

# **Responsible Before God: Human Responsibility in Karl Barth's Moral Theology**

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of Chester for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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## Abstract

This thesis contributes to the recent scholarly re-evaluation of Karl Barth's moral theology through an examination of the theme of human responsibility in his thought. The language of responsibility recurs throughout Barth's ethical writings, and its frequency and strategic significance in his articulation of the nature of the active human agent in Christian ethics means it is worthy of scholarly consideration. To date, no extended study of this topic in Barth's thought exists, and, apart from critical summaries of his use of responsibility language in select parts of the *Church Dogmatics* in corners of the secondary literature, responsibility-ethicists have tended to ignore Barth's work on this topic. My intention, through exegetical reading of several key texts, is to provide explication, clarification, and analysis of his understanding of human responsibility. On the basis of this exegetical work I shall argue that the idea of responsibility is in fact a key component of Barth's theological ethics and significantly informs his presentation of human agency.

Following the introductory chapter, the central chapters of the thesis are exegetical readings of human responsibility in three major texts from the Barth *corpus*: the *Ethics* lectures; the ethics of *CD* II/2; and the special ethics of *CD* III/4. The fifth and final chapter is a synopsis of the development of Barth's understanding and his articulation of human responsibility across these texts. My constructive proposal as to how we may understand Barth's overall account is based on the preceding exegetical work. I argue that the ethics of the *Church Dogmatics* ought to be read together, and that in doing so we see that the mature Barth offers: 1) a theological description of human responsibility, which I argue is a kind of moral ontology in which the human agent is called to inhabit a particular space in relation to God; and 2) concrete indications of the kind of responsible actions that represent and enable the embedding of that description in human life. He develops what I term "indicative practices" which give shape to human lives, enabling human agents to navigate the moral space into which they have been placed. These two elements taken together are, I suggest, the sum of Barth's account of human responsibility.

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## Abbreviations

<i>Anselm</i>	<i>Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum. Anselm's Proof of the Existence of God in the Context of his Theological Scheme.</i> Eugene: Pickwick Press, 1975.
<i>FQI</i>	<i>Fides quaerens intellectum. Anselms Beweis der Existenz Gottes im Zusammenhang seines theologischen Programms.</i> Herausgegeben von Eberhard Jüngel und Ingolf Dalfrèth. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2002.
<i>CD</i>	<i>Church Dogmatics</i> , 4 volumes, 13 part-volumes. Edited and translated by G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936-62.
<i>KD</i>	<i>Die kirchliche Dogmatik.</i> Zurich: A.G. Zollikon, 1932-62.
<i>The Christian Life</i>	<i>The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics Volume IV/4 Lecture Fragments.</i> Translated by Geoffrey Bromiley. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981.
<i>Das christliche Leben</i>	<i>Die kirchliche Dogmatik IV/4 Fragment. Das christliche Leben.</i> Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1980.
<i>Ethics</i>	<i>Ethics.</i> Edited by Dietrich Braun, translated by Geoffrey Bromiley. New York: The Seabury Press, 1981.
<i>Ethik I</i>	<i>Ethik I.</i> Herausgegeben von Dietrich Braun. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1973.
<i>Ethik II</i>	<i>Ethik II.</i> Herausgegeben von Dietrich Braun. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1973.
<i>The Holy Spirit...</i>	<i>The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life: The Theological Basis of Ethics.</i> Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993.
‘Der heilige Geist’	‘Der heilige Geist und das christliche Leben’ im <i>Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1925-30.</i> Herausgegeben von Herman Schmidt. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1994, 458-520.
‘The Problem...’	‘The Problem of Ethics Today, 1922’ in <i>The Word of God and Theology.</i> Translated by Amy Marga. London: T&T Clark, 2011.
‘Das Problem...’	‘Das Problem der Ethik in der Gegenwart, 1922’ im <i>Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten, 1922-25.</i> Herausgegeben von Holger Fritze. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1990.
<i>How I Changed...</i>	<i>How I Changed My Mind.</i> Louisville: John Knox Press, 1966.

All abbreviated references to the *Church Dogmatics* and *Kirchliche Dogmatik* will be followed by the volume number, part-volume number, and page reference; for example *CD* II/2, 631. In each footnoted reference to primary texts the English edition will be followed by the German edition in parenthesis; for example *CD* II/2, 631 (*KD* II/2, 701).

## Chapter 1

### Introduction: Human Responsibility in Barth's Moral Theology

#### 1.1 Introduction and Rationale

This thesis seeks to contribute to the ongoing scholarly re-appraisal of the theological ethics of Karl Barth by attending to the theme of human responsibility in his moral theology. For most of the twentieth century Barth's approach to ethical reasoning in general, and to human agency in particular, was regarded with indifference or hostility due to his methodological decision to treat ethics in the *genre* of dogmatic theology. This decision meant that many felt Barth emphasised theological priorities such as divine sovereignty and revelation at the expense of anthropological considerations, and was therefore unable to speak about human being and action. His so-called ethics was therefore useless for thinking about *human* action because it was encumbered by the need to speak foremost about *divine* action. The recent challenge to this critical reading of Barth has sought to understand his theological ethics 'from within' by investigating, describing and analysing the theological contours of his approach, and taking seriously his ethical claims in the light of the results. Such readings have been illuminating not least because they are more sympathetic to Barth's concerns. Sympathy is not an indication of a lack of intellectual rigour or suggestive that the theologians engaged in this re-reading are all 'Barthians', but rather speaks of an openness to reading Barth as he wished to be read and in that way to making sense of his claim to be engaged in Christian ethics. This re-appraisal is ongoing, but several strides forward have been made. Recent studies have explored issues relating to the structure of Barth's moral theology; the relationship between dogmatic claims on the one hand and concrete ethics on the other; and particular themes in Barth's ethical thought. I shall discuss these further in section 1.2. One theme in Barth's thought that has not yet been discussed in detail, and on which no monograph-length studies exist at all, is human responsibility.

The lack of attention paid to Barth's responsibility ethics is nothing short of a lacuna in our understanding of his moral theology which needs to be filled, for two reasons. The first is because the frequency of instances of responsibility language throughout the Barth *corpus* is high, and this indicates that human responsibility was an important recurring idea for him. From his earliest occasional writing and lecturing on ethics, through to the first systematic treatment in the *Ethics* lectures, and finally the ethical sections of the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth consistently deployed the language of responsibility to talk about human agents. It is an important element of both his theological description of the human agent and also the way he thinks the Christian life must actually be lived, and even a casual reading

of his ethics would throw up several occasions in which the language of responsibility is used in this way. By making Barth's idea of responsibility a focus of detailed study I turn this observation about the frequency and potential importance of responsibility-language into a more coherent argument about its conceptual significance. The second reason is that when Barth deploys the language of responsibility, the idea is accorded great significance in terms of human agency. Two short examples from the *Dogmatics* serve to demonstrate this, and begin to indicate the value of a comprehensive study of the topic. The first is from the ethics of *CD II/2*. Here Barth argues that "the idea of responsibility...gives us the most exact definition of the human situation in the face of the absolute transcendence of divine judgement." He concludes the same paragraph saying, "We live in responsibility..."<sup>1</sup> In this example, Barth's idea of responsibility is definitive of human existence; that is to say it is the ultimate and final description of the human situation with regard to the sovereignty of God which is experienced in the transcendence of divine judgement. Responsibility is definitive of human life, and also describes the context in which human beings conduct themselves. When Barth says human beings live in responsibility, therefore, he is at the least commenting on the ongoing nature of this situation, and its absolute accuracy is defining human existence in this way. The second example is from *CD III/2*, where Barth states, "real man...is engaged in active responsibility to God", and again summarily in the same paragraph that "being human consists in responsibility."<sup>2</sup> Here the language names an ontological aspect of human existence; it describes for Barth the nature of real or genuine human being, suggesting that this may only be understood and actualised from within relationship to God. Moreover, for Barth, this relationship is anthropologically axiomatic - the *sine qua non* of true human agency is responsibility to God.

Taken together these quotations indicate the fundamental nature of Barth's understanding of human responsibility, and are intended to indicate how significant the idea of human responsibility is for Barth. They are not exhaustive, and there is much more that Barth has to say on the topic. The statements are an indication of why a study of human responsibility is important: I have chosen them because they are suggestive of the ways that responsibility language is employed by Barth in different parts of his dogmatic whole, and are helpful for my contention that the idea of responsibility is close to the centre of what Barth wants to say about human agency. With very little explanation or contextualisation it is easy to see from these quotations that at the least responsibility-language plays an integral role in his articulation of human being and doing. To be human, and to be so in the fullest

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<sup>1</sup> *CD II/2*, 641 (*KD II/1*, 713).

<sup>2</sup> *CD III/2*, 175 (*KD III/2*, 209).

sense of that, is to be responsible. It is also to know oneself in relationship to God. By implication, those who do not know that they are responsible before God in some sense or other deny their true humanity because genuine humanity consists in this responsibility. Barth employs the language to name and define the human situation; responsibility plays a central role in his theological description of human existence and therefore human action; it is his definition of the *modus* in which we live and act as creatures. The significance of responsibility-language, therefore, cannot easily be underestimated. All ethical systems - whatever their theological or philosophical persuasion - proceed with some vision or overarching account of human being in mind in order to guide and make sense of what is said about human action. In Barth's case, I shall argue, 'responsibility' is at the heart of this vision. Therefore if we wish to develop our understanding of his account of human being and doing, as the recent trend in interpreting Barth's ethics invites us to do, the task of understanding Barth's account of human responsibility demands attention.

Given the importance that I am suggesting Barth accords to it, a clear and decisive account of what responsibility means in the context of his theological ethics is necessary: how and in what way are humans responsible before God? What is the ethical, especially ontic, implication of this responsibility? What form does it take? A detailed study of human responsibility in Barth's thought is required to answer these questions, and to unearth its real value and meaning for his theology as a whole. Such a study will also clarify the kind of contribution Barth is able to make to the wider discussion about responsibility-ethics.

That being said, reading Barth on human responsibility is not at all straight forward. He does not proceed with some common definition of responsibility in mind, nor does he borrow one from another discipline. On the contrary, Barth's general approach to moral reasoning means that he qualifies and revises ethical concepts in relation to the dogmatic location he gives to them, and as such common moral ideas are frequently reworked and re-orientated by him. They are thus also given particular and nuanced meanings. The idea of responsibility is no exception. Therefore, in order to interpret and understand the idea of human responsibility in Barth's theological ethics, special care must be taken to attend to the way he uses the language. I may not presume to know what Barth means or intends by human responsibility by virtue of some other account of it. The conceptual and practical content of responsibility-language is defined by the wider matrix of his dogmatic ethics, and this must be given full attention if the depth of his claim regarding responsibility and the human situation is to be properly understood.

Recognising that Barth thinks theological claims ought to qualify ethical concepts, and indeed that he discusses ethical ideas in precisely this way, matters particularly for the

idea of human responsibility. Barth writes, “the idea of responsibility, rightly understood, is known only to *Christian* ethics.”<sup>3</sup> The adjective ‘Christian’ distinguishes the use of responsibility language in that context from any wider discussion of human responsibility. The Christian confession gives the idea of responsibility a nuanced and particular meaning - which Barth regards as the “right” understanding - which is informed, presumably, by the particularities of the Christian conception of the human agent. By implication, Barth suggests that *Christian* ethics as distinct from other kinds of ethics finds its genesis not in the moral quandaries of life, though those may cause us to question what the appropriate action is, but in God’s work for us in Jesus Christ. This is witnessed in Christian doctrine<sup>4</sup> - here understood as the essential teaching of the Church grounded in scripture and creed.<sup>5</sup> Christian doctrines describe reality as they bear witness to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the place of the human being within it.<sup>6</sup> Because the gospel affects us, doctrines as witnesses to the gospel also solicit behaviours from us: the quest to conform to the will of the God whom we worship and confess as Lord. To borrow a phrase from Christopher Holmes, Christian doctrine “radically implicates.”<sup>7</sup> To say that responsibility may only be “rightly understood” in relation to Christian faith is for Barth to state that the idea of responsibility names something that is true about human beings as those for whom God is God *pro nobis* and in the light of which a Christian account of human responsibility may be offered. As such, Barth’s particular understanding of human responsibility is intrinsic to the dogmatic location he gives to the idea.

Therefore the basic question *what does human responsibility mean for Barth?* needs answering because *for Barth* it means something different than for other responsibility-ethicists. As I shall argue in section 1.3, the concept has always had fluid meanings and flexible application within ethical systems of the twentieth century, and scholars have always gone to lengths to clarify their own particular understanding of it. Answering the question of what it means for Barth is necessary to continue the task of making overall sense of his moral theology, and to contribute to our growing understanding of its potency.

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<sup>3</sup> CD II/2, 642 (KD II/2, 714). Emphasis added.

<sup>4</sup> Barth famously said that dogmatics is ethics. CD I/2, 793 (KD I/2, 888). On this see also Duane Stephen Long’s essay, ‘Moral Theology’ in John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance, eds., *The Oxford Handbook to Systematic Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 456-465, especially 462-3.

<sup>5</sup> A helpful summary of Barth’s thought on this is Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (London: SCM Press, 1949), chapter 1.

<sup>6</sup> On this point I have found Christopher J Holmes, *Ethics in the Presence of Christ* (London: T&T Clark, 2012) really helpful: “doctrines describe, albeit through a glass darkly, what is real and going on”, p.vii.

<sup>7</sup> Holmes, *Ethics in the Presence of Christ*, viii.

My thesis proceeds with three goals in mind. The first is to substantiate my claim that human responsibility in Barth's thought is a worthy topic for consideration by demonstrating that the idea plays a significant role in his moral theology. I shall do this by way of exegetical reading of three key texts in which the concept is theologically and ethically important. The second is to clarify and explicate Barth's particular understanding of human responsibility through a close exegetical-reading of those texts, offering an overall account of it in relation to his wider theological and ethical concerns, and attempting to understand what Barth is proposing. The third is, on the basis of these two, to contribute to the scholarly re-appraisal of Barth's theological ethics by arguing: 1) for greater recognition of the role responsibility language plays; and 2) that Barth has something particular to offer a Christian ethics of responsibility that the current critical rejection of his work in this area ignores. Taking account of this helps to give us a fuller picture of what is possible when we treat ethics in the *genre* of dogmatics.

In order to facilitate this I will use the rest of this chapter to complete some preliminary work before moving onto exegesis and analysis in the following chapters. This work involves mapping out my particular approach to the topic within the Barth *corpus*, and where necessary defending my methodological decisions. It seems important to contextualise as much of my work as possible by locating it in relation to several wider fields, notably Barth scholarship in general, other Christian responsibility-ethics, and the current state of interpretation of Barth's responsibility-ethics. I shall tackle each of these in order. First, in section 1.2, I shall give an overview of the contemporary discussion of Barth's moral theology and in particular the shift in scholarly opinion over the last twenty-five years, in order to show where my research might complement the growing trend to read Barth as a serious theological ethicist. I begin by outlining the received tradition, before giving an overview of the key thinkers who have been influential since the early nineteen-nineties. Then I shall highlight the instances where a more robust account of human responsibility would help fill out our current understanding of Barth's moral theology. Second, in section 1.3, I will give an overview of the development of the concept of responsibility in the twentieth century. I begin the section by plotting the development of the concept in moral and political philosophy using Richard McKeon's helpful essay on the subject. I then turn to the development of Christian understandings of responsibility throughout the twentieth century. These two spheres of moral reasoning - broadly speaking the secular and the religious - have not always communicated well with one another, and a clear divergence becomes evident from the historical survey I offer: in each trajectory the idea of human responsibility took different conceptual paths. This, I suspect, contributes to some of the

hesitancy that exists among scholars regarding Barth on this topic, which itself grows out of a general hesitancy in Christian responsibility-ethics connected to a lack of clear conceptual definition. Attention to the divergence will make clear the parameters of the broader conversation and allow me to comment on the way Barth's ethics of responsibility has been understood and received. In section 1.4 I will attend to the ways in which Barth has already been read on human responsibility, and in particular to the work of three Christian scholars, all of whom are concerned to develop a meaningful Christian understanding of responsibility: H. Richard Niebuhr; Albert Jonsen; and William Schweiker. I shall explore each of their readings of Barth and also their criticisms of him in detail. In the closing chapter of this thesis I shall return to Jonsen and Schweiker in particular and ask whether or not my re-reading of Barth deals with their concerns. In section 1.4 I shall highlight the key internal problems that scholars face when reading Barth on this topic: in particular his lack of a direct and clear definition of the terminology. After that I move to suggesting a possible way forward by developing an idea from an essay by Edward Farley. Farley would not normally be considered a dialogue partner for Barth, but I draw on his work here not to interpret Barth directly but to give insight into how we might regard Barth's approach to human responsibility in the light of his lack of conceptual clarity. In particular I draw on Farley's distinction between 'theological thinking' and 'theological methodology'. In a context where the meaning of the language of responsibility is notoriously fluid, Barth's oversight of a definition makes a huge difference, and explains the requirement for this thesis to take on an exegetical approach. Finally, in section 1.5, I shall draw together some of the key insights from preceding sections in order to give an overview of the shape and flow of the rest of the thesis, and explain what will be discussed in each of the following chapters. Here I give my rationale for the decision regarding which texts I have chosen to engage exegetically, and how these relate to one another as well as to Barth's wider theological development.

## **1.2 The Changing Landscape of Secondary Literature**

Twenty years ago Nigel Biggar noted that "the English-speaking world has not been generous with the attention it has paid to the ethical thought of Karl Barth." In the same paragraph he went on to name the small number of volumes that gave "sustained consideration" to Barth's ethics and suggested that the cause of such a dearth was his reputation as one whose "stress on divine judgement seems such as entirely to devalue human activity and ethical reflection."<sup>8</sup> Five years later John Webster suggested that "close

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<sup>8</sup> Biggar, *The Hastening That Waits: Karl Barth's Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 1.

study of Barth's ethical writing is still in its infancy" and that detailed study of texts in his moral theology was "needed more than anything else."<sup>9</sup> Both were recognising to some extent that the Anglophone world had already digested Robert Willis' critical call to "move beyond Barth" in ethical discourse.<sup>10</sup> Willis argued that "the credibility and effectiveness [of Barth's ethics] are vitiated by a series of recurring problems" all of which could be linked to the "exceedingly tight relationship" between dogmatic theology and ethics, i.e. which could be linked to Barth's methodology.<sup>11</sup> Willis' had been the dominant view for more than twenty years at the point when Biggar made his comments.

While Willis had set out to overcome the "repetition of accumulated caricatures and shibboleths about 'abstractness' or 'remoteness'" in Barth's ethics by attending to the "ethical thrust" of Barth's theology,<sup>12</sup> his conclusion was that Barth's particular theological method was in fact a hindrance to his ability to adequately fulfil the work of an ethicist. The recurring problems to which Willis refers centre on what he regarded as Barth's overemphasis on Christology. In brief, Barth's Christocentric commitment, and its impact on his description of the human creature, requires him to employ the idea of *analogia relationis* thus providing an epistemological base for the moral agent. But Willis argues that this actually obscures rather than clarifies the position of the human agent<sup>13</sup> because it avoids the "pressing questions of evidence and verification" that are normally required in ethical discourse.<sup>14</sup> He notes that these questions may have been answered if Barth had not rejected the *analogia entis*, because it would have provided an analogical basis on which to consider the material of created order as ethically significant. Instead Willis argues the Christocentric *analogia relationis* leads to "the total elimination of the world, including human action...so that the world and the human are somehow absorbed into the being of God."<sup>15</sup> There ceases to be, on this reading of Barth, an ontological distinction between Creator and creature and so there is no substance for moral discourse - everything is collapsed into Christology. Willis' contention is that Barth's favouring of *analogia relationis* over *analogia entis* is inadequate for moral reasoning because faith is not an "ordinary epistemic mode." Faith-

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<sup>9</sup> John Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 449.

<sup>11</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, 428.

<sup>12</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, 430.

<sup>14</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, 431.

<sup>15</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, 36.

based ethics results in a kind of “transcendentalism...that...makes ambiguous the precise status of the created order, history, and the knowledge derived from ordinary cognitive modes...”<sup>16</sup> Instead “all relevant insights about humanity are developed out of Christology...[which] makes it difficult to take seriously the kinds of data and insights that are provided by phenomenological description.”<sup>17</sup> Willis’ point is that Barth’s description of human agency appears to be at some distance from what human beings know of themselves. Barth, Willis charges, “fails to make effective transition out of the context of ‘divine ethics’ and into the empirical framework where the stuff of *human* decision and action must be wrestled with.”<sup>18</sup>

Willis’ critique was a substantial contribution to the discussion on Barth. It was also regarded by many as the final word on Barth’s moral theology: very few scholars who were engaged in reading his *Dogmatics* in 1970s and 1980s took time to treat his ethical material. Those ethicists who read Barth usually gave him as an example of approaches that were inadequate for the task.<sup>19</sup> Since 1990 however, things have changed: there has begun “an ongoing re-evaluation of the importance and validity of [Barth’s] theological ethics.”<sup>20</sup> Instead of “moving beyond” Barth, as Willis desired, there has been a resurgence of interest in him, which has resulted in the publication of several monographs and articles that treat him as a significant voice in the general history of Christian ethics.<sup>21</sup> These fresh readings have not been uniform in their approach, and three particular ways of engaging with Barth’s ethics are discernible: 1) scholars seeking to interpret Barth in the light of some other ethical system, and enquire as to the compatibility of it with his moral theology. Nigel Biggar and Matthew Rose are good examples of this: the former reading Barth through the lens of casuistry, and the latter through the lens of natural law theory; 2) those scholars engaging Barth for some insight into a moral problem or quandary or as part of a wider discussion

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<sup>16</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, 433.

<sup>17</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, 446.

<sup>18</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, 443.

<sup>19</sup> For example, Robin Lovin’s critique of the viability Barth’s ethics - “it is impossible for public ethics” - in his *Christian Faith and Public Choices: The Social Ethics of Barth, Brunner, and Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 42.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Nimmo, *Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Karl Barth’s Ethical Vision* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2007), 3.

<sup>21</sup> On this see David Clough and Michael Leyden, “Claiming Barth for Ethics: The Last Two Decades” *Ecclesiology* 6 no. 2 (2010), 166-182. Since the publication of this review article several more substantial monographs have appeared: David Haddorff, *Christian Ethics as Witness: Barth’s Ethics for a World at Risk*; 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* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010). I may also include here the published papers of the Princeton Theological Seminary Annual Karl Barth Conference, 2008: Daniel Migliore, ed., *Commanding Grace: Studies in Karl Barth’s Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

about a particular topic. These tend to be more occasional pieces, or as part of a larger constructive conversation. For example, scholars have sought dialogue with Barth on bioethics,<sup>22</sup> animal ethics,<sup>23</sup> criminal justice,<sup>24</sup> war,<sup>25</sup> politics,<sup>26</sup> family,<sup>27</sup> and economics,<sup>28</sup> as well as more conceptual discussions about agency<sup>29</sup>, anthropology,<sup>30</sup> and metaphysics.<sup>31</sup> It is unusual now for publications dealing with Barth's theology not to include at least one chapter on his ethics, and increasingly scholars are turning to it as a component of his overall dogmatic thought without which it is difficult to make sense of Barth's theology. By no means are all these conversations 'Barthian' in nature, nor are the scholars that look to him for insight 'Barthians', but the increasing engagement with his thought shows that Barth is an ethicist of whom notice must be, and is being, taken; 3) those describing the content of Barth's moral theology, what might better be called "dogmatic ethics"<sup>32</sup>, to develop our understanding of his ethics. This third approach to Barth has led to an attitudinal change amongst scholars: a willingness to read and understand Barth on his own terms, before

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<sup>22</sup> For example, Neil Messer, *Respecting Life: Theology and Bioethics* (London: SCM, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> David L. Clough, *On Animals: Volume One: Systematic Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2012).

<sup>24</sup> See essays by Timothy Gorringer and Katherine Sonderegger in Migliore, ed., *Commanding Grace...*

<sup>25</sup> Rowan Williams, 'Barth, War, and the State' in *Reckoning with Barth: Essays in Commemoration of Karl Barth's Birth*, edited by Nigel Biggar (Oxford: Mowbray, 1988) ch 9; David Clough, 'Fighting at the Command of God: Reassessing the Borderline Case in Karl Barth's Account of War in the *Church Dogmatics*' in *Conversing with Barth* edited by John McDowell and Mike Higton (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004) ch 11.

<sup>26</sup> George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) pt. 1. See also essays by David Haddorff and Todd Cioffi in Daniel Migliore, ed., *Commanding Grace: Studies in Karl Barth's Ethics...*; Timothy Gorringer, *Against Hegemony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Frank Jehle, *Ever Against the Stream: The Politics of Karl Barth 1906-1968* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

<sup>27</sup> William Werpehowski, 'Reading Karl Barth on Children' in *The Child in Christian Thought*, edited by Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) ch 15; Joseph Mangina, 'Bearing Fruit: Conception, Children, and the Family' in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, edited by Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006) ch 35.

<sup>28</sup> See Kathryn Tanner, 'Barth and the Economy of Grace' and also Christopher R J Holmes, 'Karl Barth on the Economy: In Dialogue with Kathryn Tanner' in Daniel Migliore, ed., *Commanding Grace...*, ch.10 and ch. 11.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Mangina, *Karl Barth on the Christian Life: The Practical Knowledge of God* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001); Archibald Spencer, *Clearing a Space for Human Action: Ethical ontology in the Theology of Karl Barth* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003); Nimmo, *Being in Action...*

<sup>30</sup> For example, David Kelsey's recent *Eccentric Existence*, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009) takes Barth as a significant interlocutor at several points in his own constructive argument.

<sup>31</sup> Matthew Rose, *God, Metaphysics, and Morals...*

<sup>32</sup> Michael Banner, 'Turning the World Upside Down - and Some Other Tasks for Dogmatic Christian Ethics' in his *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Banner describes Barth's ethics as the simultaneous assertion of "the ethical significance of the subject matter of dogmatics, and the essentially dogmatic character of the presuppositions of genuine ethics." "Turning the World Upside Down...", 3.

rushing to fit him into extant conceptual frameworks, or rejecting his approach because of its perceived uselessness. Instead, more considered exegetical readings of Barth have been able to lay bare the inner logic of his moral theology, and explore the structure and content of his ethical material. This trend has benefitted from the publication of the *Gesamtausgabe*<sup>33</sup> and access to several previously unpublished texts such as the Münster/Bonn *Ethics* lectures. With a greater number of original works available, scholars are now able to engage more fully with the depth and breadth of Barth's moral theology, and to appreciate both its peculiarity and its significance.

Briefly, I want to sketch some of the issues raised by approaches 1) and 3). Highlighting the work of Biggar and Rose I shall indicate how some readings of Barth have been creative and have helped to explore aspects of Barth's work otherwise understudied, whilst rejecting this approach for my own work because the fundamental premise challenges the basic contours of Barth's dogmatic ethics. I then turn to an overview of contributions from Paul Matheny, John Webster, David Clough, and Paul Nimmo to show where my work relates to their common judgement that Barth's moral theology is some kind of ontology. Matheny and Webster attend to the formal Christological elements of this, whilst Clough and Nimmo in different ways engage in some discussion of the concrete requirements of it in human action, Clough by attending to the ongoing significance of dialectical thinking and Nimmo by examining the ontic element of Barth's presentation of human agency. The interplay between ontology and action is a background feature of my work on Barth's responsibility-ethics, and so taking some time to note the key thinkers here is important. I will argue in my discussion of the *Ethics* lectures in Chapter 2 and of *CD II/2* in Chapter 3 that Barth describes the *nature* of the "moral space" inhabited by human agents using responsibility-language. My contribution to this discussion is to suggest, on the basis of material drawn from *CD III/4* in Chapter 4, that Barth also describes indicative practices which enable the human agent to navigate this space, and these actions are themselves responsible-acts thus aiding the human agent to embed the insights gained in discussion of the ethics of responsibility in *CD II/2* in real lived-life. This addition, I shall argue, enables human agents to inhabit and fulfil their divine determination as responsible partners of God in the Covenant.

Biggar thinks that a kind of casuistry is discernible in the systematic structure of Barth's moral theology. His theology is trinitarianly differentiated - Creation, Reconciliation,

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<sup>33</sup> Published, since its inception in 1971, by Theologischer Verlag Zürich in conjunction with the Karl Barth Archive (Switzerland) - the Director of which is also the Editor-in-Chief of the *Gesamtausgabe*. The Collection is published in five series: Predigten (Sermons); Academische Werke (Academic Works); Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten (Lectures and Short Articles); Gespräche (Conversations); Briefe (Letters).

Redemption - and at the close of each volume Barth intended discussion of ethics. “In each of these spheres, special ethics explicates the meaning of the constant will of God in terms of a governing concept or principle.”<sup>34</sup> Biggar argues that Barth’s special ethics does not “claim the power to identify conclusively what God is commanding in a given situation”<sup>35</sup> but can give indications of the normal form of the divine command - what he also calls “an aid to hearing” the command - without claiming to be the command itself. This is so because the command of God in Biggar’s reading of Barth is concretely recognised as calling. He writes, “what is actually commanded is finally determined, not by moral rules, but by personal vocation.”<sup>36</sup> The command of God is ultimately personal - the divine address is received by a hearing-subject as command and calling, and is enacted as the subject obeys. Biggar sees the casuistic element in the hearing-role of the human agent: “this concept of hearing God’s command has the advantage of being compatible with the casuistic exercise of the full analytical powers of moral reason.”<sup>37</sup> Biggar sees casuistry as a particular listening “technique” governed by theological discernment.<sup>38</sup> The agent must position themselves to hear the command, and also discern and assess what they think they have heard in the light of what they know of God in Christ. Reading Barth in this way places him at odds with others aspects of his theology in at least two ways: the first is Barth’s outright rejection of the casuistic tradition, as he writes, “the way of casuistry is basically unacceptable, however enticing it may seem, and however convenient it would be...”<sup>39</sup> The second is about the nature of the the encounter between God and human agents in the divine address. Barth suggests consistently that human beings know themselves to be “arrested” by the commanding-Word, such is its force and power. Biggar has not been without scholarly criticism about this. David Clough argues strongly that Biggar’s work ought to be viewed as a rather unhelpful “reinterpretation” of Barth’s ethics, and judges that “squeezing Barth’s

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<sup>34</sup> Biggar, *The Hastening That Waits*, 31.

<sup>35</sup> Biggar, *The Hastening That Waits*, 32.

<sup>36</sup> Biggar, *The Hastening That Waits*, 44. On several occasions Biggar comes close to presenting Barth’s ethics as a kind of Christian spirituality. For example, when he writes that “a major theological correlate of this concept of vocation is the intimate presence of the living God to the individual human creature.” *The Hastening That Waits*, 164.

<sup>37</sup> Biggar, *The Hastening That Waits*, 44.

<sup>38</sup> Biggar, *The Hastening That Waits*, 41.

<sup>39</sup> *CD III/4*, 8 (*KD III/4*, 7).

vigorous and provocative ethical thought into the confines of natural law and casuistry deprives it of its most compelling qualities.”<sup>40</sup>

In a similar vein to Biggar, though from a Roman Catholic perspective, Matthew Rose has sought to read Barth in-step with the natural law tradition, in particular the Thomist moral philosophy of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s earlier work.<sup>41</sup> In essence Rose wants to argue that Barth thinks moral rules are discernible for Christians, and that Barth displays “an unwavering conviction that certain moral truths flow straight from the gospel.”<sup>42</sup> Rose here argues that for Barth one impact of the gospel is that it gives human agents an insight into moral truth and that encounter with Christ gives Christians a perspective from which to interpret the world morally. Statements like this make Rose’s interpretation particularly interesting, since most Protestant readings of Barth have articulated his rejection of any kind of natural law or casuistry. For Rose the gospel as the gracious act of God liberates Christians to “conform to God’s intentions for the created order” which are knowable “*in rerum natura*.”<sup>43</sup> We are enabled to perceive these divine intentions precisely because of Jesus Christ: “For Barth, Christ liberates us from the self imprisonment of false views and discloses the intelligible form through which all things were made...the revelation of Christ is also the discovery of *nature*.”<sup>44</sup> Christology is key to Rose’s assertion here, and in particular the nuanced Christology of *CD* III, which is his sole focus. Rose perceives in this permission to construct a Christocentric ontology which encompasses all of creation - “Jesus Christ is the contingent truth and basis of everything”<sup>45</sup> - and which therefore makes moral truth open to human agents: reality takes on an imperatival characteristic. Rose’s account of Barth has met with scholarly criticism, mostly for its idiosyncratic presentation of his theological concerns, and for the skewed picture presented by focusing solely on the special ethics of *CD* III/4.

Whilst Biggar and Rose offer interesting interpretations of Barth, neither approach is particularly helpful in this study: I am concerned with explicating the meaning of a particular

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<sup>40</sup> David Clough, *Ethics in Crisis: Interpreting Barth’s Ethics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 116. Biggar has since acknowledged that his earlier work was a “reconstruction” indicative of where he thought Barth “should have gone”. Biggar, ‘Karl Barth’s Ethics Revisited’ in Migliore, ed., *Commanding Grace...*, 26.

<sup>41</sup> Rose, *God, Metaphysics, and Morals*, 5. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*. Translated by Edward Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992).

<sup>42</sup> Rose, *God, Metaphysics, and Morals*, 18.

<sup>43</sup> Rose, *God, Metaphysics, and Morals*, 42.

<sup>44</sup> Rose, *God, Metaphysics, and Morals*, 49.

<sup>45</sup> Rose, *God, Metaphysics, and Morals*, 55.

theme within Barth's dogmatic ethics. To do so requires a different method for engaging Barth, which other scholars may help with.

Turning to Matheny, Webster, Clough, and Nimmo the discussion moves towards a comprehensive understanding of Barth based on close-reading of key texts. In his *Dogmatics and Ethics*<sup>46</sup> Matheny argues that Barth's ethics is best understood as a "theological realism" centred on the divine-human covenant-relationship which is determined by God in Jesus Christ. As such, for Barth, from a centre in Jesus Christ dogmatics and ethics were not separate disciplines but a homogenous whole.<sup>47</sup> Matheny sees this as the proper way to think about human agency and conduct in Barth's ethics recognising that dogmatic description has ethical significance: "Dogmatics was to be understood as an explication and examination of the proclamation of the Church in reference to the Gospel message in terms of its appropriateness as instruction and regulation in living the Christian life."<sup>48</sup> Matheny sees in Barth a way of understanding the relationship between Jesus Christ as the sum of the gospel of grace, and also the revelation of true humanity in the divine command. The reality of human being - what Barth calls genuine or real humanity in *CD III/2* - is grounded in the person of Jesus Christ. Matheny saw in Barth's *Dogmatics* a necessary turn to Christology in order to underpin the ontological status of the human agent *qua* agent. The doctrine of election Barth develops in *CD II* means that there is, therefore, no place of neutrality in relation to God. Matheny sees in Barth's "Christological ontology" a resource from which he can develop "formal and material anthropological statements from corresponding Christological statements."<sup>49</sup> Barth's Christology gives Matheny formal resources for thinking about human agency.

Similarly, John Webster denotes Barth's approach to ethics as a "moral ontology" in which Barth is describing the space in which human agents act. The basis of this is the covenant which God has established between himself and human beings in Jesus Christ, and in which he invites human beings to be active participants. Participation presupposes and conditions human agency, such that all of Barth's *Dogmatics* (which takes as its theme the divine-human covenant) has agency and ethics within its vista, and therefore radically implicates human beings.

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<sup>46</sup> Paul Matheny, *Dogmatics and Ethics: The Theological Realism and Ethics of Barth's Church Dogmatics*. (New York: Peter Lang, 1990).

<sup>47</sup> Matheny, *Dogmatics and Ethics*, 3.

<sup>48</sup> Matheny, *Dogmatics and Ethics*, 7.

<sup>49</sup> Matheny, *Dogmatics and Ethics*, 134.

Barth's dogmatics can be construed as an extended enquiry into the moral field – into the space within which moral agents act and into the shape of the action, a shape given above all by the fact that their acts take place in the history of the encounter between God as prime agent and themselves as those called to act in correspondence to the grace of God.<sup>50</sup>

Webster is not so much concerned with the concrete questions of what exactly I ought to do in this situation, but sees in Barth a way of delineating the space wherein such actions take place and therefore to inform the “shape” of human lives. The spatial metaphor is helpful, because Webster argues that Barth's moral vision for true human agency is understood through it.<sup>51</sup> This means that the theological realism which Matheny identifies in Barth is explicated in terms of human conduct: in as much as Christian confession purports to a particular understanding of the world, so too it gives rise to a particular way of being and acting within the world, with a particular orientation.<sup>52</sup> Webster's reading of Barth places Barth against the background of post-Enlightenment attempts to describe the active agent philosophically, opting instead for a robust theological ethics in which human action is invited and agency bestowed in Jesus Christ.<sup>53</sup> The human agent is describable on this basis, and appropriate actions may then be inferred.

Clough and Nimmo attend to the more concrete and contextual elements of the moral vision Matheny and Webster have discerned in Barth, but they do so in different ways. While Clough does not deal with Barth's ethics using terms like ‘moral ontology’, his emphasis on the situated-ness of human agents in relation to God in Barth's thought, and his conviction that therein ‘crisis’ is an “inescapable feature of God's relationship with the world” lend themselves to being understood in this way.<sup>54</sup> The cause of the crisis Clough sees as continually operative in Barth's thought is partly epistemological - “because we do not hold the will of God in our hands...we must continually seek after it in new times and new places”<sup>55</sup> - and also the ongoing dialectical nature of Barth's theology. The dialectical ‘Yes-No’ of God is grounded in Barth's Christology, and so in some sense is the condition

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<sup>50</sup> John Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 4.

<sup>51</sup> Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, 216.

<sup>52</sup> Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, 223.

<sup>53</sup> See, Archibald Spencer, *Clearing a Space for Human Action: Ethical Ontology in the Theology of Karl Barth* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 58-9.

<sup>54</sup> Clough, *Ethics in Crisis...*, xiii.

