

Introduction

In order to get a sense of the multifaceted nature of Karl Barth's ethics, one thing to do is to conjure up before the inner eye images that western societies commonly associate with a long interval of the twentieth century such as the years between 1932 and 1967. This was the time it took Barth to publish his multi-volume *Church Dogmatics* (CD),¹ which comprises both theology and ethics. Moreover, the various social, ecclesial and political contexts of his work are reflected in the fact that the critical edition of Barth's works includes five volumes of individual smaller texts, written for particular occasions, as well as three volumes of open letters. The particular contexts of his work not only help us gain a better sense of where Barth is coming from in a given text. The fact that Barth often engaged contemporary public issues—be it in a more academic or a slightly more popular fashion—also provides us with clues about his own understanding of the ethical dimension of his work. While its multifaceted character does not make the descriptive and interpretive task easier, it also adds to the power inherent in Barth's work to speak to different times and contexts.

1. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936–61).

Barth's Ethics: Appreciative and Critical Stances

Karl Barth's influence in the church and the public sphere may well be unparalleled among his contemporaries in the German-speaking academy. The well-known issues that characterized his public activity include the role of the churches during Hitler's reign as well as political questions during the Cold War. Writing from exile, the philosopher Karl Löwith judged in 1940 that Barth's pamphlet *Theological Existence Today!* "was and remained the only serious expression of academic resistance against the raging time."² Barth critiqued the National Socialist transformation of a pluralistic society into a monohierarchical, totalitarian state when he addressed the problem of the so-called Aryan paragraph in church law and the unification of German Protestant churches under a national bishop. More dramatically, in 1938 Barth called on Czechoslovakians to resist an impending German invasion by force: "Every Czech soldier who would then fight and suffer will do so also for us, and he will do so—I am saying so today without reservation—even for the church of Jesus Christ."³

What may be less well-known is that, for example, his discussion of abortion in *CD* was the first thorough treatment of the issue in German after approximately 2 million German women suffered rape by members of the Red Army occupying east Germany.⁴ Another little-known consequence of Barth's work is that shortly after his death, a German reform of criminal law was influenced also by

2. Karl Löwith, *My Life in Germany before and after 1933: A Report*, trans. Elisabeth King (Athlone: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 37.

3. Barth, "Brief an Prof. Dr. Josef L. Hromádka, Prag 1938," in *Offene Briefe 1935–42*, ed. Diether Koch, Barth-Gesamtausgabe (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 2001), 107–33, 114. Whenever the footnote provides a German title for an English quotation, the translation is my own.

4. John L. Gaddis, *The Cold War* (London: Penguin, 2005), 24; Christiane Kohler-Weiss, *Schutz der Menschwerdung: Schwangerschaft und Schwangerschaftskonflikt als Thema evangelischer Ethik*, Öffentliche Theologie 17 (Gütersloh: Kaiser and Gütersloher, 2003), 37.

his ethical thought.⁵ There are even more examples of the public impact of Barth's thought in Germany. A politician and churchman who played an important role in the German policy of *détente* with the USSR under chancellor Willy Brandt, Erhard Eppler, recounts how his involvement in politics began when he heard Barth give the lecture "The Church between East and West."⁶ Another notable politician and church man, Jürgen Schmude, named the Barmen Declaration, penned mainly by Barth himself, his source of continuing orientation,⁷ as did the German constitutional judge Helmut Simon.⁸

All of these examples of Barth's impact on public life indicate that an important dimension of his ethics is eminently public in character. In all these examples of Barth's influence on German public life,

5. A key figure in the German reform of criminal law was Gustav Heinemann, former German secretary of justice and German president, who held the Barmen Declaration in high esteem and whose sister-in-law Gertrud Staewen was Barth's lifelong friend. A notable feature of the reform was, for instance, the abrogation of atonement as a category in criminal law. See Peter Borowsky, "Sozialliberale Koalition und innere Reformen," *Informationen zur politischen Bildung* 258 (1998): 31–40, www.bit.ly/JrG5iC; Gustav Walter Heinemann, *Einspruch: Ermutigung für entschiedene Demokraten*, ed. Diether Koch (Bonn: Dietz, 1999).
6. In Bern, Eppler attended Barth's original presentation of his lecture "Die Kirche zwischen Ost und West" (The church between east and west), published in *"Der Götze wackelt": Zeitkritische Aufsätze, Reden und Briefe von 1930 bis 1960*, ed. Karl Kupisch (Berlin: Vogt, 1961), 124–43. Eppler worked closely with Heinemann, became federal minister for development aid, and held high positions in the German Social Democratic Party. Rainer Burchardt, "Vom Minister zur Galionsfigur der Friedensbewegung: Zeitzeugen im Gespräch: Erhard Eppler," *Deutschlandradio*, Nov. 27th, 2008, <http://tinyurl.com/nskt4c2>. Jussi Hanhimäki, "Détente in Europe: 1969–1975," in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War: Crises and Détente*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 198–218. On Eppler, see Christine Simon, *Erhard Epplers Deutschland- und Ostpolitik*, PhD diss., University of Bonn, Germany, 2004, <http://hss.ulb.uni-bonn.de/2004/0337/0337.htm>.
7. Jürgen Schmude was secretary of education and science, of law, and of domestic affairs in West Germany (1978–82, successively), but also President of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD). From 1983–6, he chaired a commission of the Union of Evangelical Churches, Germany (EKU, part of EKD), with the task to articulate the contemporary meaning of the fifth thesis of the Barmen Declaration. He was awarded the Karl Barth Award of the EKU in 2008.
8. See Helmut Simon, "Die zweite und die fünfte These der Barmer Erklärung und der staatliche Gewaltgebrauch," in *Bekennende Kirche wagen: Barmen 1934–1984*, ed. Jürgen Moltmann, Kaiser Traktate (Munich: Kaiser, 1984), 199–222.

substantially theological reasons played a role in Barth's justification of his positions. He typically distinguished the church's characteristic standards of reasoning from "worldly" ones and challenged the church to cultivate the former. At the same time he rejected "Christian" public politics based primarily on religious justifications.⁹ But he did not simply withdraw from public responsibility into sectarian particularism. In the instances just mentioned, his ethical argument was thoroughly discursive and public. These are tensions, but they are fruitful, productive tensions. It should be added, however, that Barth did not always make it easy for his contemporaries to understand how these tensions might eventually be resolved. Sometimes his assertiveness was even perceived as the erratic instinct of a would-be prophet rather than resting on scholarly argument.¹⁰

Barth may be seen as steering a course between the Scylla of an ethical argument that is driven by the facts available to everyone—which would require attention to so many empirical details that one would no longer know how to fit all of them into an interpretive framework—and the Charybdis of a cantankerousness that can always tell good and evil apart, but consistently fails to appeal to those not yet converted. Can we discern a helpful strategy of ethical argument in Barth's work? How did he combine his insistence that the church focus on its particular task in faith and theology with his theological concern for wider society? Moreover, how is Barth's thinking on specific moral issues connected to positions he took on

9. Barth, "The Christian Community and Civil Community," in *Community, Church, and State: Three Essays*, ed. David Haddorff, trans. Will Herberg (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 149–89, 160–1. ("CCCC").

10. Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 405. When asked why political disputes with him regularly seem to escalate into all-out personal judgments, Barth rather unhelpfully called such a confrontation exemplary Christian commitment. See also *ibid.*, 395.

other moral questions, to his convictions in ethical methodology, and to his wider theological thought?

The question may arise whether the public role of the theologian is not in tension with the notion that Barth's standards of reasoning are strictly internal to the church. Is it true to the spirit of Barth's ethics, for example, to rely on empirical indications while arguing for faithful Christian action? It is very common to answer these questions in the negative. This seems to be in tension with the way Barth sought public attention, however, which then may very easily appear as authoritarian. By contrast, this volume argues that on the whole, the answer should be yes, even by standards internal to Barth's own theological thought. With this premise, what is Barth's conceptual strategy to attain wider resonance within society, while retaining his insistence on particular Christian commitments? I contend, as outlined below, that Barth's argument for a particular relationship between gospel and law is crucial in this regard, which will, however, require revision of certain aspects of textbook depictions of Barth's ethics.

