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# "What Ought We To Do? Normativity in Barth's Ethics of Creation"

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“What Ought We To Do?”  
Normativity in Barth’s Ethics of Creation

SCOTT PAETH

INTRODUCTION

THERE ARE THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN KNOWN TO ENTER THE *CHURCH Dogmatics* never to be heard from again. Its labyrinthine structure makes any examination of its contents an amazingly complex task. Thus, any examination of Barth’s thought must always focus in on one small part of the whole or else risk becoming hopelessly lost in the seemingly endless corners around which one might decide to peer. That being the case, I make no pretensions in this article to offer an exhaustive account of Barth’s ethical thought. My objective is to explore one particular issue raised by his approach to the problem of theological ethics. There have been several recent books which ably explore aspects of Barth’s moral theology. My intention in this paper is to open discussion on an issue touched upon but lightly in these other treatments—namely the problem of “normativity” in theological ethics.<sup>1</sup>

What do I mean here by “normativity”? In brief, normativity is the name given to those aspects of ethical thought which guide and judge the actions of moral agents. It is, in other words, the description of those *norms* according to which moral agents *act*. Thus, for example, the chief norm according to which a utilitarian acts is related to the principle that the greatest good should be done for the greatest number. Or again, a Kantian would work according to the norms set out in the Categorical Imperative. Whatever it is

<sup>1</sup>This article was originally written for a course in the theology of Karl Barth at Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ. My thanks to Professor Daniel Migliore for his comments and instruction

according to which the moral agent judges his or her own actions as being right or wrong, good or bad, falls under the heading of normativity.

At first glance, Barth's ethics seems to have a very simple and straightforward norm. He insists that all theological ethics has to do with the "command of God" (Barth II/2:516). However, by the command of God, Barth does not mean to imply a deontological or rule-based system of ethics. Rather, for Barth, as I will proceed to explain, the command of God is something which is given to the agent by God in the particular situation in which the agent finds him or herself. But the question arises of how such a normative principle can actually be either reliable or efficacious for moral decision-making.

This is especially interesting in terms of his contrast between the scriptural norm and what he calls "exceptional cases" of the command of God. In light of the method he employs, on what grounds is he able to argue that these exceptional cases are also constitutive of the command of God? Looking at his discussion of "freedom for life" in *Church Dogmatics* III/4, section 55, we will critically explore how he applies his method in those situations that call for ethical decisions "at the edge of life." But let us turn first to the question of Barth's ethical method.

#### BARTH'S ETHICAL METHODOLOGY

Barth makes a distinction in the *Church Dogmatics* between "general" and "special" ethics. His discussion of the general basis of ethics is found in the second half of II/2 in the doctrine of God, while the discussion of the special basis of ethics is reserved for III/4, under the doctrine of Creation.

We turn first to his discussion of ethics in general, in which he provides a useful summary of his method, using the question: "what ought we to do?" as the organizing principle. What ought we to do, he wonders, in light of the gracious action of God toward us in Jesus Christ. But before we turn to consider the way in which he utilizes this question, let us first consider a few preliminary remarks about what ethics is not according to Barth.

#### What Ethics is Not

Nigel Biggar points out that Barth's frequent attacks on "ethics" in the *Church Dogmatics* is not an attack on ethics as such, but rather an attack on

a specific way of doing ethics, which had been predominant in the modern period. That is, an ethic which is based solely on the will of the autonomous individual: “[Barth] uses ‘ethics’ to refer to the subjective idealist conception of the making of moral judgments as an autarkic process; that is, as a process in which the human subject is absolutely self-determinative” (Biggar 1993:7–8).

Such an ethics, as Barth sees the case, is based on a rebellion against God and an assertion of the individual will against the will of God. Thus, his attack on “ethics” is to be construed not as an attack on ethics generally. Rather, ethics can never be seen as a free-standing subject for general reflection, but instead is firmly rooted in the task of dogmatics. Thus, as he discusses this in relation to the doctrine of God, Barth writes: “The doctrine of God must be expressly defined and developed and interpreted as that which it also is at every point, that is to say, *ethics*” (II/2:513). Specifically in II/2, Barth derives his discussion of ethics from his previous discussion of the election of humanity in Jesus Christ as God’s covenant partner.

But if this is so, then any ethics which seeks to set itself up on some other basis than the electing grace of God in Jesus Christ must be rejected. Otherwise humanity puts itself in the position of God by trying to determine for itself what constitutes the right and the good under God: “[M]an is not content simply to *be* the answer to this question by the grace of God. He wants to be like God. He wants to know of himself (as God does) what is good and evil. He therefore wants to give this answer himself and of himself” (517). Barth asserts that the proper attitude of humanity is not that of seeking to *know* the good as something independent of God, but rather of trusting in God’s goodness and acting responsibly in light of God’s electing grace.