<sup>55</sup> Clough, *Ethics in Crisis...*, xvii.

and divine determination of human agency: “for Barth the dialectic between Christ’s divinity and humanity is one key reason why all theology must bear a dialectical shape.”<sup>56</sup> Since Clough recognises that ethics is intrinsic to Barth’s theological work, so too must ethics bear a dialectical shape. The ‘crisis’ theology describes the nature of the moral landscape, and in that sense provides some sort of ontological description of the space wherein the agent must act. For Clough, this means that Barth’s insistence that human existence is the series of actions each agent performs must reckon with the crisis-ontology constructively - providing some navigational tools that will enable agents to act within the tension of not knowing directly the will of God. Clough outlines three attitudes that he thinks are necessary for this: faithfulness; humility; and active-ness which he thinks enable the human being to act well. These three, he thinks, resist the temptation to be prescriptive about what human beings ought to do, and also the possibility for paralysis in the face of not knowing, whilst taking seriously the crisis-ontology he sees in Barth.

Like Clough, but in a slightly different way, Nimmo addresses the concrete requirements of navigating the ontological space Barth describes for the human agent in his discussion of Barth’s understanding of conformity to Christ.<sup>57</sup> He cites three aspects of human conformity to the divine determination which he finds in Barth: faith; obedience; and prayer. Each of these is concrete and practical, since “for Barth...conformity of the ethical agent to Jesus Christ means correspondence *in action*.”<sup>58</sup> There is no way that ethics remains ethereal or descriptive only, but takes on a dynamism that is proper to genuine humanity. Each of these attitudes has their ground in Jesus Christ. Faith is the decision and act of the human agent to determine herself in confirmation of the divine determination of her in Christ, and is characterised by gratitude and repentance.<sup>59</sup> Obedience is the enactment of that self-determination to confirm the divine-determination in Christ through particular and concrete works, most especially the call to love as Christ loves.<sup>60</sup> In both these attitudes Nimmo sees in Barth the requirement to take account of the way the gospel of Jesus Christ conditions the being *and action* of the agent. The prayers of human beings are enabled by Jesus Christ, who is himself the “proper suppliant”, but are for the human agent true and genuine acts wherein she calls upon God from the concreteness of her situation.<sup>61</sup> In doing

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<sup>56</sup> Clough, *Ethics in Crisis*..., xviii.

<sup>57</sup> Nimmo, *Being in Action*..., 136.

<sup>58</sup> Nimmo, *Being in Action*..., 137. Emphasis added.

<sup>59</sup> Nimmo, *Being in Action*..., 139.

<sup>60</sup> Nimmo, *Being in Action*..., 145.

<sup>61</sup> Nimmo, *Being in Action*..., 149.

so, she orders her life and confirms its proper orientation. This matters for any ethics, because all moral discourse has some direction. For Nimmo, Barth's actualistic ontology gives ethics a shape and direction, as well as particular content and practice in the concrete circumstances of human life.

In the work of all of these theologians our interpretation and understanding of Barth's ethics has developed considerably. In my contribution of explicating the idea of human responsibility in Barth's thought, my work stands on the shoulders of giants by touching upon the issues raised by Matheny, Webster, Clough, and Nimmo. In particular the delineation of the ontological space inhabited by responsible human beings on the one hand, and the navigation of that space through indicative responsible actions on the other. A substantial aspect of my argument is that "responsibility" names, for Barth, the nature of the moral space which human agents are accorded, as well as indicating for them how they might navigate that space appropriately. The practices I highlight in *CD III/4* are not in themselves exhaustive of all responsible actions, but serve to orientate the responsible agent in a way that appropriately reflects the ontological reality in which she finds herself. In my discussion of human responsibility in the ethics of *CD II/2* and *CD III/4*, I argue that the two aspects of description and indicative action can be read in tandem with one another.

### **1.3 Responsibility: The Development of the Concept**

Generally speaking, the notion of human responsibility has a relatively short history compared to some of its other counterparts in moral discourse both within and outside theological ethics. The semantic history of the term is tied up with the Latin *respondere* and the idea of answering and being answerable to/for something/one.<sup>62</sup> Responsibility came into use as an ethical term in western European philosophy only in the past three hundred years<sup>63</sup> - a mere toddler compared to, for example, the ancient ethical concepts of praise and blame, with which contemporary accounts of responsibility have much to do. According to Richard McKeon, the arrival of the term is to be considered "at best a new instrument for use in current and ancient controversies." For this reason also - it having been marshalled

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<sup>62</sup> The same is true in German, where *Verantwortung* is cognate with *Antworten*, to answer. The Latin has its roots in the term *spendere*, to promise. To respond is therefore to re-promise, or to revisit the oath/promise made and ask oneself whether ones actions conform to it. Responsibility has some connection, semantically speaking, to integrity.

<sup>63</sup> It is widely agreed that the earliest general uses of the term date back to the seventeenth century. See Jonsen, *Responsibility in Modern Religious Ethics* (Washington: Corpus, 1968), 3. According to Richard McKeon in his 'The Development and Significance of the Concept of Responsibility' in *Freedom and History and Other Essays*, edited by Zahava McKeon (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), 65, the first philosophical treatment of the term comes much later in Alexander Bain's *The Emotions and the Will* published in 1859.

only in contentious issues - it became a much disputed notion.<sup>64</sup> At the heart of the dispute was the struggle to give responsibility a distinctive ethical meaning, since its cognitive range incorporated ideas already at play in “ancient controversies” - accountability, answerability, praise and blame, judgement, culpability, virtue, relationship, authority, and power.

McKeon argues that this dispute continued throughout the modern period, becoming a hallmark of the difficulty of introducing new concepts into ethical debates, and that it was only in the aftermath of the Second World War that some effort was made to give responsibility a peculiar moral flavour. The driving factor in this was the need to concentrate the efforts of European philosophers in conversation and understanding in order to help with the cultural reconstruction of the continent at that time. He locates the particular shift from a lack of coherence to a more comprehensive philosophical account in the papers presented at the International Institute of Philosophy conference, 1956, at which the theme was responsibility.<sup>65</sup> Freed from the “official” interpretations of human agency in totalitarian regimes, and with a concern to give sound guidance to the newly emerging post-war humanity, philosophers from across Europe were able to come together and articulate something about the way acts and values interrelate, and about how assessment of these is a vital part of philosophical ethics. This was the basis for their account of responsibility.<sup>66</sup> The Second World War had played a significant role in altering the landscape of moral discourse, and the notion of responsibility – it was thought – could give people the language to organise and structure post-war political rebuilding, diplomacy, and the establishment of harmony. Because it had none of the baggage of the more ancient ethical language, “responsibility” could be moulded and shaped to fulfil this political task. With a vision of the new Europe in mind, responsibility-ethics could encourage certain kinds of attitudes and behaviours that lead to the strengthening of relationships, and mitigate against those which might lead to war.

In the subsequent development of the concept over the latter part of the twentieth century, further questions have been raised by philosophers, but these grow out of this primary concern to let values and actions interrelate critically thus ensuring the integrity of human action. In particular, questions around the freedom of the agent to act in accordance

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<sup>64</sup> McKeon, ‘The Development and Significance...’, 68.

<sup>65</sup> The International Institute of Philosophy was an arm of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

<sup>66</sup> This is a much less forensic description of human responsibility than is found in John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza, eds., *Perspectives on Moral Responsibility* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), but is closely linked to what Fischer elsewhere call “intuitive judgements” about human action. See John Martin Fischer, *My Way: Essays on Moral Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 64.

with their values, whether he or she is predetermined for certain activities,<sup>67</sup> and what conditions must be met in order for us to say that someone is truly responsible for their actions (or, indeed, lack of action) – and therefore open to praise or blame – have been especially important.<sup>68</sup> As have very grounded concerns about the way in which our actions and values relate to specific practical *foci*. The most famous of these is probably Hans Jonas' clarion call for humanity to review its attitude towards future generations, in his book *The Imperative of Responsibility*.<sup>69</sup> In developing an account of human responsibility for technological development and its effects on the world presently, Jonas calls us to be guided by a sense of obligation and duty of care to those who come after us. Here is an interplay between the way in which we value technology for the support of our lives, the acknowledged value of our current resources upon which we are dependent, and the value we place on our descendants who have a future share in our resources (which is, of course, closely related to the value we place on ourselves as human beings and links in the chain of human history). As these three tussle for ascendancy, Jonas argues that our responsibility is properly toward the future and the generations that come after us. This assessment process is what responsibility is all about: we ask to whom we are answerable, and against what standard, and whether we are able to fulfil the requirements placed upon us in this deliberative process in the actions we choose to undertake.

In all of these instances, what McKeon called “the intelligibility of ideas and values” has played an important role in the way we assess the integrity of human activity, and has become the foundational aspect of philosophical responsibility. What has made it so potent is the extent to which it works both at the personal/individual level of our thinking and acting, and also at the corporate/social levels. The original desire for a uniting concept has been carried on in the philosophical approach to human responsibility, influencing not only academic debate about agency and power, but also exercising influence in court rooms, as in John Martin Fischer's work, and in social programmes, as in Hans Jonas' work. That more ancient concepts such as imputability, accountability, answerability, and liability are frequently drawn alongside our modern understanding of responsibility serves to fill-out its conceptual

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<sup>67</sup> These questions are not new, and find their genesis in Enlightenment concerns raised by key thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke, Hume, and Kant about the nature and foundation of common morality. McKeon seems to suggest that the intensification of focus on responsibility after World War Two takes this debate forward in a new way.

<sup>68</sup> Here again, see John Martin Fischer, ed., *Moral Responsibility* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986); Fischer and Ravizza, eds., *Perspectives on Moral Responsibility*; and Fischer, *My Way...*

<sup>69</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984).

range and extend its cognitive influence. As such the secular development of responsibility-ethics has been considerable.

By contrast, the notion of human responsibility in Christian ethics has achieved very little conceptual coherence across the twentieth century. According to Jonsen the notion has suffered from a sense of “confusion...about the precise meaning and use”,<sup>70</sup> and has, according to Gerald McKenny, “gone out of fashion” in twenty-first century Christian discourse. He goes on in the same paragraph, “the concept of responsibility is too thin to compete...with the well elaborated conceptions of moral and intellectual virtues that have appeared in recent decades.”<sup>71</sup> To have gotten to the point where virtue theory can completely override responsibility-ethics seems like a strange development in the recent history of Christian ethics given that in the mid-twentieth century - when philosophically responsibility-ethics was gaining a greater level of coherence - the language of moral responsibility was almost pervasive in the thought of several significant theologians. Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer,<sup>72</sup> Emil Brunner,<sup>73</sup> Joseph Fletcher,<sup>74</sup> Bernhard Haering,<sup>75</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr,<sup>76</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr,<sup>77</sup> and Helmut Thielicke<sup>78</sup> were all engaged in thinking about Christian moral reasoning as some form of responsibility-ethic, and all use the language of responsibility at critical points in their discussions of human agency as well as in their ethical work more broadly. Nearly all of these scholars are synonymous with a Christian understanding of human responsibility, such was their influence. Furthermore, in 1948, the first World Council of Churches (WCC) Assembly, held in Amsterdam, reported that the notion of human beings as those “responsible before God” living in the “responsible society” would be helpful in the restructuring of Europe.<sup>79</sup> The following WCC Assembly, held in Evanston, gave a whole section of the plenary meetings over to the theme

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<sup>70</sup> Jonsen, *Responsibility in Modern Religious Ethics*, 2.

<sup>71</sup> Gerald McKenny, ‘Responsibility’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*, ed. Gilbert Meilander and William Werpehowski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 239.

<sup>72</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, ‘The Structure of the Responsible Life’, in *Ethics*, ed. Clifford Green, DBW Vol. 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 257-289.

<sup>73</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, translated by Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth Press, 1953).

<sup>74</sup> Joseph Fletcher, *Moral Responsibility: Situation Ethics at Work* (London: SCM Press, 1967).

<sup>75</sup> Bernhard Haering, *The Law of Christ* (Westminster: Newman Press, 1961).

<sup>76</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953).

<sup>77</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*, 2nd edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999).

<sup>78</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966).

<sup>79</sup> Willem Visser’t Hooft, *The First Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (New York: Harper, 1948).

“Responsible Society in World Perspective.”<sup>80</sup> The quest here was for a universal notion of responsibility - what does a truly responsible society look like? - that could form and shape the Church’s participation in post-war society, and which could permeate secular moral discourse for the benefit of all. This mirrors almost exactly the secular developments articulated by McKeon in the years immediately following the Second World War. More recent articles by William Schweiker, Kathryn Tanner, Nigel Biggar, Bernd Wannewetsch, and Wolfgang Hüber show that until about the last fifteen years theologians and Christian ethicists have been engaged with some kind of notion of responsibility as a way of thinking about and articulating meaningful human activity for most of the last hundred years. Why then the increased un-fashionability of responsibility-ethics articulated by McKenny?

At this point, the contrast with the development of the philosophical idea described by McKeon is helpful: unlike the secular school of thought, at the peak of its use in Christian ethics there was no single coherent understanding of responsibility and its importance for the discipline of Christian moral reasoning. It never developed a uniform conceptual meaning. William Schweiker puts it more sharply when he writes, “it is not at all clear that they [theologians] are speaking about the same thing despite the use of common language.”<sup>81</sup> The U.S. sociologist Horace Kallen, writing in 1942, states bluntly that “it [responsibility] is the subject of a great deal of mystification amongst theologians...”<sup>82</sup> and a little later, in 1966, U.S. philosopher Herbert Fingarette argued that it was a confusing concept because there was no agreed way of dealing with responsibility, but when it is brought into dialogue with the religious tradition “us poor mortals” get “caught in limbo between history and God.”<sup>83</sup> From the start, the discussion about human responsibility in Christian ethics has been hindered by lack of cogency - we are in limbo - and the result in recent years has been a wholesale move away from the idea in moral discourse.

Though Schweiker articulates the problem near the end of the twentieth century, it is clear from Kallen and Fingarette, as well as Jonsen, that it was recognised as a problem for Christian/theological ethics thirty years earlier. But it was also a problem for those mid-twentieth century theologians employing the language themselves. This is clear to us because one of the disciplines of those Christian ethicists engaged in this topic has been to explain and clarify over and over what is intended in their use of the terminology. At each step these various forms of Christian ethics have been required to explain and defend their

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<sup>80</sup> <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/who-are-we/background/history/assemblies.html>

<sup>81</sup> Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, 103.

<sup>82</sup> H. M. Kallen, ‘Responsibility’ in *Ethics* 52, no. 3 (1942), 350.

<sup>83</sup> Herbert Fingarette, ‘Responsibility’ in *Mind* 75, no. 297 (1966), 74.

understanding of human responsibility from within the rationale of their own methodologies. So, for example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer described human responsibility in terms of social interactions rooted in the soteriological idea of *Stellvertretung* - vicarious action: “responsibility is essentially a relation from one human being to another.”<sup>84</sup> Emil Brunner, on the other hand, argued that responsibility is first and foremost a description of humanity as “created and claimed by God”<sup>85</sup> rooting the idea in the doctrines of creation and redemption. The Niebuhr brothers focused less on doctrinal issues and more on philosophical anthropology, but disagreed about the location of the impetus for responsibility: whether it begins with the active agent at large in the world (Reinhold) or with some external force acting upon the agent and compelling a response (H. Richard). Though this might seem incidental, the disagreement is really about whether responsibility is proactive or reactive in nature, and therefore about what form responsible human agency actually takes.<sup>86</sup>

Noting the differences between all these thinkers supports the idea of lack of clarity that Schweiker notes, and highlights the problem raised by what Robin Lovin calls the “frequency and fluidity”<sup>87</sup> of the concept in Christian ethics. In a helpful and elucidatory essay, he argues that despite its prevalence in the mid-twentieth century, responsibility-ethics has actually suffered from a great deal of neglect - a consistent lack of analytical attention - which in turn has given rise to a lack of conceptual clarity, and a failure to root responsibility language appropriately. He comments that responsibility language is “pervasive in modern life, but...curiously ungrounded.”<sup>88</sup> How we ground the concept in Christian ethics helps us to gain clarity over its meaning and function, and the absence of close attention to this fact leads to fluidity and ambiguity of meaning. One impact of this fluidity is simply the recognition that every instance of responsibility language in Christian moral discourse needs glossing in order to be meaningful. Another is to recognise that without such careful clarification, the term is potentially meaningless.

“Grounding” contributes to the classificatory task as it gives us a theological context in which to read and against which to interpret the idea of responsibility, which helps us to

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<sup>84</sup> Bonhoeffer, ‘The Structure of the Responsible Life’, 259.

<sup>85</sup> Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, 152.

<sup>86</sup> A very helpful discussion of the differing stances of the Niebuhr brothers, and the points at which their opinions converge is Douglas Ottati, ‘The Niebuhrian Legacy and the Idea of Responsibility’, *Studies in Christian Ethics*, vol. 22 no. 4 (2009), 399-422.

<sup>87</sup> Robin Lovin, ‘Becoming Responsible in Christian Ethics’, *Studies in Christian Ethics*, vol. 22 no. 4 (2009), 390.

<sup>88</sup> Lovin, ‘Becoming Responsible...’, 392.

navigate the interplay between wider theological concerns about human responsibility, and the practical nitty gritty of instantiating responsible action - what Lovin calls “proximate responsibility.”<sup>89</sup> How can human beings be considered responsible in relation to divine sovereignty? And how can Christians act responsibly *in concreto*? Unless it is clear what human responsibility means theologically and ethically the terminology will remain equivocal, and therefore profoundly unhelpful for moral discourse; hence McKenny’s valedictory note. Theology is a considerable part of this problem, according to Lovin. He suggests that “ambiguity of terminology mask[s] a deep division in theology”,<sup>90</sup> and so to understand the meaning and use of ethical language by a particular theologian, close attention must be paid to their theology. Only when the theological questions are asked and answered will the proximate/practical questions be answerable. This will be especially important in this thesis because of Barth’s particular approach to the relationship between ethics and theology, discussed in section 1.2. It will be in paying close attention to the theological discourse wherein Barth discusses human responsibility that its meaning will become clearer.

Barth is usually thought to be concerned only with theological articulation of moral concepts but not the practicalities of ethics. This is, on my reading of Barth’s responsibility-ethics, a mistake which grows out of a lack of detailed attention to this theme- he has never been given the same kind of hearing on the topic as Bonhoeffer or Haering, for example. One contention of this thesis is that there is more material on human responsibility available in the Barth *corpus* than scholarship has thus far suggested, and that in attending to this material we see that he offers us a theological description of human responsibility grounded in and attentive to Christian dogmatic theology but with practical and liveable implications.

In the following section I articulate the current *status quo* in the scholarship on Barth’s understanding of human responsibility, before turning to highlight some other problems that the would-be reader of Barth’s responsibility-ethics faces. I then suggest a way forward, borrowing some insights from Edward Farley’s work on context and interpretation.

#### **1.4 Reading Barth on Human Responsibility: The *Status Quo***

Earlier I noted that human responsibility has not yet been treated as a significant theme in the recent scholarly re-evaluation of Barth’s ethics.<sup>91</sup> Any proposed re-reading of Barth on

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<sup>89</sup> Lovin, ‘Becoming Responsible...’, 395.

<sup>90</sup> Lovin, ‘Becoming Responsible...’, 397.

<sup>91</sup> A notable exception to this is a forthcoming essay by Gerald McKenny, ‘Karl Barth’s Concept of Responsibility’ in Jürgen Boomgaarden und Martin Leiner, (Hg.), *Kein Mensch, der der Verantwortung entgehen könnte: Verantwortungsethik in theologischer, philosophischer und religionswissenschaftlicher Perspektive* (Freiburg: Herder Verlag, forthcoming). I am grateful to Professor McKenny for sending me copy of the essay in advance of publication.

this topic in the light of the scholarly re-evaluation must first take into account the *status quo*: first the problem of existing critical scholarship; and second the internal problems that Barth's work poses for the would-be reader. This section is concerned with describing these two issues, before offering a way forward that takes them seriously but is not encumbered by them.

#### 1.4.1 Three Key Critics: Niebuhr, Jonsen, and Schweiker

On the whole, the rejection of Barth's ethics rests on the disbelief that his theological premise has the capacity and ability to do the work traditionally associated with ethics: reasoned reflection that leads to practical action. Professional ethicists regard his way of thinking as simply not action guiding. Three scholars are particularly important in this with regard to Barth's idea of human responsibility: H. Richard Niebuhr in his posthumously published *The Responsible Self*;<sup>92</sup> Albert Jonsen in his *Responsibility in Modern Religious Ethics*;<sup>93</sup> and William Schweiker in his *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*.

Niebuhr's work on responsibility is subtitled "An Essay in Moral Philosophy" and this might give us a clue as to where it begins to diverge from Barth's approach.<sup>94</sup> Niebuhr treats Barth as the best example of "Christians who have sought to make Jesus Christ not only their exclusive principle of their understanding but also of their action."<sup>95</sup> He suggests, quite directly, that this is largely a problem for those who wish to do ethics "confined to theology" and accuses Barth of both Christo-centrism and "Christo-morphism." By this he means that Jesus Christ is the only permitted analogy or metaphor for a Christian understanding of human conduct, and so is the true  $\mu\omicron\rho\tau\tau\epsilon$  of human being and action. But, over against Barth, Niebuhr reads Christ through the category of "symbol" not ontology, and so his criticism of Barth focuses on the ethical need to interpret the Christ-symbol for human agents. His contention is that Christian moral reasoning has always used symbolic speech in order to make sense of its task and to give direction for human action. Borrowing insights from philosopher Ernst Cassirer, he argues that we ought to interpret ourselves "as symbolic more than as rational animals" which means that

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<sup>92</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*, Second Edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999).

<sup>93</sup> Albert Jonsen, *Responsibility in Modern Religious Ethics* (Washington: Corpus Books, 1968).

<sup>94</sup> A helpful overview of Niebuhr's critique of Barth is Robert E. Willis, 'The Concept of Responsibility in the Ethics of Karl Barth and H. Richard Niebuhr' in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (1979), 279-290.

<sup>95</sup> Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 158.

we are far more image making and image-using creatures than we usually think ourselves to be, and further that our processes of perception and conception, of organising and understanding the signs that come to us in our dialogue with the circumambient world, are guided and formed by images in our minds. Our languages, we are reminded, are symbolic systems.<sup>96</sup>

The depth of our symbolic nature means that both our interpretation and therefore our interaction with the world around us is governed by imagery. From this view point he then re-interprets the person of Jesus Christ:

...when we reflect on our existence as Christian with this hypothesis in mind we become aware that in Christian life Jesus Christ is a symbolic form with the aid of which men tell each other what life and death, God and man, are *like*...<sup>97</sup>

In this way, Jesus Christ is for Christians the “symbolic form with which the self understands itself, and with the aid of which the self guides and forms itself in its actions and its sufferings.”<sup>98</sup> The Christ-symbol is the source of Christian self-identification and self-understanding, and of moral and ethical imagery by which the Christian decides and acts *Christianly*.

Niebuhr’s argument against Barth is simply that Jesus Christ alone is not enough for the Christian to live well. The meaning of Jesus Christ needs to be made known, and this cannot be done “without the aid of other metaphors and symbols such as Word of God, Son of God, Servant, Lord, covenant, humiliation, exaltation, reconciliation, salvation.” He finds all of these interpretative elements in Barth’s theology, and so argues that his Christocentrism is in fact not Christ-centrism at all, but the introduction of “non-Christian though not non-biblical symbols such as commandment, law, obedience, and permission.” The issue here then is about “the adequacy, the revelatory value, of the symbols associated with Jesus Christ”<sup>99</sup> and more importantly the place of responsibility in relation to those.

Responsibility, for Niebuhr, was best understood as an emerging symbol through which the human agent could understand their actions, reactions, and interactions with other human agents. It is the primary symbol for understanding relationships, which are

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<sup>96</sup> Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 151-2.

<sup>97</sup> Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 154. Italics original.

<sup>98</sup> Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 156.

<sup>99</sup> Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 158.

foundational to human existence. The question then is “How can Christians relate the form of Christ to the form of responsibility? or how do we understand ourselves as both responsible in our Christianity and Christian in our responsibility.?” What this question highlights for us is the way in which Niebuhr understood responsibility-ethics to originate independently of Christian moral reasoning, and then in some sense to be annexed by it. The key question he asks is about the form that that annexation should take, and in what ways we may “associate Jesus Christ with the responsible life...”<sup>100</sup> since Christ is the controlling symbol for all Christian ethics (hence his jibe at Barth’s non-Christian if not non-Biblical moral language).

Niebuhr’s rejection of Barth is therefore methodological: he preferred to have a commonly held philosophically structured notion of responsibility which he brought into dialogue with the central Christian symbol of Jesus Christ to assess the formal connections between them. This makes Christian ethics applicable beyond the boundaries of the theological/confessional fraternity for the good of the whole society. Christ “exemplified” the ethics of responsibility, but is not the sole definition of it. In freeing responsibility-ethics from the confines of theology, Niebuhr is able to develop “an ethics of universal responsibility” which appeals to a universal society.<sup>101</sup>

Barth’s methodology was also a problem, for similar reasons, for Albert Jonsen who was the first to offer a comprehensive overview of responsibility-ethics in twentieth century Christian thought. In his book he engaged with several key thinkers, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, offering a critical reading and interpretation of their various approaches to the topic. He suggested that Barth should be included in such an overview “less for the purpose of analysis than for the purpose of illustrating the problems and peculiarities of religious use of the concept...”<sup>102</sup> In a short, and very focused, analysis of *CD II/2*,<sup>103</sup> Jonsen argues that Barth’s theological method commits him to the idea that “all our understanding about man’s works must be derived from our knowledge of God’s works”, and this ultimately is problematic because it forces us to do the unnatural thing of turning away from the subject-matter in order to develop our understanding of it.<sup>104</sup> His critique centres on Barth’s commitment to theological thinking *per se*, in such a way that is “not done

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<sup>100</sup> Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 162.

<sup>101</sup> Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 167.

<sup>102</sup> Jonsen, *Responsibility in Modern Religious Ethics*, 3.

<sup>103</sup> A move Jonsen justified by saying that “Barth asserts that theological ethics...must be done as part of the doctrine of God”, Jonsen, *Responsibility in Modern Religious Ethics*, 80.

<sup>104</sup> Jonsen, *Responsibility in Modern Religious Ethics*, 80.

with the intention of translating propositions of faith into philosophical propositions.” This kind of method gives rise to ethical statements that resist public applicability and scrutiny.<sup>105</sup> Jonsen here foreshadows some of the concerns of scholars such as Gerald McKenny and Robin Lovin, who worry about the way responsibility language can be generally understood if there is no common conceptual grounding.

Jonsen articulates the concerns of many Christian ethicists engaged in public discourse when he says that the appropriation of the concept of responsibility by theologians from moral philosophy is not straightforward; the conceptual content gets skewed. He writes, “when the theologian employs such a term in his own context, it does not go unchanged. By adoption into theological discourse its boundaries are stretched. Its connotation shifts...which has led to some uncertainty and loss of clarity in use.”<sup>106</sup> This statement is very telling: Jonsen clearly thinks that the controlling centre of ethical discourse must be philosophy, or else the language of responsibility loses its meaning and purpose, it becomes unclear. Accordingly, a Christian understanding of responsibility must reject theological concerns and follow a more philosophical trajectory, or translate the particularities of theology into more acceptable philosophical themes, if it is to become generally comprehensible. Barth simply will not do this, but maintains that theology is the appropriate *modus* in which to consider human activity Christianly. Jonsen labels the approach “theological affirmation” because he argues the primary end is in “thoughtful consideration in faith upon the revealed word of God in the light of reflective human experience”<sup>107</sup> rather than in garnering an audience persuaded of the correctness of the approach who are subsequently enabled to live by it. If theologians want to enter meaningfully into public ethical discourse, or at least speak to other Christians who are engaged in this discourse, more is required if they are to be more than merely problematic examples:

we are requesting our theologians to clarify the fundamental relationship that exists between God and man...and the place which the perception of human values and human norms has in relation to the divine will for man.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Jonsen, *Responsibility in Modern Religious Ethics*, 83.

<sup>106</sup> Jonsen, *Responsibility in Modern Religious Ethics*, 83.

<sup>107</sup> Jonsen, *Responsibility in Modern Religious Ethics*, 85.

<sup>108</sup> Jonsen, *Responsibility in Modern Religious Ethics*, 86.

Jonsen's fear about Barth's approach to responsibility is that in its theological affirmation of the concept the discussion becomes exclusive of common human experience and perception - "human values and human norms" - and so limits the extent to which Christian ethics can speak to concrete human beings, and which they in turn can speak to their culture and learn from it. It fails to lead to definite human activity. For Jonsen, Barth has little to say about the nature of responsibility beyond the confines of the Church,<sup>109</sup> - i.e. the place wherein the basic assumptions about God and humanity are agreed - and less to say about the practicalities of responsibility even to those in the Church. Hence his portrayal of Barth only as a problem: the latter makes no space for "human values and human norms" as ethically valuable in distinction from the divine will, and struggles to instantiate his theological understanding in human activity.

William Schweiker rejects Barth's approach, making similar points to Jonsen, but takes a different critical route. In his book he offers a classification of various kinds of responsibility ethics according to the kind of power dynamic involved. Barth is presented as having a "weak" approach because of the dialogical structure of human responsibility - prioritising obedient response to God as the key to the concept.<sup>110</sup> So, along with other responsibility-ethics of this type, Barth "reduces the central moral datum to interpersonal relations" thus avoiding important issues such as agency, self-assertion, and power.<sup>111</sup> As such Barth has little to offer a robust account of responsibility that emphasises practical questions about these issues in a contemporary culture in which they are highly prized. Again, focusing on *CD II/2*, Schweiker argues that in making God the primary "other" whom we are called to encounter as Commander, Barth reduces human power for self-determination: the human being does not act in and of herself, but always in response to the sovereign power of Another - even though this "other" is thought to be benevolent. Aside from the potential abuses that can and have been associated with this kind of religious ethic, of which he is clearly not unaware,<sup>112</sup> Schweiker makes the point that this use of responsibility language is only meaningful for those within the Christian community, and those who in choosing to act in obedience are willing to put aside their own moral instincts:

For Barth divine command ethics asserts the sovereignty of God in terms of the good and also in determination of what we all ought to do. What we think is good

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<sup>109</sup> Jonsen, *Responsibility in Modern Religious Ethics*, 3, 79.

<sup>110</sup> Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, 94.

<sup>111</sup> Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, 45.

<sup>112</sup> Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, 10-14.

cannot be definitive of the good; what we decide to do is only right if it is in obedience to the divine command.<sup>113</sup>

This means a fundamental shift away from the usual modes of moral reasoning that are common to public discourse in a post-Enlightenment tolerant society, toward dependence upon encounter with the Christian God - hence Barth's reputation for command based ethics: "revelation not responsibility is morally basic" because the agent is morally contingent. What is missing, as far as Schweiker can see, is a description of how this encounter happens and therefore how it can possibly be morally normative for Christians, let alone other human beings. As such he rejects Barth's approach because, as with Niebuhr and Jonsen, it is difficult to instantiate this kind of responsibility-ethic. It makes theological sense but is of little practical value. Schweiker instead offers his own working hypothesis for human responsibility: the integrity of relationship between what an individual values, and the choices she makes - and the power she has to enact her values: what he calls "moral integrity".<sup>114</sup> This makes sense to Schweiker as a method for Christian ethics as well as non-Christian ethics because values are permitted to vary from person to person: what matters is the relationship between what we value and how we live. Like Niebuhr, this has a much more universal application than the narrowly theological focus of Barth's ethics.

For all three critics, the language of responsibility is a theological cypher that helps Barth say something about God in the context of moral theology, but very little about the active human agent engaged *in concreto* and needing to think towards action. Either Barth offers a concept that is too oblique, and in the end fails to fulfil the task of guiding human agents towards concrete activity because of its dogmatic (theological) nature; or it excludes Christians from meaningful contribution to contemporary public discourse on ethics and values because its foundational theology is alien to wider society, and therefore to her own normative way of thinking about action; or he violates the sovereignty of the responsible self and promotes an unhelpful subservience to a divine will - which we may or may not encounter - by emphasising the descriptive nature of dogmatic theology and therefore refusing to provide something practically normative. Their criticisms of Barth are wholly consistent with the received view held until recently that Barth's ethics suffers from his commitment to thinking about action from the perspective of dogmatic theology.

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<sup>113</sup> Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, 97.

<sup>114</sup> Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, 224.

#### 1.4.2 Highlighting Internal Problems

The response to this kind of critical reading of Barth is not simply a straightforward reading of, for example, the *Church Dogmatics* highlighting the particular sections of special ethics wherein he discusses human responsibility. This is important, but it is the beginning rather than the end of the task. Understanding and articulating human responsibility in Barth's thought is made difficult by two related internal factors. By 'internal' I mean problems of Barth's own making, and which themselves prove to be obstacles to a coherent account of his understanding. These must be named in order to be dealt with.

First, Barth offers no overarching account or conceptual definition of the idea of human responsibility in his thought. Even theologically rich and potent statements like those discussed at the beginning of this chapter are not readily accessible in terms of their ethical meaning. Barth marshals the language of responsibility early on in his theological career - in the 1922 lecture, *The Problem of Ethics Today* - without any introduction or gloss, and from then on, though there are moments of intense usage - such as those in the Special Ethics of *CD II/2*, which have given rise to critical comment from Niebuhr, Jonsen and Schweiker - there remains no working definition to help us understand what it means for him to say human beings are responsible before God. So in this thesis I join scholars such as Gerald McKenny in seeking further clarity about the nature and meaning of the idea in Barth's thought.<sup>115</sup>

Second, Barth uses responsibility and its cognates regularly in shorter ethical writings and also through each volume of the *Church Dogmatics* to say something about human agency. His comments about responsibility are not confined to the special ethics, though it is in the sections of special ethics that their moral meaning is most readily discernible. Given that the Barth-*corpus* is so large, dealing with texts in isolation will only paint part of the picture and fill-in part of our understanding. Hence my critique of Niebuhr, Jonsen and Schweiker for their narrow focus on the Christology of *CD II/2*. Human responsibility is a significant part of Barth's mature writing but it is not always clear what it means as an overall theme running through his theology. Therefore, the different sections of theological ethics from across his dogmatic edifice must be brought together in dialogue to give us a fuller picture. Barth's

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<sup>115</sup> In a forthcoming chapter discussing broad themes in Barth's responsibility ethics, McKenny highlights the problematic relationship between divine and human responsibility, and in particular the fact that, "the responsibility God assumes for us, as Barth describes it, thus appears to absolve human beings of responsibility altogether." Given that this is one possible reading of Barth, work needs to be done to make sense of his use of the terminology. Gerald McKenny, 'Karl Barth's Concept of Responsibility' in Jürgen Boomgaarden und Martin Leiner, eds., *Kein Mensch, der der Verantwortung entgehen könnte: Verantwortungsethik in theologischer, philosophischer und religionswissenschaftlicher Perspektive* (Freiburg: Herder, forthcoming). I am grateful to Professor McKenny for sending me a copy of his essay prior to publication.

unusual approach to human responsibility requires both theological and ethical analysis, and some attempt at bringing these two aspects together into a coherent account.

### **1.5 A Way Forward: My Approach to Reading Barth on Human Responsibility**

So far along the way there have been two audiences involved in this discussion. The first is the fraternity of Barth-scholars who are concerned to develop our understanding of the logic and content of his theology, of which ethics is a constitutive part. Thus far I have argued that our understanding of human responsibility as a key theme within his ethics has suffered from neglect, and that this is a substantial gap in our knowledge because it is a significant and recurring idea. It is also of critical import to Barth's theological anthropology. The second audience is the fraternity of Christian responsibility-ethicists who have largely been critical of Barth's work on the basis of his method and in relation to the practicality of his thought. What Barth does with the idea of responsibility is, for some, unrecognisable as ethics even in relation to the general lack of conceptual cogency about it within the broader Christian tradition. Alongside these two audiences, each with their own concerns and requirements, has been the problem which Barth himself causes for us by not attending to the key task of defining the notion as he understood it. He therefore swims against the stream of theological ethicists of the twentieth century who took time to clarify the technical language they employed. Therefore, in short, a thesis that proposes to understand Barth on human responsibility must attend to the theology, practicality, and interpretation of the topic.

In terms of the way forward addressing these issues, it seems necessary to me to attend in detail to key texts in Barth's *oeuvre* to illumine our understanding, and in particular to pay attention to how he thinks the responsible human being conducts themselves. I am taking seriously Lovin's comment, discussed earlier, that contemporary Christian understandings of responsibility have suffered from a lack of clear conceptual "grounding" and therefore I wish to allow Barth's theological grounding to become clear. In doing so, initially I shall hold back from rushing to any judgement about its moral usefulness, in particular its practicality. I am proposing to *think with* Barth about human responsibility throughout this thesis, and to clarify what he is saying about responsibility, offer a more coherent definition of the idea from this perspective, and so deal with the central critique of Christian-ethicists that his approach has no practical impact. This latter issue, I argue, is one that Barth actually considered but not until later sections of the special ethics of the *Church Dogmatics* - sections which have not, until now, been part of the wider discussion about responsibility-ethics.

Edward Farley's distinction between theological *thinking* and theological *method* has been very helpful for informing my approach to the difficulties I have discussed. Ordinarily these two theologians would be very far apart in terms of method and theological priorities, and certainly no inference that they might be close to one another in these ways should be drawn from my use of Farley at this point. In an essay entitled *Ecclesial Contextual Thinking*<sup>116</sup> Farley outlines two approaches to theological method that shed some light on the issue of Barth's reluctance to define responsibility. Farley distinguishes between the more formal "methodological approach" and the more intuitive "thinking" theology. Methodology connotes something scientific, ordered, and demonstrable. It involves the "precise delineation of the field, subject matter, procedures of enquiry, and modes of verification"<sup>117</sup> in order to make discussion accessible and understandable. It also enables scrutiny, and comparison with other approaches to the same topic. The essential paradigm of "methodology" is scientific. This seems to me to sum up what Christian ethicists such as Niebuhr, Jonsen, and Schweiker have wanted from Barth on responsibility thus far, and which they have found more readily in other theological ethicists of the twentieth century. In the light of my account of the haphazard development of the idea in Christian ethical discourse, this expectation is necessary if we are to understand the technical language used. By contrast, Farley argues that theology is not always scientific *per se*. We know this, he argues, because experience tell us it is not only for the expert trained in the appropriate method: "lay people, believers, even non-believers" are capable of thinking and reflecting about truth in a given context. It is not a privileged activity, but a general human one. Moreover, the context in which it happens affects the content and way of thinking: "context enters thinking by way of the aims and agendas of thinking...and is given thematic and criteriological weight."<sup>118</sup> In a university lecture theatre theological thinking will look very different from the kind on offer in a church service. Thus "theological thinking" is more intuitive, almost more organic, than theological method because it relies upon a deep connectedness to the context in which the activity of thinking occurs, and grows out of that. This is true not just for the physical context - a lecture theatre or a church building - but also the intellectual context in which a particular topic is considered. Theological intellectual-contexts will inform our thinking in a different way from historical or philosophical ones.