In contrast to existing analyses of Barth's thought, the present work does not merely isolate a few exemplary material issues in ethics, nor does it suffice to extrapolate one strategy of ethical argument, such as "actualistic ethics" or "natural law." Indeed, while there are helpful and significant studies on Barth's ethics already, a serious attempt at a comprehensive look at Barth's ethical oeuvre still remains to be desired.¹¹ What must become clearer is not only if and how Barth

11. Since 1990, at least sixteen works dealing with Barth's ethics have been published in English, and, since 1968, about a dozen German monographs on individual aspects (see the overview below). Timothy Gorringer's *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony* stands out for its historico-genealogical approach, but Barth's substantial ethical sections in *CD* II/2 (273 pages) and III/4 (685 pages) are discussed on ten pages altogether. Gerald McKenny's *The Analogy of Grace* laments that an analysis of Barth's special ethics remains a desideratum of research. The following titles stand out in the English literature: Nigel Biggar, *The Hastening That Waits: Karl Barth's Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993); John B. Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*

made a consistent argument for any one strategy through the years, but especially how such a strategy relates to the particular positions he took on specific moral questions.

Trying to answer these questions, the present book is the only one to examine Barth's ethics using a historico-genealogical approach. This method will reveal new aspects in several large sections of Barth's texts, a close reading of which has remained a desideratum of research for some time. It will not come as a surprise if a work the scope of *CD*, written over more than three decades in the context of dramatic ecclesial and political changes, implies tensions, at least in some parts. It is multifaceted even if considered only in its ethical parts, and indeed *CD* will turn out to advocate rival views of ethics at times, some aspects of which are more helpful for today's ethical reflections than others.

A conundrum in current Barth studies is that his thought is claimed for contradicting agendas in theological ethics. While Nigel Biggar makes a case that Barth emphasized orders of creation, Paul Nimmo

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), Timothy J. Gorringer, *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony*, Christian Theology in Context (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); David Clough, *Ethics in Crisis: Interpreting Barth's Ethics*, Barth Studies (Farnham: Ashgate, 2005); Paul T. Nimmo, *Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Barth's Ethical Vision* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2006); Gerald McKenny, *The Analogy of Grace: Karl Barth's Moral Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Matthew Rose, *Ethics with Barth: God, Metaphysics and Morals*, Barth Studies (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010); David Haddorff, *Christian Ethics as Witness: Barth's Ethics for a World at Risk* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011). As the most recent collection of interactions with Barth on ethics, see the forthcoming volume by Markus Höfner (ed.), *Theo-Politics? Conversing with Barth in Western and Asian Contexts* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016). In the German literature, Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, Herbert Anzinger, and Frank Jehle have made helpful contributions, but the following titles deserve mention especially: Ulrich Dannemann, *Theologie und Politik im Denken Karl Barths*, Gesellschaft und Theologie 22 (München: Kaiser, 1977); Herbert Lindenlauf, *Karl Barth und die Lehre von der "Königsherrschaft Christi": Eine Untersuchung zum christozentrischen Ansatz der Ethik des Politischen im deutschsprachigen Protestantismus nach 1934* (Spardorf: Wilfer, 1988); Marco Hofheinz, "Er ist unser Friede": *Karl Barths christologische Grundlegung der Friedensethik im Gespräch mit John Howard Yoder*, Forschungen zur systematischen und ökumenischen Theologie 144 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014).

describes Barth's ethics in terms of a divine command that is unforeseeable and cannot be deduced. This latter concept, also known as actualism, views both God's command and God's self-determination of God's very nature as fundamentally contingent. Given the vast extent of Barth's writing, it is not surprising that current interpretations arrive at markedly different results. To some extent, there are difficulties in justifying the selection of key texts to guide one's overall argument. One of the goals of this book is to achieve a greater degree of objectivity in this descriptive task. For a more representative view, it is necessary to examine the correlation between Barth's conceptual approach and his judgments on specific moral questions. Nor are these aspects to be confined to just one period of Barth's work. In addition, greater attention needs to be paid to the historical circumstances in which Barth wrote his contributions to ethics.

According to a widespread critique, Barth evacuates ethics from critical discourse, which is closely connected with Barth's views about an ever "afresh" commanding of God that supersedes all previous ethical convictions. Barth's ethics are often criticized for a deficit in integrating experience into ethics, which is sometimes associated with a critique of the priority Barth assigns to the gospel over the law. By contrast, the priority of the *law* over the gospel in the Lutheran tradition is sometimes taken to forge a complementary, rather than a more critical, relationship between natural law traditions and christological traditions. The main document of Barth's actualistic ethics, *CD II/2* (ch. 8), opens the ethical section opposing that prioritization.

The question has been raised, however, if, under the rubric of the gospel, a christological approach can incorporate all the empirical factors that enter into moral discernment for those involved in moral conflict. James M. Gustafson argues that Christians do not merely

live a life characterized by religious commitments, but participate also in the worlds of politics, science, or business, for example, and a coherent, plausible way of life poses the difficult task of doing justice to many spheres of value. He considers a conception of ethics in which God simply hands down a command that requires obedience in all spheres of life insufficient.¹² Barth's reference to the gospel may also be said to bring the category of law under one-sided domination by ecclesial proclamation. The christological premises then confront the moral subject with drastic alternatives, furthering a contrast between church and world. This critique is voiced, among others, by Martin Honecker and Trutz Rendtorff.¹³

12. James M. Gustafson, *Can Ethics Be Christian?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 156–7, and “The Sectarian Temptation: Reflections on Theology, the Church, and the University,” in *Moral Discernment in the Christian Life: Essays on Theological Essays*, ed. Theo A. Boer and Paul E. Capetz, Library of Theological Ethics (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 142–54, at 150–51.
13. Trutz Rendtorff, *Ethics: Basic Elements and Methodology in an Ethical Theology*, trans. Keith Crim (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1986), 18, 61; Rendtorff, “Karl Barth und die Neuzeit,” in *Theologie in der Moderne: Über Religion im Prozess der Aufklärung* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 1991), 127–45, at 142. On Rendtorff, see also McKenny, *Analogy of Grace*, 127. The charge of authoritarianism is also associated with the critique of actualism, the “category of a decision that cannot be deduced” (Rendtorff, “Barth und die Neuzeit,” 142). See also Martin Honecker, “Weltliches Handeln unter der Herrschaft Christi: Zur Interpretation von Barmen II,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 96 (1972): 72–99, at 72–3 (“christological totalitarianism”), more moderately in *Einführung in die Theologische Ethik*, de Gruyter Lehrbuch (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1990), 79–82; Hermann Ringeling, “Kritik der Moderne und kritische Modernität: Evangelische Ethik heute,” *Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik* 40 (1996): 23–37, at 29; Georg Pfeiderer, *Karl Barths praktische Theologie: Zu Genese und Kontext eines paradigmatischen Entwurfs systematischer Theologie im 20. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 22. In his essay, “Die politische Verantwortung der Christengemeinde im Denken Barths,” *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 12 (1996): 149–74, Michael Beintker presents Barth's actualistic ethics favorably as a “situational ethics” (155), which in its fundamental allegiance to Christ retains an openness and freedom vis-à-vis mere principles, the nontheological sciences (145–6), and ideologies. However, even its strict commitment to God's command in the present situation is “after all something like a ‘principle’ as well” (156n33). In addition, Christian ethics necessarily depends on empirical analysis (167, 171), which Barth, however, cannot incorporate with a consistent methodology. As a result, his stance toward the social sciences is eclectic. To the extent that the church's proclamation is supposed to “reflect back into society” (167), the question arises about the true constructive potential of the “prophetic [dimension] as a qualified expression of the present Christ, who asserts his presence in an actualistic way and proclaims himself” (166). Is there not a tension between Beintker's case for social analysis and

On the other hand, it has been noted—for example, in the works of ethicists Heinz Eduard Tödt and Wolfgang Huber—in favor of Barth’s ethics that there are “significant cases of a rapprochement between an ethics indebted to Barth and Bonhoeffer and an ‘ethics of responsibility’ aware of the importance of consequences.”¹⁴ It is a sign of Barth’s influence that since about 1990, significant contributions to “public theology” have been influenced by a priority of the gospel to the law.¹⁵ It should be added, however, that this “brand” of theology is not typically associated with Barth’s name, as public theology argues for greater public debate and interdisciplinary analysis than Barth’s work is generally known for.¹⁶

The mattress will not be covered by too short a bed sheet. Attempts to describe Barth’s ethical work in terms of one particular theological method should be resisted. No analysis of this extensive work can do without substantial critique at least of certain aspects. To some degree, the considerable influence that Barth’s ethics has exercised rests on the fact that it inspired resistance against National Socialism and its totalitarian politics toward the churches. Although this remains a valid argument in favor of Barth’s ethics, its effects can be ambiguous. The subordination of ethics to theology has enabled a critique of ideologies that helped German theologians gain a constructive stance toward the recent German past.¹⁷ Even after 1945, it had an emancipatory effect in contexts other than National

“relationships of responsibility” (171), on the one hand, and the supposedly strictly situational character of Barth’s ethics, on the other?

