goes further - at this point it would be no different from any generic theistic ethics. The Christian ethic demands that we take seriously the self-revelation of God in the form of Jesus Christ. Following the principle – much used in Thomistic ethics – that *the good* depends on *being* (or *the real*), Bonhoeffer draws the obvious conclusion that ethics, from a Christian perspective, must find its basis in Christ as its only appropriate source and origin. At various points in the *Ethics* Bonhoeffer cites both scripture and theological doctrines in support of the pivotal claim that neither the will of God nor any created reality can be grasped apart from Christ.⁷⁴ So we add to the developing argument the following assertions:

- (6) [In Christian revelation] God (and God's will) is most fully revealed to us in (and is revealed to us as identical to) Jesus Christ.

Thus,

- (7) A genuine ethics has to deal, first and foremost, with Jesus Christ.

But Bonhoeffer also realizes that:

- (8) Ethics concerns the realization or actualization of the good.

All of this leads to his assertion of the following guiding principle of his *Ethics*, formulated in two distinct but related ways:

- (A) The subject matter of a Christian ethic is God's reality revealed in Christ becoming real... among God's creatures.⁷⁵
- (B) The question of the good becomes the question of participating in God's reality revealed in Christ.⁷⁶

Since God is supremely concrete in Christ, an ethics based on Christ will likewise have to be supremely concrete, as opposed to all ethical approaches that deal in abstractions. For Bonhoeffer, neither an ethics of intentions nor an ethics of consequences, and neither an

⁷⁴ See, for instance, *ibid*, 399-400: "Everything has been created through Christ and toward Christ, and everything has its existence only in Christ (Col. 1:15ff.)." Bonhoeffer also describes Christ as "the one through whom and toward whom all created being exists, indeed the one in whom alone all created being finds its origin, essence, and goal" at p. 402, citing Col. 1:16 as support.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*. This quotation continues, "just as the subject matter of doctrinal theology is the truth of God's reality revealed in Christ." Note that Bonhoeffer does not set apart these statements or number them as I have done for the purpose of drawing attention to key moves in his argument.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 50.

ethics focused on the individual nor one focused on society, can avoid the charge of abstraction, for each severs off a part of reality from the whole (e.g. the concrete person in the world), and the whole is the only proper locus of the good. So Bonhoeffer presents another formulation of (B):

(B)' To participate in the indivisible whole of God's reality is the meaning of the Christian question of the good.⁷⁷

Since God became human in Jesus Christ, we find in Jesus Christ the reality of God and the reality of the world together, in such a way that the reality of the world is "borne, accepted, and reconciled in the reality of God," and that the reality of God reveals itself only along with the reality of the world. So we can formulate still another, fuller formulation of (2):

(B)''The good which ethics seeks consists in "participating in the reality of God *and the world* in Jesus Christ today."⁷⁸

The reality of God and the reality of the world, having been reconciled in Christ, are now inseparable. This implies, Bonhoeffer argues, that ethical approaches that divide reality into two realms (e.g. profane/sacred; nature/grace; worldly/spiritual; rational/revelational) – the dominant approach historically, though, he argues, not that of scripture or of the Reformation – are fundamentally flawed. Since the whole of the world is accepted by God in Christ and finds its reality only in the reality of Christ, there can be no genuine autonomy of the world; but neither can there be any autonomous (non- or anti-worldly) Christianity. True Christianity is worldly, and true worldliness is Christian.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Ibid, 53. The inference Bonhoeffer draws from the fact that reality is one in Christ to the claim that "the [human] person who belongs to this Christ-reality is also a whole" (p. 62) appears to rest on an implicit idea of human beings as created in the *imago Dei*.

⁷⁸ Ibid. My italics.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 61. A related principle to which Bonhoeffer frequently appeals, states that in the incarnation, God took on bodily the whole of humanity (and not only an individual instance of the human nature). See, for instance, p. 67: "in the body of Christ all humanity is accepted, included, and borne." This implies, among other things, that the world already, objectively speaking, belongs to Christ. Following Bonhoeffer's train of thought, we have to admit the Christian ethics takes a very different approach to the whole ethical domain. But that is only to admit the hypothetical claim that if you want a Christian ethics, it will have to proceed in such a way. Bonhoeffer, of course, coming from a Christian standpoint, wants to say more, since from that standpoint, the whole world stands under the determination of Christ, by whom and for whom it was made. More on this in the assessment in Chapter Three.

What has been said so far indicates already some potent reasons for seeing a Christian approach to ethics as irreducibly unique vis-à-vis other ethics. But to complete the contribution of the first *Ethics* manuscript to the argument, we should make one further observation. Bonhoeffer, like Barth, sees the will of God as *already fulfilled* in Jesus Christ. For this reason, our participation in the will of God is a participating in something already fulfilled. What, then, we have to ask, remains for other human beings to do? Bonhoeffer writes,

[T]o partake in the reality of the fulfilled will of God... is possible only because of the fact that even I myself am already included in the fulfillment of the will of God in Christ, which means that I have been reconciled to God. The question of the will of God is not asking about something hidden or unfulfilled, but about what has been revealed and fulfilled. It remains, however, a genuine question insofar as I myself, together with the world around me, am placed into this question by the answer given by the revelation and fulfillment.⁸⁰

A natural way of thinking about the will of God is to imagine God making known what he wants of us in the form of directives, and ourselves as obeying those directives. Bonhoeffer, like Barth, clearly thinks of the matter differently. On the one hand, we are called to participate in the already-fulfilled will of God, and hence there is something for us to do. But on the other hand, this “doing” of ours turns out to be relatively passive. We participate in the already-fulfilled will of God through faith in Jesus Christ. And this faith is “the single source of all good.”⁸¹ In this faith and in this participation, the reality of God revealed in

⁸⁰ Ibid, 74.

⁸¹ Ibid, 75. A logical progression related to this last point unites the next few manuscripts, the details of which cannot detain us here as they develop the character of a Christologically-based ethics rather than its foundation, which is our present concern. I will be referring to “Ethics as Formation” again in a later section. Here is the gist of the train of thought that links these manuscripts: Having identified the central concern of a Christian ethic as participation in God’s reality revealed in Christ, Bonhoeffer considers, in “Ethics as Formation,” *how* the “form” of Jesus Christ takes form in the world, “forming” concrete human life according to three aspects of the form of Jesus Christ – the incarnation, the crucifixion and the resurrection. But (“Heritage and Decay”) the Western peoples have fallen away from the form of Christ which once constituted their unity and have exchanged this unity for “Western godlessness,” an ultimately nihilistic “religion of enmity toward God” that manifests in both non-Christian and also numerous ‘Christian’ forms, and that deifies and worships humanity, while at the same time showing itself to be violently anti-human (122-23). Accordingly, Bonhoeffer (in “Guilt, Justification, Renewal”) issues a call to the West to turn back to Christ by acknowledging its guilt toward Him. Such repentance is a crucial part of the answer to the question of how the form of Christ can be formed among us today, and hence to the question of Western renewal. Part of the theological basis for Bonhoeffer’s belief that “[f]ree confession of guilt is... the form of Jesus Christ breaking through in the church,” lies in the second aspect

Christ, becomes real again and again in the world. There are clear echoes here of a Barthian prioritization of gospel over law, and of the true imperative force of ethics as emerging from the grace of God revealed in Christ.

Christ as Origin, Essence, and Goal of Life

In his second draft of “History and Good,”⁸² Bonhoeffer again opposes any ethics that abstracts from real human life, which includes its historical boundness, its tensions and unresolved contradictions, and its ambiguity. He then defines “life,” including my own and our daily life, as identical to Christ:

Ever since Jesus Christ said of himself, “I am the life” (John 14:6; 11:27), no Christian thinking or indeed philosophical reflection can any longer ignore this claim and the reality it contains. This statement of Jesus himself declares every attempt to formulate the essence of life in itself as futile and doomed from the start.⁸³

The saying of Jesus binds every thought about life to his own person. I am the life. No question about life can reach behind this “I am.” The question of what life is changes here into the answer of *who* life is. Life is not a thing, an essence, or a concept, but a person - more specifically, a particular and unique person. This particular and unique person is life, not in possessing life among other attributes, but as an I, the I of Jesus.⁸⁴

In this identification we find another crucial premise in Bonhoeffer’s argument for the Christological foundation of ethics, and so, following our practice in the previous subsection, we set it apart:

(9) Our life is identical to the person of Jesus Christ.

of his earlier threefold account of the formation of Christ in human beings. For “[o]nly as judged by Christ can humanity that has fallen away exist before Christ” (142).

⁸² Bonhoeffer wrote two versions of “History and Good,” the second of which incorporated, reworked, and restructured material from the first, but went unfinished and hence left out at least one significant section. I make use mainly of the second draft, but with reference to parts of the first (especially the discussion of love and its relationship to responsibility) which Bonhoeffer would likely have eventually incorporated into the second.

⁸³ Ibid, 249. Bonhoeffer also refers to Phil. 1:21; Col. 3:4 as providing further biblical textual support for these claims.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 250.

A further identification follows this one, which can be seen as following from previous statements (in particular, from (4), (6) and (9)), but which also takes on a unique formulation here:

(10) The good is “life as it is in reality, that is, in its origin, essence and goal,” namely Jesus Christ.⁸⁵

In virtue of (9) and (10), Bonhoeffer indicates that

(11) Jesus Christ is the measure (evaluative standard) of human life and action.⁸⁶

We exist as persons, he says, in encounter with Jesus Christ and with others. In encounter with Christ, the word of God addresses us (the whole of our life) in Christ and requires our (likewise complete) answer, or response. And it is the life “lived in answer to the life of Jesus Christ [which]... we call ‘responsibility.’”⁸⁷ Bonhoeffer’s identification with Christ as our life thus serves as the basis for his ensuing discussion of responsible action – one of the key notions of ethics as he develops it. Since we will be looking at the character of his ethics in the next section, it will be enough here to indicate in a preliminary way the connection between this notion and its Christological foundation.

Although we will look at “God’s Love and the Disintegration of the World,” in the next subsection, for the sake of holding together the premises supporting the positive argument for the Christological basis of ethics, I include here Bonhoeffer’s explication of the biblical concept of love in that manuscript. Love, he writes, is “the decisive word that distinguishes the human being in disunion from the human being in the state of origin. Without this ‘love’

⁸⁵ Ibid, 253. Further, “[e]verything that actually exists receives from [him]... both its ultimate foundation and its ultimate negation, its justification and its ultimate contradiction, its ultimate Yes and its ultimate No.” In identifying life, the good, and reality itself with Christ, Bonhoeffer asserts that reality ultimately has a personal structure. This point is reflected in his comment on the “world of things,” which, he says, “receives its full freedom and depth only where it is seen as oriented toward the world of persons” (260). As the editors point out, the formula itself is implicitly Trinitarian, pointing to “God the Creator, the incarnate Christ who is truly human, and the Holy Spirit who consummates eschatological redemption” (p. 251).

⁸⁶ We might have also added here this piece of reasoning, also present in Bonhoeffer: The good is to be in accordance with reality; Jesus Christ is the ultimate reality; so, “[g]ood is the action that is in accordance with the reality of Jesus Christ; action in accordance with Christ is action in accord with reality” (228-29; see also 231).

⁸⁷ Ibid, 254.

everything disintegrates and is unacceptable; in this love everything is integrated, united, and pleasing to God.⁸⁸ The biblical concept of love cannot be drawn from any common or general conceptions of love. Instead, it has to be defined strictly in terms of its irremediably particular expression in God. Since God is love, love can only be known from God;⁸⁹ since God is revealed in the concrete, historical person of Jesus Christ, who is the “incarnate love of God for human beings,” we know love only from looking to Him.⁹⁰ The love revealed as Jesus Christ, in whom all genuine love participates, is none other than “the reconciliation of human beings with God in Jesus Christ. The disunion... of human beings from God, from other human beings, from the world, and from themselves has ended. Their origin has once again been given back to them as a gift.”⁹¹ Love is thus through and through an activity of God. Human love for God and for other human beings rests completely on our being loved by God, and indeed is nothing but our reception of love from God. “[I]t is this love of God and none other with which human beings love God and neighbor.” The converse of this is that since God’s love for us embraces us “as whole human beings,” it embraces also all of our thinking and doing, so that these occur within the scope of God’s love.⁹² Life within the origin, the ultimate reality, and life within the reconciliation, should all be identified as life within the love of God, which is Jesus Christ. All good human action “springs from God’s love that became human.”⁹³ So we express the following premise:

(12) Action and life that spring from the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ is the distinguishing mark of a person who has regained unity with the origin.

Having made use of the term “the origin” here already, it will be helpful now to look at its significance in greater depth.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 332.

⁸⁹ Here Bonhoeffer draws his biblical textual basis primarily from the Johannine gospel and first epistle.

⁹⁰ “Love is defined here ... as the utterly unique event of Jesus Christ giving up his life for us” (ibid, 334-35; see also “History and Good I,” p. 232).

⁹¹ Ibid, 335-36.

⁹² Ibid, 337-38. Unfortunately Bonhoeffer did not complete this manuscript, nor fully developed this last train of thought, which bears marked similarities to Barth’s treatment of love in the ethical section in *CD I/2*.

⁹³ Ibid, 241. Good human action thus manifests as vicarious representative action and willingness to become guilty, as we will see in the following section.