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<sup>116</sup> Edward Farley, 'Ecclesial Contextual Thinking' in Darren C. Marks, ed., *Shaping a Theological Mind: Theological Context and Methodology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 15-30.

<sup>117</sup> Farley, 'Ecclesial Contextual Thinking', 16.

<sup>118</sup> Farley, 'Ecclesial Contextual Thinking', 16-17.

In relation to Barth, whilst these two scholars could not be thought of as from the same ‘school’ of thought, Farley may offer an insight and a way forward in the difficulty of reading Barth’s seeming reluctance to be “methodological”. Barth’s approach to human responsibility is much more akin to “theological thinking.” The presence of responsibility-language and its critical use in his ethics demonstrates that he is reflecting on the topic and drawing attention to it, and doing so in the context of dogmatic theology; thus, from Farley, the theological context affects the content of the concept. In order to think about human responsibility *with* Barth, and to understand what that language means for him, it is necessary to consider the immediate dogmatic location of his discussion - the theological grounding of the topic, in Lovin’s terms. This is best done by way of exegesis - critical explanation, explication, and interpretation - of key passages in which Barth’s idea of human responsibility plays an important part. The three core chapters of this thesis, therefore, are centred around exegesis of key texts in his theological ethics.

The texts I have chosen are deliberate works of theological ethics rather than more general works of dogmatic theology, because I am keen to see how the idea of responsibility is developed within Barth’s ethical material. The texts are: the 1922 lecture, *The Problem of Ethics Today*; the 1928-32 *Ethics* lectures; the 1929 lecture, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Life*; the ethics of *Church Dogmatics* II/2 originally published in 1942; and the special ethics of *Church Dogmatics* III/4 originally published in 1952. There are several reasons for choosing these particular points of engagement with Barth’s theological ethics.

The first is that such a wide variety of texts, both published works of scholarly dogmatic ethics and occasional lectures addressing clergy and students, allows me to consider the topic in greater depth than has been done before. As I suggested in the previous section, critics of Barth have tended to focus only on short passages from *Church Dogmatics* II. The more thoroughgoing engagement that I suggest is necessary requires the consideration of a greater number of texts, and therefore a greater number of dogmatic contexts in which to consider ethics. This is an important methodological point regarding best practice when reading Barth: it is too easy and commonplace to focus on short passages - even long paragraphs - and miss the bigger picture that is carried across the whole *corpus*. In the case of the *Church Dogmatics* this seems particularly important: the Trinitarian structure<sup>119</sup> of the whole means that reading sections, paragraphs, and volumes in isolation

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<sup>119</sup> On this see Biggar, *The Hastening That Waits*, 46-96; also Biggar, ‘Barth’s Trinitarian Ethic’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, edited by John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) ch 13.

from the rest may not give the fullest possible picture of Barth's thinking on a particular topic.<sup>120</sup>

Second, and related to the first, is that these particular works of theological ethics punctuate Barth's life at roughly ten year intervals. This enables me to be aware of the development of the idea of responsibility in Barth's thought, and in particular to highlight the significance and impact of the Christocentric refocusing of his thinking which happened between the *Ethics* lectures and the publication of *CD II/2*. Though his theological development is not the primary topic here, it is necessary to plot some aspects of it precisely because Barth's ethics is so fundamental to his theological project. We ought to expect that developments in his theological method would affect his theological ethics. Indeed, what I think becomes clear is that the Christological turn actually provides Barth with a theological basis for talking about human responsibility in a way that was not possible before it.

Third, the choice of particular texts is important. In *The Problem of Ethics Today* Barth offers his own summary critique of contemporary Christian ethics, and its development from the nineteenth century "bourgeois" Christianity influenced by post-Enlightenment anthropocentrism. He critiques the historical connection between ethics and human flourishing aside from God, and subsequently offers his own constructive suggestions. What is notable about this is the way the language of responsibility is marshalled as part of his constructive work, quite without explanation or definition, to say something about human agency. This seems like a helpful point of departure in my thesis, making us aware that responsibility-language was a part of Barth's re-envisioning of the project of Christian ethics from an early point, and giving us some insight into what it meant at this stage. It sets the scene also for my engagement with the later *Ethics* lectures. Only in recent years have these lectures been recognised for their significance in Barth's overall development. They are particularly important in a thesis considering his ethics both because of their subject matter, and also because they comprise the only complete account he offers. The special ethics of *CD IV* was never finally completed, and *CD V* remained entirely unwritten. Therefore, attending to the way responsibility language is deployed here, amongst his more thorough presentation of the project of theological ethics, should render insights that prepare us for reading the special ethics of the *Dogmatics*. Alongside these lectures in chapter 2 I also give some attention to *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life* lecture. It demonstrates the importance of both the trinitarian approach to moral reasoning which Barth employs in the *Ethics*, and also the dogmatic underpinning of his understanding of Christian life at this stage.

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<sup>120</sup> Biggar talks about the requirement that we "gain some sense of the dynamic whole." Biggar, *The Hastening That Waits*, 47.

Responsibility language is marshalled here also, though very briefly. These three texts taken together give an oversight of his early thinking about human responsibility.

For Barth's more mature approach, I turn attention to two sections from the *Church Dogmatics*. The first is the most commonly read section amongst responsibility-ethicists, *CD* II/2, and particularly §§36-39 which comprise the ethics section. The fact that this section of the *Dogmatics* has had so much attention indicates that Barth's discussion of human responsibility here is quite significant: he locates the human agent in relation to the divine covenant and election actualised in Jesus Christ, and uses the language of responsibility at length to describe the *modus* of human being and acting as divine covenant partners. What is most interesting here, and frequently overlooked by commentators, is that Barth deploys responsibility-language in a way that reflects his two-natures Christology, thereby arguing that human responsibility is enabled by divine responsibility, and that both are epitomised in Jesus Christ. The description Barth offers here is foundational for his understanding of human responsibility, but it is not exhaustive. So, while I wish to attend to it in depth, it forms only one half of my discussion of human responsibility in the *Church Dogmatics*. The other half is in the special ethics of *CD* III/4, in particular §§52-56, where Barth discusses the ethics of the doctrine of creation. This is a different dogmatic-context, and sees Barth engage much more in the concrete and lived experience of the human creature as one necessarily caught up in responsibility before God and required to enact that. Barth takes seriously these issues and discusses more freely the ontic aspects of human responsibility. Reading this, in the light of his dogmatic concerns, gives us a different angle on the idea of human responsibility, and allows us to consider both the theological description - and therefore the logic of his ethics - and also the practicality of human responsibility for the lived experience of human creatures. Again, I have chosen to engage with the topic of responsibility here in the midst of the special ethics, and not to engage in detail the earlier discussion of responsibility in *CD* III/2, because my primary interest is in human responsibility as a theme in Barth's theological ethics. For the purposes of clarity and appropriate focus I have chosen to make the special ethics my primary exegetical target.

In addressing these two sections of the *Dogmatics* I am deliberately allowing them to be in dialogue with one another. This is slightly unusual, since the ethics of *CD* III/4 is often read in the light of *CD* III/2 and the dogmatic discussion of covenant theology there. This matters, and will inform my account of the special ethics of *CD* III/4, but I wish to attend to the integrity of the breadth of his theological ethics also and argue in the closing chapter that reading the special ethics of *CD* II/2 and *CD* III/4 together gives us a much more substantial understanding of human responsibility in Barth's moral theology than we

currently have. I am aware that my argument here does not attend in the same level of detail to the fragments of the ethics of *CD IV/4*, published as *The Christian Life* but more appropriately the “Command of God the Reconciler.” This decision was taken early in my work to keep the focus on the completed sections of ethics and bring these into dialogue with one another. If I had given sustained attention to the fragmentary ethics of *CD IV/4* I would first need to engage in the (distracting) task of critical reconstruction before moving on to exegesis and analysis. There are common themes and there is a coherence to the special ethics which grows out of the earlier insights from the *Ethics* lectures which I think is helpful for understanding a difficult topic like responsibility in Barth’s thought; so approaching the topic in this way we are more likely to come to a coherent account of it. Where the fragments contribute directly to our understanding and illumine some earlier passage in the special ethics, I have referenced them appropriately. Not attending to these in the same way as earlier special ethics reflects the conviction that what I will say about human responsibility on the basis of my research is not challenged by the material in *CD IV/4* but strengthened by it. A detailed exegetical discussion of this text was therefore not necessary to fulfil the goal of explicating Barth’s understanding of human responsibility and its ethical significance.

Approaching the topic at hand by way of an exegetical reading, I am able to engage both Barth’s early theological ethics and his more mature dogmatic ethics and see how his thinking developed as well as see how the different sections of ethics can be brought into fruitful dialogue. This allows me to think with Barth in depth about human responsibility. In doing so I answer the question posed by the fraternity of Barth scholars that we make sense of the logic and structure of human responsibility within the wider framework of dogmatic theology, and thus contribute to an area of knowledge hitherto neglected. In addressing the theological anthropology and concrete ethics of the doctrine of creation, I am also able to attend to the question of its practicality posed by the fraternity of Responsibility-ethicists, namely how does a responsible human creature conduct themselves? The final question for me is how these two relate to one another, and what an overall account of human responsibility in Barth’s thought might be.

## **1.6 Thesis Overview**

I begin in the following chapter with a close reading and examination of the cycle of lectures Barth delivered at Münster (1928-9) and the updated version at Bonn (1931-2) on the topic of Christian ethics. Here I will trace the way the language of responsibility is used at key points in Barth’s thinking at the time, and what he means by it in the context of those

lectures. I shall set this material in a wider theological context by examining the earlier lecture *The Problem of Ethics Today* and the contemporary lectures on *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life*.

In chapter 3 I will tackle the material in *CD II/2* and explore the account of responsibility Barth offers there, but in the wider context of Barth's theological development, and the particular emphases of that whole volume. The result is to see the heavily theological material in a new light - not as deliberately overly-conceptual and contrived so as to reduce the import of practical ethics, but as an act of theological ground-clearing in which space is created for responsible human activity.

I turn in chapter 4 to the special ethics of *CD III/4*, and explore how Barth uses the language of responsibility in that context. What becomes clear is that his notion is quite different in presentation from the *earlier* special ethics, and is much more concrete - naming particular instances and ways in which human beings might practice responsibility. The material in this special ethics has the feel of a regular ethics manual, giving concrete examples and instructions about the practicalities of responsibility.

The final chapter is a discursive chapter in which I bring together my observations about Barth on human responsibility in the two preceding chapters by offering a single account that makes sense of the relationship between the theological work of *CD II* and the more concrete description of responsibility in *CD III*. I characterise my exegesis as two-parts of one single account: a theological description of human responsibility that must subsequently be embedded in human life. This embedding takes the form of concrete and particular practices, which I suggest are indicative practices that punctuate our lives but which give them form and structure. This then is how the theological description is actualised, and how we are able to inhabit the reality it describes. I then return to some of the earlier criticisms of his responsibility ethics which I highlighted in chapter 1, and suggest ways in which these might be addressed, based on my reading of Barth's responsibility ethics.

## Chapter 2

### Human Responsibility in the Münster/Bonn *Ethics* lectures

In this chapter I argue that Barth's understanding of responsibility belongs very specifically to the human side of the event in which the divine address is encountered as commanding-Word. The Word of God elicits human responsibility, and in so doing binds the human agent to God primarily and to fellow creatures secondarily. Responsibility describes the nature of the actions undertaken by agents caught up in this event. At this stage, Barth's account of the theology of human agency and therefore his theological location of responsibility is severely underdeveloped - he offers no account - but the material here is indicative of what will be developed in the ethics of the *Church Dogmatics*.

#### 2.1 Introduction

The *Ethics* lectures consist of two cycles of the same lecture series, delivered first at the University of Münster in 1928/29, and then again with revisions at the University of Bonn in 1930/1,<sup>121</sup> to which Barth had moved to take up the Chair in Systematic Theology in 1930. Until that point Barth had never offered a systematic account of ethics, preferring instead to address ethics through various occasional lectures, addresses, and speeches, or as part of larger works. These lectures represent a deliberate and focused treatment of ethics as a discipline, and a re-assertion of its intrinsic relationship to dogmatics. According to Eberhard Busch, Barth's assistant and biographer, the *Ethics* lectures ought to be understood as a response to the spread of anthropocentrism within Christian ethics in the early twentieth century. Busch notes Barth's particular "fear that his colleagues Bultmann and Gogarten were completely dissolving dogmatics into ethics (because the term 'decision' had such a central place in their views)."<sup>122</sup> Barth's 'fear' is that in collapsing dogmatics into ethics theology becomes anthropology in disguise because we cease to talk about God. This is a particularly acute anxiety for Barth in relation to Rudolf Bultmann and Friedrich Gogarten, who had shared much in common with him during 1920s, and whose theological

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<sup>121</sup> By the time of the second cycle at Bonn, Barth's unusual approach to Christian ethics had proved a novel draw for students in the University, and as many as 250 students were recorded in attendance. See Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (London: SCM Press, 1976), 204.

<sup>122</sup> Busch, *Karl Barth...*, 181. Barth, Friedrich Gogarten, Emil Brunner, Eduard Thurneysen, along with Rudolf Bultmann, were considered co-founders of the dialectical school of thought in early twentieth-century Protestantism. Together these were responsible for publicising the theological journal, *Zwischen den Zeiten*, and for a general turn towards God as divine subject in theological method. The group grew apart in the late 1920s into 1930s, and Barth ceased to be involved with the journal in 1933. Christophe Chalamet charts the early development of this group in his *Dialectical Theologians: Wilhelm Hermann, Karl Barth, and Rudolf Bultmann* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2005). He describes the rise of the journal in particular on pages 152-160.

friendship he had enjoyed. But their developing trajectory was one from which he was keen to distance himself, especially in the latter part of the 1920s. Barth spoke against Gogarten in particular, whom he named alongside Emanuel Hirsch as examples of those compromising the integrity of a truly *Christian* ethics by misleading attention.<sup>123</sup> In particular Barth was worried about Gogarten's recasting of Christian faith as essentially an ethics of relationship - "from which he correlated statements about God and human being, thus emphasising anthropology"<sup>124</sup> - which he had learned from Martin Buber, and which is most clearly demonstrated in the introduction to his collected essays *Glaube und Wirklichkeit* (1928) where Gogarten offers heartfelt thanks to Buber.<sup>125</sup> Barth did not approve of Buber's influence here, and in his *Ethics* lectures critiqued both Gogarten and Bultmann by citing another Lutheran theologian, the nineteenth century theologian Richard Rothe (1799-1867) and in particular his multi-volume theological ethics<sup>126</sup> as exemplary of the pitfall into which their theology was heading because of the tendency to turn to anthropology too quickly and from the wrong direction. In that text, Rothe developed the argument that ethics is a human task concerning human agency which is finally about the moral/spiritual development of human beings (i.e. anthropology) and that religion - and its theological or dogmatic content - supplies the data for this human development, albeit the best possible data. Herein the moral life and the religious life coincide, but in such a way that the religious life is reduced in scope and content to a supporting role, and in which God is not necessary, or at least not necessarily talked about.<sup>127</sup> Barth likens this to another idea of Rothe's - the "disappearance of the Church in the State", such that the Church becomes merely an agent of the State, or is given insignificant tasks to exercise on behalf of the State but is never really a thing in itself with its own sphere of reference. The Church disappears. As Barth applies it to the

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<sup>123</sup> In a short commentary on the life of the Barth-Gogarten-Bultmann group, Timothy Gorringer suggests that the underlying tensions in this circle reflected the tensions of the Reformation: "Much of the problem with Gogarten was a sense that there were things simply not shared with Lutherans. 'The controversies between Lutheran and Reformed were never resolved', Barth wrote to Bultmann." See Timothy Gorringer, *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 79.

<sup>124</sup> Jack Forstman, *Christian Faith in Dark Times: Theological Conflicts in the Shadow of Hitler* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 161.

<sup>125</sup> See Nahum Glatzer and Paul Mendes-Flohr (eds), *The Letters of Martin Buber: A Life Dialogue* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 37.

<sup>126</sup> *Ethics*, 8 (*Ethik I*, 9). Richard Rothe, *Theologische Ethik I-III* (Wittenberg: Koelling, 1869).

<sup>127</sup> This was a major concern for Barth: at the end of an overview of the various approaches to Christian ethics other than his own, he writes: "We regard all these attempts at a methodological distinction between dogmatics and ethics as ethically suspect because with great regularity there takes place in all of them a suspicious change of direction, a suspicious exchange of subjects, namely, of God and man..." *Ethics*, 12 (*Ethik I*, 17).

situation of ethics, dogmatics serves the flourishing of anthropology by giving up its primary sphere of reference and as such dogmatics disappears.

The *Ethics* lectures represent, in this context, a “fresh grounding” of ethics - Barth’s attempt to seriously locate ethics within the spectrum of dogmatic theology.<sup>128</sup> He does this by re-stating the basic problem of all ethics: the goodness of human conduct. Barth is careful to remind his hearers that human conduct is not the concern of Christian ethics alone, but of any and every ethical system because the function of ethics as a discipline is to explore and elicit human action and the thinking that leads toward action. But more than that, the discipline of ethics is not simply concerned that human beings act but that they act well - that their actions are good, that their conduct is moral. The question then becomes, *how* do we assess the goodness of human conduct? Every account of ethics has its own approach to this question. But any human self-referencing answer leads Christian thinkers into the trap which Barth wants to avoid: anthropocentrism. To understand the goodness of human action by reflecting upon human being alone is impossible for Christian ethics, whose inner logic is formed and informed by Christian theology, which is, in turn, governed by divine revelation. As such, Christian ethics can only ever be theological ethics.

Theology, rooted in revelation, is always about divine disclosure; what Barth calls “the Word of God directed to man.” The directional language is important. The divine Word moves towards human beings, and because it is Word-in-motion it must be address - God’s address to humanity; it is a human-ward action on the part of God in which God remains Subject, i.e. speaker. As such, “man to whom God’s Word is directed can never become the theme or subject of theology”<sup>129</sup> since that would be to replace the divine address to humanity with the human address to God. Such a move is impossible because the impetus is always of God in his address. The subject of Christian theology is therefore always the divine Word. As such, if Christian ethics is properly speaking theological ethics, it is impossible for ethical discourse to proceed in any way other than by way of the same divine Word or address. This does not preclude talking about human beings, as some have suggested, but rather it means that anthropology is not a substantive or separate theme alongside God: it must be discussed as a reality dependent upon God, “as predicate relates to subject.”<sup>130</sup> This places humanity within the sphere of the divine Word as those to whom divine address is made. As *addressed* creatures human beings are caught up in the dynamic of

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<sup>128</sup> *Ethics*, vii (*Ethik I*, 8).

<sup>129</sup> *Ethics*, 13 (*Ethik I*, 19).

<sup>130</sup> *Ethics*, 14 (*Ethik I*, 20).

Christian theology - “the Word of God...is spoken for you and to you”<sup>131</sup> - and so there is a place for considering humanity appropriately from within the proper focus on revelation.

In dogmatic terms, the *locus* of theology wherein this appropriate consideration may be made, and therefore wherein ethics is to be located, is the doctrine of sanctification; we might think of this as the effect of the divine address as it is received. The answer to the question of the goodness of human conduct is found in the statement, “good means sanctified by God.” The question of human goodness therefore has a divine orientation: we are forced to turn towards the will and Word of God in order to do the work of ethics in assessing the goodness of human conduct, because we are lacking sanctification aside from God. This has the effect of relativising all other modes of ethical assessment: we must enquire about the validity of all possible methods of approaching the problem of ethics from within the sphere of theology. For the Christian, actions may only be attributed as ‘good’ if they are sanctified, i.e. if they are predicated on the divine Word.

But Barth thinks sanctification means more than simply acting well. Though contemporary ethics concerned itself with actions - asking the question what should we do? - Barth sees the task in more existential terms. It concerns the whole person, the entirety of our human existence which includes our actions: “man does not exist and also act. He exists as he acts.”<sup>132</sup> Barth calls this our *Lebensakt*. Human life is the enactment in particular habits and practices of human existence; human existence is not static, but enacted. Thinking about ethics in this way mitigates against generalisations about human existence, since existence is enacted, and enactment means concrete specific activity. There is no place for the merely theoretical: Christian ethics cannot proceed “without the fact of my being this specific person having any significance.”<sup>133</sup> Barth’s re-conception of ethics is about my concrete hesitance here and now; we not only weigh the merits of our conduct, but in so doing comment on its relation to the origin and determination of our existence. *What is good human conduct?* is in essence the same question as, *what is true human existence?* There is an interplay between the universal and the particular that refuses to allow ethics to become either overly generalised or exclusively particular. The answer to the questions can never be a purely human self-reflection, because human beings are not self originating. We exist by virtue of the divine act of creation. This takes us further into dogmatic theology.

What this means for Christian ethics as Barth developed it is an expansive vision of action and agency, in which we are no longer concerned with specific activities or actions

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<sup>131</sup> *Ethics*, 16 (*Ethik I*, 24).

<sup>132</sup> *Ethics*, 16 (*Ethik I*, 24).

<sup>133</sup> *Ethics*, 63 (*Ethik I*, 104).

alone, or for that matter responses to particular moral ‘issues’, but with the whole life of the whole person: our actions have meaning in relation to what we think about our life and existence. Grounded in the doctrine of sanctification, we perceive our lives to be originated, ordered, and claimed by God. Or as Barth puts it, the Word of God is spoken to an individual and “lays claim to his life.”<sup>134</sup> This claiming-Word is understood and received by human creatures as divine command - the imperative of the good that must be enacted, or against which our conduct and decision are measured, and which therefore is the truth of our human existence. Sanctification, therefore, is nothing more than the claiming of a human life by God in the divine command and the fulfilment of that command in obedient response.

The God who speaks this life-claiming commanding-Word to human beings is the Triune God. This is of central importance to a genuinely Christian ethic, since it is the encounter - in the speaking and receiving of the life-claiming commanding Word - between human beings and God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which is its true condition. This encounter, Barth articulates as an *event*:

In ethics no less than in dogmatics God’s Word is not general truth which can be generally perceived from the safe harbour of theoretical contemplation...God’s Word *gives* itself to be known, and in so doing is heard, man is made responsible and his acts take place in that confrontation.<sup>135</sup>

There is no space for generalities: God’s life-claiming Word is spoken and received concretely at particular moments and informs our actual conduct. Its content is revelation, the witness of God to God’s own self - the Word of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit - and so the confrontation of human beings with their false perceptions of themselves and the world they inhabit. So Barth comments that “...revelation is God himself. But God himself is our Lord from and by and to whom we are what we are.”<sup>136</sup> In hearing God’s Word, we know him as Lord and ourselves as subjects of divine lordship. The Word is God’s Word and speaks of God, and so the Word is also triune: the command of God the Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer.

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<sup>134</sup> *Ethics*, 17 (*Ethik I*, 26).

<sup>135</sup> *Ethics*, 50 (*Ethik I*, 83).

<sup>136</sup> *Ethics*, 34-5 (*Ethik I*, 56).

What then does God's Word say? It is the Word of the divine *creation*, the divine *reconciliation*, and the divine *redemption*...it speaks to us about our *determination* for God, about the event of our *relation* to God, and about the goal of our *fulfilment* in God....[These] are the great orientation points of the whole course of Christian dogmatics.<sup>137</sup>

The *Ethics* lectures, as in his later *Dogmatics*, are structured according to the being and purpose of God and its impact upon the moral life of human beings.<sup>138</sup> Barth considers the life-claiming Word from each of these dogmatic locations, and as he does so each takes on a particular nuance: creation is about life; reconciliation about law; and redemption about promise. This is not a separation of Christian ethics into three types: it is about recognising that Christian theocentrism, by nature of the triune *theos* at its heart, forces a threefold approach to the life-claiming Word. Again, this is about much more than the actions we perform, but the whole scope and orientation of human life and existence. By introducing these theological *foci* Barth emphasises the role of what we might call 'vision' in ethics. What is the bigger picture wherein my particular *Lebensakt* takes place? This almost metaphysical consideration underpins Barth's wholesale rejection of anthropocentric approaches to Christian ethics: we cannot know of ourselves the origin and determination of our existence.

It should be clear from the preceding overview that Barth's aversion to anthropocentrism is not an aversion to talking about the human being and the validity of her conduct. Rather it is about locating that conversation with theological integrity, and therefore speaking the truth about the goodness of human conduct. This is his concern about Gogarten and Bultmann, amongst others, whom he perceives to have sold-out the theological integrity by focussing on human experience. In so doing he rejects even action focused ethics, expanding the task to include the wider question of existence and determination. This systematic refocusing is what makes these lectures so important for any account of his moral theology, or any account of the development of Barth's thought. Strangely, as I argued in the opening chapter, not much attention has been given to these lectures in the field of Barth scholarship, even since the English translation of the *Gesamtausgabe* edition in 1980. A small number of essay length treatments of the lectures

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<sup>137</sup> *Ethics*, 52 (*Ethik I*, 86).

<sup>138</sup> On this see Nigel Biggar's helpful essay 'Barth's Trinitarian Ethic' in John Webster (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 212-227. His extensive comparison of the Trinitarian structure of the *Ethics* and that of the *Church Dogmatics* is also very important. See his, *The Hastening That Waits*, 46-96.

exist,<sup>139</sup> but there remains a space for a monograph length study of them and their important contribution to the development of Barth's theological method as well as the journey towards the special ethics of the *Church Dogmatics*.

In the case of this thesis, it is important in the context of this theological re-positioning of ethics to see how Barth deploys responsibility language, and to understand what he means by it. Before I turn to the way that is done in the *Ethics* lectures, I wish to attend to two other texts from 1920s to help shed light on his appropriation and understanding of responsibility-language.

## 2.2. Responsibility Language before the *Ethics* Lectures

Though I have suggested thus far that the *Ethics* lectures are some of the most important texts in the Barth-*corpus*, I am also aware that Barth's peculiar approach to moral reasoning did not simply appear from nowhere in 1928 - though the final trigger may have been his growing divergence from Gogarten and others at about this time. Barth had been very interested in the co-inherence of dogmatic theology and Christian ethics for a number of years and several occasional lectures and papers bear witness to the fact that some idea of responsibility or other was present in much of his moral theology in 1920s. I want to briefly attend to two of these works in particular to fill out the developmental aspect of Barth's thought and its relation to the wider intellectual backdrop: a lecture delivered to church ministers in 1922 entitled, *The Problem of Ethics Today*, and a lecture delivered to pastors, students, and other interested parties in 1929, entitled *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life*. Both texts indicate the way Barth's theology was developing throughout the 1920s, and most especially help us to see how his search for a coherent account of human responsibility took shape.

### 2.2.1 *The Problem of Ethics Today*

In the first lecture, Barth provides analysis of the development of Christian ethics in the early twentieth century and adopts a highly provocative stance against what he considers to be its major theological, and therefore ethical, pitfalls. The lecture was delivered in September 1922, and carries with it much of the critical force that Barth-scholarship ordinarily associates with the (contemporary) *Romans* commentary: a total rejection of the

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<sup>139</sup> Nigel Biggar, 'The Trinitarian Dimensions of Ethics'...; Paul Nimmo, 'The Orders of Creation in the Ethics of Karl Barth' in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60, no. 1 (2007), 24-35; John Webster, 'The Great Disruption?: Word of God and Moral Consciousness in Barth's Münster *Ethics*' in his *Barth's Moral Theology*, 41-64. My own (unpublished) Master's thesis was an exegetical commentary on the theme of divine judgement, *The Form and Function of Divine Judgement in Karl Barth's Münster/Bonn Ethics 1928-31*. (M.St. Thesis, Oxford University, 2008).

unaided human endeavour towards God, and the recognition that Christian theology stands under the judgement of God in as much as it is a human discipline which speaks human words in response to divine action. There is a resounding ‘No!’ to human beings in this lecture that is indicative of this period in Barth’s life. The lecture was delivered four times in the period September - October 1922. The audience for each delivery were various groups of church ministers and pastors, the ranks of which Barth himself had only recently left to join the faculty of Göttingen.<sup>140</sup> Through a series of scathing critiques, Barth attacked the ease and laxity with which contemporary Christian faith had descended into the ethics of the “ascending German middle class.”<sup>141</sup> His central concern here was the way in which the intelligentsia of nineteenth century Europe seemed to exercise an influence over Christian moral reasoning in a way that encouraged, in Barth’s mind at least, the avoidance of the complexities of the search for the good by conflating cultural development with morality. Towering figures such as Kant, Schleiermacher, and Troeltsch are highlighted as examples of those whose thinking about faith and morality underpinned the cultural *status quo*. This got epitomised, for Barth, in the way Christian ethics saw fit to “reduce the Gospel to a few religious-ethical categories like trust in God and love for one’s neighbour.”<sup>142</sup> Downplaying the religious content to a few palatable values centred on trust, love, and common humanity overcame some of the complexities of thinking faith-fully about human action in a context in which textual and historical criticism had undermined the traditional sources of Christian ethics, viz. the Church’s teaching and its biblical underpinning. But such avoidance of complexity was anathema to Barth who saw it only as the desire not to be confronted by the living God, and as such to set ethics on the - much more unreliable - ground of human history in its most optimistic form. He wrote,

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<sup>140</sup> He delivered the lecture at a Pastors Conference in Weisbaden, on 26th September; a continuing education seminar, on 28th September; a pastors co-operative group, on 11th October; a clergy meeting in Lower Saxony, on 13th October; and a Provincial Pastors meeting in the Ruhr Valley, on 24th October.

<sup>141</sup> *The Problem of Ethics...*, 141 (*Das Problem der Ethik...*, 110). The earlier English translation of this lecture uses the more provocative phrase, “the ethics of the bourgeoisie...” See Karl Barth, ‘The Problem of Ethics Today’ in *The Word of God and The Word of Man*, translated by Douglas Horton (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1935), 145.

<sup>142</sup> *The Problem of Ethics...*, 143 (*Das Problem Ethik...*, 112). This is clearly a reference to Barth’s esteemed teacher Adolf von Harnack, and his well known lectures *The Essence of Christianity* which finish with exactly this summary of Christian faith. It is unusual in this text that Barth does not name him as an enemy of rightly-ordered Christian ethics, since much of this text involves very direct naming of particular theologians and the mistakes they have made - amongst them the Ritschlian School, another tradition with which Barth had earlier association. One reason for not naming Harnack is that it may not have been wholly necessary to do so, since Barth and he were engaged in a simmering dispute at the time of this lecture, which was to become very public within a few months. See Martin Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology: An Analysis of the Barth-Harnack Correspondence of 1923* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

At its most basic, however, it was not really about asking *what* was to be done, as if one did not know what to do. Rather, it was a matter of asking about whether the more philosophical or theological way, the Kantian or Schleiermacherian way, would provide the enlightening formula for doing the Good which was to be done, that which was quite evidently to be done in the certain, infinite need for improvement in culture as a whole. This was a culture which was quite evidently infinitely capable of improvement...<sup>143</sup>

That which is “quite evidently” necessary is not the most logical or well argued point, but about that which comes most naturally to a given society, i.e. that which is already happening, and the ongoing development of the society - its improvability. This, he argued, was felt by the elite to be an inherent and infinite quality of high culture. Barth saw the influence of the post-Enlightenment intellectual tradition as a fundamental turn to the human subject in the most positive way. Douglas Horton’s English translation loses some of the force of Barth’s language when it translates, “*annähernd genau passte*” as the “almost perfectly obvious answer.” Amy Marga’s more recent translation captures more of the force of Barth’s point when she renders it “that which fits almost exactly the answer to all preceding questions”.<sup>144</sup> The connotation is much the same, but its rhetorical force indicates more clearly the extent to which Barth saw his contemporary culture as being affirmed nearly entirely by Christian ethics: an almost exact match of priorities and practice. This betrays the proper vocation of Christian ethics to attend to the will of God, reckoning that that lies outside of society (though, at this stage, Barth may well have affirmed that it was discernible therein because of the ‘orders of creation’) and causes Christian ethics to lose its spiritual identity and rationale. Its *raison d’être* had become the affirmatory “yes” to what was already happening and was already believed to be right - answers to questions already decided upon. But as Barth already pointed out in the *Romans* commentary, the “yes” of God is always accompanied by a resounding “no!”

In place of this kind of limp Christian ethics, Barth forcefully shifts the focus from cultural affirmation to the contemplation of a key ethical question: “what ought we to do?” It is an evocative question, which places action and compulsion at the heart of Christian ethics: something is to be done, there is an imperative attached to it which comes from God, and we are called to discern what that is in order that we are able to do it. The *status quo* simply will not do. But lest we think this is a question we pose to ourselves - like bored

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<sup>143</sup> *The Problem of Ethics...*, 141 (*Das Problem der Ethik...*, 110).

<sup>144</sup> *The Problem of Ethics...*, 142 (*Das Problem der Ethik...*, 111).

children on a rainy afternoon - Barth is quick to claim that this is a question asked *of* us not *by* us. Pursuit of the “ought” means an external reference, a redirecting of our attention away from ourselves to a reality other than our own in which the answer to the rightness of our conduct resides. The result therefore is that the question of the goodness of our conduct is posed to us not by us. We are questioned as human beings caught up in the crisis of relationship with God in the whole of our existence, and asked what ought we to do in light of this relationship. It is an existential crisis, since both our being and doing are interrelated. Barth writes,

...at its most basic, the only sense it makes is in its emphatic reminder to us that this problem cannot simply deal with a perspective on life and the world or other harmless things. Rather, it deals with our very existence, our most personal and most real situation in this moment; it deals with our plight, the actuality of which we cannot even for a moment abstract from...<sup>145</sup>

This existential problem is a crisis for us because it catches us in the weakness of not knowing the will of God, of not being able to live it, and yet still living from moment to moment and feeling the need to live well - “life means doing, even when it is by chance a not doing... [and] all action stands unavoidably under the question of meaning, order, and truth.”<sup>146</sup> And so our whole lives are brought into question not from within but by the truth of God which lies beyond us, and questions us as to our being and doing. It is a question bound up with the justification of the sinner - those who is Jesus Christ are taken up by God and established as righteous. All human beings, *simul justus et peccator*, are questioned as to the way they will live in the light of Christ-centred proximity to God.<sup>147</sup>

Barth introduces the language of responsibility only twice in this discussion<sup>148</sup> so there is no extensive definition of the concept, but its use here indicates that it was a part of his new vision for Christian ethics. In both instances Barth deploys the language in order to say something about the nature of the human being and her conduct in the midst of the

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<sup>145</sup> *The Problem of Ethics...*, 138 (*Das Problem der Ethik...*, 106).

<sup>146</sup> *The Problem of Ethics...*, 138 (*Das Problem der Ethik...*, 106).

<sup>147</sup> The whole essay finishes with a very forceful series of statements about Jesus Christ, which are both critical of the bourgeois Christianity of nineteenth and twentieth century Europe, and which affirm what Barth takes to be Pauline emphases on the identity of Christ (crucified, risen, and ascended) which ultimately will solve the ethical problem that faces all human beings. See *The Problem of Ethics...*, 168 (*Das Problem der Ethik...*, 143).

<sup>148</sup> In the German text, though the English translator introduces responsibility-language at other places in the lecture which serves to elucidate part of Barth's argument further.

crisis-relationship I have just described. In the opening paragraph of the lecture, Barth argues that

The problem of ethics is a critical question under which is placed all human action, that is, one's entire temporal existence. This question asks about the meaning and law of individual actions as well as the extent of the truth in one's existence. It makes the individual responsible [verantwortlich] for the presence of truth in his existence.<sup>149</sup>

The meaning of this becomes clearer as Barth develops the idea through the first part of the lecture: essentially each human agent is required to examine the underlying meaning of their actions - what informs and shapes their conduct, and that in turn relates to what is true and real about human existence. As such, our actions convey much more than simply our desires, but also our understanding of what is true and real about human existence. Already we have seen that this remained an important idea for Barth in the *Ethics* lectures. At the heart of practical Christian ethics is the need to examine one's behaviour and conduct in the light of the true reality of the inescapable relationship with God in which all humanity is caught up. This is properly the subject of Christian moral reasoning, and is for each human agent to own for themselves:

The human as human is placed into the situation in an irredeemable way, where his "being" is understood as those activities he is responsible for [verantwortliches handeln]; where his desires are questionable; where that-which-does-not-yet-exist wants to engross that which should be, as the *truth* of the trueness of his actions.<sup>150</sup>

The "truth of the trueness" to which Barth refers is the question of the truthfulness of our assumptions and assertions about the human situation, which Barth characterises as the question of goodness - "what is True - even if it were the truest - must submit itself to the critical question of whether it is also *good*."<sup>151</sup> God is the arbiter of truthfulness and goodness.

As Barth re-envisaged ethics in contradistinction to the inherited optimistic subjectivism of nineteenth century middle-class, bourgeois Christianity, the language of responsibility offered a way to navigate the unavoidable crisis-relationship with God. On the

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<sup>149</sup> *The Problem of Ethics...*, 135 (*Das Problem der Ethik...*, 102).

<sup>150</sup> *The Problem of Ethics...*, 136 (*Das Problem der Ethik...*, 104).

<sup>151</sup> *The Problem of Ethics...*, 135 (*Das Problem der Ethik...*, 103).

one hand is the fact that human beings exist, and to do so is to act; on the other is the interrogative discipline of self-examination, in which the truth and goodness of our actions - and therefore our existence - is called into question in the light of our knowledge of God. This is the basic function of the language of responsibility in this lecture, holding together these two and creating space for the human agent to act within.