14. Ringeling, “Kritik der Moderne,” 27.

15. Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, “Geschenkte Freiheit: Von welchen Voraussetzungen lebt der demokratische Staat?” *Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik* 49 (2005): 248–65, at 258–9.

16. Yet another ethics inspired by Barth is Hans Günther Ulrich, *Wie Geschöpfe leben: Konturen evangelischer Ethik*, Ethics in Theological Discourse 2, 2nd ed. (Berlin: LIT, 2007). It is closely related to Barth’s actualism, but still differs from Barth’s notion of God’s contingent revelation of God’s command. The book avoids Barth’s name painstakingly, but might be said to transpose Barth’s actualism into a Lutheran key.

17. This can be demonstrated in the case of the ethicist Heinz Eduard Tödt: Wolfgang Schuhmacher, *Theologische Ethik als Verantwortungsethik: Leben und Werk Heinz Eduard Tödt’s in*

Socialism.¹⁸ In particular circumstances, however, the argument of a critique of ideologies can contribute to an unhelpful polarization of the discussion about Barth's ethics. Rather than mapping out entire forests, one must also distinguish between individual trees. With a word from Barth's *Epistle to the Romans* (2nd ed., 1922, henceforth: *Rom II*), we should hope that eventually, "calm reflection on 'justice' and 'injustice' may then replace the revolutionary spasm . . . 'reality' can be taken into account prudently, as the hubris of a war of the good ones against the evil ones has been overcome."¹⁹ Critics doubt that the extent to which such realism captures the spirit of Barth's ethics is very large, however. If a working antidiscriminatory system of legal and social justice has been established, critics may still fear that Barth's ethics tends to treat moral decisions as a *status confessionis*, a situation that calls urgently for an exclusive Christian confession, precisely because it does not—supposedly—rest on empirical analysis, but on a mere judgment of faith.

In the face of these problems, it may help to set things in perspective historically. The most prominent document of Barth's ethical actualism, *CD II/2* (ch. 8), appeared when the National Socialist regime was at the peak of its international power, with Nazi sympathizers becoming more vocal even in Switzerland.²⁰ This

ökumenischer Perspektive, *Öffentliche Theologie* 20 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2006), 90.

18. On Barth's reception in Eastern Germany, see Matthias Gockel and Martin Leiner, "Kritik und Versöhnung: Karl Barth und die DDR," in *Karl Barths Theologie als europäisches Ereignis*, eds. Martin Leiner and Michael Trowitzsch (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 79–119, at 117–19; Heino Falcke, "Was hatte die Barmer Theologische Erklärung den Kirchen in der DDR zu sagen?" *Ökumenische Rundschau* 58 (2009): 28–37. For apartheid South Africa, see *On Reading Karl Barth in South Africa*, ed. Charles Villa-Vicencio (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988). See Dirkie Smit, "Paradigms of Radical Grace," in Villa-Vicencio, *ibid.*, 17–43, at 20, and in the same volume John de Gruchy, "Racism, Reconciliation, and Resistance," 139–55, at 140–41. See also Nico N. Koopman, "Status confessionis im Blick auf Apartheid, processus confessionis zu Fragen der ungerechten Weltwirtschaft: zur Rezeption der Barmer Theologischen Erklärung in Südafrika," *Ökumenische Rundschau* 58 (2009): 167–80.

19. Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Zweite Fassung): 1922*, ed. Cornelis van der Kooi and Katja Tolstaja, *Barth-Gesamtausgabe* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 2010), 653 (*Rom II*).

was a moment when an ideologically heated atmosphere was hardly conducive to a distanced and open-ended discourse according to shared standards of reasoning. On the other hand, the ensuing major ethical section, *CD III/4*, appeared in 1951, before the polarizing controversies about West Germany's joining NATO (1954) and the foundation of the army in West Germany (1955) took place. Germany and Switzerland had to find their own places in a newly emerging political order in the Northern Atlantic world. This background may be helpful in interpreting the fact that *CD III/4* aims much more strongly than actualistic ethics at establishing ethical consensus by discursive means.

What to make of the emancipatory potential of the priority of the gospel to the law then? Deciding for the special ethics—that is, the discussion of relatively concrete ethical questions—of *CD III/4* against the ethics of the doctrine of God in *CD II/2* would merely short-circuit the problem. After all, the theory of God's sovereign commanding in *CD II/2* follows on the heels of a section expounding the precedence of the gospel. Although Barth's ordering of gospel and law is controversial, it should not be overlooked that, of all things, critics take issue with a text according to which a course of action is moral only to the extent that it is rooted in the *liberation* of the human person by God. This should raise the question how far a course of action is in keeping with an emancipatory impulse. In turn, how does actualism relate to the priority of the gospel over the law?

20. Only toward the end of 1941 did it turn out that the German invasion of the Soviet Union suffered from fundamental logistical and strategic mistakes, if nothing else. In summer 1942, military events sealed the fate of the invasion. Kurt Bauer, *Nationalsozialismus: Ursprünge, Anfänge, Aufstieg und Fall* (Wien et al.: Böhlau, 2008), 382, 388.

Actualism and Election

To begin with, it is helpful to compare two major approaches in research on Barth's ethical oeuvre. While Nimmo highlights Barth's actualistic ethics, especially in *CD II/2*, Biggar's account relies mainly on Barth's special ethics, as in *CD III/4*. Both interpretations hinge on a specific view of Barth's theological thought as a whole.

Nimmo's monograph *Being in Action* pursues the actualistic interpretation of Barth's ethics most resolutely. The significance of this interpretive approach is also highlighted by David Clough, who draws a parallel between the actualistic ethics of *Rom II* and *CD*.²¹ Like Clough, Nimmo explicitly does not aim at a diachronic, historico-genealogical presentation of Barth's ethics. He restricts his monograph, moreover, to a synchronic, systematic presentation of the ethical sections in *CD* and the lectures *The Christian Life* from 1959–61 (edited posthumously, henceforth: *CL*). He understands Barth's actualistic concept of God's command as the consequence of a strictly "actualistic ontology." This notion objects to attempts to extrapolate general guidelines in God's commanding beyond an ever-fresh attending to God's new, incomparable commandment; God's very being is characterized by historical interaction.²²

It is only in this encounter with God that truly good news can be experienced. The God of the gospel is not characterized by any steady, inert being. Rather than being in the manner of a simple fact, God "is" only insofar as God acts ever anew. For this view Nimmo points especially to Barth's doctrine of election in *CD II/2*, which Barth calls "the sum of the Gospel."²³ In eternity, God the Son elects

21. Clough, *Ethics in Crisis*, 107, 127–8, 131.

22. Nimmo echoes Barth's vague statement that God will issue God's commands in accordance with certain continuous lines that are open to discovery (Nimmo, *Being in Action*, 32–3). Yet Nimmo also agrees with Barth's statement that all moral convictions must be suspended in asking for God's commandment, so they do not eclipse God's actual, new command (*ibid.*, 63).

humanity and resolves to bear the consequences of the creature's sin. In this Nimmo sees the theological culmination of the baseline conviction, "the history of Jesus Christ is identical with the history of God."²⁴ Not *all* theology is "ontotheology," Barth may be taken to imply in a gesture to an ongoing contemporary philosophical dispute.²⁵ In ethics, this focus on God's action and history is reacting against a general ontology, which might draw ethical conclusions from an order of nature, and against any attempt to pin God down to creaturely standards, which always orient themselves to being rather than opening themselves radically for God's ever-new action.²⁶ Christian ethics does its job best when arguing for the need to listen ever anew and making a theological case for this stance.²⁷ These statements rely especially on Barth's ethics of the doctrine of God in *CD II/2*, which follows on the heels of Barth's doctrine of election. The concept of God does not come full circle before the concept of God's commanding, as God not only elects the creatures, but also claims them, which constitutes their responsibility before God. Importantly, God's commanding even determines God's very being.

23. *CD II/2*, 3.

24. *Ibid.*, 8.

25. When Martin Heidegger recast ontology in temporal terms, he was wary of metaphysics as a distraction from the challenge of facing *Sein* squarely. One response would be to recast theology accordingly. It is probably not a coincidence that Dietrich Braun begins his preface to Barth's ethics lectures with the reminder that Heidegger's *Being and Time* and Carl Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political* enjoyed wide currency when Barth wrote these lectures. Barth, *Ethics*, vii. See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 41: "Dasein's Being finds its meaning in temporality. But temporality is also the condition which makes historicity possible as a temporal kind of Being which Dasein itself possesses, regardless of whether or how Dasein is an entity 'in time'. Historicity, as a determinate character, is prior to what is called 'history' (world-historical [events])."