Christ as Life in Union with the Origin

The third manuscript of particularly poignant relevance to the arguments for the Christological basis of ethics in Bonhoeffer bears the title: “God’s Love and the Disintegration of the World.” Here Bonhoeffer draws significantly from his exegetical work on Genesis 1-3 in *Creation and Fall*, and comes closest to stating arguments that parallel those we found in Barth for the radical difference of a faithfully Christian ethics to all other ethical approaches. Consider the opening lines:

The knowledge of good and evil appears to be the goal of all ethical reflection. The first task of Christian ethics is to supersede that knowledge. This attack on the presuppositions of all other ethics is so unique that it is questionable whether it even makes sense to speak of Christian ethics at all. If it is nevertheless done, then this can only mean that Christian ethics claims to articulate the origin of the whole ethical enterprise, and thus to be considered an ethic only as the critique of all ethics.⁹⁴

The primary reason Bonhoeffer gives, in this context, for the radical uniqueness of a Christian approach, concerns the nature of the knowledge of good and evil and the state of human beings who define themselves by it:

For Christian ethics, the mere possibility of knowing about good and evil is already a falling away from the origin [*Ursprung*]. Living in the origin, human beings know nothing but God alone.... they know everything only in God, and God in all things. Knowledge about good and evil points to the prior disunion and estrangement... from this origin....

In knowing about good and evil, human beings understand themselves not within the reality of being defined by the origin, but from their own possibilities, namely, to be either good or evil. They now know themselves beside and outside of God, which means they now know nothing but themselves, and God not at all.... The knowledge of good and evil is thus disunion with God. Human beings can know about good and evil only in opposition to God.⁹⁵

These claims clearly rest on, or at least reflect, a particular understanding of the Eden narrative. Bonhoeffer identifies Adam and Eve’s attempted grasping of equality with God via the knowledge of good and evil with the impulse in “ethical man” to judge and

⁹⁴ Ibid, 299-300.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 300.

determine for himself what is good and evil in his conduct, and links both of these to his notion of God as “the origin.”

Corresponding to these negative concepts, Bonhoeffer offers a sense of what human life, properly grounded in the origin, would have been like (before the fall), and could still be like now (in Christ): In the origin, human beings know “only God who is good to them and... everything [else] in God.” They “gladly accept... the choice and election of God” rather than attempting to “choose on their own and thus be the origin of election.”⁹⁶ Since, however, life itself

flows out of God’s choice... [h]uman beings who know about good and evil in opposition to God, against their origin, through their own godless choice, and who understand themselves within the framework of their own split possibilities, are separated from the unifying and reconciling life in God and have been handed over to death.⁹⁷

As is the case with the similar views we found in Barth, much rests here on the legitimacy and force of the interpretation of Genesis 2 and 3. But that question will have to wait until the third chapter. Here, however, we can trace out the salient features of the condition of the human being in the state of disunion resulting from the knowledge of good and evil, and contrast this with Bonhoeffer’s account of the human being and human life “within the origin.” Bonhoeffer characterizes the “good” of a life apart from the origin, in which human beings have functionally taken the place of God as source of good and evil, as consisting in “the unity of human beings with themselves,” and in self-knowledge rather than knowledge of God.⁹⁸ Because self-knowledge essentially involves “establishing the relation to oneself” it also essentially involves disunity, and as such it manifests in all sorts of disunities – “everything splits apart – is and ought, life and law, knowing and doing, idea and reality,

⁹⁶ Ibid, 302.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 302.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 308. This condition manifests, interestingly, in the call of conscience, which “only makes explicit this internal disunity of human beings who are already in disunion with their origin. Conscience is the voice of fallen life that seeks to preserve unity at least within itself.”

reason and instinct, duty and inclination, intention and benefit, necessity and freedom.” This fragmented condition differs markedly from life within “the rediscovered unity” with the origin proclaimed in the New Testament, in which none of these tensions hinder the freedom of human action any longer.

We need to step back at this point and formulate the assertions that emerge here, as they fit into the argument we have been tracing.

(13) Living in union with the origin, human beings know God and all other things (including themselves) in God.

(14) Knowing good and evil involves understanding oneself independently from God, exclusively in terms of one’s own possibilities (to be good or evil).

(15) Human beings in a state of knowing good and evil attempt to usurp the place of God as the source of good and evil.

(16) Human beings in a state of knowing good and evil seek to replace the genuine good with the false good of self-knowledge and self-unity apart from the origin.

Therefore,

(17) The knowledge of good and evil is only possible in a state of disunion from the origin and in opposition to God, or (in other words) in a state identifiable as death.

(14), (15) and (16) comprise a conductive argument for the conclusion expressed by (17). The person who accepts (17) however, now faces the problem of trying to explain how a person could even live, in the daily need to evaluate, choose, judge and decide, all of which seem to entail the use of some standard of good and evil. Even while denouncing all knowing and judging that take place apart from the origin, Bonhoeffer affirms a legitimate and biblically grounded mode of knowing, judging and self-examining that takes place *within* the origin, or as reconciled with God in Christ. This, he says, will involve judging “by not judging” and knowing “by not knowing good and evil.” It will be “a judgment of reconciliation and not of disunion.”⁹⁹ To know Jesus Christ, Bonhoeffer says, is to know the will of God, and in

⁹⁹ Ibid, 316.

knowing the will of God – in knowing Jesus only – we no longer know or judge our own goodness.¹⁰⁰ We know the will of God no longer by our “own means” but as “those who already live in the unity of the will of God because the will of God has already been carried out in their lives.”¹⁰¹ Moral reasoning, if we may still call it that, proceeds in light of the union with God given in Jesus Christ, taking this as given. And yet, Bonhoeffer assures us, it still amounts to reasoning – “the entire array of human [cognitive] abilities will be employed” – and remains directed at concrete situations in life along with their various possibilities and consequences.¹⁰² What makes the difference is the faith and confidence that God will make known His will and ensure its realization. For Jesus Christ is now our sole criterion of judgment, having taken the place of our own knowledge of good and evil so that “[o]ur self-examination... consist[s] precisely in surrendering ourselves completely to the judgment of Jesus Christ.”¹⁰³ From this we can fairly straightforwardly derive the conclusion that

(18) All legitimate moral reasoning involves reasoning from the origin (Jesus Christ) as starting point, and the use of the origin as evaluative standard.

There could hardly be a clearer way of stating that the foundations of any legitimate ethics are to be found in Jesus Christ.

¹⁰⁰ Bonhoeffer makes a similar point in his discussion of the sixth beatitude in Discipleship: “Who is pure in heart? Only those who have completely given their hearts to Jesus, so that he alone rules in them. Only those who do not stain their hearts with their own evil, but also not with their own good. A pure heart is the simple heart of a child, who does not know about good and evil, the heart of Adam before the fall, the heart in which the will of Jesus rules instead of one’s own conscience. Those who renounce their own good and evil, their own heart, who are contrite and depend solely on Jesus, have purity of heart through the word of Jesus. Purity of heart here stands in contrast to all external purity, which includes even purity of a well-meaning state of mind. A pure heart is pure of good and evil; it belongs entirely and undivided to Christ; it looks only to him, who goes on ahead. Those alone will see God who in this life have looked only to Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Their hearts are free of defiling images; they are not pulled back and forth by the various wishes and intentions of their own. Their hearts are fully absorbed in seeing God. They will see God whose hearts mirror the image of Jesus Christ” (*DBWE* 4, 107-108).

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 322.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 323.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 325.

Bonhoeffer's Arguments for the Christological Basis of Ethics

Having walked through the texts from which the premises for Bonhoeffer's argument for the Christological basis of ethics emerge, we can now state the complete argument in a concise form, keeping in mind its textual basis. As was done in the first chapter on Barth, I present the arguments here using the premises derived from the texts, modifying things only to the extent necessary to see more clearly their relation to the conclusions.¹⁰⁴ I present Bonhoeffer's reasoning this way for the purpose of clarity, reserving comments and evaluation for the final chapter, where the combined force of Barth's and Bonhoeffer's reasoning will be taken up together. Whereas in the chapter on Barth I found it expedient to include distinct sections on the positive and negative arguments and their corresponding textual bases, in treating Bonhoeffer I have found that the positive and negative arguments emerge more organically from the set of propositions we have extracted from his texts. Presenting Bonhoeffer in this way also allows me to conserve some space for the next chapter.

The Positive Argument:

(1) [We know in faith that] God is the ultimate reality.

So,

(2) All created realities, including the self and the world (realities on which ethics typically focuses), exist only within the context of ultimate reality.

¹⁰⁴ I have modified the numbering and ordering of the propositions that make up the negative argument much more extensively than those composing the positive argument.

Thus,

- (3) The self and the world can only be truly understood within the context of God.
- (4) The good, which is the primary concern of ethics, depends on the ultimate reality.

So,

- (5) A genuine ethics has to deal, first and foremost, with God (and, more specifically, with God's will). [from (3) and (4)]
- (6) [In Christian revelation] God (and God's will) is most fully revealed to us in (and is revealed to us as identical to) Jesus Christ.

Thus,

- (7) A genuine ethics has to deal, first and foremost, with Jesus Christ.
- (8) Ethics concerns the realization or actualization of the good.

Therefore,

- A. The subject matter of a Christian ethic is God's reality revealed in Christ becoming real... among God's creatures.
- B'. The good which ethics seeks consists in "participating in the reality of God *and the world* in Jesus Christ today."

Furthermore,

- (9) Our life is identical to the person of Jesus Christ.
- (10) The good is "life as it is in reality, that is, in its origin, essence and goal," namely Jesus Christ. [from (4), (6) and (9)]
- (11) Action and life that spring from the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ is the distinguishing mark of a person who has regained unity with the origin.

Therefore,

- (12) Jesus Christ is the measure (evaluative standard) of human life and action. [from (9), (10), and (11)]¹⁰⁵

Therefore,

- (13) The person of Jesus Christ is the basis of any legitimate ethics. [from (B') and (11)]

¹⁰⁵ I have here switched the order of propositions (11) and (12) from the previous section to present more clearly the directionality of the reasoning.

The Negative Argument:

- (1) Living in union with the origin, human beings know God and all other things (including themselves) in God.
- (2) Action and life that spring from the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ is the distinguishing mark of a person who has regained unity with the origin.

So,

- (3) All legitimate moral reasoning involves reasoning from the origin (Jesus Christ) as starting point, and the use of the origin as evaluative standard [from (1) and (2)].

Furthermore,

- (4) Knowing good and evil involves understanding oneself independently from God, exclusively in terms of one's own possibilities (to be good or evil).
- (5) Human beings in a state of knowing good and evil attempt to usurp the place of God as the source of good and evil.
- (6) Human beings in a state of knowing good and evil seek to replace the genuine good with the false good of self-knowledge and self-unity apart from the origin.

So,

- (7) The knowledge of good and evil is only possible in a state of disunion from the origin and in opposition to God, or (in other words) in a state identifiable as (spiritual) death. [from (4)-(6)]

But,

- (8) All non-Christian approaches to ethics attempt to establish a position in which the human being possesses and can apply the knowledge of good and evil.

It follows that,

- (9) All non-Christian approaches to ethics essentially involve the human person in disunion from the origin and hence from the true good of human life, and hence in spiritual death. [from (7) and (8)]

Therefore,

- (10) No non-Christian approach to ethics can be considered as legitimate. [from (3) and (9)]¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ We could add to this the following complementary sub-argument based on the relationship of judging to the knowledge of good and evil:

Any attempt to base an ethic on knowledge of good and evil independent of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ is equivalent to sin, or in other words, intrinsically misguided and disordered. A major part of the reason for this conclusion is that thinking from the knowledge of good and evil essentially involves judging. Judging is always an impediment to doing. But doing the will of God is the only appropriate human response to God. So, those who think

The Character of a Christologically-Based Ethics in

Bonhoeffer

Having explicated Bonhoeffer's arguments, one positive and one negative, for the Christological basis of ethics, I turn in this section to the consideration of the general contours he believes an ethics grounded in such a way should have, and the arguments he presents to this effect. As I was unable to do with Barth, so here again with Bonhoeffer I will not be able to discuss all the details of the character of ethics, but will limit myself to the claims that derive immediately from the Christological foundations laid down in the argument presented in the previous section. In the following subsections the phrases "ethical action," "ethical life" or "good human life" always denote *genuine* ethical action and life, as Bonhoeffer sees it, and hence Christian ethical action and life. The interest of this section being to display the overall character of an ethics based on Christological foundations as it exists in Bonhoeffer's thought, it only makes sense to exclude his discussions of illegitimate ethics, except where such discussion remains absolutely necessary as a foil to the real deal. Following the same pattern as the previous section, the first of the following subsections contains my derivation of the premises of the argument from Bonhoeffer's text, and the second displays the argument itself in concise form. Each subsection provides at least one of the "immediately derivative claims," the totality of which, taken together with the equivalent

apart from the origin can never do what is objectively good (the will of God). By contrast, genuine ethical action is action that springs from the recovered unity with God given in the reconciliation of the world with God in Jesus Christ.

claims from Barth, will constitute the subject matter for the theological assessment in Chapter 3.¹⁰⁷

Creaturely Human Life as Established in Christ: The Texts

I begin by making a brief return to the second of the *Ethics* manuscripts, “Ethics as Formation,” which provides the general perspective from which to view the character of ethics in Bonhoeffer’s thought. As we saw toward the beginning of the last section, the concern of a genuine ethics – an ethics in accord with ultimate reality – is with God’s reality revealed in Christ becoming real... among God’s creatures, and the ethical good is to participate in the reality of God *and the world* in Jesus Christ today. One can put this point in somewhat different words: The human good amounts to being formed by the form of Jesus Christ. In “Ethics as Formation” Bonhoeffer discusses how such formation occurs, according to the three central aspects of the form of Christ. And in “The Concrete Commandment and the Divine Mandates,” Bonhoeffer reinforces and expands on these ideas. I derive the following propositions from a combination of these separate discussions of the form of Christ.