### 2.2.2 *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life*

The second text was delivered in October 1929 at a German conference organised with the purpose of introducing pastors and students to the latest trends in theological thinking and research, and to expose them to the scholars and scholarship in the service of the Church's ministry. The approaches were wide ranging, and Barth's brother, the philosopher Heinrich Barth, was also presenting a critical paper on ideas of the spirit in German idealism.<sup>152</sup> As one of those scholars who had been formed theologically as a pastor, Karl Barth's own offering was a personally important lecture because it gave him chance to acknowledge, and defend himself against, some recent criticisms: notably that he had no place for the Holy Spirit in his theology.<sup>153</sup> But *The Holy Spirit* lecture is more than simply Barth's response; it is his own constructive pneumatology which is grounded in his developing Trinitarianism. His concern was to reject the prevalent neo-Kantian approach to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, developed even amongst other members of the Dialectical "school", which treated the human spirit as a significant part of the discussion about God's Spirit. As Bruce McCormack writes, "Barth's central conviction is that the Holy Spirit, if indeed it is truly the *Holy* Spirit of which we wish to speak, is not human spirit. No synthesis of the two may be imagined."<sup>154</sup> In this he is also rejecting German idealism's claim that focus on the human spirit might open a way into speaking about the Absolute Spirit, or God, by point of comparison between divine and human consciousness. While Barth is keen to develop a structure for thinking clearly about human being in general and the Christian life in particular, with its theological impetus in God - i.e. in the work of the Holy Spirit, he thinks

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<sup>152</sup> Opinion is divided as to what extent their approaches conflicted: Robin Lovin's introductory essay to the recent English edition of the lecture, from which all my English references are taken, argues strongly that "the brothers Barth took positions in their lectures that were almost as opposed to each other as to the themes of German idealism." *The Holy Spirit...*, xiii. This view is implicitly supported by Busch who suggests that "from now on [i.e. after this lecture] tensions arose in Karl's relationship with Heinrich..." Busch, *Karl Barth...*, 189. Bruce McCormack cautions against reading too much into the different approaches taken by the brothers, suggesting Lovin's assessment is "one-sidedly negative" and that "there was enough agreement in the essentials to warrant sending them into the public arena under the shared title 'On the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit.'" Bruce McCormack, 'Review of Karl Barth's *The Holy Spirit and The Christian Life*' in his *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) 311.

<sup>153</sup> *The Holy Spirit...*, xxi.

<sup>154</sup> McCormack, 'Review of Karl Barth's *The Holy Spirit...* 311.

the conversation must begin with God and not with the Christian. This mirrors the move he was already making in the *Ethics* lectures, and is a basic methodological point: the Spirit about which Barth wishes to speak is the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, and so revelation is the only appropriate way of proceeding accurately. The fundamental distinction between God and creatures for which Barth argued in the *Romans* commentary remains. It should therefore be no surprise that Barth orientates his discussion of the Spirit in a way very similar to his discussion of the Word - the claiming-address of the Triune God - in the *Ethics*. The Spirit is God's Spirit, and as such is involved in the fulness of the work of God. The three foci of his lecture are: The Holy Spirit as Creator; The Holy Spirit as Reconciler; and The Holy Spirit as Redeemer. In each of these Barth demonstrates how a theological account of the Holy Spirit will emphasise the subjectivity of the Spirit as the Spirit of God, as the one who remains sovereign in all interactions with human beings. As such, the Spirit is the condition of human beings' knowledge of God; human beings' true life in God; and human beings' hope in God. Barth does wish to speak about Christian life because that sphere is the particular work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification; but the discussion must begin with the Spirit.

The tone of the text is much less critical and aggressive than the *The Problem of Ethics* lecture, and a notable difference between them is the move away from the idea of crisis and the existential question posed by it. What we have instead, in terms of the ethical content of the lecture, is a theological and dogmatic rationale for Christian ethics. What is noteworthy is that it takes place directly within the doctrine of God. In true Reformed style, Barth thinks any consideration of human agency must reckon with the work of the Holy Spirit. And ethics is the Spirit's work: there is no separate sphere of anthropology which is "human ethics" and which does not therefore involve the work of God. The Christian life is commanded, and so Christian ethics is about turning attention towards God who speaks his commanding-Word. But Barth cautions that it "should not in any way try to say directly what God's command is...An ethics that thinks it can know and set forth the command of God plants itself upon the throne of God."<sup>155</sup> Emphasising the divine orientation of Christian ethics, most particularly in the doctrine of sanctification as the work of the Holy Spirit, necessarily requires some idea of divine sovereignty, implying God's freedom to speak his commanding Word. This may not be second guessed: what is in view is a discussion about the way in which we receive the Word of God, and therefore the way in which the sanctificatory work of the Spirit is received by human creatures. The language of human

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<sup>155</sup> *The Holy Spirit...*, 9 ('Der heilige Geist...').

responsibility, whilst used in passing, is helpful here because it begins to illumine Barth's understanding of the active human agent in relation to the Holy Spirit.

*The Holy Spirit* lecture is more sparing in its treatment of the idea of human responsibility than the earlier lecture, but nonetheless it features in a noteworthy way. Its single occurrence is in the context of Barth's discussion of reconciliation, and in particular the shape that Christian life takes from the viewpoint of the Holy Spirit as Reconciler. The particular issue Barth has in mind is the *problem* of sanctification, i.e. the way in which the work of the Holy Spirit as reconciler is appropriated in the lives of human beings. Here we meet the soon-to-be very familiar notion of faith as miraculous work of God in the heart of each Christian. It is miraculous because its content is judgement and justification, but it is *our* faith as it claims us, and therefore as we are unable to escape who God is for us as justifying judge, and who we are in the light of that. The Holy Spirit works the reconciliation in such a way that some response or other is required of us: Barth argues that the best possible response is obedience.

The requirement for obedience comes at a cross-roads, where, in Barth's terms, the grace of God which is God's judgement and justification "cuts" into our lives as a vertical axis cuts a horizontal one.<sup>156</sup> This is the moment of hearing God's Word in faith, in the concrete moment of our lives in which this "cutting in" of God happens. In that, we are bound to God and also bound to our fellow-human beings who share in creaturely reality, and are therefore part of the creaturely existence from which we may not escape: "we become forfeit to God and bound in duty to our neighbour through sanctification."<sup>157</sup> In this context, Barth labels human's as "responsible beings." What he means by this is particularly interesting, and will help to shed some light on the use of responsibility language in the *Ethics* lectures, and later on. He writes,

...this means that our sanctification is actual in the fact that we are challenged as responsible beings [verantwortlich aufgerufen] by a summons that is never suspended but that is to the effect that we are appointed to establish the orders of creation that apply to our existence as such – for example, marriage, race, and so forth – in the *church* and in the *state*, as in the spiritual and secular order of life implied in the kingdom of grace, that is of our existence as *simul peccatores et justi*.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> *The Holy Spirit...*, 34 ('Der heilige Geist...').

<sup>157</sup> *The Holy Spirit...*, 34 ('Der heilige Geist...').

<sup>158</sup> *The Holy Spirit...*, 34 ('Der heilige Geist...').

The focus on the *Schöpfungsordnungen* is surprising especially given Barth's reputation for rejecting this approach in his later work,<sup>159</sup> but as he employs it here it is not to be misconstrued with the doctrine as exemplified by Erich Przywara from the Roman Catholic perspective, or later by Emil Brunner from the Protestant perspective.<sup>160</sup> The orders are not themselves a means of knowing and understanding who God is, but the perception of them is the direct result of this knowing in revelation and sanctification. They are the work of human beings who are called, *aufgerufen*, to be responsible, *verantwortlich*, in and through creation, i.e. in the concrete instance of their own existence. The false-tension Barth highlights wherein this responsible life is to be lived is the conflict between the Church and the state - the former as the place of the spiritual order of life, and the latter the place of the secular. This divide is wholly overcome in the work of the Holy Spirit because the whole of life is in view, and the whole of creation, as God's creation, is ordered to the fulfilment of that. The summons is to confirm, *Bestätigung*, as valid for our human existence those orders as the proper spheres wherein human being can grow in grace as both condemned and justified sinner. Whatever that means exactly, and this will become clearer when we return to the *Ethics*, at the least it means life lived in the concrete circumstances of creation - marriage, work, family etc.. Responsibility is therefore about the dual aspect of divine encounter - those who know themselves to be sanctified because of the moment in which the Holy Spirit "cuts into" their lives with the divine address - and of the summons to live that sanctified life in the concrete reality of creation. Barth is much more directive here than before about the way human beings ought to act as sanctified creatures, and responsibility names his approach to that particular problem. It is not a developed account but is a useful way into several themes that emerge in the contemporary *Ethics* lectures, to which I now turn.

### 2.3 Responsibility in the *Ethics* Lectures

Having explored the broad contours of his *Ethics* in the introductory section, the purpose of this section is to give a detailed overview of Barth's use of responsibility language in those lectures.

Barth clarifies the answer to the question of the goodness of human conduct as the outcome of a single event comprising a conflated set of happenings: divine address to

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<sup>159</sup> Dietrich Braun's preface to the *Ethics* lectures suggests that "the ethical lectures of 1928 were not printed during the lifetime of Karl Barth because the author... appears in them an advocate of the doctrine of the orders of creation which he later passionately rejected." *Ethics*, vii (*Ethik I*, 7). See also CD III/4, 36-39 for Barth's detailed rejection of *Schöpfungsordnungen*.

<sup>160</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1937).

human beings in life-claiming Word; human hearing of that Word as command; and obedient human response in concrete activities. Or in Barth's shorthand, "man does good acts when he acts as hearer of God's Word, and in obedience to the good."<sup>161</sup> Though human action appears to be the zenith of the progression, its quality of goodness lies in the will of God which is made known in the Word. As such, obedience is not the important point - i.e. Barth is not advocating an ethics of human works where the good is simply to do as we are commanded as automatons. This would be to defy Barth's methodological preference for speaking of God. Therefore, the will of God - which is the good, including the good for us as creatures - takes centre stage. But not simply the knowing of God's will, for to know what God wills is not itself the fulfilment of it. The fulfilment of God's will is in its enactment. The good is enacted when human beings respond to God in conformity, fulfilling his determination of them in their *Lebensakt*. Barth deploys the language of responsibility to explore this point further, and to explain the space created for the human agent. He writes,

Man does good acts as he is led by God to responsibility [Verantwortung]. To act in responsibility to God [Verantwortlichkeit] is to act in a committed way. In this commitment the good is done. Thus the good arises out of responsibility [Verantwortlichkeit] and therefore out of divine speaking to which man responds [verantwortet] with his acts.<sup>162</sup>

God leads human creatures to responsibility by way of his life-claiming, commanding-Word. It means that responsibility cannot be replicated, anticipated, or created aside from the activity of God: human agency cannot properly be conceived aside from God. We *become* responsible by the act of God: "man is made responsible."<sup>163</sup> We become cognisant of our responsibility in the moment of encounter with the life-claiming Word. The human agent is gifted a space in relation to God - something into which they are led - the essential character of which is relational, and within which they must act. But it is not action alone: in Barth's language responsibility is the human side of divine-human "commitment", *Bindung*. The bond that exists between human beings and God is the work of God, and is the ontological basis of a human being's agency. This relationship signifies the possibility and fundamental Godward orientation of human responsibility, and thus their acceptance or rejection of him,

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<sup>161</sup> *Ethics*, 49 (*Ethik I*, 82).

<sup>162</sup> *Ethics*, 49 (*Ethik I*, 82).

<sup>163</sup> *Ethics*, 50 (*Ethik*, 83).

and of their own true humanity.<sup>164</sup> We have already encountered this language in *The Holy Spirit* lecture, discussed above. To be responsible is to be committed or bound to God, and *vice versa*, and to live responsibly is to live out of this commitment. It is the continual life-situation of human beings encountered and claimed by God.

This ‘bond’ is the ontological truth of human life, in distinction from what Barth calls “conditioned truth.” Conditioned truths are those intellectual disciplines such as history, mathematics, and science which primarily reference the particular aspect of creation with which they are concerned. These truths are objective, factual and theoretical: they relate to specific areas of knowledge and are best asserted and tested without the active participation of the observer in order for them to be what they are. They are not in themselves *the* truth, but have a share in the truthfulness of the truth. Beyond them, Barth contends, there is a single truth which relates concretely to the reality of all existence, and which is the *sine qua non* of conditioned truth: i.e. “the condition on which my assertions are assertions of truth.”<sup>165</sup> This truth cannot be viewed objectively in a way that distinguishes it from the life of the viewer because her life is part of it. Rather it is experienced as the critical question of “the truth of my life and conduct...the truth of my life and existence...the truth of the good.” This ontological truth is about the truthfulness of our lives in relation to their being and determination by God. In relation to ethics, it asks us to consider how accurately we enact our genuine humanity.

This question may only be answered in the concreteness of my *Lebensakt*. These concrete lived responses to the question of truthfulness are also a form of responsibility as Barth understood it:

We must only answer with our life itself, to which our whole active life and each of our individual acts, whatever it may be, must be viewed as the answer, in relation to which our whole existence takes on the character of *answerability* [Verantwortung]<sup>166</sup>

In this case responsibility is about the ability to contribute to the truthfulness of our own lives by fulfilling the divine determination. Our actions matter because by them we either confirm or deny our true selves. This must be distinguished from more common accounts of answerability which are really about accountability. In accountability, the agent must

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<sup>164</sup> As Barth writes later in these lectures, “The decision in which we live every moment is a decision for or against God. Responsibility to him is its point.” *Ethics*, 87 (*Ethik I*, 141).

<sup>165</sup> *Ethics*, 64 (*Ethik I*, 105).

<sup>166</sup> *Ethics*, 66 (*Ethik I*, 107-8).

retrospectively explain the thinking behind her actions, the actions themselves, and the consequences of them to a person to whom she is answerable. Neither the thinking nor the actions themselves are the same as the account she gives of them. For Barth, the characteristic of *Verantwortung* is not the explanation of the actions one undertakes, or the thinking towards action, but the quality that those actions have, *in se*, in relation to God. This is a permanent arrangement: there is no point at which my actions cease to be caught up in this, and I can be free from this bond.

We must not...stop considering the answerability [Verantwortlichkeit] of our life-situation, if we are to know how far God's command is real, how far...it is revealed to us. It is revealed to us in the event of our responsibility [Verantwortung] understood as conduct.<sup>167</sup>

Barth's approach to human responsibility here introduces a new weight of significance to conduct that removes from it any sense of arbitrariness, both as it contextualises the whole scope of our activity and as it frames our understanding of the meaning of concrete actions: "we are making a response with our act."<sup>168</sup> The result is that human agents must consider their conduct carefully since their actions have meaning and value as concrete enactments of, and answers to, their standing before God and as such means we are "concerned with the symmetry and harmony of our decision with his own will."<sup>169</sup> Such consideration is the point of ethical reflection: "not to try and find the truth of the good but to give an account of what it means that we have been found by it, and to give an account of the character of responsibility [Verantwortung] that our conduct will always have in the face of it."<sup>170</sup>

Accounting for what it means that "we have been found by" the truth of the good means taking seriously the Church's dogmatic theology, since these relate to the truth of human existence precisely as they describe the truth of God. Methodologically speaking, by keeping dogmatic theology central to this - governed as it is by revelation - we are forced to maintain focus on God and avoid the anthropocentrism Barth feared so much. It also prevents us falling prey to the "irresponsible possibilities" [unverantwortlichen Möglichkeiten] of our lives - i.e. the false actions that deny our true determination and therefore deny us genuine humanity. There may be many opportunities, and various options,

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<sup>167</sup> *Ethics*, 67 (*Ethik I*, 108).

<sup>168</sup> *Ethics*, 76 (*Ethik I*, 124).

<sup>169</sup> *Ethics*, 90 (*Ethik I*, 148).

<sup>170</sup> *Ethics*, 74 (*Ethik I*, 120).

but the only way Christian ethics may proceed, and therefore the only way the responsible agent may act, is in accordance with the divine Word. In saying this, Barth reminds his hearers that it is possible to go the wrong way, to make the wrong choices, and to live badly. We must therefore “resolve on responsible action” [verantwortliches Handeln]<sup>171</sup> - i.e. action rooted in our awareness of, and commitment to, the divine-human ‘bond’. This is the decision I must make as moral agent.<sup>172</sup> In doing so we endorse responsibility-before-God as our particular way of life:

“as we come to reflect on the fact that we are weighed and that our acts in some way mean responsibility [Verantwortung], we recognise that we will be weighed and therefore will be responsible [verantwortlich] the very next moment...”<sup>173</sup>

Though I must decide what kind of actions will form my response to the life-claiming Word, I am not alone in this precisely because the dogmatic theology at its heart is the theology of proclamation, and therefore belongs to the community of proclamation: the Church. As a ‘moral fellowship’, the Church is the company of men and women who have heard and received the divine command, and therefore have been made responsible before God. The fact that this fellowship exists bears witness to the “absolute, personal, living will distinct from ours” which has caused it to be.<sup>174</sup> Our fellowship with other Christians is the result of the Lordship of Christ, who confronts us and calls us to be part of it. We are bound to him as head of the Church (Colossians 1:18), and therefore bound to one another as members of the body. The Church is therefore the fellowship of responsibility. But the church is not the only fellowship of which human beings are part. Barth was keen to emphasise the fact that we live “with and alongside” other human beings, and this also involves some idea of responsibility. This point was made very clearly in his discussion of the dual aspect of responsibility - to God and to other human beings - in *The Holy Spirit* lecture. Barth writes, “the life of others must be handled with awe and responsibility...because our attitude to this other life...can mean its life or death.”<sup>175</sup> Such is the concrete reality of our responsibility for one another that my action or inaction can have ultimate meaning for the flourishing or not of another. The language is stark but communicates the seriousness of the point that

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<sup>171</sup> *Ethics*, 75 (*Ethik I*, 122).

<sup>172</sup> *Ethics*, 80 (*Ethik I*, 131).

<sup>173</sup> *Ethics*, 89 (*Ethik I*, 147).

<sup>174</sup> *Ethics*, 85 (*Ethik I*, 139).

<sup>175</sup> *Ethics*, 140 (*Ethik I*, 232).

human actions have concrete and specific meaning, and that responsibility as the particular characteristic of it is real and enacted. Barth is not saying that responsibility automatically involves the preservation of human life: it is not that human life is itself the goal of responsible action. But he is saying that responsibility will be enacted in relation to another's life as well as my own personal standing before God. Because of this, he goes on to say that my enacted responsibility may "represent God's own action" - remembering that responsibility is my obedient answer to the life-claiming Word received as command. This is a particularly difficult concept, and needs some explaining - which Barth attempts by discussing concrete examples of responsibility. The most notable of these is warfare.

War, according to Barth, is "the execution which a people organised as a state, on account of its will to live, performs on another people which threatens it will to live."<sup>176</sup> The ethical problem is not about the right one has to execute another, but the possibility of it in the light of responsibility. The argument has several points. First, that the individual member of the state is "not the responsible subject in war but rather that a third party acts for him in what proceeds, claims for him these military acts, and thus assumes responsibility in his place." This is the outworking of the bond between human beings established in the bond between God and humanity. So I may not be the responsible subject in war, but I am part of the state and share in the life of the nation, which means that I am responsible for its life and activities - i.e. the actions undertaken on my behalf, are in some sense a reflection of my own actions towards others. I am therefore invited to ask, responsibly, whether these actions conform to the divine Word. This discussion cannot meaningfully happen in abstraction, but only ever in the concrete circumstances of life: Barth refuses "the vacuum of an idea" and suggests that what is at stake is the reality that human agents must "accept responsibility for the fact that what I am now doing...is taking aim and shooting at Englishmen and Frenchmen."<sup>177</sup> The 'I' need not be the actual soldier holding the actual rifle; it may refer to the citizen at home, on whose behalf the rifle is used - "to accept the responsibility which one's people is about to take upon itself" and not to think that a person's pacifism, for example, "means that he does not share the responsibility of his country because he does not bear arms"<sup>178</sup> - such is the depth of the bond between human beings. My personal convictions about the actions of another do not abstract me from them, and cannot separate the bond established by God. So, he goes on, "if I want the state to do something, I must

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<sup>176</sup> *Ethics*, 154 (*Ethik I*, 257).

<sup>177</sup> *Ethics*, 157 (*Ethik I*, 263).

<sup>178</sup> *Ethics*, 158 (*Ethik I*, 264-5).

venture to be responsible for it as for my own personal will.”<sup>179</sup> I must decide and choose my own course of action as response to the divine determination that I be bound to others as I am bound to God. My actions are a response to this binding, but genuinely human actions embrace the bind and seek to fulfil it in the truthfulness of their actions.

Responsibility understood like this is about living from the prior bind to God that commits or binds us to fellow human beings in the concrete circumstances in which we find ourselves; it is about hearing the Word as command, and enacting that command in our particular *Lebensakt*.

## 2.4 Conclusion and Summary

Barth once retrospectively described the 1920s as an ongoing apprenticeship - beyond the completion of his formal student years, but not quite at the point of announcing his own dogmatic proposals.<sup>180</sup> His early ethical work, of which *The Problem of Ethics* is a good example, was largely critical response to the false moves he detected in other approaches to Christian moral reasoning. As the decade progressed, Barth was much more willing to be dogmatically constructive in public, and was beginning to announce his own distinctive propositions first in the *Göttingen Dogmatics* (1924) and then with more force in the “false start” of the *Christian Dogmatics* (1927). The *Ethics* lectures should be understood as his first complete proposal regarding the proper way forward for Christian ethics, a constructive vision for ethics as the radical implication of dogmatic theology. By way of conclusion and summary to this chapter in which I have been attending to his thought on human responsibility in this period, several observations can be made.

The first is that even at this stage Barth is really concerned that there is a proper place for the human agent. His theological work is not meant as an attempt to sideline the moral self, but to allow it to act truthfully by exploring the depths of its theological constitution. This is important because it grounds his understanding of human agency in God’s treatment of humanity, and particularly the divine determination of human beings. In doing this he overcomes any distinction between human being and human-acting - preferring instead the idea of *Lebensakt*, that our existence is a series of actions and *vice versa* and that these actions are meaningful. The language of responsibility is used to give as clear an account of human agency as possible in the light of dogmatic concerns: it is about more than mere responsiveness: it involves ethical reflection and genuine decision making. The moral agent is

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<sup>179</sup> *Ethics*, 166 (*Ethik I*, 278).

<sup>180</sup> Busch, *Karl Barth...*, 193.

permitted to ignore the life-claiming address, but in so doing they open themselves up for destruction.

Second, Barth was a realist in as much as he thought dogmatic theology actually refers. This means that the Word-theology he developed to explain the way human beings are constituted as responsible creatures, and the command motif which helps explain how human beings receive the Word of God, are descriptive of reality. They tell us something about the nature and status of human beings *vis a vis* God. His understanding of the Godward orientation of human beings is an ontological statement. Barth's ethics of responsibility is therefore about conformity to the reality of our human existence, something which is not known to us but which we receive as we encounter God. His realist understanding of the will of God as something distinct from us but which encounters and commands us is key to understanding responsibility.

Third, one implication of this is that Barth's *Ethics* is predominantly a Christian ethics, that is, it only makes sense and has significance for Christian people. Hence his point that the moment of encounter - what he calls the point at which the Word "cuts into" our lives - is so determinative for the responsible human being. Without this, a human agent cannot know themselves to be responsible before God, or bound to others in responsibility. Barth does not seem too disturbed by this: his focus is on the proper dogmatic location of ethics, and so is with the Christian content of ethics.

Finally, the idea of responsibility that Barth developed in 1920s was the human side of the encounter with the life-claiming Word. It is the corollary of talking about God's Word in the dynamic terms of address and sanctification that lead to using responsibility language as a way of locating the human agent, and giving content to that agency. But it must be conceded also that the theological grounds for thinking about human agency in this way are thin. Barth is true to his initial fear about anthropocentrism, and refuses to talk about humanity except by talking about God, but his limited focus on God as divine commander means that he has no adequate space wherein to locate the human agent and her responsibility. How can talking about God mean one actually meaningfully talks about true humanity? What is needed is an account of human being that is more theologically robust. This does not come until the Christological turn of mid-1930s, and its influence on *CD II/2*, to which I now turn.

## Chapter 3

### Responsibility in the Ethics of *Church Dogmatics* II/2

The general ethics of *CD* II/2 is Barth's first sustained treatment of ethics within the *Church Dogmatics*, and therefore his first instalment since the *Ethics* lectures. Assessing the role and meaning of the language of human responsibility here makes a good point of retrospective comparison with the *Ethics*, and enables me to assess the impact of Barth's Christological turn on his understanding of human responsibility. He deploys the responsibility language extensively in these paragraphs, in relation to both divine and human agency (a nuance that is rarely picked up in the secondary literature). In a thesis that considers the ethical meaning of human responsibility, it seems appropriate then to engage with Barth's ethics of responsibility in this context. Doing so will allow me a point of prospective comparison with the special ethics of *CD* III/4 to which I turn in the next chapter. Furthermore, as I suggested in section 1.4, much of the critical literature on Barth's approach to human responsibility has focused on his Christology and its impact on the status of the human agent. Most notably the idea that Christology overwhelms human responsibility. This issue needs to be tackled if Barth is to be rehabilitated on this topic.

#### 3.1 Introduction

In his autobiographical article, *How I Changed My Mind*, published in the USA in September 1939, Barth described the previous decade - especially the period after the *Ethics* lectures - as one of significant development. He referred to a "deepening" and "moving forward" in relation to advances already made, particularly in the area of theological method.<sup>181</sup> Looking back, he said that his concern had been to shed the last vestiges of anthropocentric or naturalistic foundations of Christian doctrine - which we have seen he had begun to do in the 1920s - and to develop a new approach centred exclusively on the person of Jesus Christ. Barth saw this as a necessity for Christian doctrine and not an option, since the very existence of the Church wherein theological thinking and speaking is to be done is the result of the gracious work of God in Christ: "to be in the Church...is to be called with others by Jesus Christ."<sup>182</sup> The turn to Christology as foundational is therefore a natural corollary of the divine address, which is actualised in Jesus Christ, and ensures that theology is always fit

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<sup>181</sup> The article was first published in the Chicago based magazine *The Christian Century* on 20th September 1939 and re-issued in the same magazine in July 1984. It has also been published in a single volume in the United States by John Knox Press (1966), and in the United Kingdom by St Andrews Press (1969).

<sup>182</sup> *CD* I/1, 17 (*KD* I/1, 16).

for its task of speaking about God. If the 1920s was Barth's so-called theological "apprenticeship", unlearning and re-learning dogmatic theology, the 1930s was the final beginning of his major constructive work in doctrinal theology and ethics with the publication of the first three part-volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*.

Barth saw the Christocentric focus during this period as the affirmation, extension, and fulfilment of insights gained during the preparation of his *Anselm* study.<sup>183</sup> Published in 1931, he suggested in *How I Changed My Mind* that it was his most important work to date. It stood as a watershed in his theological development, a moment of continuity with his recent theological past and also the beginning of something new which can be seen in the general approach of the *Church Dogmatics*. It was also a work of interpretative ingenuity, giving a vision of Anselm that was totally contrary to the image often painted by philosophers keen to use the "proofs" as a basis for natural theology.<sup>184</sup> The conviction of the *Anselm* study was that theology cannot be founded upon the logic of apologetic argument (what is commonly called the ontological argument) or anthropological concerns but upon faith in God alone - grounded in God's self-revelation - which is its proper *raison d'être*. Theology, as Barth learned it from Anselm, is the *intellectus fidei* - the attempt that humans make at understanding and deepening their faith in God.<sup>185</sup> Anselm sought theological understanding precisely because he believed and not in order to believe: it was his 'faith seeking understanding.' As Timothy Gorringer - developing Sabine Plonz' reading of Barth - has put it, "the question then is not - How can God be known?, but - To what extent do we know God?"<sup>186</sup> Theological study is contingent upon faith and therefore presupposes an already existing commitment within which the human being knows herself to be caught up, and which she seeks to contemplate, develop, and know more fully. Theology is therefore dynamic, and relates to the lived-lives of Christian people in faith-relationship with God. Their faith as knowledge of God who is objectively given to be known, has an ethical impact in as much as it orders their way of living. Theology must presuppose the confession of faith, the *Credo*, including Scripture, as the articulation of truth both about God and also about who we are in relation to God. Deepened understanding comes only "by reflection on

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<sup>183</sup> The impetus for the book came from a seminar series Barth hosted in Bonn in 1930 on Anselm's *Cur Deus homo* and in the same year a lecture by Heinrich Scholz on Anselm's *Proslogion*. Barth had hosted an earlier seminar series on Anselm in 1926 at Münster.

<sup>184</sup> Which Barth would later argue against strongly in his reply to Emil Brunner, "No!" in 1934. See Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology*. Translated by Peter Fraenkel (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1946).

<sup>185</sup> *Anselm...*, 16 (FQI..., 14).

<sup>186</sup> Gorringer, *Karl Barth...*, 125.

the *credo...*”,<sup>187</sup> or as Gorringer comments it “involves thinking through what has already been given us in revelation.”<sup>188</sup> This means that the content of Christian faith is not subject to apologetic scrutiny in order to be considered viable by theologians, rather it is the “self-evident basis of the discussion”<sup>189</sup> because the discussion is taking place. Without the articles of faith and the scriptural witness which inform faith there would be no Christian theology.

Anselm’s insights here were interpreted by Barth as permission to construct a theological method that was less speculative than contemporary Protestant theology had become and more faithful to the *credo* by “start[ing] out from the knowledge of God himself...”<sup>190</sup> This knowledge is given in Jesus Christ, and faith in him as the *a priori* of theology must therefore, from Barth’s point of view, govern our approach to it in the same way that any subject matter determines the mode of study if the study is to be genuinely scientific.<sup>191</sup> These insights underpinned his sense that *all* Christian thinking must take its cue from Jesus Christ because “in Jesus Christ the living Word of God [is] spoken to us men.”<sup>192</sup>

In turning to Christ as the point of departure for theological reflection Barth also remained faithful to earlier ideas about revelation and divine sovereignty, but here grounded them much more dogmatically and more concretely than before. So the period immediately after the *Anselm* study, when all this methodological refocusing took place, he referred to as his “Christological concentration.”<sup>193</sup> It was a very important period in Barth’s development because it set the trajectory for his theology for the rest of his life, and its influence is

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<sup>187</sup> *Anselm...*, 27 (*FQI...*, 26).

<sup>188</sup> Gorringer, *Karl Barth...*, 125.

<sup>189</sup> *Anselm...*, 60 (*FQI...*, 60).

<sup>190</sup> *Anselm...*, 166 (*FQI...*, 169).

<sup>191</sup> The idea of “science” is important to Barth’s understanding of the nature of theological enquiry and is described in the opening section of *Church Dogmatics* vol. 1, where amongst other things Barth writes “The only way which theology has of proving its scientific character is to devote itself to the task of knowledge as determined by its actual theme, and thus to show what it means by true science.” *CD I/1*, 10 (*KD I/1*, 9). The basic idea is that the subject matter must determine the mode of understanding. Barth’s student Thomas Torrance describes this in greater detail in two works: *Theological Science* (Oxford: Oxford university Press, 1969) and *The Ground and Grammar of Theology: Consonance between Theology and Science* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1980).

<sup>192</sup> *How I Changed My Mind*, 44

<sup>193</sup> *How I Changed My Mind*, 44

extensive,<sup>194</sup> something which Barth himself acknowledged in the opening pages of *CD II/1*, published in 1939, when he implored the reader to keep Anselm's *Proslogion* in mind and to refer to his own study of that Benedictine scholar.<sup>195</sup>

The doctrine of Jesus Christ became for Barth the hermeneutical key by which the Christian faith, and moreover the Christian life, was properly understood. In practice, as John Thompson notes, this meant that Jesus Christ was to be accorded “priority, centrality, and normativity...” and that “all aspects of theology and dogmatics must be dynamically related to this living and concrete centre, and determined throughout by it.”<sup>196</sup> It was not an attempt to rid theology of all of its particular and varied *foci*, or to collapse all theology into Christology, but to argue in the light of the fact that theology must speak of God that the common centre of these various theological *foci*, and therefore the perspective from which each is to be viewed and understood, is governed by divine self-disclosure which enables us to speak truthfully. Christology therefore became, what McCormack has called, “a methodological rule”<sup>197</sup> against which the veracity of theology was to be measured.

McCormack highlights the key corollary of Barth's decision to proceed in this way, which is important for this chapter of my thesis, namely that doctrines could no longer be considered independent of one another because they are commonly linked in Christology.<sup>198</sup> The doctrine of Jesus Christ was now to exercise a normative and determinative influence in all matters of theology and doctrine, ethics, and biblical interpretation. This latter point is particularly important because Barth had already established himself as a Biblical

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<sup>194</sup> Bruce McCormack argues that while the *Anselm* study is certainly a key factor in this development, its role is more in setting the trajectory of Barth's thought and that more emphasis should be placed on the 1936 Calvin Conference held in Geneva. Once again Barth found himself in dialogue with his brother Peter, this time on the subject of predestination. It was hearing Peter's paper, and contrasting it with that by Pierre Maury - whose central theme was that the concrete reality of election and predestination which is made known in Jesus Christ cannot be separated from the doctrine of election - that really emphasised the need for a pervasive Christology. Maury's paper made for “a truly Christological grounding of predestination” in contrast to a more anthropocentric view, common amongst Reformed thinkers. See Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) 455-458. Barth wrote up his account of this conference and its significance for his own development in *CD II/2*, 188-194 (*KD II/2*, 207-214). In terms of this thesis, whether one takes Barth's own assessment of his development in relation to *Anselm* or McCormack's consideration for the Geneva Conference, the important point is that by the time *CD II* was written, particularly the ethics in 1942, Barth was convinced of the importance of Christology for the whole scheme of theology and this is discernible.

<sup>195</sup> *CD II/1*, 4 (*KD II/1*, 2).

<sup>196</sup> John Thompson, *Christ in Perspective in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1978) 2.

<sup>197</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 454.

<sup>198</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 454-455.

theologian<sup>199</sup> and it was in the realm of biblical exegesis and hermeneutics that his Christocentric approach could be most readily perceived by the end of the decade. In a series of observations about scripture in *CD I/2*, Barth argued quite directly that “the content of the Bible, and the object of its witness, is Jesus Christ as the name of the God who deals graciously with man the sinner.”<sup>200</sup> By “Bible” Barth meant both the Old and New Testaments, as he continued: “the name of Jesus Christ [was] concealed under the name of Israel in the Old Testament and revealed under His own name in the New Testament, which therefore can be understood only as it has understood itself, as a commentary on the Old Testament.”<sup>201</sup> The figure of Christ was for him the controlling centre from which to read the whole bible, informing Barth’s understanding of the whole canon as well as the whole project of dogmatics which flows from that.<sup>202</sup>

The influence of this Christological concentration is decisive for our understanding of Barth’s moral theology. In particular, its influence can be detected in the ethics of *CD II/2*, published in 1942. The ethical question - what ought I to do? - appealing as it does to the will of God had ordered his moral thinking from the *Ethics* lectures onwards and would now, in the context of the *Church Dogmatics*, be given a fresh answer: “the will of God...must be sought and found only in the work of God, i.e. in the core and purpose of that work, the name and person of Jesus Christ.”<sup>203</sup> In one sense it is not new: the *Ethics* lectures, as we have seen, appeal to the doctrine of the divine Word as the communicative act wherein the will of God is made known as human beings are addressed by that Word. But it is fresh in the sense that the divine Word receives greater theological attention, being grounded Christologically. It is more fully integrated into the heart of dogmatics, and underpins Barth’s controversial statement that “dogmatics is itself ethics, and ethics is also dogmatics” - that the heretofore separate disciplines of dogmatics or doctrinal theology on the one hand and ethics on the other are not only closely intertwined, as Paul Althaus suggested, but

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<sup>199</sup> Alongside his dogmatic works, and necessary for them, was constant attention to books of the bible in lectures and publications. By 1930s several lectures series on biblical texts had been delivered and commentaries written: *Romans I* (1919); *Romans II* (1921); *Philippians* (1928); and *John 1* (1933, though published much later). See Christina Baxter, ‘Barth - A Truly Biblical Theologian’ in *Tyndale Bulletin* 38, no. 1 (1987), 3-27.

<sup>200</sup> *CD I/2*, 720 (*KD I/2*, 807).

<sup>201</sup> *CD I/2*, 720 (*KD I/2*, 807-08).

<sup>202</sup> See Christina Baxter, *The Movement from Exegesis to Dogmatics in the Theology of Karl Barth with Special Reference to Romans, Philippians, and The Church Dogmatics*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. University of Durham, 1982.

<sup>203</sup> *CD II/2*, 191 (*KD II/2*, 211).

rather they are rightly understood as indivisible.<sup>204</sup> The ethical concern to live well is answered only in attending to the divine will, which is made known only as God makes all things known in and through Jesus Christ. And *vice versa*, as we understand who Jesus Christ is so we understand who we are and who we are called to be. Barth was concerned for an anthropology that was honest, and that spoke of true humanity, and he found it in relation to the doctrine of Jesus Christ who was fully divine and fully human.<sup>205</sup> In short to understand what a good and genuine human life looks like one needs Christology, in particular a form of Chalcedonian Christology. Conversely, Christology is not an abstract theoretical reflection but describes concrete and genuine human existence.

These insights are very helpful for understanding Barth's account of human responsibility as it was employed in the special ethics of *CD II/2*. Here he discusses the possibility and reality of responsible human action only in relation to divine responsibility actualised in Christ, and therefore makes human responsibility analogous to Christ's. My intention in this chapter is to explore his Christological account and, following the pattern already established in this thesis, to examine the passages wherein the language of human responsibility is deployed and discern its meaning by reading them contextually. In order to make sense of his use of responsibility language I begin by attending to the particularities of Christology developed in *CD II*, before turning to responsibility-language in the special ethics. In particular I explore in section 3.2 the typically Reformed themes of covenant and election which play an important part in his doctrine of God, and examine how Barth's new focus forms and shapes his understanding here. This is important because, as we shall see, he relates these themes directly to ethical topics such as the divine command, which in turn impacts our understanding of human responsibility. The relationship between covenant, election, and command makes for a complex theological discussion, and one that - I suggest - has been the cause of much of the scholarly rejection of Barth on the topic of human responsibility. By describing the contours of his thought on these topics, I am creating space for further discussion in section 3.3 about human responsibility in the midst of the doctrine of God. What emerges is a more interesting account than has so far been articulated in the secondary literature, in which both the divine and human agents are spoken of as being 'responsible.' The genius of this move is that it locates the responsible human being *vis a vis*

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<sup>204</sup> The infamous statement is offered as critique of Althaus' 1931 work on the foundation of ethics, *CD I/2* 793 (*KD I/2*, 888), but it appears amidst a more sustained argument for the treatment of dogmatics as ethics: *CD I/2*, 782-796 (*KD I/2*, 875-90). This section argues that the Word of God addressed to human beings in Jesus Christ is the key reason for treating ethics in this way because it is by "the Word of God that human existence acquires theological relevance." *CD I/2*, 793 (*KD I/2*, 887).