26. Nimmo, *Being in Action*, 62.

27. *Ibid.*, 65. Ethics are about "the formation of a creaturely *habitus*" that attends to God ever anew. The only crucial thing is, in Barth's and Nimmo's words, "to dare" afresh, again and again, "the leap of choice, decision and action" (*ibid.*, 66).

Doubts about the constancy of the commanding would be misplaced, Nimmo argues, as constancy plays an important role among God's perfections.²⁸ God's commanding takes place as Scripture interprets itself, thus confronting the human person with God in its witness to God's action. At the same time this must not lead to any fixation on the letter of the Bible, which would be in contrast to God's free commanding.²⁹ While faithful to Scripture, God's command remains free vis-à-vis Scripture. This must be kept in mind when the ethics of the doctrine of creation *CD* III/4 seeks "assistance in listening to the command." Nimmo concedes that perhaps Barth does not fully sustain his polemics against casuistic deductions, coming too close to specifying what God's command truly says.³⁰ By contrast, Nimmo argues, if we do not learn from God's current commanding itself, we cannot know what God commands.

In great measure Nimmo's actualistic interpretation of Barth's ethics is in harmony with Bruce L. McCormack's influential historico-genealogical study, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (1995).³¹ Its detailed theological interpretations, which highlight the dialectical element in Barth's thought over against analogy, are important both for the purposes of this study and in gaining a better understanding of the interpretation of Barth's ethics so far. According to McCormack, a transition from Barth's critical

28. Nimmo concludes, using Barth's words, "The constancy of the command is guaranteed, for ... it has 'all the constancy of the divine faithfulness in contrast to our unfaithfulness'" (*ibid.*, 21). In a similar vein, see Clough, *Ethics in Crisis*, 129. What has been received as God's command is God's command in fact. To doubt if this command is in keeping with God's faithfulness is an expression of sin. Nimmo, *Being in Action*, 19; 36–7.

29. According to Nimmo, *Being in Action*, 33, 36, God's command is not bound by Scripture's witness to a previous command. God's freedom "dictates" this (33), which, then, seems to have a strong libertarian dimension.

30. *Ibid.*, 58.

31. Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997).

thought in *Rom II* to a more constructive presentation of a dogmatics was manifest already in the 1924 dogmatics lectures at Göttingen (1924–5; part 3 held in Münster; henceforth *GD*).³² In addition, Barth's theological change was far less drastic than typically assumed. While *Rom II* highlights the aspect of judgment perhaps too strongly, it also maintains the temporal reality of the resurrection.³³ Barth's critique of religion is compatible with constructive theological thought as the resurrection is that reality in history that constitutes its own worldly possibility. Understood as *actus purus*, or "pure event,"³⁴ revelation is also possible by the standards of *Rom II*, even while Jesus Christ represents a critical *vis-à-vis* the world. Here actualism denotes God's action as it takes place in irreducibly contingent, historically real events, which thus place the addressees into a critical position *vis-à-vis* worldly realities. Thus God reveals God's self through a medium that also conceals God's self.³⁵ The point of this concept of revelation is that proclamation participates in an extraordinary, contingent "correlation of Spirit and Scripture."³⁶ McCormack also captures this with the terminology of *pneumatocentrism* and an *an-* or *enhypostatic* Christology: the revelation in Christ is nothing short of a miracle performed in the freedom of the Holy Spirit; Jesus Christ's humanity is nothing more and nothing less than the vehicle of revelation, and apart from revelation, there would be no human person Jesus Christ. Christ's humanity is strictly dependent on the eternal Son, for whom it is entirely transparent, both in the Son's self-revelation and his self-

32. *The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion*, ed. Hannelotte Reiffen, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) (*GD I*).

33. *Ibid.*, 251–2.

34. *Ibid.*, 253.

35. *Ibid.*, 250. Thus still in *CD II/1*, 341 ("God is for us fully revealed and fully concealed in His self-disclosure").

36. McCormack, *Barth's Theology*, 342.

concealing.³⁷ This concept amounts to radical divine freedom both from and for the world. As the antithesis of revelation and concealment is dialectically sublated in Jesus Christ, God's current revelation in Christ cannot be measured critically against the standard of a previous revelation.

McCormack thus objects to Hans Urs von Balthasar's influential interpretation of Barth's theology. Von Balthasar posited that Barth's *Christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf* (the *Münster Dogmatics* from 1927, relying upon Barth's 1926–8 lecture series, henceforth *MD*), in conjunction with Barth's book *Fides quaerens intellectum* (1931), represents a change of direction from a dialectical to an analogical mode of thought.³⁸ According to McCormack, both elements are already present, if in varying degrees, in *Rom II* and *GD*. Yet Barth highlights divine freedom over against the notion of an *analogia entis*, the notion that divine revelation relies on creaturely things that are thus imbued with an abiding theological purchasing power.

McCormack's last chapter, however, lays out a momentous new development, describing Barth's new interpretation of the doctrine of election around 1940.³⁹ A significant modification of Barth's actualism now takes place, as he argues critically that his brother Peter's interpretation of John Calvin's notion of divine election fails to do justice to the history of Jesus Christ as the true norm of

37. Barth, *Unterricht in der christlichen Religion: Die Lehre von Gott/Die Lehre vom Menschen 1924/25*, ed. Hinrich Stoevesandt, Barth-Gesamtausgabe (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1990), 193–4; this volume, the successor of *Göttingen Dogmatics* vol. 1 (*GD I*), will be abbreviated *GD II*. Translations of quotations by A. M. See also McCormack, *Barth's Theology*, 362.

38. Barth's *Fides quaerens intellectum* argues that only the church's proclamation, rather than speculation apart from such witness, does justice to God's power and aseity. Barth, *Fides quaerens intellectum: Anselms Beweis für die Existenz Gottes, 1931*, ed. Eberhard Jüngel and Ingolf U. Dalferth, Barth-Gesamtausgabe (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1981). God is truth as the "ground of all . . . that exists" (103). Thus, in the church, "that *summum bonum*" (highest good) must be "deduced" (*erschlossen*) "in 'ascending' from the relative, finite goods" (120).

39. On Barth's doctrine of election in *GD* and *CD*, see especially Matthias Gockel, *Barth and Schleiermacher on the Doctrine of Election: A Systematic-Theological Comparison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

theology. God's election takes place as God's revelation separates belief from unbelief every moment anew, Peter argued.⁴⁰ By contrast, Karl contends—based on a lecture by Pierre Maury—that with the eternal decree in Jesus Christ, a unique contingent act gains ontological importance for God's self.⁴¹

In consequence, Jesus Christ's story is God's own story.⁴² In this new scheme, the statement "God's being is a 'being in act'" means God's one definite, eternal act, from which a distinct, 'crucial' historical course of action flows. This new approach to the doctrine of election is actualistic as it focuses on a contingent event. However, we are now dealing with a single, eternal event, which led to a particular historical event, or a coherent story of historical events, rather than many seemingly disparate historical events. McCormack in fact prefers the term *covenant ontology* to the term *actualistic ontology*, thus highlighting a theological concept with a more specific historical reference rather than the principle of contingency.⁴³

40. McCormack, *Barth's Theology*, 455–6. Karl appreciates Peter's concept to the extent that it does not isolate God's eternal choice from history. Going beyond that, however, Maury views the history that figures prominently in God's election in christological terms. Karl intensifies this new take in 1936 and 1937 by calling Christ the electing God and the elected human person. Gockel, *Barth and Schleiermacher on the Doctrine of Election*, 160–4.

41. McCormack, *Barth's Theology*, 456.

42. *Ibid.*, 461. For this reason, Gundlach raises "critical questions regarding the positioning of the doctrine of the Trinity in the overall structure of Barth's *CD*." Thies Gundlach, *Selbstbegrenzung Gottes und die Autonomie des Menschen: Karl Barths Kirchliche Dogmatik als Modernisierungsschritt evangelischer Theologie*, Europäische Hochschulschriften Theologie 471 (Frankfurt am Main and New York: Lang, 1992), 161–2. See also Raymund Schwager, *Der wunderbare Tausch: Zur Geschichte und Deutung der Erlösungslehre* (Munich: Kösel, 1986), 250, who calls God's election according to Barth "in the full sense God's decision about God's self." Hans Theodor Goebel argues: "Strikingly, Barth's doctrine of election has the same function as the doctrine of the Trinity, as laid out in the prolegomena of the *Church Dogmatics*." Goebel, "Trinitätslehre und Erwählungslehre bei Karl Barth: Eine Problemanzeige," in *Wahrheit und Versöhnung: Theologische und philosophische Beiträge zur Gotteslehre*, eds. Dietrich Korsch and Hartmut Ruddies (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn 1989), 147–66, at 159, see also 153–4.