¹⁰⁷ What I’m trying to get at by calling these “immediately derivative claims” is a way of pointing to the “first-level” statements derived from the Christological base that express the general character of the sort of ethics B and B see as rooted in their Christology. I am aware that in seeking to elucidate the “guiding principles” or “immediately derivative claims” that shape the ethical “systems” of Barth and Bonhoeffer, I run the risk of imposing a structure onto their thought which neither thinker intended it to possess. I say this especially in light of each theologian’s explicit disavowal of “system” and/or “principles.” For instance, Bonhoeffer describes the person who lets simplicity – keeping “in sight only the single truth of God” - become wisdom for her as a person [n]ot fettered by principles but bound by love for God, this person is liberated from the problems and conflicts of ethical decision... This person belongs to God and to God’s will alone.... able, free and unconstrained, to see the reality of the world.

And he continues,

Wise people know the limited receptivity of reality for principles, because they know that reality is not built on principles, but rests on the living, creating God. So they also know that reality can be helped neither by the purest principles nor with the best will, but only by the living God. Principles are only tools in the hands of God; they will soon be thrown away when they are no longer useful. (*Ethics*, 81-2).

The fact of the *incarnation* – that God, in love for human beings became a real human being, taking on the whole of humanity bodily,¹⁰⁸ revealing that He exists not for his own sake but for us – implies, Bonhoeffer says, the following three points:

- (1) God loves and accepts us as real human beings (rather than as some ideal or idolized super-humanity) and wills that we should exist as such.
- (2) All judgment and accusation and contempt by one human being toward another is excluded.¹⁰⁹
- (3) “To live as a human being before God, in the light of God’s becoming human, can only mean to be there not for oneself, but for God and for other human beings.”¹¹⁰

The fact that God judged Jesus Christ – and all of humanity in Him – on the cross implies three further claims:

- (4) We are now able to stand before and have peace with God, who has born all our “pain, lowliness, failure, poverty, loneliness and despair in the cross of Christ,”
- (5) We are to be more concerned with accepting God’s judgment (acknowledging that God is in the right over us) than with success or the lack thereof.
- (6) We have been set free “to live before God... in genuine worldliness... [having] overcome the divisions, tensions, and conflicts between the ‘Christian’ and the ‘worldly.’”¹¹¹

The fact that God awakened Jesus to new life demonstrates a final triumvirate of statements:

- (7) that death has been broken for us so that we look for eternity not in this world but from beyond death,
- (8) that we live beyond sin as new human beings in Christ (even if this life is “hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:2)), even as we inhabit a world of sin.¹¹²
- (9) And that “[a]ll worldly powers are subject to and bound to serve Christ [as exalted Lord], each in its own way.”¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 85, 88, 91. See also p. 67. The editors note that Bonhoeffer conceives the incarnation along the lines of the patristic doctrine of *anhypostasia*, “according to which in the incarnation God took on human nature as such, and not only the nature of an individual human being” (see footnote 90, p. 97). The relevant German term for the doctrine in question is *annahmen*.

¹⁰⁹ Both tendencies were evident in Nazi Germany; on the one hand Hitler was exalted to the status of a god, while he himself despised the lives of so many of his fellow human beings.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 400.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid, 92.

¹¹³ Ibid, 401.

It is worth noting, especially in light of Barth's concerns about the insufficiently explicit dogmatic grounding of Bonhoeffer's ethics (to be discussed in Chapter Three), the way Bonhoeffer here makes obvious effort to link these claims to major Christological doctrines (the incarnation, the crucifixion, the resurrection). The implications Bonhoeffer draws from the form of Christ, displayed in propositions (1)-(9) above, provide something of an overview of the "immediately derivative claims" to be covered at greater length in what follows.

Ethical Action is Caring for the Penultimate for the Sake of the Ultimate

A major concern of the *Ethics* is to find a basis for respecting the integrity of the created, but fallen, world (which God "so loved") and of human life within it. We have already seen this tendency of thought in the emphasis Bonhoeffer lays on the fact that the entirety of the world, even in its godlessness, has been reconciled to God in Christ. It also finds expression in his claim that "the penultimate must be preserved for the sake of the ultimate."¹¹⁴ In other words, whatever serves the coming of the ultimate (the coming of Christ and the justification of the sinner by grace and by faith) within the penultimate (all aspects of reality that are distinct from the ultimate but nevertheless exist for its sake) must be preserved – whether it be an inward attitude or an external condition – and whatever hinders the coming of the ultimate must be opposed.¹¹⁵ For instance, practical needs (hunger, shelter, community, freedom) must be met for the sake of the coming of the ultimate, and this imposes a genuine responsibility on those "who know about the coming of Jesus Christ," yet the meeting of such needs does not constitute an end in itself and so we are not dealing here with a "program of social reform."¹¹⁶ In Christ who became human, was crucified, and was raised from the dead, we find what exists reconciled with the ultimate and avoid the extremes of

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 160.

¹¹⁵ So, writes Bonhoeffer, "It is hard for those thrust into extreme disgrace, desolation, poverty, and helplessness to believe in God's justice and goodness. It becomes hard for those whose lives have fallen into disorder and a lack of discipline to hear the commandments of God in faith.... It is hard for those who are disappointed by a false faith and who have lost self-control to find the simplicity of surrendering their hearts to Jesus Christ" (162-63).

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 164.

radicalism and compromise.¹¹⁷ Since this is so, it is legitimate to care for the penultimate which precedes and somehow prepares the way for the ultimate even though it is determined and made what it is only through the ultimate.

Even the distinction between good and evil can, for Bonhoeffer, have a legitimate place within the penultimate, so long as it is properly subordinated to the ultimate, since its presence can serve, and its absence can hinder, the coming of the ultimate. Bonhoeffer recognizes, alongside the ultimate goodness, a *penultimate* goodness, which he defines as

...the opposite of everything depraved, lawless, and offensive, as contrary to the public transgression of the moral law, however this may be understood in particular. To use biblical images, we understand goodness as the opposite of the tax collector and the prostitute. The scope of goodness in this sense includes all kinds of gradations, from the purely external keeping of order, to the most inward self-examination and character formation, and to personal sacrifice for the highest human values.¹¹⁸

The flexibility of Bonhoeffer's thought here allows him to see how Christ can claim and justify even values that are not explicitly or consciously Christian, a point which reflects his experience in finding people among secular members of the resistance who nevertheless "sought refuge" in Christ by allying themselves with the church.¹¹⁹ Having said all this,

¹¹⁷ These are the names Bonhoeffer gives to two equally misguided ways of relating the penultimate to the ultimate. The "radical" way sees everything penultimate as enmity to Christ and springs from a hatred of and refusal to serve the world as it is; the way of compromise gives the penultimate its own integrity independent of the ultimate, and springs from hatred of the ultimate. "The radical solution approaches things from the end of all things, from God the judge and redeemer; the compromise solution approaches things from the creator and preserver. One absolutizes the end, the other absolutizes what exists. Thus creation and redemption, time and eternity, fall into an insoluble conflict; the very unity of God is itself dissolved, and faith in God is shattered" (ibid, 154). Note how Bonhoeffer's thinking, much like Barth's, frames itself constantly within the theological boundaries of the core aspects of God (Creator, Reconciler, Redeemer. We see the same basic parallel between doctrine (or dogma) and ethics as that which guides the thinking of Barth: Just as it is improper to pit against one another a theology of the incarnation, a theology of the cross, or a theology of the resurrection, by falsely absolutizing one of them, such a procedure is false as well in any consideration of Christian life. A Christian ethic built only on the incarnation would lead easily to the compromise solution; an ethic built only on the crucifixion or only on the resurrection of Jesus Christ would fall into radicalism and enthusiasm. The conflict is resolved only in their unity" (157).

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 349.

¹¹⁹ See p. 341. At earlier points in the *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer raised but did not develop similar ideas. In "Heritage and Decay" (see pp. 132-33), he includes among the values that seek alliance with Christianity "justice, truth, science, art, culture, humanity, freedom, and patriotism"; tolerance and human rights may also be added to the list (see p. 351). Again in "Ultimate and Penultimate Things" he writes, "Certainly the human and the good of which we speak are not the humanness and the goodness of Jesus Christ.... The human and the good should not be made into self-sufficient values, but they may and should be claimed for Jesus Christ, especially where, as an

Bonhoeffer urges that we must not view preparing the way for and preserving the penultimate as, in the final analysis, our own task, to be accomplished by our own method; it is Christ who prepares the way for us. Still, the task remains “to strengthen the penultimate through a stronger proclamation of the ultimate and to protect the ultimate by preserving the penultimate.”¹²⁰

Based on all of this, we can add the following to our list of immediately derivative claims concerning the character of a Christocentrally-grounded ethics:

(10) Ethical action involves caring for the penultimate for the sake of the ultimate.

In stating that (10) is in fact a claim derived immediately from the Christological foundations described by Bonhoeffer, we are saying that it follows as a direct consequence of his Christology – it lives only a single inferential move away from the foundation. But how is it related to this foundation? Proposition (10) expresses both the union of the penultimate and the ultimate within Christ, and the ordering of the former toward the latter, an ordering of which we are aware because of the gospel of grace revealed in Christ that breaks into the penultimate which has been prepared for the ultimate as Christ determines. It also calls us to participate, in a certain particular way, in the action of Christ, the realization of the Christ-reality within the world of creatures. We might call (10) an immediately derived *principle* of Bonhoeffer’s ethics, if it were not for Bonhoeffer’s dislike for the term principle.

Nevertheless, for all practical purposes we will see (10), along with the other immediately derivative claims made in this section, functioning as an ethical principle. Of course, many other claims follow from (10), and if we were to trace out its various implications for ethical human life we would get a much fuller sense of the richness of the ethical field as Bonhoeffer

unconscious remnant, they represent a previous bond to the ultimate” (ibid, 169). Bonhoeffer enlists the beatitude, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,” in support of his point that Christ cares for those who suffer for any sort of just cause and not only one that is explicitly Christian.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 169.

saw it. But in treating of Bonhoeffer, as with Barth in the last chapter, we can only occupy ourselves with the broad strokes as far as the character of ethics is concerned. Even so, we can point out some of the directions in which his thought flows out from the spring of (10).

Within the context of ethical action as caring for the penultimate for the sake of the ultimate, we can locate part of the justification of the “orders” or “mandates” and their relationship to Christ in Bonhoeffer’s thought. The orders are to be preserved, not for their own sake (as though they were somehow independently ultimate in themselves), but for the sake of the (actual) ultimate. “From a Christian perspective,” Bonhoeffer writes, “the fallen world becomes understandable as the world preserved and maintained by God for the coming of Christ, a world in which we as human beings can and should live a ‘good’ life in given orders.”¹²¹ I will come back to the relation of the mandates to the Christological ethical foundation a little later, in connection with my discussion of Bonhoeffer’s conception of the commandment of God. But we can also see his analyses of the “natural” and the “unnatural,” as well as his efforts to provide a theological foundation for individual rights in “Natural Life” as flowing, in part, from (10). Bonhoeffer defines the natural as “that which, after the fall, is directed toward the coming of Jesus Christ,” and its contrary, the unnatural, as “that which, after the fall, closes itself off from the coming of Jesus Christ.”¹²² And, in a second definition, he states, “The natural is that form of life preserved by God for the fallen world that is directed toward justification, salvation, and renewal through Christ.... Formally, the natural is determined by the preserving will of God and by its orientation

¹²¹ Ibid, 165.

¹²² Ibid, 173. This, of course, raises the question of where Bonhoeffer stands, vis-a-vis Barth, on the issue of the possible legitimacy of a natural theology alongside a revelational theology. In asserting that we recognize the content of the natural via reason, “the part of this preserved form of life that is able to make us conscious, i.e., to ‘take in’... as a unity, the whole and the universal in reality,” (174) it sounds as though he comes quite close to the ‘Catholic theory’ he elsewhere claims to oppose, claiming that reason is thoroughly entangled in the fallen world.

toward Christ.”¹²³ Without going into further details, I hope this suffices to give the reader a sense of the structure of Bonhoeffer’s thought in this area and of how the theme works itself out across a variety of doctrines and concepts within the *Ethics*.

Ethical Action is Responsible Action

Bonhoeffer’s view of responsible action constitutes another thematic wellspring from which various streams can be traced across the *Ethics*. This time I will state the “principle” first, and then show its rootedness in Bonhoeffer’s Christology and the way it plays out in other important areas of his thought.

(11) Ethical human action is responsible action.

Bonhoeffer explicitly develops the idea under four sub-topics: (i) vicarious representative action; (ii) accordance with reality; (iii) willingness to become guilty; and (iv) freedom. Each of these four elements of responsible action displays clear links to the Christological basis of Bonhoeffer’s ethics. In regard to the first, it is because Jesus “lived as our vicarious representative,” incorporating all human selves within His own self and making Himself responsible for us all before God, and because He is our life (premise 9 of the positive argument from the previous section), that our life also consists essentially in “vicarious representation.”¹²⁴ This implies that the only genuine human life is selfless life – life lived for others. It implies further that the proper subject of ethics is “not the isolated individual but the responsible person.”¹²⁵ Among the sub-principles we might state at this point, we will limit the focus to the central one:

(12) Ethical human action is vicarious representative action.