<sup>205</sup> Wolf Krötke, 'Karl Barth's Anthropology' in John Webster (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 162.

God, but with a much more theologically satisfactory understanding of the impetus and nature of human responsibility. What emerges is a sense of human responsibility as gift, understood analogously to divine responsibility. It is clearly an act of theological description, but with significant implications for later special ethics.

### 3.2 Covenant, Election, and Divine Command

Reformed theology has always had some kind of federal or covenant theology as the organising principle of its account of Christian faith.<sup>206</sup> Although covenant theology predates the sixteenth century Reformation,<sup>207</sup> the Reformed tradition after John Calvin made the idea of ‘covenant’ central to its understanding. It remained a critical element of the tradition well beyond the time of Calvin and beyond the Swiss borders, with key synodal gatherings and official church documents affirming its theological significance, for example The Heidelberg Catechism in 1563 and the Dutch Reformed Synod at Dordrecht in 1618-19. Over time, various theological nuances have informed particular approaches to federal theology, and ideas such as covenant grace, covenant works, and covenant redemption came to express different points of emphasis within the tradition. The basic features have not changed much, however, and Reformed theology is still characterised by its emphasis on federal theology.

In keeping with the Reformed tradition,<sup>208</sup> Barth offered an account of divine-human covenant in the context of his *Doctrine of God*. As I have already indicated, the impact of the Christological concentration can be easily detected in *CD II*, and the central focus of his covenant theology is the person of Jesus Christ. In itself this is not too unusual. Calvin, for whom God’s covenant grace was the central theme of his *Institutes of Christian Religion*, in his comparison of the Old and New Testament covenants argued that Christ was the common thread across the canon - the overall mediator, prophetically witnessed in the Old Testament and apostolically heralded in the New.<sup>209</sup> Calvin could not conceive an account of covenant theology without recourse to the doctrine of Jesus Christ, and Barth was much the same.

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<sup>206</sup> On this point see: D.A. Weir, *The Origins of Federal Theology in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); and Holmes Rolston, “Responsible Man in Reformed theology: Calvin Versus the Westminster Confession,” in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 23 (1970), 129-156.

<sup>207</sup> St Augustine is one example, and is heavily referenced by Reformed scholars. See John Leith, *The Reformed Tradition* (Edinburgh: St Andrew’s Press, 1978), Ch. 1.

<sup>208</sup> A very helpful book which in part explores aspects of Barth’s relationship with the Reformed tradition, especially his understanding of the Christological emphasis of its confession, is Eberhard Busch, *Drawn to Freedom: Christian Faith Today in Conversation with the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

<sup>209</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. Edited by John T. McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) Vol. I, 428-64.

But there are significant differences and divergences, in particular the way the doctrine of Jesus Christ is understood to relate to and inform covenant theology.<sup>210</sup> The content of the Christ-mediated covenant in Calvin's theology is the fellowship of God and his chosen people, founded upon the life and work of Christ as the one who causes and enables it by his death and resurrection.<sup>211</sup> Here the relationship between Jesus Christ and the covenant is dictated by the doctrine of election - the prior sovereign decision of God regarding humanity in which the human race is divided into two groups, those elected for salvation and those elected for damnation - so that the covenant in Christ exists only between those whom God has chosen for salvation on the one hand, known in biblical theology as Israel and the Church, and God himself on the other. The identity of individuals elect for salvation is governed by and known only to God according to his sovereign will. Moreover it is rightly understood as part of the divine act of creation, though in a postlapsarian context:<sup>212</sup> "for all are not created in equal condition: rather, eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others."<sup>213</sup>

In the context of the sixteenth century Reformation, emphasis on election and predestination had the double benefit of being discernible (after a fashion) in scripture and of mitigating against what Calvin regarded as the Roman Catholic notion that good works could lead to salvation. On the contrary, he asserted that election is an act of God and is therefore never dependent upon a human being, even upon their faith – those whom God has predestined and elected for salvation are guaranteed to be subject to his grace by virtue of that act of God in deciding for them and for no other reason.<sup>214</sup> Others, because of their sinfulness, are deservedly subject to God's wrath and damnation. The will of God is the final arbiter, and because God is judge it is beyond contestation.

Barth's account works with and reworks the Calvinistic material, but, as with everything else after the *Anselm* study, he re-appraises the inherited Reformed understanding from the new Christocentric vantage point. Agreeing with Calvin, Barth places the idea of

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<sup>210</sup> In *How I Changed My Mind*, Barth noted how his new method had caused him to enter into critical dialogue with the Reformed tradition whilst remaining within it.

<sup>211</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, Vol. I, 450.

<sup>212</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, Vol. II, 976.

<sup>213</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, Vol. II, 926.

<sup>214</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, Vol. II, 932.

covenant very close to the centre of his theology<sup>215</sup> but argues that Jesus Christ is not only the mechanism by which the covenant may be enacted but is himself the definition of the covenant between God and human beings:

everything which comes from God takes place 'in Jesus Christ', i.e. in the establishment of the covenant which, in the union of His Son with Jesus of Nazareth, God has instituted and maintains and directs between Himself and His people...<sup>216</sup>

Covenant does not only take place 'in Jesus Christ', the hypostatic union of the Son with the man Jesus is itself the institution, maintenance, and direction of the covenant. The covenant is not something ontologically separate from Jesus Christ. This is a considerable step beyond Calvin, whose willingness to see the damned condemned because they stand outside the covenant suggests to Barth there is an aspect of human existence in which the grace of God in Jesus Christ is not sovereign. This is a denial of the Biblical witness and runs against the grain of his theological method. Barth's interpretation is informed here not only by his Christological concentration, but also by a thoroughgoing Chalcedonianism emphasising the union of the Son with Jesus of Nazareth and thus locating the actualisation of the covenant in the incarnation. This means that not only in Jesus Christ, the God-man and the definition of covenant, do we meet God – "God can only be known through God"<sup>217</sup> - but we also know ourselves to be covenant partners with him as we do so. Barth states, "God is not known completely – and therefore not at all – if He is not known as the Maker and Lord of this covenant between Himself and man."<sup>218</sup> Thus human beings come to know the divine determination of them for covenant relationship as they come to know God as Lord of the covenant. Because the covenant between God and human beings is actualised in Jesus Christ God is continually caught-up with human beings, and because Jesus' humanity is universal God must be in covenant relationship with all people - including the reprobate and damned.

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<sup>215</sup> McGowan suggests that for Barth, "grace is the basis of covenant, election is the outworking of covenant, creation prepares the ground for covenant, and reconciliation is the fulfilment of covenant." A.T.B. McGowan, 'Karl Barth and Covenant Theology', in *Engaging with Barth: Contemporary Evangelical Critiques*, eds. David Gibson and Daniel Strange (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008) p.115. This overview of the ubiquity of covenant in Barth's thought is challenged somewhat when McGowan critiques Barth's account of covenant for its failure to be properly Reformed, with reference to §57 only, thus missing the foundational sections of the *Dogmatics* which give rise to the content of that paragraph.

<sup>216</sup> *CD* II/2, 8 (*KD* II/2, 7).

<sup>217</sup> *CD* II/1, 79 (*KD* II/1, 86).

<sup>218</sup> *CD* II/2, 509 (*KD* II/2, 565).

This view of covenant as a divine decision to be in relationship with human beings is also upheld in Barth's doctrine of election, which he calls the sum of the gospel, and at heart is indissoluble fellowship: "God in His love elects another for fellowship with Himself...He draws it upwards to Himself, so as never again to be without it, but to be who He is in covenant with it."<sup>219</sup> In this covenant both God and the human creature cannot be without one another. Therefore, election and covenant is the existential context (the pre-condition) in which human beings come to know God, who is known as covenant-maker, established in eternity and enacted in history in Christ.<sup>220</sup>

Human knowledge of God is, therefore, *a posteriori* and *in concreto*.<sup>221</sup> In Kantian terms, God "enters into relationship of object to man the subject"<sup>222</sup> in the concrete reality of the divine-human person Jesus Christ, "for God is not known and not knowable except in Jesus Christ".<sup>223</sup> Such knowledge consists only in the benevolent self-giving act of God.<sup>224</sup> There is no ontological change operative in this: God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ shows himself to be Lord of the covenant and so to be God *pro nobis* from all eternity. The covenant is the eternal decision of God which anticipates its enactment, what Barth called "temporal event", in Jesus Christ<sup>225</sup> remembering that "what took place in Jesus Christ...was not merely a temporal event, but the eternal will of God temporally actualized and revealed in that event."<sup>226</sup> In Christ we encounter both the eternal and the temporal will of God.<sup>227</sup> Scholars have understood the significance of this in different ways: Bruce McCormack argues that the best way to read Barth here is to say that God determined that covenant-election should be constitutive of divine ontology, i.e. that the decision for covenant gave rise to Trinity; others like Paul Molnar and George Hunsinger maintain that the Trinity is the

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<sup>219</sup> CD II/2, 10 (KD II/2, 9).

<sup>220</sup> CD II/2, 509 (KD II/2, 565)

<sup>221</sup> The definiteness of the divine self-mediation is important later when Barth considers that the divine command is given with 'definite and concrete content', CD II/2, 661 (KD II/2, 737).

<sup>222</sup> CD II/1, 9 (KD II/1, 8).

<sup>223</sup> CD II/2, 509 (KD II/2, 565).

<sup>224</sup> "Where God in His *benevolentia* gives Himself to be known by man, and where man stands before Him as one who knows this *benevolentia* as such and is therefore determined by it and obedient to it, there and there alone is there a fulfilment of the real knowledge of God" CD II/1, 29 (KD II/2, 30).

<sup>225</sup> CD II/2, 150 (KD II/2, 162).

<sup>226</sup> CD II/2, 179 (KD II/2, 197).

<sup>227</sup> CD II/2, 547 (KD II/2, 607).

presupposition and ground of covenant-election, without which the doctrine of election makes no theological sense.<sup>228</sup>

The Chalcedonian definition,<sup>229</sup> which directly informs this account, gives Barth the cue for thinking that our relationship with God is much more concrete than covenant governed by an abstract account of election and predestination, as with Calvin. From the perspective of Barth's particular understanding of the two natures in Jesus Christ, emphasising "our being with God and God's being with us," we encounter the unity of humanity and divinity and as such the goal of the covenant.<sup>230</sup> This account of Jesus' humanity questions the implicit limitations that Calvin's doctrine of election entails when it suggests that only *some* (the elect) are members with Christ. Instead, Barth sees the whole of humanity encompassed in Chalcedonian Christology: both the elect and the reprobate. Barth states that, in as much as the elect are "obviously to be found in the sphere of divine election of grace...[the reprobate] are also to be found there...the former in obedience, the latter in disobedience."<sup>231</sup> Though the latter are disobedient, they are still present in Christ. The corollary is to open up the circle of the covenant beyond the limitations of the elect so that it becomes the foundation of all God's dealings with all humanity.<sup>232</sup> A focus on Chalcedonian Christology means that in Barth's covenant theology all human creatures, reprobate and elect, *are known* and *received* by God in Christ. In Calvin's predestinarian

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<sup>228</sup> Bruce 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 Webster (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 92-110; George Hunsinger, "Election and the Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth," *Modern Theology*, 24:2 (2008), 179-198; Paul Molnar, "Can the Electing God be God without us? Some Implications of Bruce McCormack's Understanding of Barth's Doctrine of Election for the Doctrine of the Trinity," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*, 49 (2007), 199-222. There are two issues here: the first is the question of how best to understand Barth, while the second is the bigger question of the truth of each theological position in relation to divine revelation. I am not particularly concerned with the second of these in this thesis. As to the first, with Molnar and Hunsinger I understand the divine determination for covenant to indicate the Trinity as ontologically prior to the act of election for Barth. Key texts support Hunsinger's argument, for example the following from Barth's account of the being of God: "As and before God seeks and creates fellowship with us, he wills and completes his fellowship with himself...He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and therefore alive in his unique being with and for and in another...He does not exist in solitude but in fellowship." *CD II/1*, 275 (*KD II/1*, 308). Hunsinger, *Election and Trinity*..., 181.

<sup>229</sup> Chalcedonian Christology - used here to argue that Barth is committed to the two-natures hypothesis of the Chalcedonian Formula of 451 - makes sense of Barth's ethics later on. Charles Waldrop, who has argued for an Alexandrian reading of Barth's Christology, has suggested that the 'overemphasis' on the divinity of Christ mitigates human actions and agency, thus rendering Barth's account of ethical agency senseless; Charles Waldrop, *Karl Barth's Christology: its basic Alexandrian character* (New York: Mouton, 1984), 176. For a critical response which argues for a Chalcedonian account see George Hunsinger's 'Karl Barth's Christology: its Basic Chalcedonian Character', in Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 131-47.

<sup>230</sup> *CD II/1*, 74 (*KD II/1*, 80).

<sup>231</sup> *CD II/2*, 346-7 (*KD II/2*, 382).

<sup>232</sup> The circle-metaphor is Barth's own, referring initially to Jesus Christ, but extended in §35.3 in order to facilitate discussion of the *apokatastasis* charge. *CD II/2*, 417-19 (*KD II/2*, 461-464).

covenant, even the *possibility* of the knowledge of God as anything other than prosecutor is impossible for the reprobate. For Barth, Jesus' universal humanity is the divine good pleasure; it is grace.<sup>233</sup>

In the gracious union of the divine and human, Christ embodies the whole of the covenant-partnership. Ethics as a human enterprise is treated in the doctrine of God as all humanity is treated in Christ: 'humanity in itself has no place in the doctrine of God. But Jesus Christ has a place...and a God without Jesus Christ...would be another, a strange God.'<sup>234</sup> Human beings own the highest knowledge of themselves as human,<sup>235</sup> claimed and commanded by God, and determined as covenant partners, on this basis: the corollary, as we shall see, is that ethics is not determinative of human ontology, or human future – Jesus Christ is. Our response to the commanding claim, I shall argue, is the content of responsible human agency since the covenant-decision is also an act of judgement, wherein God the Judge *orders our steps* as his covenant partners:

When God becomes Man's partner, as the Lord of the covenant who determines its meaning, content, and fulfilment, He necessarily becomes the Judge of Man, the law of his existence.<sup>236</sup>

God is Lord of the covenant, and the partnership to which, Barth says, humans are called recognizes that God graciously condescends to instruct human beings as to proper covenantal etiquette. This, as we shall see, is received as liberating *command*.<sup>237</sup> We see further how Barth moved away from Calvin's account of covenant in two ways: 1) the outworking of divine election; 2) the shape of the divine command. Though these two are treated in turn, the distinction is logical rather than ontological.

The doctrine of election is key to a Reformed account of covenant. Since the Synod of Dort (1619), in which something like an internationally agreed account of the tenets of Reformed faith was endorsed, the doctrine has been understood to entail 'an eternal, divine decree which...separates the human race into two portions and ordains one to everlasting life

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<sup>233</sup> CD II/1, 74 (KD II/1, 81).

<sup>234</sup> CD II/2, 510 (KD II/2, 565).

<sup>235</sup> On this see Mangina's outline of Barth's turn from Cartesianism in Joseph L. Mangina, *Karl Barth on the Christian Life: The Practical Knowledge of God* (New York: Peter Lang Pub Inc, 2001) Ch. 1.

<sup>236</sup> CD II/2, 511 (KD II/2, 567).

<sup>237</sup> 'Command' here should not be understood as 'dictate' but as permission, in accordance with the graciousness of the covenant. As William Werpehowski notes, Barth 'uses ordinary words in a peculiar but coherent way by assimilating them to his conceptual scheme.' William Werpehowski, 'Command and History in the Ethics of Karl Barth' in *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 9 (1981), 302.

and the other to everlasting death.<sup>238</sup> Again, Barth's account is a particularly nuanced version of this, shifting focus away from the election of, and ultimate destination of, individual human persons toward the single concrete person of the electing-God. This is followed secondly by the election of the community, and only finally by the election of the individual.<sup>239</sup> Again we can see why Barth chooses to treat ethics in the midst of the doctrine of God, since it is the case that human beings elect in Christ are also agents – they *act* – and ethics is concerned with the rightness of those actions.<sup>240</sup>

As with covenant, Barth explained his account of election earlier in the volume (§§32-35), where again his account of Chalcedonian Christology is important in helping us understand its structure and function. Divine election gives shape to Christology:

Jesus Christ is God in His movement towards man... Jesus Christ is the decision of God in favour of this attitude or relation. He is Himself the relation... He is also called Jesus of Nazareth. He is also very man, and as such is the Representative of the people which in Him and through Him is united as He is with God, being with Him the object of the divine movement.<sup>241</sup>

It is a two-sided structure: first, Christ's divinity is shown to encompass God's self-election in eternity to be gracious toward humanity by becoming incarnate: 'God makes this movement, the institution of the covenant... in Jesus Christ... First and foremost this means that God makes a self-election in favour of the other.'<sup>242</sup> Election, as a divine decision to act is necessarily first a choice about the divine determination before it is a choice about which human beings shall be saved. Barth prioritizes God not as the elector, but as the self-elect. It is God who first chooses for election, for covenant relationship, as the enactment of the eternal covenant before human beings were even created.<sup>243</sup> Barth once again emphasises the

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<sup>238</sup> Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1976), 83.

<sup>239</sup> See §33. This is a logical rather than ontological distinction.

<sup>240</sup> Barth treats election in relation to ethics under his account of 'the way of theological ethics' (§36.2) *CD* II/2, 543-51 (*KD* II/2, 603-12).

<sup>241</sup> *CD* II/2, 7 (*KD* II/2, 5).

<sup>242</sup> *CD* II/2, 9-10 (*KD* II/2, 8).

<sup>243</sup> Again, see in particular Bruce 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 Webster (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 92-110, and the counterargument offered by Paul Molnar, 'Can the electing God be without us? Some implications of Bruce McCormack's understanding of Barth's doctrine of election for the doctrine of the Trinity' in *NZST* 49.2 (2007), 199-222.

eternality of the covenant decision and divine self-election. This is a proper aspect of divine sovereignty: that God determines himself, and as such binds himself to the covenant, is not so much an account of the limitedness of God as the power of God. Barth acknowledges this when he suggests that God's freedom, God's eternity, and God's righteousness, as facets of divine grace which reach out to humanity, are all constituent parts of the doctrine of election<sup>244</sup>.

Second, Christ's humanity is understood as the centre of covenant-election as it is actualised. As I have already argued it is not that Christ is a *mechanism* by which some are chosen, but rather is shown to *enact* God's election of the world, so that

in Him and through Him God moves toward the world. It means not merely that He creates and sustains the world, but that He works on it and in it...That God wills neither to be without the world nor against it can never be stated more forcibly than when we speak of His election.<sup>245</sup>

The doctrine of election *εν χριστω* (Eph. 1:4) is the election of the world – the movement of God towards the world in love: 'His election is not simply exemplary and typical...there is also an election of others *in* Him.'<sup>246</sup> The elect in Christ are invited to be witnesses to God's glory and partners in the covenant. As we have already noted, this latter point is made controversial by virtue of Christ's universal humanity. It frequently leads to the charge of *apokatastasis* or universalism – since the distinction between the human-damned and the human-elect, present in traditional Reformed theology, is dissolved.<sup>247</sup> Barth argues that 'God...has taken upon himself the rejection merited by the man isolated in relation to Him; that on [this] basis...the only truly rejected man is His own Son...so that [rejection] can no longer fall on other men or be their concern.'<sup>248</sup> Double predestination is now to be found wholly in Jesus Christ: the universal human being is *both* elect human and reprobate sinner

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<sup>244</sup> CD II/2, 24 & 27-34 (KD II/2, 24 & 28).

<sup>245</sup> CD II/2, 26 (KD II/2, 27).

<sup>246</sup> G.C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 101.

<sup>247</sup> On this point see Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace...* Ch. 10; more recently Tom Greggs, "Jesus is Victor: Passing the Impasse of Barth on Universalism," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 60 (2007), 196-212, and his *Barth, Origen, and Universal Salvation: Restoring Particularity* (Oxford: OUP, 2009) explore Barth's apparent denial of *apokatastasis* in CD II/2, 417-19, by suggesting that it is the denial of the act of formulating God's grace and thus of binding God's sovereign freedom, but not actually of the ultimate friendliness of Jesus Christ.

<sup>248</sup> CD II/2, 319 (KD II/2, ). Barth immediately follows this statement in a way suggestive of universal salvation, saying that 'their concern is still to be aware of the threat of their rejection...but it cannot now be their concern to suffer the execution of this threat, to suffer the eternal damnation which their godlessness deserves.'

on the cross – God acting in humanity and for humanity.<sup>249</sup> These two parts come together to form the whole doctrine of eternal divine election as Barth conceived it:<sup>250</sup> Jesus Christ is the elect human and the electing God, the elect and the Elector,<sup>251</sup> both the object and subject of divine election.<sup>252</sup> In this concrete person, God actualised the eternal decision for human fellowship with himself and called human beings into covenant partnership: “not only did He elect fellowship with man for himself he also elected fellowship with Himself for man.”<sup>253</sup> As we have also noted elsewhere in relation to covenant, God’s judgement is enacted positively in election – since it is the case that He has judged in favour of humanity by becoming human for the sake of the covenant. So it is that Barth hails the doctrine of election as “the sum of the gospel.”<sup>254</sup>

Divine self-election for humanity still involves the election and determination of human beings for service, commission, and witness in the world.<sup>255</sup> Divine election implies the lordship of one over another: it is a partnership in which the creature is expected to fulfil the reality of the existence for which she has been determined, as the Creator fulfils the reality for which he has determined himself, in the covenant. Covenant-election involves God’s lordship and sovereignty; God’s decision and judgement; God’s claiming and determining; and ultimately God’s grace. For Barth, election involves us in obedience which comes in the form of the divine command. Ethics is about our human *response* to this:

That God wills to rule over man clearly means that He wants his obedience, and the question of obedience is therefore put to him. That God has determined him for service clearly means that He claims him for Himself, and he is therefore asked whether he will satisfy this claim.<sup>256</sup>

That determination and claim is received by humanity as the command of God addressed to His creatures. It is the way humanity hears God’s lordship, receives its election in Christ, and hears the determination of its actions – what Barth understands concretely as the request for

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<sup>249</sup> *CD* II/2, 546 (*KD* II/2, 606).

<sup>250</sup> *CD* II/2, 510 (*KD* II/2, 565).

<sup>251</sup> *CD* II/2, 94-144 (*KD* II/2, 101-57).

<sup>252</sup> *CD* II/2, 145-9 (*KD* II/2, 157-214).

<sup>253</sup> *CD* II/2, 168 (*KD* II/2, 184).

<sup>254</sup> *CD* II/2, 34 (*KD* II/2, 35).

<sup>255</sup> *CD* II/2, 313-18 (*KD* II/2, 344-46).

<sup>256</sup> *CD* II/2, 511 (*KD* II/2, 567).

obedience.<sup>257</sup> The command is addressed to humanity as a specific kind of address of the divine Word. This is a key concept in understanding God's self-giving: that the Word who was God and was with God, and became flesh and dwelt among us, *is* Jesus Christ (John 1:1-14). In the address of the divine Word God deals with humanity. In the light of what we have already seen, the Command as a form of spoken Word addressed to humanity is *the form* of God's electing – that is to say that, in hearing the Command, human beings are conscious of that they are elect, determined, and claimed for covenant partnership. This consciousness shapes and informs the human agent and gives the believer a Christian perspective from which to view themselves, the world around, and the various ethical quandaries in which they may be caught up.<sup>258</sup> It is the key to the question of their existence, and goodness of their conduct.<sup>259</sup> Human beings act well if they act as obedient hearers of the Command, as those confronted by the Word, as those who conform to God's commanding-claim in fellowship with Christ, and submit to their divine determination in Christ.

Barth has reversed the normal pattern of asking ethical questions: instead of a person asking the question 'What shall I do?' in a particular situation, she is herself questioned by God who claims her for his own.<sup>260</sup> She is made accountable (*Verantwortlich*) to the electing God through his Command<sup>261</sup> and to her is put the question of her willingness to satisfy the claim. The Command of God is therefore the basis of Barth's account of responsible human action:

The core of the matter is that God gives His Command, that He gives Himself to be our Commander. God's Command, God Himself, gives Himself to be known. And as He does so, He is heard. Man is made responsible [*Verantwortlich*]. He is brought into that confrontation and fellowship with Jesus Christ.<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> CD II/2, 546 (KD II/2, 607). It is significant that it is a *request* for obedience: God's claiming of humanity is satisfied neither by obedience nor disobedience, it is self-satisfying in as much as the claim qualifies human existence in and of itself. Failure to adhere to the request does not alter the divine determination of humanity. See CD II/2, 631-32 (KD II/2, 701-02).

<sup>258</sup> Barth only makes small mention of conscience and 'heightened self-consciousness' in this regard, but the significance of the comment remains an underlying feature of his account of responsibility, as we shall see. CD II/2, 667-69 (KD II/2, 744-45).

<sup>259</sup> 'Goodness' here connotes obedience to the command in as much as it connotes God-like behaviour. See CD II/2, 546-7 (KD II/2, 608)

<sup>260</sup> CD II/2, 545-6 (KD II/2, 606).

<sup>261</sup> CD II/2, 543 (KD II/2, 603).

<sup>262</sup> CD II/2, 548 (KD II/2, 609).

That is not to say that the question ‘What shall I do?’ is not one that Christian ethics asks.<sup>263</sup> Instead it is to re-orientate human attitudes toward moral reflection by contextualising humanity: the Command of God is addressed to human beings in a threefold determination as creatures, as reconciled sinners, and as those awaiting redemption – all of which is known only after the actualization of this determination in Jesus Christ. As such, the command of God is ultimately graced: it comes only by the enactment of God’s gracious desire to live in covenant partnership with the humans he has created, reconciled, and will redeem. Drawing here on the threefold structure of the *Ethics* lectures, Barth orders the rest of the *Church Dogmatics* according to these (again logical but not ontological) distinctions, putting the question of the divine command at the end of each. What is significant for the present investigation is the shape and content of human responsibility as the key aspect of ethics in relation to the Doctrine of God, as we have already outlined it.

### **3.3 Responsibility and the Doctrine of God**

Like his two-natures Christology rooted in the Chalcedonian Definition, Barth speaks of responsibility in two natures: divine and human, more particularly the responsibility of God and the responsibility of human beings. This is no insignificant point: Barth’s Christocentrism allows him to develop a mutual responsibility that fills out his claim that the covenant theology has at its heart divine human partnership. His actualism is central to this in two ways. First, Christ is the enactment of divine responsibility: God is as he acts, and the principal place where human beings see God in action is in Jesus Christ. Second Jesus is also the true liberated human being enacted before God. It is in the midst of the second point that human responsibility as the organising principle of human agency is to be found: Christ enacts true humanity, and human beings are called and permitted to live in the fullness of humanity as God intends. Since responsibility is a species of action our understanding of divine and human responsibility begins in the place where divine action is actualised and human agency is permitted. This makes for a heavily Christocentric and actualised responsibility.

#### **3.3.1 Divine Responsibility**

Much of this material is related to the way in which God acts for his creatures in Jesus Christ, in covenant election. As a feature of Barth’s Christological actualism, there are two

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<sup>263</sup> Though it is worth noting here that Barth opts for a communal approach asking, ‘What ought we to do?’ CD II/2, 649 (*KD* II/2, 722).

notable aspects of divine responsibility: the first concerns the human *origin* and the second the human *telos*.<sup>264</sup> The former is summed up in the eternal decision of God to be *for* us in Christ, and the reality of our existence governed by this covenant decision. In eternity God makes himself responsible for humanity, providing a context for this in creation. God is therefore prospectively and retrospectively responsible for creation – it exists because of his prior decision, it came about at the command of his word, and it belongs to him. The reality which God accords his creatures is derivative of his absolute divine reality. Compared with human responsibility, the implications of God’s responsibility are much more forensic: divine responsibility is the decision and enactment of the divine will for covenant partnership. Barth writes, “we must insist upon the responsibility which God shouldered when he created man and permitted the fall of man...for what God required of himself on man’s behalf is infinitely greater than what he required of man.”<sup>265</sup> As experienced by human beings, divine responsibility is the continuation of true human existence: it is the gracious enactment of human orientation towards God, and the overturning of the impossible demand to be ‘knowers’ of the divine person and will aside from grace, with the divine *assumption* of responsibility for this knowledge on behalf of humanity in the doctrine of revelation.<sup>266</sup> In giving himself to be known and loved in Jesus Christ, the human struggle to find God and to seek out the divine will amidst many viable options is over, and so the ethical task is redirected from that of the pursuit of the highest good to the outworking of the covenant relationship.

This helps us to understand God’s responsibility for the human *telos*: Barth’s Christology suggests that God assumes responsibility for the answer to the question of human obedience in the man Jesus, and in the union of the divine and human in him establishes once and for all the goal of covenant partnership. In short the effect is that human action in the present does not affect human destiny: ‘[God] Himself assumes responsibility for man’s temporal and eternal future.’<sup>267</sup> We noted earlier that for some this entails God ‘taking over’ from human beings and therefore removing *all* traces of human agency – rendering the actions of the present worthless by removing post-temporal

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<sup>264</sup> For example, “Jesus is the presupposition and epitome of creation and redemption” *CD* II/2, 549 (*KD* II/2, 610).

<sup>265</sup> *CD* II/2, 166 (*KD* II/2, 181).

<sup>266</sup> For example *CD* II/2, 85 (*KD* II/2, 92).

<sup>267</sup> *CD* II/2, 622 (*KD* II/2, 692).

consequences: there is no eternal judgement, and no hell for the reprobate.<sup>268</sup> But since for Barth both the elect and the reprobate are found in Christ<sup>269</sup>, there is a universal human vocation to conform to the divine determination, without fear. It could be viewed positively or negatively: those who have understood it negatively have usually done so because it makes the process of ethical reflection worthless by divesting moral decisions and actions of eternal retrospective responsibility, or because it removes creativity from the decision process and renders all *good* human actions a question of obedience to the prescriptive divine will, making human responsibility equal conformity.<sup>270</sup> Those who see it positively have understood the, sometimes implicit, call that Barth issues to take theology, in particular Christology, seriously<sup>271</sup> and allow it to influence our thinking about ethics. Theological reflection of this kind can empower Christian ethics by introducing a framework in which to think *Christianly* and creatively about moral problems. The answers to the ethical questions of the present are currently open-ended: the calling of human beings is to ‘display the image of God’ in each moment, to conform to Jesus Christ, the image of the Father.<sup>272</sup> This means that creative thinking about and continual listening for the divine command is integral to ethical reflection for the Christian and something that is integral to the shape of *human* responsibility. To see God’s actions in Christ as opposition to human agency overemphasises the restrictive elements and subsequently misinterprets Barth’s negativity towards unbounded human freedom. Barth means to reject the false notion that human beings are self-determining, seeing, instead, a liberating element, humanly speaking, to the responsibility God assumes for us. It is this that is enshrined in the notion of divine command we encountered earlier: the content of the command is the call to live in the divine determination, to let one’s life be ordered and orientated according to the covenant.

### 3.3.2 Human Responsibility

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<sup>268</sup> Here, the existence of hell is a key aspect of human freedom, and therefore agency. George Hunsinger nods at this when he argues that, in parts of the Christian tradition, hell is penalty for sin – a form of retribution, and (retrospective) responsibility. See ‘Hellfire and damnation: four ancient and modern views’ in George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000) esp. 233-34

<sup>269</sup> CD II/2, 539 (KD II/2, 599).

<sup>270</sup> See William Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics...*, Ch. 1. We should also note that this was exactly the opposite of Kant’s definition of responsibility, which emphasised the need for critical reflection and application of reason rather than blind conformity. Barth’s refutation of this consists in his reckoning that the demanded action, whatever it may be, is demanded in Christ, and is *ipso facto* a human action worthy of our conformity: CD II/2, 577 (KD II/2, 641).

<sup>271</sup> See for example the Introduction to Matheny, *Dogmatics and Ethics...*

<sup>272</sup> CD II/2, 577-78 (KD II/2, 642).

If we treat the above in terms of moral reality, then what we have seen in Jesus Christ is the establishment of that reality in the covenant. But precisely because it is Christologically grounded, we are also in the realm of human agency, and of responsibility by virtue of God's determination of human beings in Christ. Barth is clear that God makes humans responsible agents, anticipating some kind of freely chosen action as *response* to his own. The image here could be that of a divine-human dialogue, where human responsibility is a complementary component of covenant-partnership. Barth writes,

The matter of theological ethics is the responsibility [*Verantwortung*] which God has assumed for us in the fact that He has made us accountable [*Verantwortung*] through His command<sup>273</sup>

Both parties are accorded responsible agency. Though, as the English translators suggest in rendering creaturely agency 'accountability', human responsibility comes logically after divine responsibility. It is not the case that Barth simply says that in Jesus Christ right human action has been performed without also saying that this God then submits humanity to a requirement.<sup>274</sup> Neither obedience nor disobedience affects this: the possibility of either response only confirms that God has claimed and determined human beings. It is therefore through conformity to what God has determined for us in Christ that human beings are freed to live the reality of human existence.

As a divinely imparted gift, human responsibility is enacted in two different ways – before God, and before others. Human beings are called to responsible actions by free decision: 'It is in the use of our freedom that we give an account of how we stand in the sight of God...in the use of our freedom we have to embody God's righteous judgement upon us.'<sup>275</sup> Responsibility-to-God as the first order of responsible human action is macro-responsibility, orientating the whole of human existence toward its divine origin – giving an account of our standing. In the case of Christian ethics it negotiates two equal and opposite existential fallacies that are easily arguable. The first fallacy is any suggestion that human beings can legitimately judge for themselves what is right and wrong without consideration for the will of God, as if there were no God at all. It would be at least possible that this could happen if God had not decided in eternity for election and covenant, and had God not issued His command in Christ. But this is not the case: God has done those things. Nor

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<sup>273</sup> CD II/2, 543 (KD II/2, 603).

<sup>274</sup> CD II/2, 631-2 (KD II/2, 701).

<sup>275</sup> CD II/2, 634 (KD II/2, 704).

does it mean that the Church is safe from this fallacy: it might include a way of reading Scripture that privileges prescriptive sections of the Bible as easily graspable accounts of the divine will in such a way that does not require an encounter with the divine person. However conceived, Barth calls this fallacy arrogance. The second fallacy is a kind of self-deception that suggests that the sovereignty of God's decision is such, and the overarching account of Christ's humanity is such, that one need not be concerned with good conduct – with ethics – because the determination of an individual life has been pre-decided. This kind of fatalism is an easily warped version of traditional double predestination. Good conduct and bad conduct sit equally under this determination, so knowing that they cannot change God's judgement, human beings use this as an excuse not to act at all or not to be concerned for the rightness of acts committed. Barth calls this false-humility, since it plays on the apparent weakness of human beings in the face of the divine decision but is really a manipulation of the truth that seemingly permits bad conduct, and excuses humanity from ethical reflection. Between these two opposite but equally false accounts of human agency, Barth posits responsible human action. This is governed by covenant theology, and rests on an awareness of one's cosmic location, engendering

the sense of *responsibility* of those who 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 [and] to keep Him before their mind's eye...<sup>276</sup>

The concept of responsibility encapsulates, for Barth, both the need to know that we are creatures, and children of God, and also the gift of freedom and agency in the Christian life, orientated toward our divine origin and goal. That is not to say, however, that only those who are conscious of God are responsible agents. This could be a trap into which William Schweiker might fall when he argues that Barth's understanding of human responsibility is a 'dialogical theory'<sup>277</sup> in which one becomes a responsible agent only in encounter with another. It is the nature of our response to this 'other' that makes us responsible people, and so therefore only *after* encounter can we be truly responsible beings.<sup>278</sup> Schweiker makes responsibility an *a posteriori* of the divine-human encounter. Commenting on Barth's

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<sup>276</sup> CD II/2, 636 (KD II/2, 707).