43. Bruce L. McCormack, "Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John B. Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 92–110, at 99.

In accordance with this usage, I will employ the term *actualistic* in the sense of a libertarian divine freedom leading to new, potentially incommensurate historical events that define God's being. This distinction between two varieties of actualism—perhaps one defended by Peter Barth and Karl's early work, the other by Karl's later work—is crucial for the present work. For a fundamental problem with the insistence on God's radical freedom is that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Moreover, novel ways of being faithful in novel situations require criteria, lest we project the mere freedom of license into God's command. But Jesus' story, with which God's story is taken to be identical, is a particular, definite story. Disputing the role of this story as a criterion for discussions in applied ethics, however, would appear to empty the legitimate and helpful notion that revelation inscribes historical contingency into God's very being, rendering contingency pointless by overemphasizing it. Already here we must ask whether God's revelation—of God's self, of God's command—may indeed always be correlated with a similar concealing on God's part, if indeed Barth's turn in the doctrine of election is directed against an ever-new electing and refusing, and if a correlation of divine revelation and concealment highlights a principle of historical contingency in such a way that it may introduce a certain degree of theological arbitrariness via an unspecific principle of historical contingency.

Orders of Creation

In contrast to the actualistic interpretation of Barth's ethics, Nigel Biggar's monograph *The Hastening That Waits* (1993) highlights continuity in the content of God's commandment.⁴⁴ Biggar points

44. Nigel Biggar, *The Hastening the Waits: Karl Barth's Ethics*, Oxford Studies in Theological Ethics (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993). See also Biggar, "Barth's Trinitarian Ethic," in Webster, *Cambridge Companion to Barth*, 212–27 and Biggar, "Hearing God's Command and Thinking About

out that God revealed God's will in Jesus Christ, as the eternal election once and for all vouches for God's faithfulness toward humanity.⁴⁵ On the whole, however, Biggar's point is that Barth's ethics aim at action according to orders of creation. Barth interprets the biblical witness to God's revelation as containing ethical rules that must be continually matched with and applied to the current situation.⁴⁶ By contrast, Biggar criticizes large parts of Barth's ethics, especially the actualistic ethics of the doctrine of God (*CD II/2*), as the arbitrary piety of a Christian intuitionism, as actualistic ethics does not recognize any criterion of a supposed commandment apart from God's self.⁴⁷ This would preclude, however, discussions in applied ethics.⁴⁸ While Biggar devotes very little space to Barth's notion of an incommensurate command that must be heard ever afresh, he argues that Barth's ethics of creation in *CD III/4* offer a new approach. These sections discuss specific ethics.⁴⁹ Once Barth tackles specific moral problems, Biggar argues, he assumes that God's command works much in the way of general rules.⁵⁰

What's Right: With and beyond Barth," in *Reckoning with Barth: Essays in Commemoration of the Centenary of Karl Barth's Birth* (London: Mowbray, 1988), 101–18.

45. Biggar, *Hastening That Waits*, 28–9, 42, 118. God's election is in view as well when Biggar (*ibid.*, 28n95) quotes Paul Ramsey: "While for Barth God is free (as Lehmann constantly stresses and hence is concerned with the exceptional all the time), He has also made Himself known quite historically in Jesus Christ. . . . In Him is all we know about the humanity of God (theology) and the humanity of man (anthropology). This is also all we are given to know about the freedom of God, i.e., His freedom to bind Himself to the world and the world to Himself. By contrast, God's freedom in Lehmann is simply an autonomous theological speculation drawn from this world of rapid change" (Ramsey's parentheses).
46. See also William Werpewowski, "Justification and Justice in the Theology of Karl Barth," *The Thomist* 50 (1986): 623–42. Wolf Krötke also highlights the closeness of Barth's thought in *CD III/4* to the notion of orders of creation: Krötke, "Die Schöpfungsordnungen im Lichte der Christologie: Zu Karl Barths Umgang mit einem unabweisbaren Problem," in *Barmen—Barth—Bonhoeffer: Beiträge zu einer zeitgemäßen christozentrischen Theologie* (Bielefeld: Luther, 2009), 155–78, at 164–5.
47. Biggar, *Hastening That Waits*, 20–21.
48. *Ibid.*, 19, 33.
49. *Ibid.*, 25–6.
50. *Ibid.*, 119.

Such moral rules do not, however, override the necessity of acting differently in very particular situations, which constitutes Barth's notion of the marginal case, or *Grenzfall*. In such cases God's command is not suspended, but takes on a new shape, reflecting the extraordinary nature of the situation. It amounts to an extraordinary instruction that may even be in tension with the shape God's command displays in regular cases. Barth thus practices a casuistry that, by way of both theological and empirical work, carves out a correlation between specific commandment and situation.⁵¹ While a key category of this ethics is indeed creation, it also hinges on an important christological dimension, which says that in the eternal election in Christ, God committed God's self to absolute faithfulness toward creation. The command thus revealed remains reliable.

An important point of Barth's that Biggar does not mention, however, is that God's election of humanity corresponds to Jesus Christ's decision to bear the burden of the divine reprobation of sin. The drama of the cross indeed indicates that matters are more complicated than accidental human sin in the face of a good, intact creation. However, Biggar's chapter on the trinitarian structure of Barth's ethics relativizes revelation in Christ with the statement that a personal differentiation within the Godhead, and also within God's commanding, is merely of a logical, not of an ontological kind.⁵² Of course this raises the doubt whether it is indeed God's grace that is enacted in Jesus of Nazareth.

On the whole, Biggar concedes, Barth's ethics strangely avoids an open confession of its nature as an ethics of the orders of creation. Yet both *MD* and *CD III/4* consider "work, marriage, family, and

51. *Ibid.*, 36–8 speaks of open systems, which can integrate data from the environment.

52. *Ibid.*, 46. Of course Biggar's point that God is one is correct, but the well-known difficulties with the doctrine of the Trinity consist precisely in the fact that the differentiation between three divine persons is no less ontological. *Ibid.*, 46.

the inseparable principles of equality and leadership” the fundamental orders, according to Biggar.⁵³

Biggar’s interpretation of Barth’s ethical theory can be described with the classic adage *gratia non destruit sed supponit et perficit naturam*, “grace presupposes and perfects nature rather than destroying it.”⁵⁴ For the most part it is in harmony with von Balthasar’s interpretation of Barth’s thought. After describing an about-face of Barth’s in favor of constructive theology in the late 1920s, von Balthasar goes on to flesh out how Barth’s thought reaches full maturity in his doctrine of creation in *CD III/1–3*. The doctrine of God in *CD II/1* and the prolegomena of *CD I* already shaped the theological argument in terms of analogy. Indeed, von Balthasar offers important examples of an *analogia entis* operative in *CD III*.⁵⁵ Just as Barth shies away from calling the ethics of orders in *CD III/4* by its name according to Biggar, so von Balthasar calls Barth’s reserve against the *analogia entis* a self-contradiction. Von Balthasar reconstructs the *analogia entis* to denote the correspondence of God’s special revelation—to use the schematic concepts of this discourse—to general creaturely phenomena, which in turn render special revelation more plausible—without, however, abstracting from the heuristic starting point in special revelation and Christian faith. He agrees with Barth that God does not use general phenomena in revelation that are not themselves more closely determined in special revelation, and maintains a reciprocal reference between general and special

53. *Ibid.*, 57.

54. *Ibid.*, 92; see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, 1 a. 8 ad 2. Certainly it cannot be denied in theology that divine acts of grace presuppose and ennoble creation. It is doubtful, however, if the reliability of nature can be categorically asserted in the question to which general phenomena God’s special grace thus refers and in what sense it transforms them.

55. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation*, trans. Edward T. Oakes, SJ, Communio Books (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992), 110 and especially 116–20, 123–6.

revelation. According to von Balthasar, natural theology is a theology of revelation, and both are legitimate only in close conjunction.⁵⁶

Von Balthasar highlights Barth's dialogistic personalism in his notion of heterosexual shared humanity. In this phenomenon he sees confirmation of the validity and significance of the personal encounter with God: "And above all, God has prepared the human race for communion with him; in fact he makes it possible in the first place, in the sign of man and woman."⁵⁷ At this point God's activity in reconciliation makes a presupposition (" . . . *sed supponit* . . ."): "This brings us up against the central problem in Barth's theology in its most recent form: the concept of *presupposition*."⁵⁸ Reconciliation in Christ thus "perfects" its own presupposition. One must merely avoid confusing creation with the cause of creation—"despite this relationship whereby grace presupposes [*supponit*] and perfects nature."⁵⁹

According to von Balthasar, Barth resolutely claims such thoughts in *CD* II/1, where he rejects his previous emphasis on the futility of creation,⁶⁰ arguing that the absolute God⁶¹ affirms creation as a reality beyond God's self. This is preceded by von Balthasar's argument that *Rom* II identifies any stance vis-à-vis God with sin, thus rendering a genuine incarnation impossible.⁶² Interestingly, this latter point about

56. *Ibid.*, 110, 126.