¹²³ Ibid, 174. Bonhoeffer treads carefully here. He clearly makes the natural, in spite of its “moment of independence,” relative, contingent upon the coming of Jesus Christ and hence on the ultimate as already discussed. He warns, “It is critical, however, that this relative freedom not be confused with an absolute freedom for God and for our neighbor, a freedom that is created and given only by God’s word itself” (ibid). Yet he also identifies the natural with the preservation of life and the unnatural with its destruction.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 258.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 258. Bonhoeffer is concerned throughout this manuscript to counter the misconception, prevalent in most of the major approaches to ethics of his day, that ethical reflection should begin from the individual considered in abstraction from her relational and historical context.

As should be clear, (12) follows from (11) as a partial explication of the concept of responsible action. In “History and Good 2,” from which I am drawing for the sake of the present discussion, Bonhoeffer clearly intends his presentation of Christ as “our life” in the first part of the manuscript to serve as the basis for his presentation of responsible historical action in the later part. So it is unsurprising that we see here a particularly clear case of a connection between the Christological base and an immediately derived claim.

Responsible action is decisively action in accordance with reality, and this means action in accordance with Christ.

Originating from him alone, human action occurs that is not crushed by conflicts of principle, but springs instead from the already accomplished reconciliation of the world with God. This is an action that soberly and simply does what accords with reality, and action done in vicarious representative responsibility.¹²⁶

Hence,

(13) Ethical human action is action in accordance with reality.

Once again, (13) is little more than a restatement of some of the key premises we listed in the arguments of the previous section. And so the Christological grounding of this particular feature of Bonhoeffer’s ethics is, again, particularly clear. Based on ultimate reality – the God who became human in Christ – ethical human action will have a human and a divine aspect. Bonhoeffer says it is human because it involves evaluating and deciding within our limited capacity for judgment and knowledge, and divine because it gives over all knowledge of its ultimate justification to God: “Ultimate ignorance of one’s own goodness or evil, together with dependence upon grace, is an essential characteristic of responsible historical action.... Those who act responsibly place their action into the hands of God and live by God’s grace and judgment.”¹²⁷ The ethical agent’s surrender of her knowledge of her own

¹²⁶ Ibid, 266.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 268-69.

good and evil constitutes, for Bonhoeffer, a further key thematic link between responsible action and the Christological base.

Willingness to become guilty and freedom are the two other guiding concepts in Bonhoeffer's characterization of responsible action.

(14) Ethical human action involves a willingness to become guilty.

(15) Ethical human action is action undertaken in freedom.

There are cases, Bonhoeffer argues, in which necessity conflicts with law and the person acting in free responsibility consciously violates the law and thus becomes guilty. Yet when patterned on Jesus' own responsible action, and hence motivated by selfless love for real human beings, this willingness to take on guilt for the sake of the other shares (relatively speaking) in the sinlessness of Jesus' own bearing of the guilt of all human beings. Knowingly becoming guilty, however, appears to involve a violation of conscience, and hence to be unacceptable. In response to this objection, Bonhoeffer engages in a very insightful discussion of natural conscience as "the [godless] attempt of the ego who knows good and evil to justify itself to God, to others, and to itself, and to be able to sustain this self-justification." He links this to the human desire to be like God, an autonomous ego, which originates "in Adam."¹²⁸ But Jesus Christ sets the believer's conscience free from slavery to law and self-justification, and indeed takes the place of (or *becomes*) the conscience for the believer, so that "from now on I can only find unity with myself by surrendering my ego to God and others," as takes place in responsible action.¹²⁹ So this third aspect of responsible action is once again linked by several inferential threads to claims that delimit the Christological basis of ethical action.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 277. Bonhoeffer interprets and applies Gen. 3:5 similarly in *Creation and Fall*, p. 80ff and 111ff.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 278.

The free character of responsible action emerges from the fact that the responsible person has to act on her own, and within “the twilight that the historical situation casts upon good and evil,”¹³⁰ in which the choice is not between a clearly recognized good and a clearly recognized evil, but between relatively better and relatively worse. The responsible action is therefore a “free venture,” in which the deed is surrendered to God. Nevertheless it is, for Bonhoeffer, a confident action: “Free action recognizes itself ultimately as being God’s action.... In freely surrendering the knowledge of our own goodness, the good of God occurs.”¹³¹ This freedom remains compatible with obedience. Just as Jesus acted simultaneously in obedience and in freedom, all responsible human action follows God’s command and leaves the final judgment up to God. People who act responsibly “find justification neither by their bond nor by their freedom, but only in the One who has placed them in this – humanly impossible – situation and who requires them to act.”¹³² Freedom and obedience coincide in the self-identification with the will of God made possible and permissible for us by grace in Jesus Christ.

The relationship between freedom and obedience in responsible action relates also to the contrast Bonhoeffer draws in “God’s Love and the Disintegration of the World” between judging and doing. In this context, his profoundly insightful contrast of the Pharisees with Jesus serves to bring out clearly the difference between life within and life outside of the origin. The Pharisee, he says, is the person

for whom nothing but the knowledge of good and evil has come to be important for their entire lives. The Pharisee is the epitome of the human being in the state of disunion.... Pharisees are those human beings, admirable to the highest degree, who subject their entire lives to the knowledge of good and evil and who judge themselves as sternly as their neighbors – and all to the glory of God, whom they humbly thank for this knowledge. For Pharisees, every moment of life turns into a situation of conflict in which they have to choose between good and evil. In order to avoid

¹³⁰ Ibid, 284.

¹³¹ Ibid, 284-85.

¹³² Ibid, 288.

wrongdoing... Innumerable facts have to be taken into account, weighed, and distinguished.¹³³

The reason Jesus avoids directly answering the questions of the Pharisees (or those of other people) in the gospels, Bonhoeffer explains, is that their questions emerge from the state of “the disunion of the knowledge of good and evil,” while Jesus can only speak “from unity with God, with the origin, from a place where the disunion of human beings has been overcome.”¹³⁴ Jesus does not speak or act from a situation of conflict, but in the simplicity of the will of God in which there is only one possibility, and hence in genuine freedom. Apart from the origin, in their knowledge of good and evil, human beings are subject not only to disunity within themselves, but also to disunity with other people. Their knowledge of good and evil manifests as judgment; they pass judgment on themselves and on others and even on God. In their judging they never arrive at *doing* the will of God and hence never at the good.¹³⁵ At several points Bonhoeffer states that judging is the very *nature* of human beings who have fallen away from the origin. But “[i]n saying ‘Do not judge,’ Jesus, who is the reconciliation, calls the divided human being to be reconciled.”¹³⁶ Knowing the will of God, for Bonhoeffer, amounts to *doing* the will of God, where doing God’s will stands in utterly stark contrast to judging, and where it also can be seen only as the doing of Jesus.¹³⁷ Unity with God involves the overcoming of good and evil, and hence of judgment, and sets human beings free for the simple doing of the will of God in free obedience.

¹³³ Ibid, 310.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 311.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 328. “For the doers, the law never becomes a yardstick to be employed against their brothers or sisters; never does the law encounter them other than calling them personally to doing. Even with regard to a brother or sister who goes astray, the ‘doer of the law’ knows of only one single possibility for bringing the law to bear, namely, doing it oneself. In this way the law is honored, put into effect, and acknowledged as the living word of God, which prevails of its own power without needing human assistance” (ibid).

¹³⁶ Ibid, 316.

¹³⁷ See Bonhoeffer’s use of James 4:11, “if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge,” and John 15:5, “apart from me you can do nothing” (327). In general, Bonhoeffer’s drawing his points out of scriptural (New Testament) themes is at its richest and finest in this section. This, among things I’ve pointed to elsewhere, indicates that Barth’s criticism of Bonhoeffer’s ethics as relatively ungrounded (at least explicitly) in dogmatics is at best an overstatement.

Bonhoeffer straightforwardly ties all four aspects of responsible (=ethical) action to its Christological foundation. We have also seen how these aspects in turn branch out to inform other important topics within the matrix of Bonhoeffer's ethical thinking. While the first two central characteristics of ethical action (caring for the penultimate and responsible action) display a fairly tight logical connection to the foundation, the ties that bind the third characteristic – action according to the commandment of God – are somewhat looser, as we will now see.

Ethical Action is Action According to the Commandment of God (+ The Mandates)

Barth made the commandment of God the controlling idea for Christian ethics; Bonhoeffer, in spite of not having given this concept as much pride of place in his *Ethics*, nevertheless shows signs of recognizing its importance. For instance, he explicitly states that his 'mandates' of work, marriage, government, and church are grounded in the command of God as revealed in Christ and the testimony of scripture, and that the command of God provides the sole basis of their legitimacy, formation, and force (a fact Bonhoeffer believes was insufficiently emphasized in the traditional Lutheran 'orders of creation'). Neither the mandates, nor the human and natural rights they establish, possess any independent authority. They originate and find their goal in Christ, and they are "the place where the God of Jesus Christ establishes obedience."¹³⁸ Bonhoeffer insists that

[t]he divine mandates depend solely on God's one commandment as it is revealed in Jesus Christ. They are implanted in the world from above as organizing structures – 'orders' – of the reality of Christ, that is, of the reality of God's love for the world and for human beings that has been revealed in Jesus Christ. They are thus in no way an outgrowth of history; they are not earthly powers, but divine commissions.... [They] can only be explained and understood from above, from God. The bearers of the

¹³⁸ Ibid, 358. For Bonhoeffer, God's commandment as given to us in its concreteness, occurs within the mandates, even though it comes from beyond them and cannot be analyzed as the claim of any earthly power as such.

mandate are not commissioned from below, executing and representing particular expressions of the collective will of human beings.¹³⁹

Because, and only because, of its concern with preparing the way for the ultimate within the penultimate, the church has a responsibility to oppose all concrete orders (economic or otherwise) “that clearly hinder faith in Christ,” though it cannot deduce any positive statements concerning the order that should exist from its faith.¹⁴⁰

Bonhoeffer is clearly anxious to assure his reader that the mandates are founded on Christ.

The claim he derives from the Christological base this time can be formulated as follows:

(16) Ethical action takes the form of following the command of God.

And, since the command of God comes to human beings in the form of the mandates,

(17) Ethical action takes the form of following the mandates.

Concerning this particular derivation, however, we find skepticism raised by none other than Barth himself. Barth approved of Bonhoeffer’s approach insofar as it sought the epistemological basis of the moral imperative in the Word of God and not elsewhere. But he charges that the mandates – the concrete loci of church, marriage, culture/work, government, in which the command of God manifests itself in a regular fashion in human life – as Bonhoeffer works them out, remain to some extent arbitrary:

Would it not be advisable... to begin with the more cautious question what we have to learn from God’s Word concerning this constancy rather than rushing on to the rigid assertion of human relationships arranged in a definite order, and the hasty assertion of their imperative character?... But is it not the case that the reference to these relationships as such does not necessarily have the character of an imperative, and therefore in the strict sense of a mandate, but that it must become an imperative, a concrete command or mandate, in the power of the divine command itself, in the ethical event?¹⁴¹

Rather than strictly deriving his mandates from revelation, Bonhoeffer, in Barth’s view, did not in the end respect the (non-imperative) nature of the scriptural presentation of these areas

¹³⁹ Ibid, 390.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 361.

¹⁴¹ *CD* III/4, p. 22.

of human existence, and ended up imposing a structure that is in the end not as thoroughly scriptural as it could be. I do not have the space to engage this point of dispute fully here, but in the first section of Chapter Three I will return to it.

Turning to Bonhoeffer's treatment of the command of God itself, located primarily in "The 'Ethical' and the 'Christian' as a Topic," we again get the impression that Bonhoeffer sees both the importance of characterizing ethics as having its source in God's command, and the need to present the command itself Christologically. He even refers to the commandment of God, which he claims is necessary to provide legitimate authorization for ethical discourse, as "the only possible subject matter of a 'Christian ethic.'" ¹⁴² The 'ethical' as ordinarily understood, Bonhoeffer says, has its proper place only on the boundaries of human life, from which it interrogates human existence in light of the stringent demands of the qualitatively ultimate "ought." By contrast, the commandment of God and the ethics engendered by it "encompasses all of life. It is not only unconditional, it is also total. It not only prohibits and commands, but also gives permission. It not only binds but also sets free – in fact, it does so precisely by binding."¹⁴³ The freedom for which the commandment sets us free is the freedom to live before God as human beings, and to engage in human life as instituted by God without the constant anxiety of ethical examination, as Bonhoeffer repeats multiple times on pages 381-85. From this we can formulate the claim:

(18) Ethical human life is life lived in freedom as a human being before God, on the strength of the permission granted via God's commandment revealed in Jesus Christ.

¹⁴² Ibid, 378. The question of authorization, Bonhoeffer thinks, necessarily takes us beyond the sphere of the (ordinary, that is non-Christian) ethical; no legitimate basis of concrete authorization can be found in given empirical reality or in the arbitrary construction of "a system of orders and values within which authorization is ascribed [primarily] to [one or another of] the parent, the master, the government" (ibid, 376). The authorization of ethical discourse, in Bonhoeffer's view, is irreducibly concrete, and takes place only within a nexus of concrete relationships of mutual responsibility. Only the command of God possesses the kind of concreteness that could suffice here. Any view that takes the ethical "as something formal, universally valid, and rational inevitably leads to the complete atomization of human community and individual life" (ibid, 373).

¹⁴³ Ibid, 378.