<sup>277</sup> Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics...*, 94

<sup>278</sup> Schweiker is essentially arguing along Niebuhr lines here. See Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self...*

understanding of divine command ethics, he implies that *only* as God is *encountered* are human beings made responsible agents:

Karl Barth's divine command ethics is one of the most radical expressions of responsibility ethics centred on encountering the other. He insisted...that the other, God, reveals himself and encounters self as commander...[and] defines responsibility in terms of an obedient answer to the Command of God.<sup>279</sup>

Contrary to this, I suggest that though it may be the case that human beings *know themselves* as responsible agents as they encounter God, it is not ontologically the case that human beings *become* responsible only after this encounter. For Barth, responsibility is the state of existence for all humanity: it is the 'most exact definition of the human situation in the face of the absolute transcendence of the divine judgement.' It is our creaturely situation, such that our actions are "an actualization of responsibility."<sup>280</sup> The distinction between Schweiker's Barth and my understanding of Barth here is that, in my reading, divine *encounter* reveals the fact of universal human responsibility but does not establish it. It has been established in Jesus Christ, by virtue of the divine responsibility already undertaken. We can see this point demonstrated with regard to Barth's opposition to natural theology, where he argues that a person's attempt to know God other than by revelation actually means that 'his responsibility before his God remains completely hidden.'<sup>281</sup> That is not to say that it does not exist, but to say that the person in question is unaware of it: she has blinded herself to the reality of the human situation in which she has a share. Humans are responsible agents by virtue of Christ's universal humanity: this is true of both the Christian and the non-Christian, as the following quote illustrates:

We live in responsibility, which means that our being and willing, what we do and what we do not do, is a continuous answer to the Word of God spoken to us as Command...Man does not belong to himself....He is subjected to the divine will, Word, and Command, and called to realize the true purpose of his existence as covenant-partner with God...This is the essence of responsibility...Christian ethics

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<sup>279</sup> Schweiker, *Responsibility and ethics...*, 95-98

<sup>280</sup> *CD II/2*, 641-42 (*KD II/2*, 713-14)

<sup>281</sup> *CD II/1*, 92 (*KD II/1*, 101).

will see every man as responsible and caught up in the dreadful act of responsibility.<sup>282</sup>

All human beings live and act in responsibility before God, knowingly or unknowingly, but those who are Christians are more aware of the calling because they are sensitive to the subjective way in which the command is heard: conscious that Jesus Christ speaks definitely and concretely. The command is peculiar to everyone – ‘[God’s] command applies to us all’ but is received as ‘our personal question...addressed to us personally.’<sup>283</sup> So what of those who do not hear? One answer is that only those who hear are the elect, but this is not Barth’s answer. He nuances it slightly saying that the one who listens is the one who hears. That is to say that there is in the message of Jesus Christ<sup>284</sup> an invitation to, and enabling of, responsible human action addressed to each person, not ‘as the specimen of a natural or historical collective...but as this particular man, i.e. this one beloved by God and therefore a responsible partner in the divine covenant.’<sup>285</sup> This person knows herself as covenant partner as she hears covenant-election as command, and enacts that partnership in obedience to the divine determination, as she is self-consciously aware of her part in the covenant-partnership.<sup>286</sup> Barth goes on, ‘We are not responsible to an idea...[but to] the concrete reality of the covenant between God and man, in the person and work and lordship of Jesus Christ.’<sup>287</sup>

On the issue of the content of particular momentary commands, Barth is silent. He affirms that God speaks and argues that individuals receive the divine command as ‘concrete and specific orders’<sup>288</sup>, of which stories of divine encounter and command in the Bible are indicative.<sup>289</sup> But, Barth recognizes, for many people the sense of confrontation by the divine command is ‘rare and superficial’. This is because, he argues, for the most part people do not

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<sup>282</sup> CD II/2, 641 (KD II/2, 713). This is very different from moral responsibility according to, for example, Georg Hegel, who argues that human beings are responsible only for what is intended in their actions. Hegel would object therefore to Barth’s *a priori* universal human responsibility. See Wilhelm Hegel, *Elements of the philosophy of the right* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991); Also Mark Alznauer, ‘Hegel on legal and moral responsibility’ in *Inquiry*, 51.4 (2008) pp. 365-89.

<sup>283</sup> CD II/2, 654-55 (KD II/2, 729).

<sup>284</sup> ‘the salvation accomplished and prepared for us by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ...’ CD II/2, 645 (KD II/2, 718).

<sup>285</sup> CD II/2:655 (KD II/2, 729).

<sup>286</sup> CD II/2:667-68 (KD II/2, 744).

<sup>287</sup> CD II/2:660 (KD II/2, 736).

<sup>288</sup> CD II/2:675 (KD II/2, 753).

<sup>289</sup> CD II/2:677-78 (KD II/2, 755).

live as though the Bible were ‘the normative Word of God.’<sup>290</sup> In so doing they do not allow themselves to be shaped by the covenant story. To do so would be an event of confrontation, and an act of orientation. Barth argues that being reminded of the covenant-story reminds us of our responsibility before God:

If we realise again that God’s Son is made sin for us...if we listen anew to the selfsame Son of God speaking for us...We are made responsible as we have heard the voice of the risen Lord, and it is our responsibility to continue to hear this voice.<sup>291</sup>

Much of what I have said above can seem quite subjective – it relies heavily on a personal encounter with God in order to know one’s own status before God, and it relies on the honing of one’s conscience and self-consciousness for the reception of the divine command. To leave it at that, however, would be a misleading representation of Barth’s thought on the subject. Barth’s account is about much more than the subjective relationship of the ‘I’ with God: it also impinges upon human beings as they relate to one another. Barth reckons with these elements of responsibility as he tackles political responsibility [*politischer Verantwortlichkeit*] within the circumference of the goodness of the divine command (§38.3). The *polites* to which he refers is the interrelation of human beings in community with each other, and with God.

The section is under-girded by a commentary on Romans 12-15, through which Barth argues that part of the universal responsibility of humanity before God is revealed in the political responsibility humans have to one another.<sup>292</sup> That is to say, the former so conditions the latter, that the latter can become a witness to the former. It is contextually significant that Barth should choose to address political responsibility here, given the Nazi shadow hanging over the European landscape in 1942. His message was universally appropriate – that political responsibility means the fulfilment of a divinely given obligation for human beings to love one another, a clearly implicit critique of the German regime, and an appeal to let one’s life accord with the reality of its determination. It is also an ecclesially specific charge, for it is the church that is most aware of the divine-human covenant-partnership, and most aware of the divine determination of humanity with regard to God and one another. So it is the Church that is most conscious of its political responsibility,

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<sup>290</sup> CD II/2, 708 (KD II/2, 790).

<sup>291</sup> CD II/2, 761 (KD II/2, 851).

<sup>292</sup> CD II/2, 714 (KD II/2, 797).

acting ‘not out of fear, but because it knows the will of God.’<sup>293</sup> It is clear that for Barth, the responsibility humans have before God informs and shapes the responsibility they have before one another. In what follows I will delineate the key points in Barth’s explanation of the goodness of the command as it sheds light on his account of political responsibility.

The goodness of the command is expressed in three terms: right; friendly; wholesome. All of these belong together, ‘if we subtract two, or even one, of the three, we are not speaking truly or seriously of goodness.’<sup>294</sup> This definition is founded upon divine action for humanity in Jesus Christ, and so by the command of God which is the active form of election. God loves what is right, he is friendly towards us in Christ, and effects what is wholesome as he returns humanity to its proper created determination. Human responsibility, as the act of correspondence to this determination, involves regard for the goodness of God’s will, and so for the right, the friendly, and the wholesome. With regard to political responsibility, Barth sees in Paul a call for active political involvement that is all of these things, existing to promote what is right and wholesome out of friendly regard for, and for the good of, the state:

...Christians should see and fulfil their whole obligation by loving one another, that in reciprocal love they are to build up and maintain the Church and so fulfil the whole Law, thus proving themselves to the world, and accepting their basic responsibility to the divinely instituted order of the state...<sup>295</sup>

Granted, the first level of responsibility is still to God – the state is *divinely* instituted – but the second level of responsibility for Christians is to the *order* of the state. It is because of the divine institution that the Christians are aware of their responsibility for its order. The Church affirms the rightness of the state’s existence, as a given by God, and it does so in friendly speech –in affirmation and rebuke – in order to seek the wholesomeness of our common life together as co-partners with one another, and partners with God, in the covenant. Barth draws comparisons with Paul’s account of the strong and the weak (Rom. 14-15), implying that both instances have their ‘basis in the fact that Christ is the Lord of the living and the dead’ and that such lordship leads to an ordering of things in which humans are responsible to each other – learning the ‘law of love’ for each other, which is grounded in Christ. As in Jesus Christ all are accepted by virtue of his responsible action, so there

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<sup>293</sup> CD II/2, 714 (KD II/2, 797).

<sup>294</sup> CD II/2, 708-09 (KD II/2, 791).

<sup>295</sup> CD II/2, 714 (KD II/2, 797).

must be a reciprocal act of responsibility in the Church for those beyond its borders. Part of this responsibility involves the Church in worship and witness: the refusal to conform to this world, asking in opposition to it, ‘what is the will of God?’ and the pointing, by its common life, to the reality of creaturely existence in covenant-partnership.

But the Church does not do this from a distinct ontological position in relation to other human beings: rather Barth affirms the fellowship of all humanity before God. Those who know themselves to be responsible, the Church, know themselves actually to be in common (universal) responsibility, and therefore mutual trust and living fellowship with each other before God. We have already encountered this in the *Ethics* lectures. It changes therefore the way we view the ‘other’, acknowledging in them the fellowship we have with Jesus, who, as the concrete and responsible human being before God, encompasses all human acts of responsibility. This Barth calls an inward brotherly love:

...the affectionateness with which we seek neither ourselves nor others but the common Lord in brotherhood with others, gladly seeing in our brother, although without surrendering our own freedom and responsibility, the representative of our eldest Brother, and therefore the common Father, and thus yielding him the preference and honour.<sup>296</sup>

There is a profound strength and gentleness to Barth’s account of mutual human responsibility here: the strength is in the Church’s witness to the responsibility human beings have to God, and because of that to one another, which can involve both challenge and rebuke, and a re-orientating of our human interaction; the gentleness comes in the affection with which Barth calls us to relate to fellow human beings, applying the metaphor of brotherhood and family.<sup>297</sup> What Barth has done is to reduce political responsibility and Christian responsibility to a common factor in Jesus Christ, thus “understanding Christian responsibility in itself and as such as political, and political as Christian.”<sup>298</sup> The way of the Christian in the world is the way of Christ. The effect is to emphasize the point that human beings exist in community and so individual responsibility before God involves an outworking in common-responsibility to others, with the former shaping and influencing the latter. Once again Christology underpins responsibility.

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<sup>296</sup> *CD* II/2, 719 (*KD* II/2, 803).

<sup>297</sup> Though the language is the same, the application is very different from that of, for example, Adolf von Harnack whose characterization of Christianity as the brotherhood of humanity failed, in Barth’s eyes, to be sufficiently theological.

<sup>298</sup> *CD* II/2, 731 (*KD* II/2, 817).

### 3.4 Summary and Conclusion

By way of a summary of human responsibility in the context of the doctrine of God, I want to highlight several key points that will help with the interpretation of future volumes of the *Dogmatics*:

First, Barth understands all human responsibility within the reality of the covenant-partnership established in Christ. With this in mind, much of what we have seen in this chapter is orientation or conceptual location: it allows Barth to place human responsibility firmly within the covenant, and therefore to accord human action a reality of its own. Barth believes, contrary to many of the ways he has been interpreted, that human action is meaningful within the theological meta-narrative. Indeed, meaningful human action is *only* determined within that framework – it is the only place where agency is established, and the human being is free to live in the responsibility of her creaturely determination. It is against this determination, therefore, that all human actions, whether in obedience or disobedience, are acts of responsibility – they are indicative of a person's relation to God, but not determinative of their standing within the covenant. The primary calling of human agents, whether intentionally Christian or not, is to reckon with the God of Jesus Christ as the origin and end of humanity and so to conform to that existential matrix – i.e. to live within the boundaries of reality. In this way, Barth makes the ethics of responsibility a foundational question of human existence.

Secondly, Barth's account of covenant really is one of divine-human partnership. We have seen that this is primarily enacted in Christ – thus rendering the fate of all humanity secure in God – but in the subsequent bestowal of responsibility within this Christ paradigm, human agents are made peculiarly responsible. This responsibility can be summed up broadly as the invitation to conform to the proper determination of human existence, to cease warring with God and to partner God in the life of the covenant: its more particular elements are part of the command of God as 'I' hear it. God makes himself responsible to humanity as he binds himself to the covenant, to being God for us. Barth's actualism enacts this point, as God fulfils his covenant determination in Christ. In the humanity of Jesus, God maintains his responsibility for human beings – in the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection the covenant-story is told, and human *telos* is fulfilled: God has made himself responsible for the whole of human existence. The mutuality of this account should not be over-emphasised since God is still the Lord of the covenant. Nonetheless, Barth does point to a paradigm of divine responsibility, in which human beings are also called to be responsible, and in which each requires the action of the other.

Thirdly, Barth's covenant responsibility gives Christian ethics a theological perspective from which to look at, and interpret, the reality of the world around. The covenant narrative provides a framework that delineates the relationships between God and creation, and between human beings. It provides the meta-ethical context for the living of human life. Again, thinking and acting in conformity to the divine determination is important but it is not so prescriptively given that all human agency is removed. The concept of human responsibility Barth deploys involves a great deal of human creativity to think and act in the midst of the flow of covenant narrative, hence Barth's point about the human conscience being shaped and informed by our self-conscious awareness of our part in it. From this vista, human beings recognize that our lives are inexorably connected to the life of Jesus Christ, and this recognition allows the conscience to hear and know the Command of God when it comes.

Fourthly, human responsibility before God has a corollary form in the responsibility humans bear to one another under the law, the latter mirroring and testifying to the former. Barth's account of human action opposes any kind of individualistic fideism in favour of the common responsibility of the community. His account of political responsibility, with its emphasis on the fellowship of humanity before God, is grounded in the co-partnership of all humans in covenant-partnership with God. This brings with it a whole new way of relating to other people – of being responsible to them, at a secondary level, as we would be responsible to God in Christ.

## Chapter 4

### Responsibility in the Special Ethics of *Church Dogmatics* III/4

In this chapter I turn to the next sphere of ethics in the *Dogmatics*, and argue that here Barth discusses human responsibility in terms of particular concrete activities. These acts orientate the agent in relation to God, others, and self, and in so doing draw on the theological description of human responsibility discussed in the previous chapter. Throughout this chapter I signpost the ways in which the discussion of responsibility in the special ethics of *CD* III/4 relates directly to the discussion in the ethics of *CD* II/2.

#### 4.1 Introduction

The *leitmotiv* of *CD* III/4 is freedom.<sup>299</sup> Barth's discussion of freedom focuses on the concrete and particular moments of human acting, informing us about the kind of person the responsible agent will be. He considers what responsible human agency, sanctified and freed by the grace of God, might look like in reality. Various accounts of freedom play prominent roles in philosophical and theological accounts of human responsibility, and these are mostly couched within a theological doctrine of sanctification. This fact is no less true for Barth. What is new is the particular dynamic Barth creates between freedom and responsibility. To be clear about the significance of the practice of responsibility here I shall begin by outlining Barth's conceptual understanding in § 52 "Ethics as a Task of the Doctrine of Creation", clearing the way for a close reading of human responsibility in §§ 53-56. This opens up space in the following chapter for exploration of the relationship between the substantive account and the practice of responsibility in which their interrelation is finally clarified, and the interpretative function of each for the other is explored.

If it is the case that, in fulfilment of my initial projection in chapter 2, the practical concerns of *CD* III/4 fit broadly, *mutatis mutandis*, the idea that the practice of responsibility is the embedding in lived-life of the substantive account of responsibility, then it will also confirm one of the suggestions with which I introduced this study: that the specifically ethical sections of the *Dogmatics* ought to be read together within an appropriate hermeneutical framework because in so doing Barth's notion of human responsibility can be shown to be coherent and ethically valuable.

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<sup>299</sup> W.A. Whitehouse argues that the introduction of a detailed discussion of freedom is what distinguishes Barth from other Protestant ethics of the twentieth century. See his, "The Command of God the Creator," in *The Authority of Grace: Essays in Response to Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981), 54.

## 4.2 Freedom and Responsibility

Barth introduces § 52 with the problem of the goodness of human conduct. He inquires about the goodness of the actions of a person who is not God, when the Christian tradition acknowledges that God alone is good (Mark 10:18). Barth's short answer, "that man's action is good in so far as it is sanctified by the Word of God which as such is the command of God"<sup>300</sup>, is unpacked throughout this part-volume. "Sanctified" human action is commanded human action. This statement suggests that the onus of sanctification rests with God, but it must be held in tension with Barth's emphasis on human obedience: "the hearing and obeying which proceeds from and by the Word of God is man's sanctification. Ethics has to understand the Word of God as the fullness, measure and source of his sanctification." The command does sanctify, and therefore make good, but the human agent must also of herself freely act in accordance with the commanding Word.

The argument of § 36-39 is partly repeated here: the command of God is liberating.<sup>301</sup> It is the means by which humans are sanctified, set free for God and humanized, and so free to be the moral agents they are intended to be by divine determination. Barth writes,

the command is God's judgement upon him; the judgement of His grace by which man is at once condemned and acquitted and thus becomes free for eternal life. This freeing of man for eternal life by God's judging grace is the final goal, the real work and therefore the original purpose of the command of God. It is man's sanctification. Good human action is action set free by the command of God.<sup>302</sup>

Barth understands his conceptual consideration of the relationship between the command, sanctification, and human freedom leading to concrete consideration of the actuality of human activity in a natural progression from the concerns of general ethics (as I shall argue the substantive account of human responsibility) to the concrete moments of human action (in the practice of responsibility). He writes:

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<sup>300</sup> *CD III/4*, 4.

<sup>301</sup> *CD II/2*, 634. Barth is picking up themes found in *CD II/2* § 36 regarding the difficulty of reckoning with human sanctification as "effected by the action of God in His command" seemingly without the involvement of active human agents. The task of § 36 was to explore how it is so in Barth's mapping of the ethical field and in so doing to outline the proper place of responsible human agency in acceptance of the command.

<sup>302</sup> *CD III/4*, 5.

if then the outworking and shaping of man's sanctification by the command of God in man's real action is a problem of ethics, this necessarily means that ethics becomes concrete, particular, or special ethics...it now follows the work of grace and the Word and command of God into the distinctive lowlands of real human action and therefore into the sphere of concrete human volition, decision, action, and abstention.<sup>303</sup>

An important feature of the turn to the concrete is the refinement of Barth's critique of "systematic casuistry" and his perception of its claim to deliver universal ethical insight.<sup>304</sup> Barth distinguishes between the *discourse* of systematic casuistry and the deliberative *mechanism* of practical casuistry. The processes of the latter are appropriate to deliberation in the midst of encounter with the divine command, and are considered good practice for the responsible human agent. But its systematic counterpart is considered prescriptive of the content of the Command.

Barth's approach addresses concreteness and particularity head-on by considering the imperatival value of the context in which a person must be responsible. Though proponents of casuistry are often critical of Barth's ethics for its lack of concreteness, Barth's counter-critique is that systematic casuistry makes little of the particularity of ethical situations instead emphasising the universality of the divine will, i.e. the texture of the moment lends nothing to our understanding of the command - though it may affect its application. Universal laws, by their very universality, detract from the absolute particularity of each moment thus distorting our understanding of what is required. For Barth it implies a lack of confidence in the Holy Spirit as moral guide.<sup>305</sup> The command and will of God is regarded as prescribed legal text: scripture, natural law, and tradition supply the elements of our understanding of the divine will's content - though with various taxonomies operative amongst those elements in different shades of the tradition. Barth's problem is that this makes a distinction between the actuality of an ethical situation and the form and content of the divine command. The situation itself does not have an imperatival texture, i.e. it does not contain the command. Thus Barth cannot speak of the *command* as being truly concrete from a casuistic perspective, regardless of the particularity of the situation to which it is applied.

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<sup>303</sup> CD III/4, 6.

<sup>304</sup> Nigel Biggar queries any sense in which casuistic ethics claims absolute rights with regard to ethical deliberation. See his "A Case for Casuistry in the Church," *Modern Theology* 6, no. 1 (1989): 29-51; "Moral Reason in History: An Essay in Defence of Dialectical Casuistry," in *Issues in Faith and History* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1989).

<sup>305</sup> CD III/4, 7.

Practical casuistry on the other hand locates the commanded will of God in and through the particulars of the concrete situation, recognizing that the command for that situation is particular to it. The job of the responsible human is to interpret and understand the situation as the particular and concrete command, and in so doing agree to act accordingly (i.e. responsibly). Only in this can the responsible human agent be engaged in properly concrete and particular action.

Barth offers three theological rebuttals of systematic casuistry. Firstly, it contradicts God's grace and makes the human agent lord instead of God - claiming to know the command and will of God aside from practical interaction with God. It does so because, for example, practitioners of casuistic ethics need not pray as part of ethical deliberation: i.e. there is no necessity for dynamic interaction with God whose will it is that such people claim to know. Secondly, systematic casuistry abstracts the command and will of God as it reifies it thus making it a rule or principle waiting for application rather than the living Word of the living God made known in its particularity. Thirdly, and most importantly for what Barth will say about human agency and responsibility, systematic casuistry contributes to the destruction of proper human freedom. Barth distinguishes between freedom as individualistic and self-concerned "choice, preference, or selection"<sup>306</sup> and what he calls the human being's "real freedom". This is the actual voluntary freedom of the creature to be governed by the divine Word – to be obedient – in the actual concrete and particular circumstances of her life and as such discover her proper creatureliness. For Barth, to talk about freedom means to speak of concrete acts of obedience and responsibility.

Freedom and obedience here mean the voluntary confession of God and the offering of oneself to God in the particularity of one's life situations, continually and momentarily, and in so doing the proper realisation of oneself as creature and not Creator; the fulfilment of one's created determination. We have seen something of this in the Muenster/Bonn cycle already. Casuistic ethics, Barth charges, "conceals...direct responsibility" from the creature, which is the proper characteristic of his free conduct before God. In saying this he repeats the charge levelled against natural theology in *CD II/1*. From this we can conclude that Barth regards casuistic ethics as the ethical manifestation of the natural theology, and therefore it is fundamentally theologically flawed.

Barth's concern for concreteness and particularity in free and responsible activity is not to argue against the substantive account of responsibility given in *CD II/2* but to see particularity as corollary of it. The human creature only knows herself as such in the concrete and particular moment of knowing it. The discourse of special ethics does not

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<sup>306</sup> *CD III/4*, 13.

promise the content of the divine command but instead is a “formed reference” to the circumstances in which the command will be heard and its content responsibly enacted.

“Formed reference” is a frequently used term in the introductory paragraph and expressed in various ways throughout the part-volume. “Form” indicates concreteness of our creaturely reality in which the command is heard - grounded in a concrete situation and event. It is opposed to a “formless reference”<sup>307</sup>, i.e. one abstracted from particularity and concerned only with generalities. A formed reference allows the discourse of special ethics to serve as “preparational instruction” for the responsible Christian, what Barth also calls “training in Christianity”<sup>308</sup>, enabling the concrete practice of responsibility. It is because special ethics is instruction and training that the theological mapping of the ethical field is essential in *CD* II/2. Barth can construct formed references to the divine command, and in so doing prepare Christians to hear the command of God, because of a thorough-going Christology. Again, we encountered this in the previous chapter.

### 4.3 Responsibility in Respect of God, § 53

Matthew Rose comments regarding this section that “what is remarkable about Barth’s account of our freedom for God...is his strong argument that the most fundamental of human activities are in some sense *liturgical*.”<sup>309</sup> In using this term Rose is arguing that the first concrete activities Barth cites – observation of the Holy Day<sup>310</sup>, confession, and prayer – are those worshipful acts that are “appropriate to human beings by virtue of the fact that they are human” and as such those actions which consummate our humanity.<sup>311</sup> In considering responsibility in respect of God, we turn now to consider the practice of responsibility in those things which make us fundamentally and fully human<sup>312</sup> from which all other concrete forms of the practice of responsibility take their cue and in which humanity is appropriately orientated in relation to God and therefore itself.

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<sup>307</sup> *CD* III/4, 18.

<sup>308</sup> *CD* III/4, 3.

<sup>309</sup> Rose, *God, Metaphysics, and Morals*, 149.

<sup>310</sup> Barth does not refer to Sunday, *Sonntag*, or Saturday, *Samstag*, in this regard though certainly the Sabbath idea is in his mind when he references the Decalogue. He does not use language of Sabbath, *Sabbat*, much at all, though in several places the English translators have opted to translate the more colourful language of festival and celebration that Barth does use – *Feiertag* – as Sabbath. In modern German, *Feiertag* is commonly translated as ‘Bank Holiday’ but literally means ‘celebration day’. In parts of the English edition, including the section title, it is given as ‘Holy Day’, and for ease this is how I translate it throughout, noting the places where I have changed the quirks of the English edition.

<sup>311</sup> Rose, *God, Metaphysics, and Morals*, 149.

<sup>312</sup> What Barth called “humanizing actions” in the Muenster/Bonn cycle: *Ethics*, 250 (*Ethik* I, 424).

Barth introduces this paragraph by reminding his readers that “it is the will of God the Creator that man as His creature should be responsible before Him.” He extends this description by saying that,

To be a man means to be caught up in responsibility before God. This responsibility implies man’s acknowledgement that God his Creator is in the right in all He does – in His governance and judgement as well as in His gentleness and goodness, and His silence as well as in His speaking, in His anger as well as in His love; and it means that he may entrust himself wholly to God and render obedience to Him alone.<sup>313</sup>

But in reiterating this point about the cosmic standing of human creatures before God, something already discussed in *CD II/2* as I have shown in the previous chapter, Barth is not trying to avoid the concrete questions of responsible human action. He continues,

The same responsibility before God which is in fact the one and all that God claims from man is also one particular thing which, as such, stands alongside other divine claims. Hence it must not be regarded as only embracing and accompanying everything else as a general theme, but rather as constituting at the same time a particular theme.<sup>314</sup>

The theological description of responsibility I have been pursuing in the previous chapter is clearly implied in the above discussion. But the concreteness of the commanded human life means that responsibility before God is also a particular theme enacted in particular instances and concrete moments of action that are directed Godward.<sup>315</sup> Responsibility before God means that some particular task is ours to perform *in concreto*. The command of God to which we make our response is therefore the *mandatum Dei concretissimum*. Barth is clearly aware of the incongruity that presents in a theological ethics that emphasises both the sovereignty of the content of the command as it remains free from (Barth’s understanding of) casuistic considerations, and also his own theological discourse on ethics which deals with the concreteness of human responsibility. What he offers are “approximations” to the

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<sup>313</sup> *CD III/4*, 47 (*KD III/4*, 51).

<sup>314</sup> *CD III/4*, 47 (*KD III/4*, 52).

<sup>315</sup> Barth is critical of some parts of the Protestant tradition that emphasise indirect worship of God through social action or serving the Church. He cites Ritschl, Soe, and Brunner in this regard, and marshals the double-love command (Mark 12:29ff) to show that God is a proper object of human action distinct from others. See *CD III/4*, 48-49.

concrete command, without pretending to absolute knowledge of its content.<sup>316</sup> These approximations give us indicative examples of Barth's understanding of our responsibility before God as it is embedded in the actuality of lived human lives, and contribute to the pedagogical formation to which he refers in § 52.

There are three areas in which the human agent is called to concrete and particular responsible action that is directed Godward: keeping the Holy Day, confession, and prayer.<sup>317</sup>

#### 4.3.1 The Holy Day

Keeping the Holy Day is a particular act of “regular observance of a definite portion of time...the most comprehensive form of [the human creature's] special responsibility before God.”<sup>318</sup> The particularity of observing a whole day and acting on that day in accordance with its meaning is the primary example of the Godward practice of responsibility. The Holy Day is, for Barth, the first thing to be said within special ethics because it is “the end, the beginning, and the interruption” of human work.<sup>319</sup> It is to be understood broadly as a commandment – the “Sabbath Commandment”, *das Feiertagsgebot* – by virtue of its relatively lengthy inclusion in the Decalogue. Barth's is a theological reading of Genesis 1 and 2, and Exodus 20: the Holy Day is the eschatological symbol of the consummation of all human work in the rest of God at week's end. But the Holy Day is also the beginning of the week. For Barth this liminality is important: at the beginning of the week the Holy Day indicates that before human beings were given work they were given rest, and this rest is symbolic of the grace of God which called them into being; at the end of the week it provides an eschatological horizon for human life (Heb. 4:1-11).

With the commencement of human work, book-ended weekly by the Holy Day, there is also across the span of our lives continual interruption of human work by the Holy Day – human beings cease from human work for the purpose of the peculiar human task of devotion to God. As a symbol of the whole gospel narrative, the Holy Day stands to constantly remind human creatures of the omnipotent grace of God and in so doing to

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<sup>316</sup> *CD III/4*, 48 (*KD III/4*, 53).

<sup>317</sup> In his account of these, Rose refers to the observation of the Holy Day as “worship” in contradistinction from confession and prayer. Barth does not do this. Rose refers to these works collectively as “religious actions” or “doxological actions” presumably as opposed to non-religious actions. Again this is not Barth's phraseology. I suspect it comes from Rose's desire to read Barth from the perspective of the Roman Catholic tradition's naturalistic emphasis that particularizes the religious in amongst the sacred natural. See his *Ethics With Barth: God, Metaphysics, and Morals*, 146, 148, 151, 152.

<sup>318</sup> *CD III/4*, 73 (*KD III/4*, 79).

<sup>319</sup> *CD III/4*, 50 (*KD III/4*, 55).

scupper any bent towards self-sufficiency in their work. It is a “renunciation [*Entsagung*] of man [and] a renunciation of himself, of all that he thinks and wills and affects and achieves”.<sup>320</sup> Considering the *Feiertagsgebot* this way is not to contradict his earlier critique of casuistry – the “particularity of the Sabbath Commandment... [cannot] be reduced to general rules, thus telling the individual indirectly what is his obedience to this commandment”.<sup>321</sup> Rather, Barth’s instructions on the Holy Day are understood to “aid the proper human hearing of God’s command” not preclude it. He takes the general command to observe the Holy Day for the above purposes as his starting point, and argues that its content, i.e. what we ought to do with it, is the content of the particular command to each person. Observance of the Holy Day in this way is “a holy exercise” of particular and concrete responsibility, “of the special responsibility towards [God] which belongs to each human being.”<sup>322</sup>

#### 4.3.2 Confession

Though the Holy Day is the primary example of the practice of Godward responsibility, Barth cautions that “it takes other forms as well”, in particular “the invitation and obligation of man to bear express witness to God... [as it] concerns a man’s mouth, tongue, lips, talking, and speaking.”<sup>323</sup> This is Barth’s summary of the practice of responsibility in the free act of confession. Confession here is the execution of a Christian’s willingness to bear witness to God, and as such “the execution of special responsibility”<sup>324</sup> before God. Barth writes,

It is certainly true, though almost too true, that God claims for His praise and witness man’s life in all the length or brevity of its time and in all its expressions. But it is even more true, or at least it is to be noted more urgently in an ethical context, that this is also a matter of single and concrete human actions. A man’s praise of God, and therefore his confession and witness to Him, is often enough recounted in the Bible as the simple moment of a particular history...and...it will be realised in definite moments of our own history.<sup>325</sup>

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<sup>320</sup> *CD III/4*, 59 (*KD III/4*, 64).

<sup>321</sup> *CD III/4*, 65 (*KD III/4*, 71).

<sup>322</sup> *CD III/4*, 73 (*KD III/4*, 80).

<sup>323</sup> *CD III/4*, 73-75 (*KD III/4*, 80).

<sup>324</sup> *CD III/4*, 73 (*KD III/4*, 80).

<sup>325</sup> *CD III/4*, 74-5 (*KD III/4*, 81)

In this way, the Christian witness becomes “a responsible partner” of God. Their responsibility lies in the practice of witness-bearing in real and particular moments of speech and action to the covenant of God with humanity in Christ. “Man is responsible for this.”<sup>326</sup> This responsibility means particular activity. “A confessor...”, says Barth, “...is one who is not ashamed to do something...”<sup>327</sup> Confession as a responsibility of the human creature before God takes the form of concrete and particular “free” speech which is directed Godward.<sup>328</sup> It is not however, the same as prayer.

#### 4.3.3 Prayer

Barth suggests that prayer is also a special and particular instance of human Godward responsibility. It is not an attitude nor a kind of spirituality, but an actual temporal, particular, and concrete activity that “must take concrete form in individual moments and specific actions.”<sup>329</sup> It is, therefore, a matter of the practice of responsibility.

[Prayer]...is not a matter of mere existence, of a mood, of surrender to a feeling. In all circumstances prayer is also a matter of man’s responsibility before God, a responsibility fulfilled in the particular that man has recourse to God in prayer and encounters Him as one who prays...<sup>330</sup>

It is responsibility grounded in the freedom that comes from the command of God: “the real basis of prayer is man’s freedom before God, the God-given permission to pray which, because it is given by God, becomes a command and order and therefore a necessity”.<sup>331</sup> As with the Holy Day and confession, prayer has a humanizing effect for the Christian: “in prayer, all masks and camouflages fall away” and we stand before God in our creaturely

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<sup>326</sup> *CD III/4*, 75.

<sup>327</sup> *CD III/4*, 78.

<sup>328</sup> *CD III/4*, 85.

<sup>329</sup> *CD III/4*, 88-89.

<sup>330</sup> *CD III/4*, 89.

<sup>331</sup> *CD III/4*, 92.

reality as those who petition Him<sup>332</sup> and, though as creatures we pray falteringly, we are guaranteed to be heard since “what we do badly is made good by His grace.”<sup>333</sup>

#### 4.3.4 Summary

That human responsibility before God means very definitely concrete human action should now be obvious. Moreover, responsible actions are enacted in a Godward direction. Barth describes quite vividly what responsibility before God might look like: human agents, freed by the gracious command of God, live lives in which God’s presence is recognized in the performance of particular activities; in which they set aside time each week to encounter God afresh in the gospel narrative; in which they confess with their mouths their relationship to the God who encounters humanity in Jesus Christ; and in which they pray to Him in both good times and bad. This is not an abstract description of human responsibility, but relates to real people walking around: Barth expects that this kind of responsibility in respect of God can be seen in the lives of worshipping, confessing, and praying Christians.

That this account of Godward responsibility presupposes the earlier theological description of *CD II/2* should also be obvious. There I argued that responsibility names our particular location in relation to God: through the covenant actualised in Christ we have been determined and situated as ethical agents, and as such are permitted to know and understand that agency only as we turn attention to the covenant, and therefore to Christ. In the indicative acts of responsibility discussed above, we see how Barth maintains that Christ-centred account of responsibility, and makes it ontically viable by ensuring human agents maintain the Godward orientation through prayer, sabbath observation, and confession.

### 4.4 Responsibility in Respect of Other Human Agents, § 54

In his short commentary on *CD III/4*, Otto Weber suggests that Barth’s emphasis on humanity, *Mitmenschlichkeit*, in § 54, “Freedom in Fellowship”, is a development in which “he had taken over...the concept of *analogia relationis*” to explain “the fact that God did not

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<sup>332</sup> *CD III/4*, 97.

<sup>333</sup> *CD III/4*, 101. Barth raises the question of how prayerful petitions are received by God whilst maintaining the integrity of the petition and the continuity of God’s will. He remarks that “the intervention of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit...makes our human asking a movement in the cycle which goes out from God and returns to God”. Therefore, “under Christ’s leadership and responsibility...[God] can give to the requests of His creature a place in His will.” See *CD III/4*, 101, 107, 109; *KD III/4*. Prayer as a practice of human responsibility is encompassed and enabled by Christ’s responsibility as the one who is both divine and human. See also John McDowell, “‘Openness to the World’: Karl Barth’s Evangelical Theology of Christ as the Prayer,” *Modern Theology* 25 (2009): 253-283; and John McDowell, “Prayer: Particularity, and the Subject of Divine Personhood: Who are Brunner and Barth Invoking When They Pray?,” in *Trinitarian Theology After Barth*, ed. Myk Habets and Phillip Tolliday (Eugene: Pickwick, 2011), 255-283.

intend himself to be a lonely God and that *correspondingly* man's creation in the image of God...consists in his 'co-humanity'".<sup>334</sup> This point about living socially has been repeated more recently, and in different ways, by Paul Matheny<sup>335</sup>, Joseph Mangina<sup>336</sup>, and Matthew Rose<sup>337</sup>. It is an important observation that human solidarity and responsibility in respect of one another is grounded in the divine responsibility for us; it follows from the close relation we observed in §§ 36-39 between divine and human responsibility. Barth considers the fellowship of humanity a natural corollary of responsibility in respect of God. "[The human agent's] ordination to be in covenant relation with God has its counterpart in the fact that his humanity, the special mode of his being, is by nature and essence a being in fellow-humanity."<sup>338</sup> As Paul Jewett writes of Barth's account, "Since God is no *Deus solitarius*, but the *Deus triunus*, i.e. God in relationship, there is no possibility that Man, who is in His likeness, should be *homo solitarius*."<sup>339</sup> The human creature is not given to a solitary life, but one in which her humanity is properly realized in the fellowship of all human creatures. The affirmation of humanity in fellowship is part of the practice of responsibility in respect of other human agents. Again, Jewett writes, "[God] gives him, invites him, commands him, not only to receive his humanity as his nature but to affirm it as humanity-in-fellowship by his own decision and responsibility."<sup>340</sup>

Unlike responsibility in respect of God, where particular forms of Godward observance were considered, the practice of responsibility in respect of other human agents falls into three particular spheres of *relationship*.<sup>341</sup> The practice of responsibility in respect of co-humanity is fulfilled in these three spheres: the relationship between men and women; between parents and children; and between near and distant neighbours.

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<sup>334</sup> Otto Weber, *Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics: An Introductory Report* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1953), 214. Emphasis added.

<sup>335</sup> Matheny, *Dogmatics and Ethics*..., chap. 3. Matheny calls the fellowship of human creatures the *Conditio sine qua non* of Barth's ethics, but acknowledges that it rests on "the interrelation of God and the human as pre-supposition of the human situation." Ibid., 106.

<sup>336</sup> Joseph L. Mangina, *Karl Barth on the Christian Life: The Practical Knowledge of God* (New York: Peter Lang Pub Inc, 2001).

<sup>337</sup> Rose suggests that to exist socially is to "become God's 'imitator' by living in solidarity with humanity". See his *Ethics With Barth: God, Metaphysics, and Morals*, 152.

<sup>338</sup> CD III/4, 116.

<sup>339</sup> Paul Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 35; CD III/4, 117.

<sup>340</sup> Jewett, *Man as Male and Female*, 36.

<sup>341</sup> Continuing the trajectory of the Muenster/Bonn cycle, where the subject of the practice of responsibility was human relationships with God and one another.

#### 4.4.1 Men and Women

It is key to Barth's theological anthropology that the single co-humanity of male and female reflects the *imago Dei*. The divine image is not found only in men to the exclusion of women, but in the fellowship of the two.<sup>342</sup> Sexed human co-existence is a gift of God in creation<sup>343</sup> requiring from human beings responsible actions. Barth explores this idea in an extended description of male female relations, both platonic and amorous.<sup>344</sup>

As he did in the Muenster/Bonn cycle, Barth instructs men and women that they are to live in mutual responsibility.<sup>345</sup> The terms of this responsibility are framed slightly differently from in the earlier text. In his later theological anthropology Barth recognizes that the differentiation of the sexes is a form of conflict – “each sex has to realise that it is questioned by the other” - but finds in this conflicting relationship something constructive. He writes, “the question challenges both man and woman to act in responsibility to each other. As they consider one another and necessarily realise that they question each other, they become mutually, not the law of each other's being...but the measure or criterion of their inner right to live in their sexual difference.”<sup>346</sup> The responsibility men and women have in respect of one another is the fulfilment of their created determination as male and female, enabling the other to do the same. There is an implicit complementarity here: maleness is located in both its distinction from and inner connection to femaleness, and vice versa. Fulfilling their sexuality is therefore the “reciprocal responsibility” that human beings owe to one another, what Barth also calls their “mutual responsibility.”<sup>347</sup> Matthew Rose highlights the significance of this when he writes,

Sexual difference is therefore charged with ethical significance; our created bodily forms are not morally indifferent. God created us male and female and commands us

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<sup>342</sup> This is a précis of *CD III/2*, in particular § 45.3, “Humanity as Likeness and Hope.”