57. *Ibid.*, 124. See 96, 134–6; Barth considers personal human fellowship a presupposition rather than merely a correspondence to God's grace in *CD* III/2, 274. The present work will discuss *CD* III/4 § 54.1, which is relevant in this context, in the context of *CD* IV.

58. Von Balthasar, *Theology of Karl Barth*, 119. The notion of *presupposition* achieves prominence once again in the chapter "Analogia Entis" (161). Von Balthasar, *ibid.*, 167, quotes Barth, *CD* II/1, 411: "In this sense we must admit the truth of that maxim of Thomas Aquinas which is so often put to dangerous use and in the first instance was no doubt dangerously meant: *gratia non tollit (non destruit) sed (praesupponit et) perficit naturam.*"

59. Von Balthasar, *Theology of Karl Barth*, 123 (trans. rev.).

60. *Ibid.*, 114. "The first volume of the *Church Dogmatics* was still speaking of the 'contrast,' the 'contradiction' between the Word of God and its configuration in the Bible, proclamation, theology" (trans. rev.).

61. For von Balthasar's characteristic notion of God's absoluteness see *ibid.*, 111, 137, 145.

Rom II is openly conceded even by defenders of *Rom II*.⁶³ It is only once creation's existence is firmly rooted in God's self that there can be a legitimate ethics, which responds to God's grace.⁶⁴

Von Balthasar's thesis of an *analogia entis* implies not only justification through grace and works,⁶⁵ but also motivates him to reject Barth's doctrine of election explicitly in *CD II/2* and to downplay Christ's cross. Occasional allusions to the doctrine of election do not mention damnation,⁶⁶ and the rare references to Jesus' cross often highlight its role as an example.⁶⁷ He hardly acknowledges Barth's conviction that the election of humanity is correlated with the damnation borne by Christ before his section on "Praedestinatio Gemina," which explicitly rejects Barth's doctrine of election. Von Balthasar sees Barth's doctrine of election culminate in universal salvation, which he calls overly daring, thus "gnosis, theosophy; in short, philosophy."⁶⁸ Moreover, according to von Balthasar, Barth's doctrine of election counters the notion *operari sequitur esse* ("action follows being") "with what to the Scholastic mind would be an absurdity: *esse sequitur operari*" ("being follows action").⁶⁹ By contrast, von Balthasar asserts that Barth usually affirms God's absolute nature in the sense "that God's absolute being and God's absolute truth [do]

62. *Ibid.*, 71.

63. Cornelis van der Kooi, "Karl Barths zweiter Römerbrief und seine Wirkungen," in *Karl Barth in Deutschland (1921–1935): Aufbruch—Klärung—Widerstand*, eds. Michael Beintker, Christian Link, and Michael Trowitzsch (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 2005), 57–75, at 75.

64. Von Balthasar, *Theology of Karl Barth*, 113.

65. *Ibid.*, 135.

66. *Ibid.*, 118, 127.

67. *Ibid.*, 375, portrays Christ as an example for another righteous person who undergoes suffering on account of someone else's guilt, by which "he shares an active portion in the holiness of the Redeemer." *Ibid.*, 385, however, strikes an unexpected tone with the statement that Golgotha is synonymous with the murder of God. Yet *ibid.*, 118, quotes Barth's portrayal of the dramatic extent of God's mercy (*CD III/1*, 50) tendentiously. Von Balthasar repeats Barth's reference to the cross, on which Christ bore the sins of the world, yet omits Barth's reference to the world's "lowliness and non-godliness, indeed its anti-godliness."

68. *Ibid.*, 185.

69. *Ibid.*, 191.

not become intermingled with the sphere of the relative, created being and its truth.”⁷⁰

Gospel and Law and the Public Dimension of Ethics

A theology of orders and actualism denote two fundamental foci of interpretation that each find some justification in particular parts of Barth’s oeuvre. As far as the analysis of Barth’s explicitly ethical writings is concerned, I will pay more attention to actualism. This concept has clearer roots in Barth’s ethical works, especially the ethics of the doctrine of God in *CD II/2*. By contrast, an explicit ethics of orders is especially to be found in Barth’s early ethics lectures,⁷¹ which Biggar was one of the first to interpret in greater detail. Yet the importance of the orders for Barth’s thought on the whole depends especially on the ethics of creation in *CD III/4*, as Barth never published the early ethics lectures. On the other hand, von Balthasar and Biggar argue for an about-face in Barth’s thought that led Barth only later to take the created order seriously. The implications about Barth’s earlier work are worth full attention. My analysis of *CD III/4* will not confirm Biggar’s notion of an ethics of orders. Nonetheless, Barth’s interpreters often agree that the ethics of creation discusses various courses of action in a more discursive manner than warranted by the actualistic concept.⁷² This may be a helpful effect of Barth’s renewed attention to creation. However, it will also become clear that sometimes, some of von Balthasar’s

70. *Ibid.*, 130.

71. Barth, *Ethics*, ed. Dietrich Braun, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2013). Barth gave this ethics lecture cycle twice, in two consecutive semesters each time, in 1928–9 in Münster and in 1930–31 in Bonn. The lectures became widely available in print only with the critical German edition (2 vols.): ed. Dietrich Braun, *Barth-Gesamtausgabe* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1973 and 1978).

72. Biggar, *Hastening That Waits*, 23–5, Nimmo, *Being in Action*, 58.

and Biggar's instincts in terms of a natural theology and God's absoluteness in Barth's work are not misplaced on a descriptive level.

While the concepts of actualism and an ethics of orders elucidate important parts of Barth's ethical thought, they do not do full justice to its full range. Presumably this is the reason why many discussions of Barth's ethics do not deal constructively with a prominent lecture such as "Church and State" ("Rechtfertigung und Recht" [or Justification and Justice], 1938, henceforth "CS").⁷³ If not plainly negated as a contribution to social ethics, it is sometimes mischaracterized as drawing on a Lutheran theory of two kingdoms in clarifying the relation between the justification of the sinner and worldly justice.⁷⁴ A theory of God's two kingdoms distinguishes clearly between the two ways in which spiritual and worldly affairs are governed respectively, by the gospel and the word on the one hand, and law and worldly force on the other. Barth's own contribution to political ethics is then located in the theology of creation, where he devises a concept of shared humanity (*CD III/2*).⁷⁵ At first glance, the theory of two kingdoms can seem to provide the answer to Barth's questions, as the two distinct dimensions of the theory can be seen as united in God's sovereign agency.

Take the problem of *order*, of that order, which is no longer, or not yet, the order of the Kingdom of God; or the problem of *peace*, which is no longer, or not yet, the eternal Peace of God; or the problem of *freedom*, which is no longer, or not yet, the eternal Peace of God—do all these

73. Barth, "Church and State," in *Community, State, and Church: Three Essays; With a New Introduction*, ed. David Haddorff, trans. Will Herberg (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 101–48 ("CS").

74. According to George Hunsinger, the lecture does not keep its promise of presenting a social ethics. "Justification and Justice: Toward an Evangelical Social Ethic," in *Karl Barth im europäischen Zeitgeschehen (1935–1950): Widerstand—Bewährung—Orientierung*, eds. Michael Beintker, Christian Link, and Michael Trowitzsch (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 2010), 457–70, at 457. For the suggestion that "CS" presents a Lutheran theory of two reigns, see Werpehowski, "Justification," 628.

75. Werpehowski, "Justification," 632.

problems belong to the realm of the “new creation” of man through the Word of God, do they all belong to the sanctification through the Spirit?⁷⁶

The Reformers were clear that Christian faith and public responsibility are not at odds, Barth argues. “But . . . they do not by all means tell us all that we might have expected. . . . Clearly we need to know not only that the two are not in conflict, but, first and foremost, to what extent they are connected.”⁷⁷ But Barth has yet something else than a theory of two kingdoms in mind. As he discusses the relevance of the gospel for the public dimension of Protestant ethics, he distinguishes less clearly—or perhaps even less rigidly—between worldly order and the gospel. Barth insists on justice in a constitutional state:

Of one thing in the New Testament there can be no doubt: namely, that the description of the order of the new age is that of a political order. . . . Wherever [the church] believes in, and proclaims here and now, the justification of the sinner through the blood of the lamb, it is faced with the city of eternal *justice*, “coming down out of heaven from God.” . . . Could the church of divine justification hold the human state of justice [*dem Staate des Rechts*] in higher esteem than when it sees in that very State, in its heavenly reality, into which its terrestrial existence will finally be absorbed, the final predicate of its own grounds for hope?⁷⁸

While the theory of two kingdoms views the political dimension of biblical law as a particular, contingent manifestation of natural law,⁷⁹ Barth argues here that the church should advocate for particular

76. “CS,” 101. See 102: “It should be noted that the interest in this question begins where the interest in the Reformation confessional writings and Reformation theology as a whole ceases.” It is thus unlikely that Barth was after a Lutheran theory of God’s two kingdoms. That theory deals with worldly order mainly on the basis of God’s revelation of the law, or on the basis of natural law, not the gospel.