But how exactly is this claim grounded in Christ? We could construct for Bonhoeffer an identification between Christ and the commandment via the identity of both Christ and the commandment as the Word of God, as we find in Barth, but Bonhoeffer does not state such an identification. We could tie the granting of freedom to live as human beings back to the love of God displayed in the incarnation of Christ which Bonhoeffer discusses elsewhere, but he does not himself draw any such connection here. In the absence of such connections, his statements about the character of the commandment and of human life under it float freely of the Christological basis as he has developed it.

Unlike his treatments of responsible action and the preservation of the penultimate, Bonhoeffer's discussion of the Christian ethic as an ethic of the commandment of God in the *Ethics* leaves us with several unresolved questions. Besides the problem of an inexplicit link to Christology, Bonhoeffer's suggestion that the commandment of God serves to guide and direct human beings in their concrete situations remains undeveloped. In denying that the command "would unmistakably mark a specific action, as willed by God, with the 'accent of eternity,'"¹⁴⁴ the actual operation of the command of God in human ethical reflection and deliberation becomes particularly obscure. Of course, this state of affairs makes room for the "free venture" of a decision made in the absence of clearly determinate and applicable criteria of good and evil. It coheres with Bonhoeffer's claims, in this manuscript and elsewhere, that "God's commandment does not make human beings the critics and judges of themselves and their deeds, but allows them to live and act with the certainty and confidence of being guided by the divine commandment."¹⁴⁵ But how are we to conceive of the workings of the actual situation of ethical choice in which we must venture our decision as actually guided by the commandment? Before delving further into a critical assessment of

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 379.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 384-85.

Barth and Bonhoeffer's approach to ethics, we first need to bring before our mind's eye the arguments concerning the character of a Christologically-grounded ethics as we have found them in Bonhoeffer's texts.

Creaturely Human Life as Established in Christ: The Arguments

The arguments of two sections back concerned the conclusion that only an ethics resting on Christology can be regarded as legitimate in the final analysis. The arguments of the present section concern Bonhoeffer's derivation of three separate claims that outline the character an ethics so-grounded should take on. In Chapter three I will ask, among other things, whether one who accepts the premise that ethics ought to be Christologically-grounded must also accept the conclusions Barth and Bonhoeffer draw from this grounding, as they conceive of it. The answer to this question will depend on the legitimacy of the inferences they draw from this foundation to their claims concerning the character of ethics.

The arguments presented in propositions (1)-(9) in the previous section rely on the important principle that

- (1) the good in human being and action is to be formed by the form of Jesus Christ.

I take (1) to be operative as an assumption in all of the arguments that follow in this section.¹⁴⁶ Part of what proposition (1) means, Bonhoeffer thinks, is that an ethical human life will (a) avoid judgment or contempt toward others, (b) be lived for the sake of God and others rather than for the self, (c) be lived in the freedom and peace of genuine (reconciled) worldliness before God and (d) be lived beyond sin as new human beings in Christ.

¹⁴⁶ Note that (6) below asserts more or less the same thing as (1) here, so we can see this core principle of Bonhoeffer's ethical thinking as the conclusion of an argument ((2)-(6) below) rather than a mere assertion.

However, these ethical implications of the central Christian doctrines of the incarnation, the crucifixion, the resurrection, appear in Bonhoeffer's text in a relatively unsupported form; Bonhoeffer makes no real presumption of logical rigor here, but leaves the reader who wants to formalize the arguments needing to tease out a good number of implicit premises. Rather than undertaking such a lengthy procedure here, having briefly noted the relevant implications and the idea that drives each of them (asserted in proposition (1) above), I focus here on the more carefully worked out aspects of the character of a Christologically-grounded ethics whose textual bases are richer and more complete. We have already examined the texts extensively in the previous section; here we set out the arguments in as concise and clear a manner possible.

(2) The good is to be and act in accordance with reality.

(3) Ethical human action is action in accordance with reality [*from (2)*].

(4) The person of Jesus Christ is ultimate reality.

Furthermore,

(5) The person of Jesus Christ is our life. [*premise 9 of the positive argument from the previous section*]

So,

(6) Ethical human being and action is being and action in accordance with Jesus Christ. [*from (3)-(4), (5)*]

(7) Jesus Christ lived as our vicarious representative, making Himself responsible for us.

(8) Because of love (the love of God) Jesus Christ was willing to share in and bear our guilt.

(9) Jesus Christ lived in free obedience.

(10) Jesus Christ surrendered his own goodness or evil in dependence on the grace and judgment of God.

(11) Ethical human life consists essentially in (i) vicarious representative action. [*from (6), (7)*]

(12) Ethical human action involves (ii) willingness to become guilty. [*from (6), (8)*]

(13) Ethical human action is (iii) action undertaken in free obedience. [*from (6), (9)*]

(14) Ethical human action involves (iv) surrendering one's own goodness or evil in dependence on the grace and judgment of God. [*from (6), (10)*]

(15) Responsible action, by definition, includes (i)-(iv).

Therefore,

(16) Ethical human action is responsible action. [*from (11)-(15)*]

In addition,

(17) God's commandment revealed in Jesus Christ grants us permission to live in freedom as a human being before God.

(18) Ethical human action takes the form of following the command of God. [*from (13), (17)*]

(19) The command of God comes to human beings in the form of the mandates.

Therefore,

(20) Ethical action takes the form of following the mandates. [*from (18)-(19)*]

Chapter 3: Assessing Barth and Bonhoeffer's Position

Introduction

In the first two chapters we saw four arguments emerging from the texts of Barth's and Bonhoeffer's major contributions to ethics (the *Church Dogmatics* and the *Ethics* respectively). I identified two of these arguments as negative (since they conclude that no non-Christologically-grounded ethics can, in the end, be seen as legitimate), and two as positive (concluding as they do that Christ is the indispensable foundation of all legitimate ethical thinking). We then observed the general contours of the character of Barth's and Bonhoeffer's ethics as they attempt to derive them from the Christological foundation, and formulated these into numbered argument form as well.¹⁴⁷ Before moving on to my assessment of the arguments proper – the main topic of the present chapter – there is a preliminary issue that needs to be dealt with. Since I am proposing to assess the approach to ethics of the two thinkers simultaneously, I need to say a few words in support of my position that it is fair to lump them together in this way. This I will do in the first section of this chapter. Following that I will assert what I take to be the common challenge issued by Barth and Bonhoeffer's thought toward any Christian ethicist who comes after them. In the

¹⁴⁷ We need to keep in mind here that for both Barth and Bonhoeffer the foundation, properly speaking, is not dogmatic statements about Christ, but Christ Himself. Nevertheless, ethics being a matter of theorizing and theories being expressed in propositions, we can identify a propositional Christological basis rooted however well or however clumsily in the Divine Reality itself, and it is with this propositional base that we are mainly concerned for the purposes of our theological assessment of Barth and Bonhoeffer's approach to ethics.

second section, I consider and respond to some objections that arise concerning the approach these two thinkers take to ethics.

I assume that this essay, in elucidating, condensing and relating the views of Barth and Bonhoeffer on the Christological foundations and derivative character of ethics will already have accomplished a significant task. In this last chapter, I will have space here neither to survey the secondary literature for responses to Barth and Bonhoeffer's approach to ethics, nor to deal with the representative objections I have selected for discussion in a comprehensive way. I will not in fact be systematically defending the approach of Barth or Bonhoeffer here. Instead, this chapter will serve primarily to dismantle objections to my own thesis, namely that even if one disagrees with the details of the character of ethics these two theologians derive from their vision of the Christological base, and even if one finds weaknesses (e.g. questionable assumptions) in the arguments for the necessity of appealing to such a base for ethics, one cannot consistently avoid the requirement this approach imposes on further ethical theorizing, at least if one is a professing Christian.

The thesis I am arguing for here appears particularly plausible if one agrees with Barth's (and to perhaps a lesser extent Bonhoeffer's) claims concerning the central importance of the ethical question for human life. The ethical question – the question “What should we do?” – is, on this view, the most basic of all human questions in the sense that it underlies all other questions we might ask, so that the very asking of any other question (being itself an action, something we *do*) assumes some answer to the more basic ethical question. Whatever particular voluntary action we undertake (explicitly, or much more usually, implicitly) involves action-guiding principles, the most general of which are, “Do what is good” and “Avoid what is evil,” and more specific examples of which are “Help those less fortunate than yourself” or “Do not lie.” The ethical question, being the most basic of all human

questions, entails that the answer we accept and which determines our lives must be for us of all-important concern since its answer is the deepest root and well-spring of our voluntary activity, and our voluntary activity constitutes our very life, as the expression of our being or what we are as persons. In this context, the question of how and to what extent the gospel (the revelation of the grace of God in Jesus Christ) is relevant to our posing and answering of the ethical question becomes particularly poignant. It is not a question that can be picked up or set aside at leisure by a Christian who wants to talk about ethics. Rather, it is a question that urgently demands an answer, and the answer to it will determine in the most fundamentally important way the nature of the ethics that result.

Barth writes, in the posthumously published lecture fragments that would have comprised the bulk of *CD IV/4*:

Comprehensively, ethics is an attempt to answer theoretically the question of what may be called good human action. Theological ethics such as is attempted here finds both this question and its answer in God's Word. It thus finds it where theological dogmatics as the critical science of true church proclamation finds all its questions and answers. Theological ethics can be understood only as an integral element of dogmatics (cf. *CD I,2 s 22,3*). The Word of God, with which dogmatics (and consequently theological ethics) is concerned at every point as the basis, object, content, and norm of true church proclamation, is, however, Jesus Christ in the divine-human unity of his being and work.

The truly radical thing about the way Barth and Bonhoeffer conceive ethics lies in their insistence that the good must not be, and indeed never can truly be, separated from the person of God, and thus of God in the person of Jesus Christ, the Word of God. In light of this, Barth and Bonhoeffer pose to the church (and more particularly, to the Christian ethicists or moral theologians within the church) the question of whether this person has been or is being taken sufficiently seriously as the determinative standard for all ethical thinking. My conclusion, again, will be that we ought to agree with Barth and Bonhoeffer concerning the radical importance of this person for ethics (and hence of a Christological grounding of ethics), even if we find reasons to reject or at least modify aspects of the

reasoning they employ to establish the necessity of a Christological basis and/or to demarcate the character an ethics so-grounded should possess.

Differences and Similarities in Barth and Bonhoeffer's

Approach to Ethics

To what extent can we really locate sufficient common ground between the views of Barth and Bonhoeffer on the basis of ethics to treat them together, as the assessment contained in the later pages of the present chapter proposes to do? In this section I outline some key points of divergence between the methods by which the two theologians present their views, and then between aspects of the content of those views, arguing that their respective presentations of ethics contain more than enough overlap to legitimate treating the two thinkers together as far as concerns their overall approach. I conclude the section by drawing attention to the challenge presented by the common core of Barth and Bonhoeffer's approach.¹⁴⁸ This common core will be the subject of the second section's evaluation.

¹⁴⁸ I will not be reiterating the contents of this common core, taking it to have been sufficiently established in the first two chapters. If I was going to rehearse this material again here, I would probably begin by reminding the reader of the fact that both Bonhoeffer and Barth present the love of God as the basis of ethics, and human love as generated by and in response to the love of God as the essential character of good human action. Further, like Bonhoeffer, Barth insists that we cannot grasp the sense of love according to which it is true to say, with 1 Jn. 4:8,16, that "*ho theos agape estin*" from some general concept of love which includes as specifications within itself the love of God and our love. Instead, the love of the Deity (as opposed to the deity of love) can only be seen in the particular form it took in the concrete event of God's giving of Godself to us in His Son.

Differences in Method

Barth acknowledged that he regarded Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* as a brilliant work. He lamented that it could not have been completed, and held that Bonhoeffer's approach should be favoured over the attempts of moral theologians like Althaus and Brunner to derive morality from a basis other than the revealed Word. At the same time, Barth felt that Bonhoeffer did not go far enough in making explicit the scriptural and dogmatic basis of his ethical work.¹⁴⁹ Barth approved of Bonhoeffer's approach insofar as it sought the epistemological basis of the moral imperative in the Word of God and not elsewhere. But, as we saw toward the end of the last chapter, Barth charges that the mandates – the concrete loci of church, marriage, culture/work, government, in which the command of God manifests itself in a regular fashion in human life – as Bonhoeffer works them out, remain to some extent arbitrary.¹⁵⁰ Rather than strictly deriving his mandates from revelation, Bonhoeffer, in Barth's view, did not in the end respect the (non-imperative) nature of the scriptural presentation of these areas of human existence, and ended up imposing a structure that is in the end not as thoroughly scriptural as it could be.

Elsewhere Barth raised a more general objection along the same lines to the method of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, which he saw as internally related to, but “in external separation from dogmatics.”¹⁵¹ Barth again notes approvingly that Bonhoeffer links ethics and dogmatics as

¹⁴⁹ This is the main point of Barth's critique of Bonhoeffer's concept of mandate in his excursus at *CD* III/4, pp. 21-23. By the time Bonhoeffer had worked out the last phase of his work on the *Ethics* before his arrest in 1943, he had been able to read the Galley proofs of Barth's *CD* II/2, and his work in this phase (which includes “The Ethical and the ‘Christian’ as a Topic” and “The Concrete Commandment and the Divine Mandates”) involved an effort to show how his own views aligned with those of Barth. See the German editors' “Afterword” in *DBWE* 6, 426.

¹⁵⁰ See *CD* III/4, p. 22. Bonhoeffer was himself unsure about how best to articulate his views on this important topic, as is evident from the fluctuation in the terminology he used at various points in time. He began with “orders of creation” which he rejected because of its use by Nazi theologians in favour of “mandates,” only to adopt the expression “orders of preservation,” and still later to return to “mandates.” It is, then, given the unfinished nature of the *Ethics*, at least a fair open-ended question what Bonhoeffer's final statement on these issues would have looked like.