<sup>343</sup> Barth writes, “his creatureliness is to be male or female, male *and* female, and human in this distinction and connection.” *CD III/2*, 286. Emphasis added.

<sup>344</sup> Barth's account of co-humanity is novel in that it does not focus primarily on marital relations or sexual encounter. He writes, “...the sexual relationship is notoriously capable of transformation and sublimation. It, too, is only a dimension and component of the whole encounter of man and woman, and alongside it there is in greater or lesser proximity to others... Coitus without commitment is demonic.” *CD III/4*, 133.

<sup>345</sup> *Ethics*, 143 (*Ethik I*, 239).

<sup>346</sup> *CD III/4*, 167.

<sup>347</sup> *CD III/4*, 168.

to live *as* males or females. He commands humans in and through their sexual differentiation and his law presupposes and acknowledges sexual integrity.<sup>348</sup>

The practice of responsibility will look different for women than for men. The responsible female must live in the fullness of her sexual distinction, and vice versa.<sup>349</sup> Barth fleshes this out a little by discussing marriage as symbolic of the responsibility sexed humans reciprocate to one another.<sup>350</sup>

In marriage the man and the woman bear separate and distinct responsibilities toward one another as they are ordered to one another in their sexual difference. The male has a particular “responsibility to live with woman as an heir together of the grace of life... and to treat her as the fellow creature without whom he himself could not be a man... with whom he stands or falls... This is man’s special responsibility.”<sup>351</sup> The man’s role is understood as one of “service”.<sup>352</sup> The woman too “has her own responsibility” in this relationship: she “will never let herself be pushed into the role of compliant wife... she will endorse the strength of the strong man which is the strength of his sense of responsibility and service”.<sup>353</sup> It is unclear what Barth is practically advocating: he is reluctant to say much about what the married man and the married woman should do *in concreto* in order to fulfil their sexuality for one another. As for responsibility in respect of God, it is clear for Barth

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<sup>348</sup> Rose, *Ethics With Barth: God, Metaphysics, and Morals*, 154-155. Though I cite Rose favourably here, he goes on to argue a few lines later that the moral deductions we might make from this observation are that “human beings should be faithful to their nature and duties indicated by it.” Whilst this is partly true for Barth, Rose evades talk about phenomenal human nature in contradistinction from real human nature which is the conceptual framework underlying Barth’s own discussion in *CD III*, provided in part by *CD II/2*. For a (slightly) more balanced view see, Hans Mikkelsen, *Reconciled Humanity: Karl Barth in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), chap. 5.

<sup>349</sup> It is a frustration that Barth does not give clear guidelines as to what maleness and femaleness is, beyond some brief remarks about psychology and biology. Rather sexual difference is considered worthy of comment because it is an observable aspect of God’s creative work, the definition of which exists only in the fact that men and women are distinct in their reciprocal responsibility for one another. Even Rose recognizes the “perplexity” of this: “Barth is convinced that this cannot require upholding any particular masculine or feminine standards, and his sexual ethics does not prescribe what it means to be individually male or female.” *God, Metaphysics, and Morals*, 159.

<sup>350</sup> Jewett expresses frustration with Barth’s handling of marriage as an incidence in the male-female relationship. He suggests that the argument “suffers...not only from the occasional overstatement, but also from complexity – even confusion – as the argument unfolds since he constantly shifts the subject of the discourse from Man’s creation as male and female to the institution of marriage with its roles of husband and wife.” *Man as Male and Female*, 46.

<sup>351</sup> *CD III/4*, 175. In this particular section Barth appears to advocating sexist views about subordination of the woman to the man, and male headship, in the context of Christ’s giving himself for the Church. This is not, however, a patriarchal treatise: its Christological centre means that Barth’s argument culminates in “exhortation to mutual subordination.”

<sup>352</sup> *CD III/4*, 177.

<sup>353</sup> *CD III/4*, 178-180.

that the responsibility in which humans are placed requires particular actions in keeping with the concrete circumstances of sexual difference. It is also clear that to live in this responsibility is liberating – both for oneself and for the sexual ‘other’. He comments, “the life-partnership of genuine marriage emancipates man as man and woman as woman and both in their particularity... the fullness of this life-partnership consists in the fact that man and woman keep in step in this gladly demonstrated and experienced freedom. It is a question of freedom in fellowship, of the genuine freedom which here as elsewhere is identical with responsibility.”<sup>354</sup> Human responsibility in respect of one another is first and foremost about acting in ways appropriate to the liberation of the other, so that woman may realize in her life acts the proper determination which is hers by God’s creative act. In so doing she is also made free for God and free for the other, and therefore free to be responsibly herself. Rose comments that this has a “peculiarly modern shape” that can be summarized as “emphasising an ethic of mutual responsibility and trust.”<sup>355</sup>

#### 4.4.2 Parents and Children

The theme of responsibility continues in Barth’s discussion of parents and children.<sup>356</sup> Here we are commonly on more familiar territory with the language of responsibility, since many contemporary manuals talk about “responsible parenting.” Indeed Barth, for the most part here, addresses the practice of responsibility from the perspective of the parents. “The [child] owes its existence to an encounter of man and woman consummated in sexual inter-course”, the corollary of which is that the parents “are now responsible for its existence.”<sup>357</sup> Responsibility indicates both the historical priority of the parents in relation to the child, as those whose union has brought the child into being, but is also a description of the ongoing relationship of the parents and child “as an integral part of their existence”. What governs the parents’ responsibility is not some vague notion of family<sup>358</sup>, but the command of God which leads human agents into the particular

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<sup>354</sup> *CD III/4*, 190-191. Barth goes on to say that “it is primarily the responsibility of the man that their fellowship should always be and become a fellowship in freedom...” *CD III/4*, 193. Here the mutuality of the subordination breaks down a little in practice, as the male is required to be responsible to woman as the one who maintains the proper order of their relationship. It is perhaps language like this that accounts for the manifold critique Barth has received for his views on women. See Alexander McKelway, “Perichoretic Possibilities in Barth’s Doctrine of Male and Female,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 7, no. 3 (1986), 231-243.

<sup>355</sup> Rose, *God, Metaphysics, and Morals*, 158.

<sup>356</sup> Though, as Rose notes, “at a high degree of generality” - Rose, *God, Metaphysics and Morals*, 162.

<sup>357</sup> *CD III/4*, 240-241.

<sup>358</sup> For Barth’s critique of the concept of family, and orbiting of Christian ethics around such a concept, see *CD III/4*, 242.

responsibility that belongs to parents. In this instance the command is not concerned with the physical generation of the child from the parents as much as it is “with the certain oversight and responsibility with regard to children which this physical relationship implies for the parents.”<sup>359</sup> At its most basic, this oversight and responsibility means that parents are “required to provide for children indispensable guidance in the conduct of life. Its most fundamental responsibility is that of instruction and the raising up of children in the training and instruction of the Lord.”<sup>360</sup>

Theologically, the rationale for this responsibility is grounded not in creation *per se*, but in the covenant responsibility that God the Father assumes for his creatures: “the superiority which demands this respect [of parents by their children] consists rather in the correspondence of their parenthood with the being and action of God.”<sup>361</sup> Here again, he builds upon the covenant theology and divine responsibility established in *CD II/2*. Barth can therefore suggest that for children their “parents have a Godward aspect.”<sup>362</sup> As such, “parents...are ambassadors of God and charged with imitating him by loving unconditionally.”<sup>363</sup> The responsibility parents enact for their children is defined by the actions of God whom the responsible parent will model. “The decisive action for which the parents are responsible in relation to their children and which the latter must be content to accept is primarily and properly God’s action, which their human action can only attest.”<sup>364</sup>

The aim of such responsible parenting is to enable the child to stand before God “in responsibility to Him as the true and proper Father” and to realize that they are creatures and God, “before whom the child is responsible”, is the Creator.<sup>365</sup> Good parenting therefore seeks “to appeal to the child itself in its...dawning freedom and responsibility”<sup>366</sup>, to,

give the child the opportunity to encounter the God who is present, operative, and revealed in Jesus Christ, to know Him and to learn to love and fear Him. The greatest

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<sup>359</sup> *CD III/4*, 243.

<sup>360</sup> Rose, *Ethics With Barth: God, Metaphysics, and Morals*, 162.

<sup>361</sup> *CD III/4*, 245.

<sup>362</sup> Barth is quick to prevent the collapse of the divine subject into the parents, and maintains a keen distinction between the two as the spiritual life of the child develops. See *CD III/4*, 252; *KD III/4*.

<sup>363</sup> Rose, *God, Metaphysics, and Morals*, 162.

<sup>364</sup> *CD III/4*, 247.

<sup>365</sup> *CD III/4*, 252. Translation slightly revised.

<sup>366</sup> *CD III/4*, 253.

and the smallest things, the most serious and most trivial, which can happen between parents and their children can become for parents an occasion to present to their children this opportunity.<sup>367</sup>

Parenting contributes to the humanization of the child as she is given the opportunity to encounter her Heavenly Father whose love is symbolized in her parents' responsible action.<sup>368</sup> "While doing everything which they can and must do within the compass of their responsibility they can only commit [the child] to the hand of God from whom they have received her [and] to the Holy Spirit of God who alone is able to make their weak testimony efficacious to her..."<sup>369</sup>

#### 4.4.3 Neighbours

The final relational sphere to which Barth attends concerns our neighbours. This narrows the focus to geography and to those who are like us and those who are not. Barth is concerned with the concrete context in which the commanded creature hears God's Word: as she is found amongst "some form of race or people group" and is confronted by her own people and others who are not her own.<sup>370</sup> "The command of the Creator presupposes this social ontology, addressing and claiming human beings as participants in a common life. God's command is directed to us as members of a particular people group and also as a member of humanity generally."<sup>371</sup>

The history of a particular human being's particular people group or race is the object of her responsible activity. "The command of God sees and affects man as one who even in this historical respect belongs to his people." Barth suggests that this belonging is what first demands responsible action from us: the divine determination that we should be of a certain race, time, and geography matters. Here Barth is acutely contextual in his account of the practice of responsible agency. He makes the point in relation to the absoluteness of God's sanctifying command:

The past and present of his people is no more holy than its language and territory, or he himself, God alone is holy. But if the sanctification of man by the divine

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<sup>367</sup> CD III/4, 283.

<sup>368</sup> Rose, *God, Metaphysics, and Morals*, 163.

<sup>369</sup> CD III/4, 284.

<sup>370</sup> CD III/4, 287.

<sup>371</sup> Rose, *God, Metaphysics, and Morals*, 164.

command is not also the sanctification of his historical existence, if his obedience does not include his historical responsibility as a member of this people, it is not sanctification.<sup>372</sup>

The command sanctifies not only the agent, but the means by which the agent hears the command – i.e. her historical location. This is acutely contextual. The responsibility of the commanded human is exercised publicly: “he cannot try to live an aesthetic or a Christian life which is private and neutral...” By living, as it were, publicly the human being must affirm what is good in the history of her people, and understand the presuppositions of her people, whilst also at her “own place and time take up and genuinely share the problems of the future.” Accepting the constraints of race, time, and geography, the responsible human is able to hear the divine command, to “exercise her own freedom in the constraint thereby imposed [by them].”<sup>373</sup> The exercise of this freedom will have meaning only in this context as it takes note of the particularities of the times and seasons.

Barth’s emphasis on the command of God in this regard is not to the detriment of responsibility in respect of other human beings, but rather is the key to understanding the propriety of responsible practices. Though the practice of responsibility is directed toward other humans, the responsible agent “even in this respect must obey God rather than man and his own habits of thought and ideas and fancies.” Barth continues: “in the share of responsibility accepted by [the responsible agent] only that will be right and good which the command of God in all its majesty requires of him day by day.”<sup>374</sup> As with responsibility in respect of sexual difference and parents and children, the overarching schema which makes Barth’s understanding of responsible agency, and the particularity of the practice of responsibility in the sphere of neighbourliness intelligible, is the divine command and its liberating effects: “Barth’s ethics envisages the life of created beings under the direction of a God who wills their lasting good and happiness.”<sup>375</sup>

#### 4.4.4 Summary

Barth’s account of the practice of responsibility in respect of others is more circumspect than it is in respect of God. He does not offer a description of the concrete practices that we undertake regarding other people. The practice of responsibility here is

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<sup>372</sup> CD III/4, 295.

<sup>373</sup> CD III/4, 295.

<sup>374</sup> CD III/4, 296.

<sup>375</sup> Rose, *God, Metaphysics, and Morals*, 173.

about the way in which human agents must negotiate the complex relationships that are theirs by virtue of God's creative activity, and which must be negotiated by virtue of God's commanding Word. This means that the practice of responsibility in respect of others is quite open-ended: providing key relationships are regarded and pursued appropriately, the particulars of the responsible agent's activity are at her discretion. But this discretion is informed, as with the rest of Barth's ethics, by the vision of the ethical agent he offers in Jesus Christ. Christ as the one in whom the covenant between God and humanity is actualised is also the one who shows us what genuine responsibility for the other looks like. Once again, we here return to Barth's earlier discussion of responsibility in *CD* II/2, and in particular think of the responsibility which God takes in respect of humanity. In doing so, God becomes responsible to Godself, as Jesus Christ is the genuine responsible agent. Christ demonstrates as fully as possible what responsible humanity looks like in respect of the other: attending to their best interest, and enabling them to fulfil their own responsibility before God as divinely determined creatures. Such responsibility is self-effacing, and seeks the flourishing of another.

#### **4.5 Responsibility in Respect of Self, §§ 55-56**

The final relationship in which a human being engages in the practice of responsibility is in respect of herself. §§ 53 and 54 explored the vertical and horizontal relationships with God and fellow-humanity respectively, but in § 55 Barth turns to discuss the command of God regarding the fact of life – i.e. that humans are alive and as such must act responsibly. In § 56 Barth extends this treatment by considering the limitation of human life, the delimitation of responsibility, and the appropriateness of this limitation for human flourishing.

##### **4.5.1 § 55**

Barth's summary of life under the divine command is a person's "freedom to treat as a loan both the life of all men with his own and his own with that of all men."<sup>376</sup> Freedom entails accepting that God has determined creatures for life in particular forms and inhabiting those forms accordingly. In other words, human freedom is not absolute self-determination, but the fulfilment of humanity. That human life is loaned by God means that humans should assume that the content and meaning of their lives are under the direction of the Creator, before whom they are responsible: "each [person] should exist – always in orientation to God and solidarity with others – as... a rational creature, attentively, unreservedly and loyally confessing his human existence in willing responsibility to the One

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<sup>376</sup> *CD* III/4, 335.

to whom he owes it.”<sup>377</sup> The link between active confession and acceptance of our human existence and our responsibility is important: human responsibility is elicited by God who commands and to whom it is owed, it is practiced in the acceptance of *human* life in adoption of certain practices that show “loyalty” to that humanity. I understand loyalty here both to mean practices that are in keeping with my humanity, and also practices that cause my humanity to flourish.

A significant and unusual way in which Barth addresses this topic is under the banner of “Respect for Life”.<sup>378</sup> Respect involves recognition that creaturely life belongs to God from whom it originates, thus imposing on human creatures a need to honour and respect non-human creation. This also means responsibility in respect of my own life: “the world of animals and plants forms the indispensable living background to the living space divinely allotted to man and placed under his control. As they live, so can he.” There is an intrinsic link between human flourishing and responsibility and the proper treatment of non-human creation. Barth argues: “as a living being in co-existence with non-human life, man has to think and act responsibly.”<sup>379</sup>

As with responsibility in respect of others, Barth is less prescriptive about what a responsible human must do to and for the non-human. Rather he discusses what a responsible human must *be* in that relationship: viz. lord. Lordship is responsibility exercised by the human creature in relation to the non-human animals, and plants<sup>380</sup>, and differentiated in respect of each. Human creatures are lords by divine will and command, and as such are made responsible for the non-human by divine command.

In respect of non-human animals, the practice of responsible lordship has particular meaning. It must prevent “human stupidity, severity, caprice, and irrationality” by emphasising “gratitude to God...translated into careful, considerate, friendly and above all understanding treatment of [non-human animals] in which sympathetic account is taken of its needs and limits...”<sup>381</sup> This is not however an argument for vegetarianism. It is the basic responsibility that the human has for the non-human animal as part of the divine command to respect life. This may also involve “a qualified and also enhanced responsibility”<sup>382</sup> to take

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<sup>377</sup> CD III/4, 341.

<sup>378</sup> CD III/4, 324-397.

<sup>379</sup> CD III/4, 350.

<sup>380</sup> CD III/4, 351. Barth’s discussion of plants is very brief. He argues unequivocally that human beings “may and should” use plants for food. “Man’s vegetable nourishment...is not the destruction of vegetation but a sensible use of its superfluity.” He makes this point following a short exposition of Genesis 1:28.

<sup>381</sup> CD III/4, 352.

<sup>382</sup> CD III/4, 354.

the life of an animal, “knowing that it does not belong to him but to God, and that in killing it he surrenders it to God in order to receive back from Him as something he needs and desires...”<sup>383</sup> The permission is granted only in as far as humans taking non-human lives do so in gratitude to God who gives the non-human for human sustenance. Non-human animals remain a commodity in Barth’s thought, to be used by responsible humans for food and clothing – hence the proper treatment of creation is a concern for responsibility in respect of self both as the use of creation causes human beings to flourish, but also as creation is properly regarded by human agents with gratitude and joy we are orientated appropriately to the God who is Creator.

Another theme is responsibility as human social activity. This impinges directly on responsibility in respect of self as one’s agency contributes to the force of social activity. In terms of the practice of responsibility it means active concern for several social factors: health<sup>384</sup>; happiness<sup>385</sup>; and promotion of life - including consideration of abortion<sup>386</sup>, self defence<sup>387</sup>, capital punishment, and warfare.<sup>388</sup> These concerns are pursued in concrete activities that enable human flourishing in each of the named areas. Rose, in his brief commentary on this section, argues that regard for these factors – or as he calls them “goods” – is basic to human flourishing because the “basic human goods of life serve human existence in the form of a loaned capacity or vitality necessary to exercise integral human flourishing.”<sup>389</sup> Beyond this, Barth is concerned for the Christian social context – i.e. the Church – within wider society and the responsibility in respect of self that participation in that particular community involves.<sup>390</sup> This particular social distinction is worth noting in respect of responsibility to self.

Participation in the Christian community is “at the head of the concretion of the active life demanded by the command of God”<sup>391</sup>. In the phrase “active life” Barth intends

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<sup>383</sup> *CD III/4*, 355.

<sup>384</sup> *CD III/4*, 363.

<sup>385</sup> *CD III/4*, 380.

<sup>386</sup> *CD III/4*, 415-416.

<sup>387</sup> *CD III/4*, 428-450.

<sup>388</sup> *CD III/4*, 450-470.

<sup>389</sup> Rose, *God, Metaphysics, and Morals*, 171. By “human goods” Rose means more than traditional natural law theories do. He intends those things each individual must affirm in his freedom for life such that difficult questions of abortion, self-defence, capital punishment, and warfare also include affirmation *and* destruction of life.

<sup>390</sup> *CD III/4*, 494-512.

<sup>391</sup> *CD III/4*, 488.

the creaturely freedom and responsibility that the command of God elicits: that life is both given and imposed on humans, and as such must be accepted, means it must, as we have seen already, be treated with respect. By prefacing the term with the qualifier “concretion” Barth intends that free, respectful, responsibility consists in particular acts of service that contribute to the life of the Christian community. He writes, “Each is responsible for what the community either is or is not in itself...for its health or sickness.”<sup>392</sup> Using the language in this way does not mean that the Church is a human construct with no spiritual meaning or power, but that we participate in its life in very concrete and mundane ways. Human responsibility pertains to these things: “It should be pondered that the responsibility of each for his own particular action is of such tremendous weight and importance because it derives from his faith, and his faith from his perception of the Kingdom of God.”<sup>393</sup> My responsibility to participate appropriately in the life of the Christian community is grounded in the faith which I own by God’s grace and which is sustained by the ongoing participation in the life of the Church, whose life is also a gift of grace: “The Christian is not free to adopt any current religious idea...and then to urge this upon the community. On the other hand he is both free and yet also summoned and obliged to reflect on the Word which underlies the community and is to be declared by it, giving responsible expression to his reflections.”<sup>394</sup> The sort of responsibility in respect of self that participation in the Church entails involves critical ownership of the Church’s faith and confession; of internalization and personal reflection. In so doing the individual member is properly responsible in respect of the life of the whole community and so of her own life.

#### 4.5.2 §56

The second aspect of responsibility in respect of self concerns the limitation God places on human beings. “This limit is both individual in a specific form for each man, and universal as the one great limit of His will as Creator and Lord which He has set for all.”<sup>395</sup> In both cases it concerns the will and determination of God for the individual as it is revealed in the divine command for that time and place, and also the willingness and actual activity of the individual as she acts in accordance with that will thus making it her own will and freedom. Hence it is responsibility in respect of self as it pertains to the fulfilment of one’s created determination in the free decision and choice to so act.

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<sup>392</sup> *CD III/4*, 494.

<sup>393</sup> *CD III/4*, 494.

<sup>394</sup> *CD III/4*, 498.

<sup>395</sup> *CD III/4*, 565.

Not least amongst Barth's considerations in this regard is death: "to consider that we shall die means, in contrast to all attempts at evasion, to accept oneself."<sup>396</sup> This final limitation means that the responsibility with which my life is currently endowed is serious and unique. The fact that in death we move to a final and fulfilled encounter with God is important for Barth: the knowledge that "the Lord is the frontier to which we move...gives my transience its seriousness and responsibility."<sup>397</sup> It is because we shall meet God that we are responsible: not through a sense of needing to impress or for fear of judgement (Barth's notion of divine judgement stands at the beginning and not the end of ethical deliberation, liberating us for the course ahead) but because life is a movement with its terminus in God. That things will one day not be in their present form is part of the eschatological horizon of Christian discipleship. It also contributes to the sense of uncertainty that has followed Barth's notion of responsibility through these §§ 53-55. The pedagogical structure of *CD* III/4 means that Barth never provides a final certain answer to the question *what should we do?* The responsible agent lives under the conviction of her encounter with God in and through the command, and in the midst of Christian and non-Christian community. The final answer is always with God alone: the frontier toward which we move.

It is in this context that Barth discusses the notion of *vocation*.<sup>398</sup> This is a theme I have already discussed in Chapter 2 as it appears in the Muenster/Bonn cycle. Much of the discussion in *CD* III/4 can be seen to be prefigured by the discussion in the early text. Nonetheless, it is still worthy of note as it relates to the practice of responsibility here. Vocation is not the same as "divine summons" in Barth's mind. The latter is the work of the divine command, the former is "the old thing which the man already is, which he has behind him, or rather which he brings with him, as the new comes to him." In this case, citing Bonhoeffer, Barth argues that a person's vocation is their particularity now claimed for the new particularity issued in the command and as such, "vocation is the place of responsibility."<sup>399</sup> By this Barth means vocation is a place of extreme particularity both because the content of the command which encounters an individual at any time and place *is* particular, but also because the history of life and encounters which an individual brings with her to that moment is also particular and peculiarly hers. Her responsibility in the face of the divine command is thus also entirely particular, and must take all aspects of vocation into account as well as the content of the divine summons.

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<sup>396</sup> *CD* III/4, 591.

<sup>397</sup> *CD* III/4, 592.

<sup>398</sup> The highest concentration of references to "responsibility" appear in this section of §56.

<sup>399</sup> *CD* III/4, 598.

The vocation of man is always the *terminus ad quo* of his obedience. He cannot begin elsewhere than here. But he can only begin here. His vocation is the limited place of responsibility at which he must always be found. Yet it can be only the place of his responsibility. Man is in no sense responsible to his vocation; he is wholly responsible to God alone.<sup>400</sup>

It is the *terminus* of her obedience because vocation is the sum of her history in the midst of divine encounter. The responsible agent cannot be concerned with the past in that moment, “it is for God to decide how well or how badly she has discharged responsibility of her previous way”<sup>401</sup>, but must be concerned for how she will act in the present: “we can only be those who are affected by the claim and responsibility of this hour as though it were first and last.”<sup>402</sup> Barth makes this point particularly clear when he considers the significance of age. The young man must not think that his present decisions can be made in the absence of responsibility because of his youthfulness – i.e. because “they are followed by many other situations with new chances and possibilities”<sup>403</sup>. Nor must the old man fall into the trap of repeating previous answers to the divine command, acting in accordance with earlier responsibilities “as if it were possible to freeze or solidify at the point where the river of responsibility should flow more torrentially than ever...”<sup>404</sup>

Barth continues his warning by re-emphasising the Godward orientation of responsibility, even in respect of self. Personal vocation and the particularity of the divine summons means that the free actions of any given individual are enacted “in primary responsibility to God, and only secondary responsibility to the situation.” This means that even in the peculiarity of her vocation and life history, at the moment of encounter a person “is not handed over to the historical situation...but in occupying it bears responsibility for what will be made of it and what it will or will not mean in relation to that of others.”<sup>405</sup> Responsibility in respect of self, still orientated towards God, permits agency to the individual that is potent and meaningful as it shapes her own history and therefore informs her future: “the vocation of a man as such, as it is to be understood as a decree of God,

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<sup>400</sup> CD III/4, 607.

<sup>401</sup> CD III/4, 608.

<sup>402</sup> CD III/4, 609.

<sup>403</sup> CD III/4, 611.

<sup>404</sup> CD III/4, 615.

<sup>405</sup> CD III/4, 623.

must also be understood as man's answer to the divine calling, as a result of his attitude to the command of God."<sup>406</sup> Barth's contention is that actions in accordance with the divine will have a more positive effect on the future history than those in opposition to it.<sup>407</sup>

### 4.5.3 Conclusion

Responsibility in respect of self does not mean self-care in the way that modern pastoral care programs might suggest. Its two pronged focus involves the place of the responsible agent in social matrix as well as the peculiarities of the special intention that God wills for each person. This means that responsibility in respect of self is not about self-concern, but about living life well – and for Barth this means being concerned for the divine will and my own vocation in that as it impacts my choices and actions - enabling and eliciting my own flourishing. Human sociality is a created given: to be involved in that is a necessity for Barth. To do so well is the stuff of responsibility. The same is true of fulfilment of vocation in the time that God gives me to live. Responsibility in respect of self therefore means acting in correspondence with the divine will for my life as it is given to me and forced upon me in the context in which I find myself: "God does His work as Creator with the intention that man should respond by doing his work as creature."<sup>408</sup> This is intensely practical, but is informed at all points by the theological description of human responsibility I have so far been discussing.

### 4.6 Conclusion

The practice of responsibility for the agent has three clear directions: Godward; other-ward; and self-ward. These three are co-temporal, and constant. Though context may delineate times when one is clearly more pressing than another, the responsible human agent practices responsibility always in these three directions. That is not to say that there is no order of priority, however. Godward responsibility – observing the Holy Day, confession, and prayer – orientates and enables responsibility in the other two respects. It reminds and establishes us in our relationships with others – the opposite sex, parents, neighbours – as responsible fellow creatures, and to ourselves – through the practice of self-care portrayed externally – as those whose life is not our own (1 Cor. 6:19-20). It is also much more clearly expressed

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<sup>406</sup> *CD III/4*, 634.

<sup>407</sup> This sentiment is echoed several times by Barth *CD III/4*, 636-641. Gerald McKenny gives a thorough-going overview of this aspect of Barth's thought in his recent, *The Analogy of Grace...*

<sup>408</sup> *CD III/4*, 474.

than responsibility in respect of others and self: Godward responsibility consists of particular concrete activities in which our agency is enacted and the theological description of the responsible agent in *CD* II/2 §§ 36-39 is embedded and revealed.

The practical considerations that Barth here names “responsibility” are all focused on the relationships the agent has with those around her and with herself. Right relating is central to good human agency. It is both incumbent upon her as one who is commanded by the Word of God and therefore encounters God, and as one who encounters other creatures – human and non-human – to engage and respond well. But, to argue that encounter is everything would be to misunderstand Barth and to read him as if he were H. Richard Niebuhr. For Barth, human beings are responsible prospectively as well as retrospectively. The difference here is whether or not the responsible agent must, as it were, “wait” for some encounter with another before she may act responsibly. On the basis of the pedagogical nature of Barth’s theological ethics I suggest not: his reflections are not, as John Howard Yoder noted, descriptive of the actual content of the commanding Word to which human agents ultimately make response, but are indicative of where Christians might situate themselves in order to hear that Word better. That the responsible agent may act *in order* to hear the command suggests that the momentary practice of responsibility is about the actions humans undertake in their journey *toward* encounter with God/others/self as well as the actions they perform in the midst of and as a result of those encounters. This double responsibility suggests that human agents can and do have their own agency and that their actions are potent and meaningful.

Having now seen what the practice of responsibility involves for Barth, it is becoming clear how his thought in this area relates to the substantive description of responsibility given in the previous chapter. The divine command establishes human creatures in a particular relationship *vis a vis* God. Responsibility in this respect initially involves recognition both of God’s sovereignty and also of human creatureliness: as such the divine will is privileged over all human desires which are contrary to it. As I argued in the previous chapter, the substantive description is orientational: Barth directs human agents to God and the gospel. In this chapter, I have aimed to show how, having been placed theologically and conceptually in the position of responsibility, human agents enact that in reality – i.e. in particular concrete forms of life. Barth is clear about this: human responsibility does involve human as well as divine activity. This activity represents the embedding of the substantive description in tangible reality – responsible agents act in this way because of God’s sovereign activity in Christ. This involves the freely chosen path of

obedience to the divine command, and in so doing the ongoing discovery and reception of one's own true humanity.

### 5.1 *Thinking* about responsibility

In the opening chapter I borrowed Edward Farley's distinction between *thinking theology* and *theological method*<sup>409</sup> in order to suggest one way of dealing with the critical problem of understanding what Barth means by human responsibility. I suggested that part of the problem for Christian ethicists has been Barth's reluctance to treat human responsibility as a particular and substantive topic within his moral theology and therefore to be methodical and scientific in his approach to responsibility ethics. Clarification and elucidation of moral concepts as well as a clear indication of their practicability is a key practice of any ethics, so the charge that Barth does not offer this when discussing human responsibility seriously undermines his assertion that he is concerned with Christian ethics in the action-guiding sense. Further, this perceived reluctance in Barth to be clear about his moral concepts has led to a skewed projection of his position by scholars concerned to develop a Christian understanding of human responsibility that is practically workable and ethically appropriate. I suggested in chapter 1 that ethicists have had wrong expectations of Barth, whose methodological decision to treat ethics as an auxiliary of dogmatics resists the kind of anthropocentric discourse with which much contemporary responsibility ethics proceeds. Another way must therefore be found, which does not try to fit Barth into the mould of contemporary Christian ethics, but which attends instead to his particular mode of moral reflection and in so doing sheds light on his understanding of human responsibility. This is what I have sought to do.

In Farley's description, *methodology* means a structured and systematic approach to a given topic - a "science"<sup>410</sup> - leading to an obviously coherent and formalised account of it. To proceed *methodologically* is to be deliberate, intentional, and focused and to explore the contours and depths of a particular moral topic thoroughly. There is also an agreed mode of investigation. Such formal and structured thinking is open to public scrutiny because it follows clear lines of thought and argument, and these may be articulated to other interested parties. By contradistinction *thinking*, as Farley describes it, is more intuitive, often organic, and lacks the formal structure of a systematic approach to a topic. It is about discerning the relationships between instances of thought and reflection, and unearthing some of the

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<sup>409</sup> Farley, 'Ecclesial Contextual Thinking'.

<sup>410</sup> Farley, 'Ecclesial Contextual Thinking', 16.

underlying theological influences that give rise to particular thought patterns. It is nonetheless powerful for that since it reflects some of the deepest held convictions and reflections of the thinker, and this tells us something important about the way we think. The potency of this approach to theology comes from its rootedness in both life lived and experienced and also within a wider discourse about that life - culture, expectations, desires, beliefs etc. - and therefore requires us to recognise that the way we think about a topic is invariably influenced by context. Farley identifies two types of context: our personal lived-context as thinkers and also the intellectual context of our thinking. This latter point has been especially important throughout this thesis, because my aim has been to understand a particular moral theme in Barth's theology by attending to key passages in his ethics in which it is employed as a significant idea. Barth employs the language of human responsibility at various stages of his theological development, so I have been careful to pay especial attention to his theological ethics in particular in order to discern the meaning of human responsibility. Engaging with somebody's particular *thinking theology* on a topic is not as straight forward as critical reflection on *theological method* because it is by definition not as publicly accessible, and therefore needs careful attention, elucidation, and explanation of the context of thinking about a topic and the application of language within it in order to make sense of the theme itself.

I turned to Farley's observation to help in two ways. The first was to suggest that Barth is best understood as a theologian who *thinks* about human responsibility as an important part of Christian ethics, but who does not pause to offer a "science" of human responsibility, a theological methodology that tells us how we ought to think about human responsibility. That is not to say that he is purely intuitive in his moral theology: on the contrary he does his Christian ethics intrinsic to a highly structured and ordered dogmatic theology. But, it is to say that he employs his own idea of human responsibility without pausing to explain what he means by it, i.e. there is no science of responsibility here. This is important to note when one considers the discussion in chapter 1 of the development of various notions of human responsibility in Christian ethics across the twentieth century.<sup>411</sup> It has been necessary for all Christian ethicists to comment, however briefly, on their own approach to the idea and how it fits within the wider theological framework with which they are working. This was true of Barth's contemporaries, for example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer in

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<sup>411</sup> Recall Albert Jonsen's contention that "in much of the Christian moral literature the meaning of the term "responsibility" is vague and its use unstable," in his *Responsibility and Modern Religious Ethics*, 6.

his *Ethics* manuscript.<sup>412</sup> This observation explains why a study such as this is important, viz. in order to make conceptual and methodological sense of Barth's thinking about human responsibility. As I demonstrated in chapter 2, the language of responsibility was initially marshalled by Barth to resist the bourgeois Christian ethics that he thought was prevalent in the early twentieth century, and which was too indebted to Kant's self-affirmation of human agents. Later, as Barth gave it some more theological weight in the *Ethics* lectures, it was deployed to make clear particularly difficult or dense theological statements about human agency. Nonetheless, it is never the focus of extended discussion for its own sake or for the sake of clarification, so even when delivering the *Ethics* lectures Barth was conscious that responsibility was a muddled concept in need of some clarification in order to become meaningful and helpful for Christian ethics. I drew attention to this in chapter 2. The fact that he was himself unclear about human responsibility for so long seems contrary to the basic requirement of clarification and application that the discipline of ethics involves.

The second help I solicited from Farley was the acknowledgement that we may still discern and offer coherent explanation and critical reflection on Barth's theological thinking about human responsibility by attending carefully to the intellectual and theological context in which it happens and learning to appreciate its contours. This means developing our understanding of human responsibility 'from within' the framework he offers us in his dogmatic theology - i.e. by attending to the way theological language is used, and the way ideas are formed in dialogue with other theological concepts, we are able to say something about meaning. Taking the impetus from Farley I have sought thus far to *think with* Barth about human responsibility, and to do so across a wider range of texts than has been done before, taking into account the earlier ethical works and the later, post-Christological-turn, material of the *Church Dogmatics*. I have been concerned to understand what Barth thinks human responsibility is, observing the way he deploys responsibility-language, providing exegesis and interpretation of key passages.

In this chapter I step back from the particular instances of responsibility-language in Barth's ethics, and attend to the bigger picture - offering an overall account of Barth's thinking about human responsibility. To do this I will draw several parallels between the instances of responsibility language I have discussed earlier, most especially in the special ethics of the *Church Dogmatics*. This will be the basis for my description of Barth's mature account of human responsibility. Most important here will be the way in which the more

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<sup>412</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'The Structure of a Responsible Life' in his *Ethics...*, 257-289. This section features an extended discussion of Bonhoeffer's understanding of the human life as essentially about responsibility, and the co-responsibility to one another. He uses several extended examples to explore this point, and to give the reader as full an understanding as possible of the theme he wants to develop.

practical instances of responsibility language described in *CD* III/4 and discussed in chapter 4 of this thesis, relate to the earlier, theological discussion of divine and human responsibility in *CD* II/2, discussed in chapter 3. There are important themes, such as covenant and divine command, which must be accounted for in this as well as the relationship between the ontological description of human responsibility and the ontic enactment of human responsibility - both of which I have suggested are present in the ethics of the *Dogmatics*.

To this end, in section 5.2 I give a synopsis of the development of Barth's thinking about human responsibility and outline the key observations made earlier. This provides a platform for my constructive work in section 5.3, where I seek to give an overall account of human responsibility in Barth's moral theology. I suggest that there is in Barth's thinking a theology of human responsibility which locates human beings in relation to God and one another, and a subsequent practice of responsibility which is grounded in the prior theology. As I see it, these two ought to be regarded as complementary aspects of a single account of human responsibility and the relationships that give rise to it. I offer a framework for reading Barth that grows out of his Christology and which treats human responsibility by analogy, taking divine and human ontology seriously.

In order to establish this reading further, in section 5.4 I revisit the critical scholarship discussed in chapter 1 and assess the veracity of my account of responsibility in Barth against Jonsen and Schweiker's own approaches to human responsibility in the light of their rejection of very particular readings of Barth on the topic. I shall argue that Barth's approach allows us a Christian responsibility ethic that is practicable and communicable without abandoning the core dogmatic theology which is proper to a *Christian* ethic. Rather than something to be abandoned, Barth's theological content then acts as a challenge to Jonsen and Schweiker, whose own approaches to responsibility lose Christian integrity by their reluctance to maintain theological distinctiveness.