77. “CS,” 102.

78. *Ibid.*, 124 (trans. rev.). Herberg’s translation of *Recht* with *law*, which seems indebted to legal positivism, has been altered to *justice*. Notably, *Recht* can also mean *righteousness*. *Staat des Rechts* amounts to the same as *Rechtsstaat*, constitutional democracy or (just) rule of law.

political goals and procedures regardless of natural law, based on its commitment to the gospel. “CS” stands thus in close proximity to Barth’s lecture “Gospel and Law” (1935, henceforth: “GL”), which argued that the necessity of acting according to the law is constituted by the gospel. This is in contrast to a traditionally Lutheran account of law and gospel, in which the judgment of the law destroys the illusion of works righteousness, but is not meant to orient Christian action. On the one hand, “CS” identifies legal justice as an essential element in the Christian proclamation of the cross and the kingdom of God; on the other, according to “GL,” the nature of God’s grace as a free gift makes a particular mode of life obligatory. Consequently, the church has a public responsibility to support legal justice. In accordance with the gospel, the church will strive for a “prophetic witness *for* the will of God *against* all of men’s sinful presumption, *against* all their lawlessness and unrighteousness.”⁸⁰

As described above, Barth’s concept of gospel and law has been singled out for critique. It has been said to bring ethical study under heteronomous dominance by ecclesial traditions, for example. By contrast, this study will argue that the most creative potential of Barth’s new concept still remains to be tapped. The crucial point is that the freedom of the gospel seeks affirmation within particular empirical conditions. If, for example, ecclesial moral traditions cannot be articulated as good news within particular social constellations, the critical potential of the gospel must also reflect back upon those moral traditions. This does not, however, amount to an uncritical justification of the powers that be, but calls for ethical work that allows for transformation that is critical, creative, and constructive. It is this dynamic that allows Barth to engage the empirical dimension

79. Martin Luther, “How Christians Should Regard Moses, 1525,” in *Word and Sacrament*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. E. Theodore Bachmann, Luther’s Works vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Mühlenberg Press, 1960), 161–74.

80. Barth, “Gospel and Law,” in Haddorff, *Community, State, and Church*, 71–101, at 80 (“GL”).

of life within which the gospel will take on the practical shape of the command with which it is correlated. The main reason for the new Christian ethos, however, can be described as thankfulness.

The main thesis of this study is that an essential strand in Barth's ethics aims at the church's public responsibility, which amounts, in broad terms, to a politically active sense of justice. As Barth emphasizes a correspondence between ethics and the gospel, the present work is entitled *Citizenship in Heaven and on Earth*.

According to these broad outlines, the church is not conceived of primarily as a factor warranting a stable political order, of whatever political color; it is not supposed to focus either on personal morality—even the personal morality of faith—or natural law; nor is it meant to address an inner spiritual realm, distinguishing political affairs strictly from the gospel. Instead, as the import of the gospel cannot be separated from external forms of life, the church faces the challenge of how particular forms of practical correspondence to the gospel can be advocated for in a wider public—without monopolizing the public realm spiritually, morally, or any other way. Certainly, Barth does not disregard the question whether legal justice can be the only, or even the predominant, concern in the public role of the church. Instead, social and economic justice are as important. Such reflection will always need to ask self-critically if public ecclesial advocacy may be a mere “retreat to commitment,”⁸¹ rather than being motivated and oriented by the gospel. This constellation leads Barth to seek theological clarification in questions of public relevance, such as the termination of pregnancy or war and peace (*CD III/4*). The thesis that requires justification is that this concept of gospel and law leads to a position capable of public defense, resting neither on an ever-new, incommensurate commanding nor supposedly universal

81. See Wolhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 3 vols. (New York: T&T Clark, 1992), 1:47.

orders of creation. At the same time, such an ethics will be eager to absorb new insight, regardless where it can be found.

This book's positive goal of presenting Barth's ethics of public responsibility will only emerge piecemeal from the historical reconstruction of Barth's ethical writings and the large body of relevant theological discussions. This detailed, at times even strenuous historical pathway has been chosen in the hope of attaining greater descriptive accuracy. This seems advisable in the face of Barth's extensive and multifaceted oeuvre. A close reading of the ethics of the doctrine of God, for example, rather than a top-down eclectic access, has still been a desideratum of research. Faced with this difficulty, a more objective interpretation of Barth's work can be achieved not only with extensive reference to Barth's texts and secondary literature, but also with attention to the genesis and historical context of the text at hand. Barth's private letters often prove helpful.

The first major task is to reconstruct the genesis of Barth's actualistic concept of revelation. On the face of it, actualism seems to be the ground in which Barth's priority of the gospel over against the law is rooted. The actualistic ethics of an ever-new, incommensurate commanding in *CD* II/2, sections 38 and following follows on the heels of sections 36–7, in which Barth integrates the priority of the gospel into his magnum opus, *CD*.

For this reason proponents of actualism claim that it is the ethical theory that best captures Barth's concept of gospel and law. The rivalry with an ethics of ecclesial public responsibility is obvious once the church needs to give reasons—even if only internally—for a particular course of action. For example, in 1951, the motto of the German Evangelical Church Assembly proclaimed that “We Are All Brothers,” while in 1963, the chosen theme was “Living With Conflicts.”⁸² Actualism, however, avoids arguing for a course of action supposedly commanded by God. Instead, God supposedly

commands every individual directly. Since pluralistic, constitutional democracies seek reasons, however, that may bolster up consensus in the long run—faced with a plurality of convictions—actualistic ethics is left with the choice between a supposedly prophetic path of mere appeals and admonitions that may at times border on the enigmatic, a withdrawal from the public realm, or a Lutheran theory of two kingdoms.

Gospel and Law in Historico-Genealogical Perspective

Due to the inherent difficulty of the actualistic concept of revelation, the first chapter of the present work will reconstruct its development from *Rom I* to *CD I/1*. The extensive focus on Barth's early work, which may at times even seem overly critical, requires justification. Interestingly, Barth research has not grasped the full theological implications of the emphasis *Rom II* puts on sacrifice and repentance. Yet these concepts are of fundamental importance for the actualistic concept of revelation as a whole. To be sure, *GD* does not leave the theology of *Rom II* unchanged but continues the constructive theological work. *GD*'s actualistic concept of revelation creates a dialectical relationship between the negative ethics of *Rom II* and a positive ethics. Yet it is precisely this dialectical synthesis that raises the question of the extent to which a Lutheran constellation of law and gospel has abiding importance even as we are dealing with what is often considered the beginnings of Barth's mature thought. This hunch is confirmed by the fact that even around 1930, Barth argues

82. The German Evangelical Church Assembly (*Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag*) is a biannual meeting of Protestants in Germany. Before the Berlin Wall excluded East German participants from meetings in the West such as the one in 1963, there were ca. forty-five thousand participants in 1961. Wolfgang Huber, "Streit um das rechte Handeln: Zwischen persönlicher Vergewisserung und gemeinsamer Aktion," in *Konflikt und Konsens: Studien zur Ethik der Verantwortung* (Munich: Kaiser, 1990), 272-90, at 280. See also Dirk Palm, "*Wir sind doch Brüder!*" *Der evangelische Kirchentag und die deutsche Frage 1949-1961*, *Arbeiten zur Kirchlichen Zeitgeschichte B 36* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002).

repeatedly for an ethics of orders. Not only has the precedence of the law over the gospel had a significant affinity to an ethics of orders historically, but the latter concept, as it was expounded in twentieth-century Protestantism, was taken to lend practical shape to the law's condemnation of sin. Moreover, one conceptual difficulty of actualism is that it is oriented toward God's command in the current moment rather than to larger political and cultural constellations, a difficulty that may appear to be remedied by resorting to an ethic of orders.