¹⁵¹ *CD* III/4, p. 4.

he does himself, but Barth thinks the connection ought to be made more explicit than Bonhoeffer makes it. The issue here seems to be that while Bonhoeffer's ethical conclusions are in line with the truths of Christian dogmatics, he has not made clear their rootedness in and derivation from dogmatics. In Bonhoeffer's defense, we could mention the circumstances under which Bonhoeffer composed his *Ethics*. Unlike Barth, Bonhoeffer, constantly pressured by the suspicious Nazi regime, had the luxuries neither of time nor stability in which to work out with care the precise relations obtaining between his ethical claims and their basis in the Word. But it is also an open question whether Bonhoeffer would have written in a more "systematic" or at least explicit fashion, even if time and circumstances permitted this. Bonhoeffer, after all, consciously wrote in response to concrete and pressing concerns of his day, and so as a rule avoided proposing general theories. So, for instance, he intended to make use of the "theory" of mandates to counter the problematic assimilation of all spheres of human life to the state under the Nazis.¹⁵²

From another vantage point we should ask whether Barth is even correct about the relative absence or at least the incompleteness of an explicit connection between dogmatics and ethics in Bonhoeffer's thought. Bonhoeffer himself asserts the centrality of just such a connection: "The subject matter of a Christian ethic is God's reality revealed in Christ becoming real among God's creatures, just as the subject matter of doctrinal theology is the truth of God's reality revealed in Christ."¹⁵³ Furthermore, Bonhoeffer at various points does provide an exegetical basis for the claims he makes about the character of Christian ethics.

¹⁵² This raises the question to what extent Bonhoeffer can be seen as a pragmatist, in so far as he seems to have, sometimes at least, developed theories for particular purposes without being ultimately concerned about their truth. This is likely not how Bonhoeffer himself would put it – instead he would likely say that the incarnate Truth (Jesus) speaks into concrete situations and circumstances, and this can manifest at different times in different thought forms, or something along those lines. Nevertheless, to the extent that someone allows the content of a view to be determined by the demands of the situation (even if those demands are purely ethical demands, demands issued by the good itself) rather than impartial considerations of truth, to that extent the person deserves to be called a pragmatist. I do not personally take this to be a derogatory term, though I am sure that some would take it that way.

¹⁵³ *DWBE* 6, 49.

There certainly is some evidence in the text of the *Ethics*, of an attempt to find the mandates of work and marriage in scripture, in the Eden narrative.¹⁵⁴ And it would be hard to dispute the scriptural grounding of the mandate of church. Besides the way he employs individual passages of scripture to support his points, Bonhoeffer's thinking clearly brings to bear on ethics – even at its very roots – the major Christian doctrines of the incarnation and of reconciliation. Whether or not these efforts are sufficient to counter Barth's criticism is at least a genuinely open question. In light of them, we are left to wonder whether Barth, in speaking of Bonhoeffer's ethics as externally separated from dogmatics, means simply to criticize the latter's decision to write a work on ethics that, unlike Barth's own *Church Dogmatics*, does not formally present ethics within the context of dogmatic topoi. While Barth's own (mature) practice is to literally enclose ethics within dogmatics by including a section on ethics at the end of each major dogmatic topic and to deal with ethics not independently but only within an overarching work on dogmatics, we might well ask how serious Barth meant this as a criticism, and how seriously we should take it as such.

Differences in Content

Having considered some arguably minor divergences concerning the methods by which Barth and Bonhoeffer respectively present their views on ethics, we now turn to potentially more worrisome divergences in the content of those views. For Barth, special ethics (ethics of the command of God considered concretely, as opposed to generally as in *CD II/2*), unlike casuistical ethics, points human beings to a lived encounter with God's command. But it also does more than this; special ethics can “become the investigation and representation of the character which this event will always take, of the standard by which

¹⁵⁴ See, for instance, *ibid*, 70-71, related to Gen. 2:15.

the goodness or evil of human action will be decided, not by the moralist and his ethics, but by God the Commander.”¹⁵⁵ In this way, theological ethics can prepare us for the encounter with the command of God. But how can we acquire the knowledge that makes this preparation possible? Barth rejects the efforts of Brunner and Bonhoeffer to make such knowledge rest on the ‘orders’ of creation or of society, and on ‘mandates,’ respectively. To do so involves, in the case of Brunner, an appeal to natural law as a source of revelation knowable apart from the Word of God’s grace. Bonhoeffer, by contrast, appeals to Scripture as the source of our knowledge of the mandates, and yet fails to listen in a sufficiently ‘radical and comprehensive’ way, and so ends up with an arbitrary arrangement.¹⁵⁶ Here we find one of the most significant points of departure, concerning content, between Barth and Bonhoeffer. And given the centrality of the notion of the command of God for Barth’s ethics, divergence at this point could threaten to rend the fabric I’m claiming to be able to weave here in two. Barth consistently refuses to hear Scripture as a set of universal pronouncements. Instead, for him, to read the Bible is to read a record of what God has said or commanded to particular persons in particular situations in the past. Through this reading one comes to know the character of the One who speaks / commands, so that if one thought one heard a command in one’s own situation that ran contrary to this record, one would have serious reasons to question oneself thoroughly before adopting that course of action. But we can never use Scripture to pin down the precise will or command of God in the present and particular case.

But arguably only a superficial reading of Bonhoeffer would permit a real separation from Barth on these grounds. We can see this from the fact that, like Barth, Bonhoeffer rejects a

¹⁵⁵ *CD III/4*, p. 18.

¹⁵⁶ *CD III/4*, p. 23.

casuistical approach to ethics. Barth himself cites Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* in support of his rejection of casuistry:

An ethics cannot be a book in which there is set out how everything in the world actually ought to be but unfortunately is not, and an ethicist cannot be a man who always knows better than others what is to be done and how it is to be done. An ethics cannot be a work of reference for moral action which is guaranteed to be unexceptionable, and the ethicist cannot be the competent critic and judge of every human activity. An ethic cannot be a retort [sic] in which ethical or Christian human beings are produced, and the ethicist cannot be the embodiment or ideal type of a life which is, on principle, moral.¹⁵⁷

Barth and Bonhoeffer alike see it as key that the Christian ethicist does not take on the role of discovering or constructing the basis of ethics, but instead only testifies to the basis which already exists and has been declared and spoken to human beings by God. This, more than anything else, is the reason why no other foundation for ethics other than the gracious revelation of God in Jesus Christ is ultimately feasible; any other foundation would be inconsistent with the reality of things as God in God's sovereignty, has decided they should be. So, like the related worry about the method discussed above, the present concern arguably does not in the end significantly divide the two thinkers.

Another point of potentially significant divergence in the content of the ethics of the two thinkers concerns their relative openness to the possibility of at least a form of goodness existing "outside" and "in addition to" the scope of Christian revelation. I put these expressions in quotation marks because there is quite clearly a sense in which neither Barth nor Bonhoeffer sees any goodness (nor any reality, for that matter) outside of God. Nevertheless, Bonhoeffer experiments with a theory of penultimate goodness that one could imagine Barth roundly rejecting. We can recognize such an experiment in Bonhoeffer's attempts to rehabilitate the concept of the "natural" in "Natural Life," in his attempts to preserve the integrity of the penultimate in "Ultimate and Penultimate Things," and

¹⁵⁷ Quoted at *CD* III/4, 10.

especially in “Church and World I,” where he makes much of the alliance found concretely in the midst of struggle between Christians and non-Christian defenders of the values of reason, culture, humanity, tolerance and autonomy.¹⁵⁸ Bonhoeffer, at least from a certain sort of Barthian perspective, looks to be walking too fine a line between ethics as grounded squarely and unequivocally in the revelation of grace in Jesus Christ and another ethics, seen as also legitimate, alongside this first, an ethics derived from and accessible to human faculties even apart from Christian revelation.¹⁵⁹

But we can lessen the apparent gap between the two thinkers in two ways – one on Barth’s side and the other on Bonhoeffer’s – and when one realizes this, one can see that in fact the perspectives of the two thinkers are in substantial agreement, even here. On Barth’s side, we find a willingness to admit that the Word of God can be spoken outside the church just as much as inside it. Genuine (that is, Christologically-grounded) theological ethics, Barth concedes, can and should listen to and even “receive instruction and correction from” a “general ethical enquiry and reply,” and allow this general approach “a legitimate place in the discussion.” This is so, Barth says, because “the one Word of God is also objectively spoken and prevails even in the midst of human perversity?”¹⁶⁰ For this reason, he says, those within the church must retain an attitude of deep humility along with a willingness to listen carefully to those outside the church, to and through whom the Word may be declared. At the same time, those who hear this Word within the church have to acknowledge the fallibility of their own hearing and speaking. The extra-ecclesial reception

¹⁵⁸ Concerning the latter point, see *Ethics*, p. 340.

¹⁵⁹ It is tempting to assign, as the reason for this divergence, the fact that Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran and Barth was more partial to a Reformed point of view. Hence, one might argue, it was easier for Bonhoeffer to countenance a residual goodness left over in creation and in human nature even after the fall, so that, even as sinners, it remains possible for human beings to accomplish genuinely good deeds, at least to some extent. For reasons I cannot go into here, and some of which will become apparent in the main text that follows, I believe that one should not give too much weight to this sort of consideration. Both thinkers, at least in their more mature periods, were too subtle and comprehensive to be limited to a single theological tradition.

¹⁶⁰ *CD II/2*, p. 523.

of the Word of God of which Barth speaks can be found concretely in, for instance, the work of individuals like “Jeremias Gotthelf, H. de Balzac, Charles Dickens, Dostoievski, Tolstoi, Theodor Fontane or John Galsworthy,” works which “open up the whole problem of the uncertain and questionable nature of human life and conduct... without asserting that there is an ultimate reality either from or within the human self as such, without seeking or exhibiting in man the principle and the reality of the good.”¹⁶¹ In observing this openness to non-(explicitly-)theological ethics, we have to remain aware that if such are to be genuine, for Barth, they will nevertheless have to be ultimately consistent with the presuppositions of theological ethics. For truth is truth, for Barth, and so any small-t truth to be found in circles not explicitly Christian will always be true in view of the capital-t Truth that is Christ, in whom “all things hold together.”¹⁶²

We can also approach reconciliation on the issue of legitimacy of non-Christologically grounded ethics from Bonhoeffer’s side, as we observe that although he treats of the integrity of the penultimate, it is what it is, and possesses the integrity it has, only because of the ultimate. Bonhoeffer makes efforts to renew and reinstate the concept of the natural, but he does so always and explicitly by defining the natural in terms of the supernatural – the ultimate – to which it is ordered, and from which it derives its legitimacy (e.g. in the case of natural rights). In the same way, all humanistic values must ultimately come to Christ if they are to stand. “Christ is the center and power of the Bible, of the church, of theology,” Bonhoeffer writes, “but also of humanity, reason, justice, and culture. To Christ everything must return; only under Christ’s protection can it live.”¹⁶³ So we have to say that once again it is only a relatively superficial and partial reading of Barth and Bonhoeffer that warrants

¹⁶¹ *CD* II/2, p. 541.

¹⁶² Col. 1:17, NIV.

¹⁶³ *Ethics*, 341.

the claim that the two thinkers diverge enough in their respective outlooks to make it untenable to treat them as proponents of a unified perspective.

The Challenge of Barth and Bonhoeffer's Approach to Ethics

We have already seen multifaceted arguments in each of the theologians we are considering for common conclusions. All and only ethics grounded in Christ are fully genuine ethics, capable of giving an ultimately accurate and adequate conception of the good of human life and activity. We have also shown that, while tensions can be found in the method and content of their respective treatments of ethics, these tensions are insufficient to pull the two thinkers apart regarding the common approach to ethics they both espouse. In light of this, we can now survey the challenge with which this common approach confronts the would-be ethicist, and especially the would-be Christian ethicist. In a nutshell, the challenge presented by the ethical approach of Barth and Bonhoeffer comes from the rigor with which they take seriously the message of the Christian faith, the good news that God really has reconciled the world to Himself in Christ, and has thereby delivered human beings from death to life. In the Christ event, we have been shown that our reality and our identity – indeed our very life – is not primarily in ourselves but in another. This is not the sort of event a person can, having once acknowledged its reality, set to one side when thinking about what she ought to do or how she ought to live. Anyone who takes this message as reality cannot avoid seeing it as completely and radically determinative of life and existence.