Finally in section 5.5 I offer a discursive note on Barth's account of human responsibility and its indicative usefulness for the co-inherence of Christian faith and practice — holding theological considerations about the nature of the human agent alongside the basic human requirement to act well, and in so doing to live responsibly before God. This, to me, seems fundamental to any understanding of Christian discipleship, and gives us a helpful model for thinking not only about the ethics of responsibility, but also the general shape and contours of a Christian life. Barth's responsibility ethics helps us to navigate the relationship between the active human agent and the will of God, rooted in prayer and the divine command, but notwithstanding the practical requirement of any ethics.

## 5.2 Synopsis

Barth's particular understanding of human responsibility matured and developed as his theology developed. Over the thirty year period which underlies the texts considered in this thesis, there are several points of continuity as well as change. I note these now in order to see the developmental aspect of Barth's work before offering a constructive account of his mature understanding of human responsibility.

The Münster/Bönn *Ethics* cycle is Barth's first attempt to ground ethics in dogmatic theology in a comprehensive way, since the other texts discussed in chapter 2 - *The Problem of Ethics Today* and *The Holy Spirit and The Christian Life* - demonstrate that his use of responsibility-language was theologically underdeveloped for much of the 1920s. The *Ethics* lectures are therefore a critical point in his understanding of human responsibility as a meaningful concept in moral theology, precisely because its deployment here in the first (and only) complete ethics gives us insights into how Barth understood the whole at this stage in his development. Some important points can be noted from my earlier exegesis. First, the human agent is not overlooked in Barth's ethics. In fact, responsibility characterises the human agent's place within the large dogmatic structure. It is a definite place to be occupied *vis a vis* God, and something to which human beings are led by God,<sup>413</sup> becoming the *modus* which they inhabit in daily decisions and actions signifying their commitment to God. God's action - in this case his command - is prior to human action, and as such the agent's responsibility (*Verantwortung*) is understood as responsiveness (*Verantwortlichkeit*) to God. As an ethic, this means for Barth that the primary work of God is to address human beings in his Word - which Barth characterises as command - in order that they may act *in response*. As such, responsibility is a form of obedience to the divine command, and therefore has an orientation and focus which is beyond the human agent themselves. In Barth's thinking, human agency is constituted in this relationship: the Commander and the commanded.

Second, Barth invites his readers to comprehend human responsibility as something which must be enacted, but without indicating what that action must be or might look like. It is not simply his denotation of a dogmatic "position" in relation to God, but something which gets really and truly experienced and lived. Responsibility is not the same as action, precisely because at this point it also names our metaphysical relationship with God, but when we act we assume a kind of responsiveness to the divine command and so human activity has a new level of meaning.<sup>414</sup> This is so in all circumstances and all situations, not

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<sup>413</sup> *Ethics*, 49 (*Ethik I*, 82).

<sup>414</sup> *Ethics*, 82 (*Ethik I*, 133).

just particular moments of ethical dilemma: it is characteristic of the whole of human life. Though this is not very well developed in Barth's thinking at the point of delivering these lectures, I argued in chapter 2 that it was indeed a concern for Barth that Christian theological ethics involves human action - and so responsibility, naming as it does human relationship to God, must also name human action in some form or other. This idea is implicit, but as I argued earlier, Barth at least suggests it is important.

But Barth was clearly unhappy with significant aspects of his approach at this stage because he refused to allow the publication of the lectures in his lifetime. Nonetheless there are points of continuity from here to the special ethics of *CD II/2* some ten years later. The most obvious is the place of ethics within the wider discourse on dogmatic theology. But so too is the abiding presence of responsibility language, as I noted in chapter 3. The basic content of human responsibility is maintained from the *Ethics* lectures onwards: human action rooted in theological description. The major development is a theological and methodological shift placing greater emphasis on Christology, which has a radical affect on his approach to human responsibility. In the first instance, responsibility is applied not to human agents responding to what God has done - i.e. responsiveness - but to God himself assuming responsibility for human beings in Jesus Christ. I characterised this as God responding to Godself in the eternal decision to be God *pro nobis*. This seems to be a much more theologically satisfactory approach to human agency than the earlier attempt in the *Ethics* lectures, where responsibility is solely the act of the human agent who responds to God by living a life worthy of God. The new emphasis extends the theological foundation of human responsibility by arguing that it is not only constituted in God's prior activity it is also actualised by God in Christ.

If we were to stop here, we would make perfect sense of the critical school of thought which rejects Barth's method as not leading to meaningful human action. If God has enacted our responsibilities in Christ, then what's the point of anything *we* do? The trick, however, is to follow through with Barth, who argues that only when the theological orientation is correct can we speak of the human agent as being responsible. The point is that we can and may speak of responsible humanity, but we must do so analogously. Human action has genuine meaning when understood from this perspective. Here, Barth's particular emphasis on the Chalcedonian Definition is important: the full humanity of Christ, caught up as it is in God's own response to Godself in the eternal covenant, means that all human beings are caught up in responsibility to God. And precisely because our response to God is rooted in Christ, it is good news. Barth is here much more consistent with his dogmatic insights, and in particular the notion of covenant and election he develops in the earlier

section of *CD II*. There is then a very definite and concrete enactment of responsibility given in Jesus which is definitive for human responsibility in every sense, ontologically and practically, and to which human agents conform in their thinking and doing. The divine command is now not a distinctive event in the interaction of God and the human creature, it is the event of the human agent being confronted by the person of Jesus Christ - and as such confronted with a vision of their own true self - and understanding that that confrontation has an imperatival invitation.

It is important to be careful here, as Barth is, not merely to make Jesus Christ a good example to follow for the would-be responsible person: the idea of analogy is theologically richer than that. Human beings partake in the life of Jesus Christ through faith,<sup>415</sup> and in so doing are commissioned and enabled to be responsible creatures through faith. As such, the responsible agent is invited to enact the divine determination for them in Christ by living a life “in keeping with this disposing”<sup>416</sup>, i.e. by analogy - believing that which God has accomplished in Christ, allowing that belief to permeate your thinking and doing, and to allow this Christ-ward orientation to inform our decisions. In so doing the human agent becomes a responsible human being as one renewed by the gospel in thought and action.<sup>417</sup> She also becomes more genuinely human, as Gerald McKenny observes,

...[Barth] seeks a more genuinely human ethic, one that reverses what he sees as the modern human attempt to be like God and thus be inhuman. And it is in the humanity of Jesus Christ that this genuine human ethic is found, so that Christ is both the one in whom the divine being is disclosed as being for humanity, and the one in whom human correspondence to this divine goodness is fulfilled.<sup>418</sup>

Hence Barth’s argument that “it is as He makes Himself responsible for [humanity] that God makes [humanity] too responsible.”<sup>419</sup> As I argued in chapter 3, his particular understanding of the Chalcedonian Definition radically implicates all human beings in

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<sup>415</sup> See Adam Neder, *Participation in Christ: An Entry into Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

<sup>416</sup> *CD II/2*, 512 (*KD II/2*, 567).

<sup>417</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:20

<sup>418</sup> McKenny, *The Analogy of Grace...*, 88.

<sup>419</sup> *CD II/2*, 511 (*KD II/2*, 566).

Christ, and invites this analogous fideistic conformity to Christ: the exercise of which is the proper grounds for talking about human responsibility.<sup>420</sup>

Certainly critics such as Jonsen and Schweiker have pinpointed this kind of theological approach to human responsibility as one of the key problems with Barth's idea. It is perceived that it is simply not action guiding. In chapter 4 I suggested that it is unfair to argue that Barth is disinterested in action-guiding ethics because he discusses human responsibility in quite practical, concrete, ways in the special ethics of *CD* III/4. I pointed to Barth's concern for genuine enacted human freedom as the *leitmotiv* which undergirds responsibility as a series of concrete and particular activities each in relation to God, others, and self. These actual practices are themselves examples of responsible action as well as being indicative of what free, responsible, agency looks like. They include: prayer; sabbath observance; confession; relationships between sexes; parental relationships; relationship with neighbours; and self-care. This is certainly a step beyond the theological description of *CD* II/2, and work needs to be done to see how Barth's concerns for the divine command and Christ-centred human ontology relate to this (the task of the following section), but it is nonetheless grounded in theological terms, most obviously divine and human freedom to be and to enact one's being - though these two are established differently: human freedom is a derivative of divine freedom.

The emphasis on responsibility and particular practices in *CD* III/4 represents a significant development beyond the *suggestion* that practice is an important aspect of responsibility, as in the *Ethics* lectures. Here, human responsibility is directly connected to a threefold relationship with God, others, and self, and these relationships are, by definition, enacted. The responsible human being is required to relate. It is not merely a theological description of divine and human relationships, but an indicative theology of rightly ordered human activity in and around these relationships. In this, our relationship with God takes priority because it is the relationship in which we are constituted as human beings, and out of which flows a right relationship with others and with self. These are maintained and supported by particular responsible actions in the sphere of each relationship. This is also a new development. Whereas before some tentative sense of orders of creation was operative for Barth - "as a creaturely standard and basis for the knowledge of the will of the Creator"<sup>421</sup> - now Barth prefers to speak of "formed references" to the will of God, which turn us and orientate us appropriately, but which are not themselves the command which we

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<sup>420</sup> Barth makes it clear that as we are bound to Christ so too are we genuinely free. See *CD* II/2, 609 (*KD* II/2, 677).

<sup>421</sup> *Ethics*, 215 (*Ethik* I, 366).

must hear and to which we must respond. This is to overcome any sense that what we do as creatures, or that creation itself, might be “misunderstood as laws, precepts, or commands”<sup>422</sup>, as the orders of creation were. The command is always direct address from God to human beings. Following the Christological emphasis in Barth’s theology, only God can occupy the centre of Christian ethical reasoning. Therefore, the practices Barth describes as supportive of these spheres of relationship are indicative: formed references to the will and command of God encountered in Christ, but not themselves the substance of that encounter. They are, therefore, properly speaking response to the divine command. Human beings pray, therefore, precisely because in Christ we are commanded to acknowledge God in praise and thanksgiving, and invited by God to make our supplications.

### **5.3 Human responsibility in Barth’s moral theology**

The question I have been concerned to answer in this thesis is what does Barth understand by human responsibility? I now wish to answer it by turning to the relationship between the two aspects of his thought on this topic just outlined: the theological description of human responsibility offered in the context of *CD* II/2, and the indicative practices Barth describes in the context of *CD* III/4. The connection of these two is fundamental to an account of Barth’s responsibility-ethics in his mature theology. Since the whole approach of this thesis has been exegetical, and focused thus far on particular points in the Barth-*corpus*, my task now is to offer something bigger drawn from these particular instances. From my reading of the special ethics, there are two aspects to Barth’s understanding of human responsibility that come together to make a whole.

#### **5.3.1 The First Aspect: A Theology of Human Responsibility**

I contend that the material in *Church Dogmatics* II/2 is best understood as a theological description of human responsibility, rooted in the inner life of the Trinity and the divine covenant. As we have seen, Barth argues that God becomes responsible to Godself for both the existence and the well being of all creation. This divine responsibility is actualised in Jesus Christ. Any understanding of Barth’s account of human responsibility must therefore be rooted in divine responsibility. But contrary to critiques made by, for example, Robert Willis on human agency in general and William Schweiker on human responsibility in particular, in making this point so clearly Barth does not neglect the proper role and place of the human being as active agent. Rather, it is necessary for him to argue in this way to establish the proper place and agency of human beings by relativizing human responsibility

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<sup>422</sup> *CD* III/4, 29.

in relation to divine responsibility. The latter is the condition and context for the former. It is therefore meaningful to speak of the responsible human, as I have suggested above, only in terms of her *becoming* responsible in analogy to Christ. Barth remains on the attack against Kantian notions of responsibility that are about promoting the self as agent in isolation from God and others.

This means that Barth's basic orientation for human responsibility is Christ-ward, since his Chalcedonianism means that all of humanity is caught up in Christ's humanity. All human life and activity therefore takes on the characteristic of response to the divine will, as Christ is in some sense the enacted response of God to God's own willing and desiring of creation. God orders his being and action *pro nobis* in the eternal covenant, and this in turn constitutes human creatures as responsible before him. In responding to God positively, i.e. living in the light of Christ's redeeming work and embracing our creatureliness rather than trying to live as if God did not exist, human agents live in line with God's determination of them, and therefore in right relationship with him. This is to be regarded as the positive fulfilment of human responsibility.

Relationship is key to this theological description because it is governed by the inner life that God has within Godself in the eternal covenant decision. God's relationship with Godself is an ontological description rather than a sociological one, i.e. God relates as God is, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ relates to the Father as obedient Son, but also reprobate and righteous human being. Christ stands as responsible before the Father, and in Christ our humanity is perfected and welcomed to share in the life of God, not *as* God but as those caught up in the humanity of, and therefore responsibility of, Christ. Relationship and responsibility belong together, therefore, as two sides of the same ontological coin. There is no way for humanity to *be* aside from its being in and with God. And God wills not to be without humanity. This desire for relationship with humanity on the part of God is the condition for human existence. We therefore have our being in relationship to God. More specifically, we exist in and through Christ,<sup>423</sup> and stand with Christ, our fellow human being, in responsibility to the Father. On our human-side of this, we then are invited to a responsible life that images Christ's responsibility. We are enabled by the Holy Spirit to enact this responsibility as we maintain right relationship with Christ Jesus.

The theological description of human responsibility therefore has ontological significance: it is not simply about ethical behaviour, but acting in accordance with the reality of God's determination of us; about occupying the "space" that is properly assigned to human agents as creatures willed and ordered by God, and learning to live and move within

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<sup>423</sup> Colossians 1:1-20.

it. Part of the task of a theological description of human responsibility is therefore about orientating human beings within that relationship, turning our attention away from ourselves and towards God in order to discern that for which we were created and the appropriate ways to inhabit that determination. By contradistinction, an ethics of irresponsibility would be to ignore or overrule the Christian claim that we are creatures, and as such to make ourselves masters of our own destiny. This was the bourgeois Christianity of early twentieth century Europe against which Barth determined to think with a greater level of theological robustness. Hence the divine command motif remains important throughout Barth's career: moral information comes to us externally; it is not the product of our own willing and doing. Humanity, rightly ordered, is determined not self-determining. As such, the divine command will not support the *status quo*. It is summons and vocation: we are not permitted to weigh the merits of God's will, but only to fall into line with it, since to decide upon its veracity and significance is to open ourselves up to destruction. Human beings are not permitted to be self-centred but God-centred in Christ; this is the essence of human responsibility as Barth sees it. In so doing we discover and fulfil our real humanity. Following Barth's Christological emphasis, we live analogously by saying yes to the divine will - the divine determination of us - and no to our own self-willing.

This is Barth's theological rationale for human responsibility. It is not the whole picture, but it locates the issue theologically and gives appropriate space in which the commanded and responsible human agent may act. It is not the whole picture for exactly the reasons that critics such as Schweiker and Jonsen articulate: it is heavily theoretical, and needs some indication of its practicality. This is the concern of the second aspect.

### 5.3.2 The Second Aspect: Embedding the Theological Description

The second aspect of Barth's ethics of responsibility, I contend, is best understood not as a separate strand of Barth's thought, but as the embedding of the theological description in the lives of Christian people.<sup>424</sup> To "embed" in this sense is to show forth the truthfulness of the theology in the patterns of life and behaviour we adopt for ourselves: to inhabit the moral space that is informed by the theological description of responsible humanity and

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<sup>424</sup> The idea of "embedded" theology has been around for quite a while now, usually connected to theological reflection and frequently found in introductory guides to theological study. For example, see the distinction between embedded theology and deliberative theology in Howard Stone and James Duke, *How to Think Theologically* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006). More recently there has been a recognition that every human agent is embedded in a particular context, and that this exercises significant influence over the way we make moral decisions. My line of argument here is that it is the external, theological description, that ought to be our primary orientational influence; I'm therefore theoretically in keeping with studies that have recognised the interrelation between the metaphysical and the concrete, and the way embedding may be conceived as a movement from the former to the latter. See for example, Christopher Steck, 'Re-embedding Moral Agency' in *Journal of Religious Ethics* 41, no. 2 (2013), 332-353.

translate it into particular practices in the concrete reality of our existence. But to embed in this sense is not to be given a series of prescribed activities one must follow. Barth instead offers a series of indicative practices that help us embed the theological description of responsibility ontically, to maintain the Christ-ward orientation, and to be open to the ongoing reception of the command of God. Such indicative practices are to be understood from the human-side of the equation as helping us to maintain and inhabit our responsibility, and thus to navigate the “responsible space” in which we are situated on the human side of the covenant. We do not cease to be responsible before God if we neglect our Christ-ward orientation or our openness to the divine command. Instead, we fail to inhabit our humanity as it has been determined by God. Indicative practices rooted in the theological description of the responsible agent, enable us to participate in the fulness of human being.

There are some points of contact between the two aspects of responsibility I am describing in Barth’s thought that help me to substantiate the overall point.

1) Orientation. As I argued in chapter 3, a key element of Barth’s understanding of human responsibility in *CD II/2* is its Christ-ward orientation. His constant assertion that human responsibility is analogous to divine responsibility enacted in Christ, means that the proper focus of human responsibility is the relationship between the individual human agent and Christ, in whom their responsibility is constituted. This seems, to me, to be what is underlying the kind of freedom and responsibility discussed in §53, *Freedom Before God*. Here Barth focuses on the practices of sabbath observance, confession, and prayer as indicators of “the responsibility that... God claims from [human beings].”<sup>425</sup> In these, more than in other practices, we are re-orientated, that it is we are turned towards God; we make ourselves open to God’s will for us; we lay aside our own willing and desiring; we “address Him personally.”<sup>426</sup> These are very deliberate acts, though Barth is not - as I suggested in chapter 4 - prescriptive about how to pray, or in which church one ought to observe the sabbath, or how confession should be made. But he is aware of the involvement of our inclination and will in these acts, and the discipline of obedience that is of central importance. To pray requires time, space, and thought. To confess requires reflection, honesty, and speech. To observe the sabbath means making plans with our time and money, the will to be alongside others in faith and fellowship, and to be open to them, and God in them, in community. In this sphere of the God-ward relationship, our responsibility is

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<sup>425</sup> *CD III/4*, 47.

<sup>426</sup> *CD III/4*, 112.

embedded in these activities. We respond to the good news of Jesus Christ by turning our lives, time and attention, to him.

But this is not supposed to be binding or restrictive. Barth labels these activities under the banner of freedom. Human agents are properly free only in this primary Christ-ward responsibility; we live out our freedom only as we pursue this relationship and these indicative practices help us to do so. Barth writes, “He does not will to be God without us, or to exist as such...He wills and demands of us that which is proper to us in relation to Him...”<sup>427</sup> As such, these activities are in themselves our responses to God, and also enable our future fulfilment of our responsibility. In turning ourselves to God today, we also prepare ourselves to do it tomorrow, and thereafter. Responsibility enacted in this way, maintained in these particular acts, affects the whole of life as it is lived. This is why it is important to regard these activities as indicative: they are not the sum of responsibility in the Christ-ward direction. Daily prayer, weekly Communion, and monthly confession do not fulfil the requirement for a whole life orientated toward God - a whole life lived in responsibility, for which I have shown Barth to consistently argue from 1928 onwards. They are indicative because they interrupt our patterns of self-willing and doing, and are themselves moments of responsible activity which undergird and influence the rest of life lived in responsible freedom.

We get a sense of this when we consider that the Christ-ward orientation is not a blinker to the rest of creation, and in particular to fellow humanity. Barth emphasises this primary, Christ-ward, responsibility in order to properly locate responsibility to other human creatures. This is a secondary responsibility, which is constituted in the primary Christ-ward orientation and influenced by the indicative practices of that sphere. Barth writes, “As God the Creator calls man to Himself, He also directs him to his fellow-man.”<sup>428</sup> Our relationships with fellow humans are rooted in our upward relationship. In this sphere, the indicative practices that Barth offers are about maintaining particular strands of human relationship in the light of the Christ-ward orientation. Barth discusses three concrete examples of human relationships: male-female relationships; the relationships between parents and children; and the relationships between neighbours. He addresses each out of the primary concern that human beings are responsible before God and this will impact their actions towards others. A good example of this is his discussion of sexual intercourse, where Barth makes the point several times that what matters is not self-gratification or sexual exploration, but remembering that human beings “live in the presence of and in

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<sup>427</sup> *CD III/4*, 104.

<sup>428</sup> *CD III/4*, 116.

responsibility to God.”<sup>429</sup> To remember this responsibility affects our practices in the present activity of sexual intercourse - our purpose and performance changes. A little later, in the context of marriage, he argues that the “usual inequality of man and woman in marriage” is a failure on the part of the man, normally, to remember his “responsibility ... that their fellowship should always become a fellowship in freedom...”<sup>430</sup> It is usually the failure of the man to seek the freedom and flourishing of the woman that leads to inequality, and Barth can make this claim because of the prior Christ-ward responsibility he sees as incumbent upon all people in their relationships, and the failure of the man to live in accordance with it.

The primary sphere of responsibility is relationship to God, and so Barth’s concern when describing indicative practices is to make sure that the theological description of this Christ-ward responsibility can be embedded in real lived-life. But it implicates human creatures in other forms of relationship too, extending Christ-ward responsibility in second and third spheres of relationship to others, and to oneself. As such, rightly ordered relationship with our neighbours and ourselves is the pursuit of those who know their life to be the enactment of response to this divine determination, and recognise themselves as responsible agents before God in Christ.

2) Command. In Barth’s theological description of human responsibility, the divine command plays the same role as it did in the earlier *Ethics* lectures, viz. the controlling centre of Christian ethics. For Barth the impetus for Christian morality lies in the fact that God addresses us, and our lives take on the character of response to that address. In the *Ethics* lectures the commanding-address is the work of the divine Word spoken in particular moments directly to individuals. It is powerful, arresting the attention of those to whom it is spoken and from which there is no escape: the hearer makes a response either positively or negatively, but there is no neutral position. In *CD II/2* the Christological emphasis adapts this earlier theology of address, such that Jesus Christ embodies the divine command. He is God’s Word.<sup>431</sup> As such, the commanded human being knows herself to be so because she encounters Christ: just as she knows herself to be responsible as she encounters Christ. In terms of theology, this locates the divine command with greater dogmatic precision and also

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<sup>429</sup> *CD III/4*, 132.

<sup>430</sup> *CD III/4*, 193. This is a particular instance of softening of cultural norms in mid-twentieth century Europe, but does not detract much from the sexism of the rest of Barth’s account. The point here is not to examine whether the way Barth employs his theological description of responsibility is accurate, but to note simply that he does so and marriage is an instance of that.

<sup>431</sup> The influence of John’s gospel on Barth’s theology is significant, and well documented. Barth lectured on the text of the gospel. See also John Webster, ‘Witness to the Word: Karl Barth’s Lectures of the Gospel of John’ in his *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 65-85.

opens up a doorway for Barth to make clear the role of the hearing human being as one who is responsible - since both the divine address and human answer are enacted in Christ Jesus. Conformity to Christ is therefore the key activity of the human being who knows themselves to be addressed and commanded.

As I indicated in chapter 3, Barth does not treat encounter with Jesus Christ as an historical event or a theological principle on which to build ongoing moral reflection. This is not akin to a past testimony or “conversion experience.” Encounter with the divine Word is an ongoing event, a particular happening at moments in life that comes to characterise the whole of life. We encounter Christ afresh, and are reminded of our status and position as responsible creatures before him. Our responsibility is the response we make in the moment of divine encounter, and the ongoing responses we make to him in the daily run of human existence. Barth writes, “we are made responsible as we have heard his voice, and it is our responsibility to continue to hear this voice.”<sup>432</sup> We have been addressed and commanded once, we are addressed and commanded now, and will be addressed and commanded again. This constitutes us as responsible before God, and ensures our ongoing responsibility to God.

This ongoing hearing and responding to Christ as the commanding address of God relates directly in two ways to the embedded responsibility which is in view in this discussion. First, our response to God will always be embedded in as much as his command to us will always be in the concrete reality of our human existence. There is no distinction to be made between the sacred and the secular in this case, at least, because God addresses and commands us entirely and so the entirety of our existence is in view. Since to exist is to act, we will always be engaged in some kind of responsive action. We embed the theological description of human responsibility in this way, by living before God in the concrete reality of our creaturely existence. Second, and more importantly for this discussion, the indicative practices Barth presents serve in some way to make us open to hear and receive the commanding address. In the sphere of Christ-ward relationship, for example, the indicative practices of sabbath observance, confession, and prayer help us to turn our attention to Christ and to seek to encounter him. Since to encounter Christ is to know oneself addressed and commanded by God, then orientating ourselves by way of these indicative practices aids us in our responsibility to continue to hear his commanding address. Moreover, these practices are themselves response to the divine command. In his discussion of the Lord’s prayer, for example, Barth argues that we pray “with and after Christ”<sup>433</sup> and that this is

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<sup>432</sup> *CD* II/2, 761.

<sup>433</sup> *CD* III/4, 108.

“what God wills...”<sup>434</sup> Christ then is for us an imperative to pray, precisely because we are caught up with him in his prayers to the Father. Again, his responsibility elicits our responsibility before God.

The idea of responsibility never becomes a substantive principle in itself, but rather a way of conceiving human existence in relation to the divine will. Because the flip-side of responsibility is relationship, the idea of the divine address to human beings holds within it the notion of relationality: speech, reception, and response. It also means that no time of prayer, sabbath observance, or confession will be the same. Nor will any relational encounter between human beings, or with oneself. This is true because each concrete moment in which a human agent embeds these relationships in particular practices is a fresh moment of re-orientation to Christ, and a new openness to his commanding address.

### 5.3.3 Summary

Barth’s account of human responsibility may be thought of as a two sided coin: on the one side a theological description of Christologically conditioned relational ontology, i.e. that humans are beings-in-relationship to God in Christ, and this establishes and affects relationships with one another and self. The relationship between humanity and God in Christ is ontologically basic because it constitutes, enacts, and enables true human being in every sense; and on the other side is the embedding of theological description in concrete human lives through the enactment of indicative practices which orientate us towards Christ, and one another and self, and which make us open to receiving God’s commanding-address. Barth’s understanding of human responsibility is therefore both an ontological category - the proper determination of human beings in relation to God - and also a *modus* of human life, a way of conducting oneself and enacting one’s agency that is fitting to the reality of its divine determination in Christ.

## 5.4 Revisiting Barth’s critics

In chapter 1, I outlined Albert Jonsen and William Schwiker’s critiques of Barth’s understanding of human responsibility. These two represent the most comprehensive scholarship on Christian ethics of responsibility in general, and engage with Barth as part of that - each is critical of his theological ethics, and each rejects his understanding of human responsibility. In the same chapter I note that both scholars make a similar methodological mistake when reading Barth’s responsibility-ethics, which is to focus too narrowly in their exegesis and to give account of only one aspect of Barth’s approach, in this case the special

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<sup>434</sup> CD III/4, 93.

ethics of *CD II/2* only. This narrowing of vision encouraged me to expand my investigation into Barth's understanding of human responsibility, and to examine a much wider range of texts than has been done before.

In order to test the depth of my account of Barth's understanding of human responsibility, and to allow for a bit of "push-back" against the existing critiques of his work in this area, I shall in this section revisit Jonsen and Schweiker's scholarly critiques, and explore the ways in which my reading of Barth's understanding of human responsibility might be brought into dialogue with them critically and constructively.

#### 5.4.1 Revisiting Jonsen

Jonsen's critique of Barth was to suggest that his overly theological approach to human responsibility was ultimately a problem for Christian ethics, because it could not be translated into action guiding principles. Jonsen categorised Barth's work as "theological affirmation" of human responsibility, and his challenge was to "translate the propositions of faith into philosophical propositions"<sup>435</sup> in order that they might become useful for Christian ethics in practice. Jonsen's objection is that Barth's discussion has "nothing to do with practical questions..."<sup>436</sup> So far I have suggested that Jonsen's judgement is hindered by his reliance on his reading of what I have called the theological description of human responsibility, rooted and grounded in Barth's Christology, and his failure to think with Barth about the ways this description can be enacted. Here I want to develop that criticism further by making three points.

First, Jonsen rejects theology as a legitimate source of Christian moral reasoning. His criticism of Barth's "propositions of faith" exposes his prejudice that faith-based ethics is required to translate itself into more generally acceptable forms of reasoning in order to be taken seriously, even by *Christian* ethicists. This seems like a strange request. If, as Barth seems to think, part of the task of Christian ethics, and in this case an account of human responsibility within it, is to describe the reality of human existence and human agency, then the Christian must acknowledge that the Church has always spoken about true humanity by speaking about Jesus Christ. This is part of the credal nature of the Church. And since, as Barth notes, Christ is not a principle - nor can a principle be made from Christ, that we might move beyond encounter with Christ - it seems that the only way for Christian ethics to proceed is theologically, i.e. from within the integrity of its confession. The difficulty this poses for Jonsen is as much about the application of ethics as it is about the method: if we

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<sup>435</sup> Jonsen, *Responsibility in Modern Religious Ethics*, 83.

<sup>436</sup> Jonsen, *Responsibility in Modern Religious Ethics*, 84.

go forward theologically, not philosophically, then the “reach” of Christian moral reflection is much less. This is surely true. But Christian ethics must proceed with integrity. Theology is the language we use to speak about God in Christ.

My second point relates to this. Part of the underlying argument here is about the “vision” of humanity we wish to paint. All ethics proceeds with some kind of account of true human being and doing in mind, but this is a major variable. Each ethicist will have his or her vision of true humanity, or at least touch points that indicate what this might be like. For Barth, this account is God-given and can only be rooted in revelation, more specifically in the person of Jesus Christ. When Jonsen turns to the material in *CD II/2*, I suggest he turns to the theological description of the responsible human - the vision of what it is to be a human being - so what he rejects is not Barth’s practical ethics of responsibility, but the bigger description that informs practice. This is, for Barth, a true description - i.e. he thinks that in turning to Christ we see something of ourselves and understand more of what it is to be a human being, elect in Christ and determined by God. What matters in every ethic is that the vision gets translated into practice. Jonsen is concerned for this, and so is Barth.

My third point then, is that Barth does indeed translate the vision into something more concrete, as I have suggested in section 5.3. He points to a series of embedded practices that grow out of the theological description and which revolve around three relationships: Godward, other-ward, and self-ward. The Godward relationship determines the other two, and the indicative practices that underpin it serving to inform the character of the whole of human life. These are grounded in the dense theology of *CD II/2*, without the need to translate that into philosophical principles. What Barth advocates, and where Jonsen loses his nerve, is confidence in the ability of theology not only to speak about God in Christ, but as it does so to speak about real human life also.

This last observation is quite ironic when one considers the conclusion of Jonsen’s work. His own articulation of human responsibility is the prospect of “the human person, essentially a decision maker and creative moralist, working in community to find those forms of rules and principles which will best promote and protect the growth of human life in depth and breadth...”<sup>437</sup> For Barth, the promotion and protection of human life can only be sought of God, and in particular God’s constitution of true humanity in Jesus Christ. The debate between Jonsen and Barth is therefore instructive for all considerations of how best to do Christian ethics: where do we locate the content of our moral concepts, and in particular our anthropology?

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<sup>437</sup> Jonsen, *Responsibility in Modern Religious Ethics*, 227.

#### 5.4.2 Revisiting Schweiker

Schweiker's critique of Barth rotates around his discomfort with Barth's concern for the divine command, and its apparent undermining of human agency. He suggests that Barth's focus on divine-human encounter is to prioritise the "Other" to the detriment of the responsible self.<sup>438</sup> This means that the role of the human agent is never morally basic; instead revelation is. This fundamentally undoes the order in which Schweiker thinks the moral problem should be considered, viz. "how a self is to be responsible, that is, how a self is to respond to others."<sup>439</sup> In a telling section of his book, he explores how in the contemporary Western world we are to seek out the sources of responsibility - i.e. that which informs our sense of being responsible agents - "after theism and metaphysics."<sup>440</sup> This is not Schweiker's proposal, but rather his recognition that the context in which we think about human responsibility is that of post-Christendom, post-modern, culture. His rejection of Barth's approach is therefore a rejection of the denial of the human subject. In response, Schweiker develops his account of integrated responsibility, in which responsibility is defined as the concern for the integrity of value and practices - i.e. the enquiry into the relationship of belief and practice.

There are two points to be made in response to this, highlighting the way a more developed understanding of Barth's theology denies Schweiker's criticisms.

First, it should be clear from my argument in section 5.3 that Barth has a very definite space for the human agent, but that this space is defined in relation to God and in particular in relation to the covenant. This is not the same as Schweiker arguing that encounter is morally basic, since the encounter is not ontologically constitutive of human being, but rather of the human being's perception of their position in relation to God and therefore of their appropriation of responsibility. This is a direct challenge to Schweiker's underlying assertion that human beings own and enact their responsibility in and of themselves; that agency is not constituted but a given. Only if Schweiker assumes this, can his critique that encounter undermines self-responsibility be legitimate for him. The real debate between Barth and Schweiker therefore concerns what human agency is and how it is constituted before God and fellow humans. Barth locates this in Christology, first, and embeds it in indicative practices - as I have already indicated.

This relates to my second point, which is that Schweiker thinks that responsibility is essentially subjective: it is about the co-inherence and integrity of one's beliefs and practices,

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<sup>438</sup> Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, 102.

<sup>439</sup> Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, 103.

<sup>440</sup> Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, 189.

and that Barth attacks the subjective self. But against Schweiker, my reading of Barth offers us a theologically robust understanding of human agency orientated not towards the integrity of one's own beliefs, but the reality that human beings are subjects of divine affection and as such are ordered and determined. This determination is, for Barth, the fulfilment of our true humanity, rather than a threat to it. So, human responsibility is genuinely before God, and genuinely for the sake of inhabiting and enacting real humanity. It is about flourishing as a human person.

### **5.5 Barth, Responsibility, and Christian Discipleship**

I have argued in this thesis that Barth offers us an account of human responsibility involving a dogmatic description of the responsible human creature as one located *vis-a-vis* God, by God, through the enactment of the covenant between God and humanity in Jesus Christ. The covenant is the context for human action, and Barth's dogmatic description of it is a moral ontology - delineating the space that is proper to the human agent. The ethical nature of this space according to Barth, I have argued, is best described with recourse to the language of responsibility. In Christ human agents are positioned as creatures responsible before God. If this dogmatic description were all that Barth had to say on the matter of human responsibility, then the criticisms of responsibility-ethicists such as Jonsen and Schweiker - that Barth's account of human responsibility is of no practical value - would be justified. But I have sought to highlight the ways in which Barth suggests the theological description of responsibility might impact human agents in the concrete circumstances of their existence. In particular, I argued that Barth maintains the Godward orientation that is proper to human responsibility by advocating prayer, sabbath observance, and confession. From these practices flow practices relating to the care of others and the self.

The dual aspect of Barth's account of human responsibility is instructive in a number of ways.

First, "without vision, the people perish."<sup>441</sup> That is to say Barth demonstrates the importance of moral vision in the construction of an account of responsible action that is also ontically viable. His outworking of the possibility of human responsibility is guided and shaped by his understanding of what it really means to be human. His vision of human agency is established in the two-natures Christology of Chalcedon, applied in the particular context of the covenant between God and humanity actualised in Jesus Christ, and the recognition that in Christ humanity is caught up in permanent relationship with God. This relationship is the proper determination of the human creature - her moral ontology - and is

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<sup>441</sup> Proverbs 29: 18.

the *telos* of her existence. In doing so, Barth opposes any ethics that seeks to bypass the theological vision by becoming overly pragmatic and action based, especially and in particular any Christian account of ethics that avoids theological reflection. He is here recognising that a vision of what human life is and ought to be is necessary for the task of ethics because without it no clear sense of how the agent ought to proceed in life can be articulated. This point is made more interesting after my comparison of Barth with Jonsen and Schweiker. What stands out here is the fact that the fundamental disagreement between the sides concerns the kind of vision of humanity they employ.

Second, Barth's double-aspect approach to human responsibility allays fears that dogmatic ethics can only ever be descriptive in nature, and thus never provide any indication of what human beings actually ought to do. This is the question of viability. Of great importance in any ethics is its ability to so inform reflection and deliberation that it will in the end result in some kind of action (or inaction, as the active form of abstinence). Human creatures are active in a world in which our choices and decisions make a difference to the course of our lives and the lives of those around us: therefore it matters that the dogmatic content of our faith is not disengaged from the requirement placed upon us to act, and to act well. I am arguing that Barth's approach to human responsibility gives us a particular model for deriving ontic agency from dogmatic (ontological) description. It works because Barth believes the dogmatic material describes all of reality, caught up in God through Christ and given its own particular determination through Christ. In so thinking, Barth provides us with sufficient material to indicate the practices that will help shape our lives in relation to our true ontology. Of course, Barth is unwilling to be exhaustive in his account of ontic agency - the divine command mitigates against this, and requires him to acknowledge that God is God. But the core practices derived from the ontological description give life a practical threefold structure - Godward, other-ward, and self-ward - and recognise the complexity of human relationships. Barth is confident in the ability of dogmatic theology to speak to concrete human beings about how they may live.

Third, Barth's account of what I have termed "indicative practices" suggests strongly that fundamental religious practices are ethically valuable. Sabbath observance, prayer, and confession interrupt the course of our natural self-obsession and remind us of our true standing before God and in relation to one another. They re-establish us as responsible creatures. There is, therefore, no distinction between the secular and the sacred: our whole lives must turn to God in prayer as we turn in prayer at particular instances; our whole life is interrupted as we observe the sabbath day; our whole life is in view when we confess Christ's lordship in the recognition of our sinfulness. These practices keep us plugged into the vision

of how things are in Christ, and help us anticipate its eschatological fulfilment. They form us as responsible creatures in recognition of the fact that this is the situation in which we have been placed by God's determination of us in Christ.

The three taken together - the vision of human life offered by dogmatic theology; the recognition that this must make a difference to what we do; and the part 'religious practices' play in moral formation - suggest to me some kind of manifesto for discipleship. They are suggestive of what is necessary to live as a Christian, and to do ethics as a faithful Christian: to be instructed by the dogmatic proclamation of the good news of the covenant in Jesus Christ, and to embrace God's gracious determination of human beings in him by acting in ways that correlate with that as hearers of the commanding-Word. Or in short, to respond to the grace of God by living responsibly.

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