It may seem to be a surprising claim that there is a significant influence of a Lutheran understanding of law and gospel on Barth's ethical work, in spite of Barth's notable efforts to the contrary. He advocated for a new conceptualization of gospel and law in the lecture of the same name, which is sometimes taken as sufficient reason for the claim that this new concept obtains throughout his work after 1935, perhaps being foreshadowed already in *Rom II*. The significance of the issue can be illustrated by Barth's remarkable, albeit late, argument that "it cannot be denied . . . that the doctrine of Calvin obviously suffers from a curious over-emphasizing of *mortificatio* [mortification] at the expense of *vivificatio* [God's enlivening work]."⁸³ A strong emphasis on mortification, which precedes and prepares the ground for an embrace of the gospel, is a hallmark of the Lutheran constellation of law and gospel. Yet there is no slight irony in the fact that Barth attributes a position to Calvin that the Geneva reformer is usually credited with overcoming⁸⁴—which is then taken as Barth's main inspiration in

83. CD IV/2 651; See Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will*, in *Career of the Reformer*, vol. 3, ed. and trans. Philip S. Watson, Luther's Works 33 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 62: "Thus when God makes alive he does it by killing."

84. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. John L. Battles, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 1:360–61 (II, 7, 12).

“GL.” However, and again with a certain irony, in 1951, Barth himself attaches great importance to the negative aspect in Calvin’s ethics that “our sanctification consists in the *mortificatio propriae voluntatis* . . . *ut propriis affectibus et operibus emortui, regnum Dei meditemur*” (killing of one’s own will . . . so that we reflect on God’s reign, having died to our own feelings and works).⁸⁵ Twenty years before that, Barth’s early ethics lectures characteristically quote Calvin in calling faith an “exinanition (abasement).”⁸⁶ It must be added, of course, that Barth also refers to Calvin in arguing that positively, Christian action proceeds in “harmony” and “consensus” with God’s will, and that Calvin’s views on Christian participation in Christ influenced Barth as well. It is notably Barth’s lecture on Calvin that plants the seeds for his later, new understanding of ethics. Regardless of the questions about the true shape of John Calvin’s ethics and the extent to which Barth’s early ethics were influenced by Calvin in particular, it is a negative aspect that characterizes Barth’s early ethics very strongly, in a way that is not counterbalanced by a corresponding notion of liberation and empowerment in the gospel. When Barth, later in his life, critiques Calvin, of all people, for highlighting the negative aspect of human unrighteousness and, as a result, the importance of mortification, this is also an indirect critique of his own ethical work.

For these reasons, the first chapter leads to significant critical conclusions about Barth’s ethics up to the early 1930s. Yet it is especially before this backdrop that the epochal nature of a new development in Barth’s thought in the early 1930s can be properly appreciated. The second chapter deals with the new development of “gospel and law” in Barth’s thought. It would indeed be to underestimate the significance and deeper logic of this new

85. CD III/4, 58; Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:396 (II, 8, 29).

86. Barth, *Ethics*, 280, Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:733 (III, 11, 7).

development to take the 1935 lecture, together with a few other prominent texts, as sufficient reason for a blanket assertion that Barth's theology on the whole argues for a new understanding of the relationship between gospel and law. In an influential interpretation of Barth's thought, Eberhard Jüngel called Barth's lecture "Gospel and Law" an important, if belated supplement to Barth's doctrine of the word of God, or the *prolegomena*, of *CD I/1*.⁸⁷

Theologically, this is associated with the increasing significance of the doctrine of election. Barth previously insisted that God revealed God's self while at the same time remaining the unknown God—in the face of which the proper human posture is sacrifice and repentance. By contrast, the doctrine of election in *CD II/2* pursues the implications of the priority of the gospel vis-à-vis the law into the realm of trinitarian theology, so that in the eternal election, God determines God's self to be the God of the gospel. Thus, a notion of an entire dimension in which God is not fundamentally committed to the gospel is radically disqualified in Christian theology. This also renders reliance on concepts of natural law—as in a theory of two kingdoms and a corresponding ethics of orders—problematic. However, even *CD II/2* is not free of "theistic elements"⁸⁸ that contradict the doctrine of election. An extensive discussion of the ethics of the doctrine of God in *CD II/2* will seek to demonstrate that its actualistic ethics rests precisely on those theistic elements that highlight God's unconditioned nature and God's omnipotence. This

87. Eberhard Jüngel, "Zum Verhältnis von Kirche und Staat nach Karl Barth," in *Zur Theologie Karl Barths: Beiträge aus Anlass seines 100. Geburtstags*, ed. E. Jüngel (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1986), 76–135, at 77. *CD I/1* discussed the concept of God's word without reference to the relation between law and gospel. See also Jüngel, "Gospel and Law: The Relationship of Dogmatics to Ethics," in *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, trans. Garrett E. Paul (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1986), 105–26, at 110.

88. Wilfried Härle, *Sein und Gnade: Die Ontologie in Karl Barths Kirchlicher Dogmatik*, Theologische Bibliothek Töpelmann 27 (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1975), 24n66.

raises the question of how far Barth himself heeds his own call to subordinate ethics to dogmatics.

Chapter 3 deals with Barth's ethics of the doctrine of creation in *CD III/4*. Individual cases of actualistic reasoning collide with Barth's repeated categorical judgments about the content of God's command in certain situations, but also with his discussions about the particular empirical circumstances in which such a precedent cannot be specified. On the theological side, how serious would the subordination of the law to the gospel in fact be if it did not prompt greater specificity in ethical judgment? In addition, Barth considers the ethical status of some courses of action to depend on the implied consequences. Thus, *CD III/4* fulfills an important criterion of an ethics of responsibility. These aspects are discussed during the analysis of various issues in applied ethics.

The ensuing chapter analyzes Barth's theological and ethical decisions in *CD IV*, where theological issues fundamental to different ethical concepts are discussed. His early ethics of repentance and sacrifice continues to have repercussions, such as the subordination of wives to their husbands, as presented in *CD III/4*, which culminates in *CD IV* in a vision of the hierarchical life of the Trinity, and which reinforces an ethical paradigm of cruciform discipleship. This is closely related to Barth's view that the humiliation and exaltation of the Son of God are correlated in such a way that his most drastic humiliation is simultaneously a triumph at an even deeper level. On a more technical level, the call for cruciform discipleship, justified by the assertion that the misery of torture was in fact Christ's coronation, can very easily be misused to undercut the significance of empirical issues in ethics and the moral conflicts they imply. Interestingly, Jesus' cry of godforsakenness (Mark 15:34; Matt. 27:46) is the scriptural verse Barth mentions most often in *CD IV/1*. However, in repeated attempts, Barth does not succeed in offering a consistent

interpretation of the verse. On the constructive side, the resurrection also gains significantly in importance. That redemption from suffering, rather than gruesome torture, becomes the guiding vision in theology is highly significant from an ethical perspective as well. Finally, it is relevant also from an ethical point of view to see how Barth tackles pneumatology again.

The final chapter asks what inspiration this historical reconstruction of Barth's thought offers for contemporary ethics. Barth's new constellation of gospel and law stands out due to its biblical and theological roots as well as its emancipatory potential. This may raise the concern that Barth's ethics has sometimes been associated with an ethical tradition dubbed Christ's royal reign (*Königsherrschaft Christi*). From opposition to Luther's theory of two kingdoms, a dualism resulted that created a deadlock in the theological conversations in German Protestantism during the Cold War, bringing it to the brink of schism.⁸⁹ The claim advanced here is that rather than leading into such a deadlock, a particular perspective on Barth's ethics has a significant constructive potential. The discussion of *CD III/4*, for example, highlights Barth's empirical sensibility—a feature often claimed to distinguish a two kingdoms theory from a closer relationship between gospel and law. This conceptual strong point will need to be developed further, in contrast to abiding problems in Barth's work. A comparison between Barth's ethics and William Schweiker's ethics of responsibility will show repeated commonalities in the understanding of a theory of goods and human responsibility. For Barth, Christian responsibility for social and legal justice in society is based in Christ's work of reconciliation. Thus Barth approaches the issue of moral

89. Lienemann, "Das Problem des gerechten Krieges im deutschen Protestantismus nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg," in *Der gerechte Krieg: Christentum, Islam, Marxismus*, ed. Reiner Steinweg, Edition Suhrkamp 1017 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), 125–62, 137–41.

responsibility much more strongly from a christological point of view. A thinker who engages the christological dimension of Barth's work is Jüngel. The present work highlights his critique of an ontological isolation of God from humanity and his question of human godlessness, which he develops in constructive dialogue with Barth. My own suggestion is to mediate between a rejection of a worldlessness of God and the possibility of human godlessness in a way that draws on pneumatological aspects of Barth's work. This is also highly relevant with respect to ethics.