We should see the challenge of Barth and Bonhoeffer's ethics as primarily involving the questioning of the Christian ethical theorist in regard to the *consistency* of her views, along with a very clear and forceful conception of what that consistency must involve. How, these

two thinkers force us to ask, can ethics be done in a way that is consistent with the gospel, with the central message of Christian revelation? They pitch this question to an audience in which many Christian thinkers have for a long time been engaged in ethical work from within frameworks which Barth and Bonhoeffer take to be ultimately *inconsistent* with the gospel of God's grace. They seek to address attempts by Christian ethical theorists to ground ethics on another basis – not only on a secular basis such as “reason and experience” or “moral sentiments” or “desire/eudaimonia,” but even on a more distinctively theological basis, i.e. on a general/abstract conception of God, or on an identification of the divine command with the good in a context that does not fully equate the content of that command with Christ. So we have Barth writing,

The peculiarity of theological ethics does not consist in the fact that it is 'theonomous' ethics, that it understands the command of the good as God's command. The same thing is done elsewhere with seriousness and emphasis. But its peculiarity and advantage consist in the name of Jesus Christ with which it can state the basis and right of the divine claim. It cannot guard this advantage too zealously.... We cannot possibly proceed to think or say anything more except with the basis and right of the gracious God, the basis and right of the name of Jesus Christ. Every deviation from this path is *per se* a step into the unfounded.¹⁶⁴

What is ultimately at issue for Barth and for Bonhoeffer, the motive that drives their insistence on a vigorously Christological grounding for ethics, is a life or death struggle to rescue the church from the world. But, for both thinkers, this can only really be (in view of their principles) a bearing witness to the rescuing already accomplished by God in Jesus Christ. Barth warns that “the attempt to set up alongside Him [Christ] a specifically Christian righteousness, holiness and vitality” is the essence of apostasy in the Church, and “always involves secularisation: an inevitable surrender of faith and love and hope, the betrayal of the Church and its message and order to the powers and values and principles of the world.”¹⁶⁵ Understanding this motivation helps us to appreciate the hyperbolic and almost vitriolic language of many of the assertions Barth makes, comparing Christian ethics,

¹⁶⁴ CD II/2, p. 565.

¹⁶⁵ CD I/2, p. 383.

for instance, with the Israelites invading the land of Canaan to conquer and enslave the so-called native inhabitants of the land (the proponents of non-Christologically-grounded ethics).¹⁶⁶

The theological (and political) context in which Barth and Bonhoeffer wrote, which has arguably not changed significantly in this respect in the intervening years, required (and perhaps still requires) a stringent insistence on the need to resist alien determinants (determinative factors outside of the gospel revealed in Jesus Christ) in ethics. Many Christian thinkers are tempted to adopt an apologetic stance and to offer a justification of the gospel in neutral terms – terms available to a person irrespective of whether or not they accept the Christian revelation. The problem with taking such a stance, as Bonhoeffer and Barth insist, is that one ends up denying the ultimate of its ultimate status, subjecting it to creaturely criteria of judgment and evaluation. One thereby reduces God to something one can control and manipulate, as both Barth and Bonhoeffer take to be the case in casuistic ethics, in which the ethicist sees his task as that of interpreting and determining which principle applies in which case. Arguably Barth and Bonhoeffer are right to protest against such a taming of God, the ultimate reality and origin of all things. One might agree with the point of the preceding paragraph and yet still be tempted to introduce a sort of duality into ethics, making room for the ultimate to determine life and existence within the Christian sphere, but then allowing a second sphere outside of this in which sub-ultimate principles suffice.¹⁶⁷ But again, keeping the reality of God's self-revelation in Christ in view, and seeing with Bonhoeffer how really the entirety of the world, even in all its godlessness, has been reconciled with God in Christ, one can never be satisfied with a view that surrenders substantial territory to the hands of someone or something other than Christ.

¹⁶⁶ See *CD* II/2, 522.

¹⁶⁷ Schleiermacher takes such an approach, and much of Barth's thought can be seen as a response to Schleiermacher.

How can a Christian accept an answer to the ethical question derived from facets of human experience or human nature considered in abstraction from the reality of human existence taken up into the Godhead in Christ? How can he or she put aside the life-altering convictions that have resulted, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, in his or her becoming a new creation, in order to then speak of human life and action as though it were ultimately unaffected (or at least not very deeply or seriously affected) by this regenerative process? Whatever one thinks of the character a Christologically-grounded ethics should have, and whatever specific answer one thinks a follower of Jesus Christ should give to particular ethical questions, one may not, according to Barth and Bonhoeffer, accept an effort to build one's ethics on a foundation other than the one which God Himself has laid. If in fact God has raised and given His answer to the question of human goodness in His Son, in whom – that is, in the gospel – alone true human righteousness has been established, then for an ethicist, and especially for a Christian ethicist who claims allegiance to this gospel, to pose the question differently and to provide an answer that diverges from that which God has given, can hardly be understood as anything less than rebellion against God's grace. I agree that a Christian who seeks to be faithful to the claims of scripture has, on pain of inconsistency, to take Christ as in some very radical sense the source of all normativity. But before making a final statement concerning the demand that Barth and Bonhoeffer's ethical thought must continue to make on any undertaking of Christian ethics, it will be worth outlining some of the more problematic aspects of their arguments, since doing so will enable a clearer articulation and contextualization of the thesis I am driving at.

Assessing the Arguments for the Christological Basis of Ethics

The previous section of the present chapter having accomplished the preliminary work of showing that Barth and Bonhoeffer present a unified front in their approach to ethics, and that taken together their work poses a powerful challenge to any further Christian ethical theorizing. But are these claims legitimate? Are their arguments cogent? Are there counter-considerations that pull us toward opposite conclusions to the ones they reach, and if so, how strong are they compared with the considerations that motivate Barth and Bonhoeffer's arguments? As I have stated already, I do not intend here to give a systematic defense of Barth and Bonhoeffer's conclusions (whether concerning the need for or the character of a Christological basis of ethics). But because I am arguing that even one who disagrees with the details of how these two theologians reason toward their conclusions remains bound to respond to the challenge they present, I must consider at least the sort of objections that would, if successful, undermine even the basic perspective that gives that challenge its weight.

Before going further it is worth recalling that in the first two chapters we laid out two types of arguments as we found them in Barth and Bonhoeffer's ethical work. The first type concerned the conclusion that all (the positive arguments) and only (the negative arguments) properly Christologically-grounded ethics are genuine or legitimate ethics. The second type of arguments we discussed concerned the character an ethics derived from an adequate Christological foundation should possess. As we attempt to assess the approach to ethics of Barth and Bonhoeffer, three questions now confront us: First, what is the quality of the arguments they employ to conclude that a Christological basis of ethics is indispensable?

Second, is a Christological basis of ethics in fact indispensable? And third, to what extent (and for what reasons) are we who agree that a Christological basis of ethics is indispensably bound to develop ethics in the manner that Barth and Bonhoeffer develop it? In what follows, the focus will be almost exclusively on the second question, though in answering it, at least partial answers to the first and third questions will also emerge. Given the close link between the Christological basis of ethics and the ethical claims derivable from it, an answer to the second question will often already be a significant step toward characterizing a Christologically-grounded ethics. And further, to adequately answer the third question one would really have to take account of the character of the whole ethics of each thinker, something that is far beyond feasible for an essay of this length. We are asking primarily, then, in the course of engaging the following objections, whether Barth and Bonhoeffer are right in claiming that any genuine ethics must explicitly or (at least) implicitly involve a Christological foundation.

From another perspective, the question of the significance of the thought of Barth and Bonhoeffer for ethics breaks into two related sub-questions. On the one hand, we might ask about the significance of their thought for ethics as conceived of and practiced within the church. On the other hand, we can ask about its significance for the world outside the church.¹⁶⁸ If Christianity is true, that is, if God has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ as Christian witness proclaims that He has, then Christian ethics will be the only (comprehensively) true ethics. The self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ has definite and distinctive ethical implications which no legitimate attempt to answer the ethical question can avoid. And yet all of this being true obviously depends on the actuality of revelation –

¹⁶⁸ It is clear that neither of these thinkers wants to limit the claims of a Christian ethics to the sphere of the church and not also to the world, or to theology only and not also philosophy; instead, each desires to embrace the whole of humanity within the scope of Christian ethics, just as Christ embraces in Himself the whole of humanity. For instance, Bonhoeffer writes, “Ever since Jesus Christ said of himself, ‘I am the life’ . . . no Christian thinking or indeed philosophical reflection can any longer ignore this claim and the reality it contains.” (249)

since the gospel is made known in the event of revelation or God's speech to us, through the Holy Spirit. Coming from an epistemological perspective that prioritizes human experience and unaided reason (or at any rate that excludes the possibility of the supernatural) it only makes sense to look for a basis for normativity in one or another empirically/rationally determined conception of human nature. From a position outside of faith, it is hard to avoid seeing the ethical thinking of Barth and Bonhoeffer as caught in a vicious epistemological circle.

Q: What is the basis of ethics?

A: Jesus Christ.

Q: How do we know this?

A: Via revelation as God speaks to us through scripture.

Q: What is the basis of the authority of this spoken Word and how do we authenticate it?

A: Via whatever standards are available to us through scripture and our lived experience of hearing God speak.

If someone is not already caught up into the experience of hearing and believing (and hence also doing in obedience) the Word of God, one can only stand in astonishment, like Pharaoh, asking, "Who is Yahweh that I should obey him?" One can admit that, hypothetically, if I accepted the starting points I would be bound to the ethical implications. But why accept the starting points?

What can Barth and Bonhoeffer offer to a person in this state? Fortunately, I can avoid answering this question here, since this is obviously not the place to debate the actuality of revelation, on which topic so much ink has been spilled elsewhere, and so I will not here treat this as a significant objection, though I recognize that a full (apologetically oriented) defense of the Barthian and Bonhoefferian position would require it. Given that my thesis primarily speaks to persons who already possess more or less orthodox Christian

convictions, the sorts of objections I countenance in what follows will be the sort that can be raised “in-house.”

Objection Class A: Questionable Assumptions

The Application of the Genesis 3 Account to Ethics

The conclusion of Barth’s negative argument for the Christological basis of Ethics, as presented in chapter 1, reads as follows:

Any approach to ethics that attempts to raise and answer the ethical question apart from the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ (that is, any non-Christologically-grounded approach to ethics) is inherently sinful (and hence illegitimate).

Barth reaches this conclusion primarily by identifying the motive that drives any non-Christologically-grounded ethics with the desire for, and the attempt to possess, the knowledge of good and evil, the originary sin of humankind as characterized in Genesis 3 – to “be like God, knowing good and evil.” We saw Bonhoeffer similarly making much of the same sort of identification in his own negative argument. All approaches to ethics not grounded in Christ, according to these two thinkers, inevitably engage in the project of attempting to know good and evil, and to use this knowledge to judge human life and activity, a project in which the human being puts him or herself in the place of God, a place he or she cannot possibly fill. By contrast, an ethics grounded properly in Christ avoids this problem by explicitly and thoroughly requiring the ethical subject to abdicate any such efforts to do what only God can do. Rather than pronouncing judgments on what is good and evil from a usurped throne the person who begins, in ethics, with the reality of Christ, begins by accepting God’s judgment on good and evil, as it has already been fulfilled in

Christ, and seeks not to judge for him/herself, but to obey the concrete commandment of God in the freedom of genuine responsibility.

We can critically approach this crucial claim about the illegitimacy (because of the inherent sinfulness) of the very project of a non-Christologically-grounded ethics from a few different angles. We can begin by asking about the legitimacy of the hermeneutic maneuver by which Barth and Bonhoeffer transfer the original sin of humankind to non-Christologically-grounded ethics. In other words, does a legitimate exegesis of the text of Genesis 3 warrant the sort of application Barth and Bonhoeffer want to make on its basis? Must anyone wanting to be faithful to a biblical Christianity bind herself to their interpretations and applications of Gen 2-3? A complete examination of this question would take us far afield into the hotly disputed territory of scriptural interpretation, and will therefore be impossible in a relatively short assessment like this. But we can at least suggest how the examination might go. If authorial intention has a privileged place in assessing the meaning of a scriptural text, one would have to ask whether the author of Genesis 3 had anything of the sort Barth and Bonhoeffer seem to be reading into the text in mind. And on such grounds it would be quite reasonable (though by no means the only possible view) to see this as rather unlikely.

Such a criticism would, however, be too simplistic. For although both men make use of Genesis 3 as a key text, they draw out their claims about the sinfulness of non-Christologically-grounded ethics not from this text alone, but on the basis of broad biblical themes and theological thinking that arguably form a deep and powerful current within the narrative of salvation history. As is clear from Barth's emphasis on the need to understand sin from the site of Christology, the text of Genesis 3 has to be read and interpreted in view of the Christ event. The sinfulness of human beings is revealed, for Barth, only in the proud, slothful, and deceitful person of sin who was judged, condemned and set aside in the death

of Jesus Christ on the cross. But on what grounds, and to what extent, can we allow this Christologically coloured conception of sin to determine the meaning of the ancient Mosaic text? The answer that Barth and Bonhoeffer would give to this sort of question would likely appeal to the unity of the Word of God which speaks through Scripture. Consider, for instance, the subtitle of Bonhoeffer's *Creation and Fall*: "A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3." Bonhoeffer, in treating this text *theologically*, as opposed to historical-critically, makes use of an approach to Scripture he arguably learned in large part from Barth (the commentary on Romans provides an excellent example of such an approach in Barth). For either of these men, any other approach to Scripture (even if useful in its own way in contributing toward the faithful hearing of Scripture) will ultimately be useless, for Scripture must be heard as the Word of God or it is not heard at all. Whether one finds such a response satisfactory will ultimately depend on one's agreement with Barth and Bonhoeffer's understanding of biblical hermeneutics.

The Problem of Foundations

Foundationalism constitutes the third basic assumption of the Barth-Bonhoeffer perspective we are evaluating. It should be very clear from the reading I have given of Barth and Bonhoeffer, that I take them to be committed to a type of foundationalism, according to which (the truth of) certain statements (whether ethical or otherwise) are true in virtue of being grounded in (the truth of) other statements. Given certain facets of the thought of each thinker, my claim to read them as foundationalists needs to be qualified. On the one hand, Barth and Bonhoeffer reject the project of attempting to construct a foundation for ethics, whether in a transcendent order of ideal concepts (Plato) or in the structure of human desire (Aristotle - eudaimonism / Bentham (Mill) – utilitarianism) or in the imperative of human reason (Kant). Barth tells us that this cannot be the task of the ethicist operating within

dogmatics, since the task of this sort of ethicist can only be to bear witness to the foundation that has already been laid – namely the revelation of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. But although he opposes such projects as inherently misguided, Barth himself clearly still thinks ultimately according to a foundationalist paradigm. For him, Jesus Christ, the gracious Word and work of God, is the foundation of ethics. The same can be said for Bonhoeffer. That the foundation of ethics is a person (and a person who is fully God and fully human!), rather than a proposition or abstract principle or a set of propositions or principles suggests right away that the foundation is going to function in a different way than the way one functions in other systems. And yet each thinker does theological ethics by generating and proposing propositions and principles. And each clearly demonstrates a concern that the propositions in question are well-founded and well-connected with one another.

If we agree that Barth and Bonhoeffer can meaningfully be labelled as foundationalists, then we can ask, in a way that is relevant to their approach, whether ethics is in fact in need of a basis or foundation of any kind. We might ask, along with Richard Rorty for instance, whether the entire effort at securing a foundation for ethics, is not in the end a practically useless and unnecessary fantasy. Should we not instead simply accept the values and virtues we have inherited, as members of the conversation of the intellectual tradition of Europe / the West, giving up the idea that these are in need of being rooted in something outside of this conversational context? According to Rorty's pragmatism, whether we appeal to the voice of God, pure unmediated reason, indubitable self-evidence, such appeals are inconsistent with the way belief systems really work. Instead, various distinct compartments of theory hang together and are intertwined in various ways without anything absolute to ground the whole enterprise. How would this constitute an objection to Barth and Bonhoeffer? It could do so by suggesting that what one says about Christology, or theology more broadly, should not be taken to have any essential relationship to what one says about

what is good in human action. One would then be free – or, more strongly, required – to develop a relatively independent body of thought about ethics. And even if one could show how one’s thoughts about Christ and religion connect in interesting ways with what one says about ethics, one should not make a fuss about foundations. Such a perspective would of course undermine much of what Barth and Bonhoeffer are concerned to establish. But whether or not one takes this as a significant criticism of their project will depend on one’s perspective on (Rortyan) pragmatism. And while we don’t have space here to fully consider the merits and demerits on that position, we can at least note that such a perspective is far from being taken as a universal standard, so that the Barthian/Bonhoefferian can easily find epistemological allies more suited to her foundationalism.

Are Non-Christologically Grounded Ethics (All) Really So Bad?

Let us set aside the question of the legitimacy of Barth and Bonhoeffer’s interpretive use of Genesis 3 in order to examine from another perspective their more general claim concerning the inherent sinfulness of non-Christologically-grounded ethics. Bonhoeffer, for instance, gives an account of the essential disunity (and hence at least kinship with death) involved in possessing the knowledge of good and evil, and of the corresponding unity (and life) that results from restoration to the origin. Relatedly, according to Barth, any ethics that refuses (or, more neutrally, any ethics that fails) to take the revelation of God in Jesus Christ as its basis amounts to a usurpation of God’s prerogative and position and an essentially sinful human self-exaltation. Consequently, any Christian ethics that adopts a “general” or “apologetic” approach, attempting to explain and justify itself before the forum of reason or any other merely human court involves a fatal compromise and must be strongly opposed. The question we have to press, in face of the arguments of both Barth and Bonhoeffer, is whether and to what extent the (apparently harmless and even noble and important) desire

to be able to discern for oneself what is good and bad in one's choices and conduct is really so harmful. The implications of the answer we give to this question, as both of these theologians point out, are vast. If they are correct, a faithfully Christian ethics must really break in a radical way with all other approaches to ethics. But are Barth and Bonhoeffer (re-)claiming ethics for Christ, or are they at best exaggerating? Are approaches to ethics of the sort Barth classifies as "general" or "apologetic" really inconsistent with the gospel in the way Barth takes them to be?

One could oppose this tendency of Barth and Bonhoeffer's thinking, at least on the face of it, by the apparent absurdity to which it leads. So, one might ask, "Can it really be the case that my judging and acting on the knowledge that it is better for me to eat my green vegetables than to adopt a diet of pure chocolate, unless it is explicitly related to Christ, must be seen as a sinful action?" More to the point perhaps, one might ask for instance, "Can it really be not only misguided or incomplete thinking but *sinful* to judge that all other things being equal, it is better to do what increases utility (e.g. pleasure, broadly construed) and decreases disutility (e.g. pain and suffering)?" Especially in the event that someone is uninformed (either completely or partially) about the gospel, is it really a moot point whether they commit rape or give to charity? Are both options really equally evil?

Neither Barth nor Bonhoeffer are under the illusion that their conclusions in this area are particularly intuitive. At the same time, we can fairly question the presumption behind the sorts of questions raised in the previous paragraphs (that such absurdities really are entailed by the approach to ethics we're considering). In fact, what Barth and Bonhoeffer seem to be doing is to transcend the whole approach to asking about right and wrong, good and evil in the way presumed by those questions. This does not inhibit them from being able to say that, within the paradigm of the questioner, judged by the standards the questioner has in place, it

is obvious that it's better to love than to hate. But Barth and Bonhoeffer are after a bigger fish; they want to help us think in big-picture terms about the meaning of human life and action, and about the ultimate determination of human life. When it comes down to concrete cases, the answer one gets within a Christologically-determined ethics and the answer one gets from an ethics not so determined may often end up being the same. But for Barth and Bonhoeffer, everything depends on getting straight about whether or not one is in Christ. And being in Christ changes everything, because in Christ one is not alone. One is not abandoned to make one's decisions about good and evil in isolation. All that one does flows from what one is. And what one is is a person beloved by God and on whom grace has been poured out in abundance in Christ Jesus. We could say, in further defense of Barth and Bonhoeffer's position, that the real culprit is always resistance to grace, and this is an attitude that may be present regardless of whether one is tying one's shoelaces or torturing prisoners of war.

Objection Class B: Counter-considerations

We have looked at three questionable assumptions that play a role in structuring the perspective of Barth and Bonhoeffer on the Christological-foundation of ethics. The next set of objections concern clashes between their views and other values or beliefs that will be held by many, whether Christian or non-Christian. The cluster of objections considered here can be gathered around the single general issue of Christian exclusivism.

The Objection From Christian Exclusivism

Although I have been examining the question of the basis of ethics from within the boundaries of distinctively Christian thought, it does not feel right to avoid altogether an

objection that many (Christians and non-Christians) will want to raise about the entire project. Many will want to resist the strong Christocentric focus of Barth and Bonhoeffer for fear of being seen as excluding approaches to ethics that derive from other faiths or from a secular perspective. Some may even argue that it is *unchristian* to adopt an approach that appears, on the face of it at least, to be narrow-minded, intolerant and even bigoted. Can an approach that makes the traditional, scriptural Christian vision its *sine qua non*, its touchstone of truth and of warrant, have any hope of speaking to a culture which deeply respects (even if it does not explicitly adhere to) a pluralism or relativism in the spheres of morals, culture and religion?

In some ways the divergence between how we ordinarily think of ethics and the perspective of Barth and Bonhoeffer goes so deep that from within each point of view even the very way of posing questions to the other perspective can only seem unintelligible. Depending on what vantage point you are looking from, the meaning of “significant,” “ethics,” and “good” take on completely different meanings. On the “ordinary” view, we are seeking to compare “Christian ethics” as one brand among many of basically the same product; on the Barth-Bonhoeffer view, we are talking about completely different products. On the former view, we are attempting to discern, from the outside, whether a certain commitment in beliefs and values – which is in any case a level playing field as far as “Christian” and “non-Christian” can be applied to beliefs and values – will have an effect on a third factor (namely conduct and perhaps experience) that is, again, located on a universal and common playing field; on the latter view that very question can only be heard from the inside as the utterly misguided asking of someone on the outside seeking to make reality into something it quite clearly is not. For from the second point of view, there is not a domain of entities (beliefs, values, practices) which could retain their identity across the application of the labels “Christian”

and “non-Christian.” Instead, there is reality (life in Christ) and a series of shadowy unrealities whose existence one cannot in good faith acknowledge any more than one can make oneself believe that shadows are substantial beings independent of the bodies and light that produce them. And this way of putting the matter is fairly soft relative to the way Barth and Bonhoeffer at times put it.

In order to be faithful to Christian revelation, are we really required to make such a radical break with ordinary conceptions? If we are, is there any way that the enterprise of Christian ethics can be seen as healthy from outside the Christian perspective? Does being Christian (being in and believing in Christ) or not make any significant difference as far as ethics is concerned (as far as our ability to be good is concerned)? Of course what Barth and Bonhoeffer ultimately want to do is to show how there is no real alternative to the Christian perspective (since the only reality is Christ and the world taken up and reconciled in Him). And how can this be “shown” since it is only visible to faith? Barth and Bonhoeffer's convictions, it would seem, must be that in presenting ethics in a way that consistently points to God (as God is, and has revealed Godself, in Jesus Christ), the Word of God will speak to their readers through the agency of the Holy Spirit and plant the faith that is necessary for sight (from this perspective) in the reader. If they are right, all talk of perspectives (in the sense of a variety of possible interpretations of reality, some of which are compatible with God's self-revelation in Christ and some of which are not) is really only provisional.

To return to the main charge against the approach of Barth and Bonhoeffer's view, the claim here is that their approach cannot possibly be accepted, because it denies the legitimacy of so many other points of view which our value of tolerance and pluralistic way of thinking demand that we respect. One could reply curtly on behalf of Barth and Bonhoeffer that truth is particular and absolute and independent of what any individual or group happens to

believe, so that if one's concern is about truth, one will simply have to accept that because some things are true (A), other things (any proposition that entails not-A) are false. Of course it is impossible at this point to indulge in a full-on discussion of pluralism about truth, or about salvation. But we might add to the curt response countenanced here that Barth and Bonhoeffer do both insist on a very real openness to the world outside the church, and to the possibility, and indeed the reality of the revelation of truth to individuals not formally associated with the church or explicitly committed to the Christian religion. It's just that in the background whenever that happens the reality – the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ – is in fact operative. And the Christian at least, who believes in that grace and has staked her life on it, cannot ever go so far as to deny that this reality – a reality in which the whole world has been reconciled – is operative. Can these Barthian/Bonhoefferian conclusions ever sit comfortably with people predisposed to take Christianity as only one manifestation of a universal human tendency, the tendency for religion? Probably not. Would Barth or Bonhoeffer be worried about that? Clearly not, since to see things that way is an inherently non-Christian way of seeing, and for them, Jesus is Lord rather than prevailing and shifting cultural standards or authorities.

I might also briefly point out a more positive effect of this radical Christocentrism. There is a longing, on the part of many who have some experience with the Christian faith, for something more authentic. It is rather common to hear the complaint that people in the church are in the end no different from people outside it. This betrays an understandable expectation that something more should be happening in the household of the living God. Should not the fact that a group of people have dealings with the ultimate reality, an ultimate reality whose very essence is redemptive love, make more of a difference in the lives of those who claim to be claimed by it? But one should not be surprised at the all-too-human character of a church that has for so long imbibed a deistic rationalism and disavowed the

supernatural - a church that does not expect to hear God speak a living word into its midst. Neither Barth nor Bonhoeffer are willing to rest content with cheap forms of grace - grace that in the end makes no real claim on human life and elicits no response commensurable to itself. The reality of God revealed in Christ demands more.

Conclusion

Whether or not one agrees with Barth or Bonhoeffer about the shape a Christologically-grounded ethics should take, and whether or not one takes their perspective to be immune to objections concerning the details of how such an ethics should be established and what that means relative to other important considerations one has, it is hard to resist the force of the challenge they pose to any ethical theorist who wants to profess allegiance to orthodox Christian convictions and to the Christian scriptures. Barth and Bonhoeffer wrote in, and we continue to live in, a historical setting where various cultural forces have shifted mainstream opinion concerning the nature and significance of Christianity away from a radically obedient faith in the living and triune God whom one takes to be one's absolute Judge, Standard, Measure, and Lord, towards a humanistic set of moral principles fundamentally coherent with the moral traditions of all the great religious and ethical traditions. Barth and Bonhoeffer speak to Christian thinkers swimming in that cultural milieu, attempting to recall us to the hearing of the particular, concrete, living Word apart from which there is no true life, no true Church, no true salvation and no true sanctification. They recall us, in other words, to the testimony of scripture and to the reality of the gospel, that God is in Christ reconciling all of humanity, and even all of creation, to Himself.

We have seen the arguments of Barth and Bonhoeffer for the conclusion that all and only Christologically-grounded ethics are legitimate, and for the character such ethics should have. In spite of minor points of disagreement, these two 20th-century German theologians present a unified challenge that goes to the heart of the church's tendency toward apostasy or compromise with the world. And yet they do so from within a perspective that embraces all of the (godless, apostate) world, as God has embraced it completely in Christ, showing Himself to be for the world and not against it in all of His might and being. God exists only as the God fully revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, the One who gave Himself for us, taking our place, saving us and sanctifying us in Him. This reality – the reality of this gospel – places all-encompassing demands on human life and action that no ethics claiming to be Christian can consistently avoid. There is room for debate about what ethical, that is sanctified, human life will look like, and indeed the view of Barth and Bonhoeffer requires that the prerogative for making judgments about this must ultimately rest with God. The stringency and harshness with which they press their claim for the sole legitimacy of Christologically grounded ethics is mediated only by the fact that such ethics are the ethics of the grace of God who opposes us only to the extent that we oppose ourselves by resisting His love.

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