This precludes, Barth argues, not only the apologetic approach to ethics of someone like Schleiermacher and the Roman Catholic “two story” approach to ethics, but also any philosophical approach which would seek to argue that Christianity and philosophical ethics speak different languages and thus philosophy has nothing to learn from the Christian approach. Rather, he argues that Christianity needs to assert itself as the true source of all legitimate ethical reflection (520–535). Any philosophical ethics which attempts to set itself against its theological basis in the election of God is bound to fail: “In so far as a non-theological ethics has for its content a humanity which is grounded in itself and discovers and proclaims itself, theo-

logical ethics will have to deny the character of this humanity as humanity and consequently the character of this ethics as ethics" (541).

Additionally, Barth rejects those ethical systems which seek to establish the command of God as anything which can be captured and contemplated apart from the sovereign grace of God. Even if one agrees with Barth that all ethics arise from the command of God, Barth would not allow that to imply that the command of God is something which is now free-standing and exists apart from God's active involvement in the life of God's people. Thus, one is not permitted to assert such an ethic as either a deontological set of rules which stand above us, or as a teleological endpoint which we may clearly see and toward which we may strive.

In contrast to the various options which Barth considers and rejects, Barth's own approach to ethics is rooted in the fact of God's present acting and commanding: "The first thing that theological ethics has to show, and to develop as a basic and all-comprehensive truth, is the fact and extent that the command of God is an event" (II/2:548). This is the controversial thesis which makes Barth's ethical thinking so elusive. As God is the free God of grace, God is not limited by God's past commands, but is always and presently commanding. Furthermore, on the side of humanity: "Concrete human action thus proceeds under a divine order which persists in all the differentiations of individual cases. It too, takes place in a connexion which is sure though it can seldom if ever be demonstrated" (III/4:17).

But in light of this ethical actualism, how is one to determine what actions ought to be taken in any particular situation? Or rather, by what method do we go about determining what is the command of God, whether what we have is truly the divine command, or how others may or may not be acting according to the divine command? What are the criteria based upon which we make those determinations? In order to clarify this, let us now turn to discuss Barth's own method before we turn to see how he applies this method.

#### What ought we to do?

One point which we need to make explicit at the outset, if only briefly, is Barth's understanding of the human agent as one who is *responsible* in light of the grace of God. He writes: "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 a command” (II/2:641). Indeed, it is the idea of responsibility which makes Christian ethics as such distinctive: “The idea of responsibility, rightly understood, is known only to Christian ethics. This alone teaches a true and proper confrontation of man” (II/2:642). Why is this?

In light of the free and sovereign grace of God, which commands us in every moment, the central question as Barth sees it is whether or not we will respond faithfully to that command. A predicate of this assertion, which we will explore in more detail later, is that there is no question on our part of *ignorance* of the divine command. Rather, we are without excuse. Barth explicitly rejects an appeal to ambiguity as to the command of God, writing:

The objection that the divine will is not known to us, or not sufficiently known, in its definiteness is not only futile but cunning and deceitful because it makes a virtue or an excuse out of our need, because it raises our unwillingness to hear carefully what is precisely spoken to us as those to whom God is present and near, to the status of a necessity on the basis of which we can withdraw into the supposed neutrality of an arbitrary questioning as to the good, so that we are acquitted in advance if in our arbitrary choice between the many possibilities open to us we may not coincide with the will of God. Our very retirement into this neutral position is in itself the signal of a perverse decision, an act of disobedience and unbelief (II/2:670).

Ethical reflection, then, cannot proceed as though its task were to discern through the fog of human finitude that which it is God wills. Rather, it is solely a question of obedience to the command which we have heard.

But this is not to imply that the possibility of hearing the divine command does not itself require something of us. For if we are to be responsible in our action, we must engage in prayerful ethical reflection. This reflection is centered on the question of “what ought we to do?” Barth organizes his discussion of moral reflection around this question.

He begins by considering the question of *what* we ought to do. The importance of the *what* is that it indicates that we are asking the question in the first place of God. Thus we are admitting our ignorance in humility and recognizing our need of the divine command. We thus recognize that “our previous answers cannot consist of more than hypothesis and opinion. They cannot be a knowledge of the will and command of God” (II/2:646). In light

of this we must always come to God anew, not presuming to know in advance what God will command of us:

When we honestly ask: *What* ought we to do?, we approach God as those who are ignorant in and with all they already know, and those who are ignorant in and with all that they already know, and stand in dire need of divine instruction and conversion. We are then ready, with a view to our next decision, to bracket and hold in reserve all that we think we know concerning the rightness and goodness of our past and present decisions, all the rules and axioms, however good, all the inner and outer laws and necessities under which we have hitherto placed ourselves and perhaps do so again. None of these has an unlimited claim to be valid again to-day as it was valid yesterday. None of them is identical with the divine command (II/2:646).

This comports with what Barth says later when he writes that “for God every encounter with every man at every historical moment is of sufficient individual importance for him on His side to encounter man in His command in a unique way, for which there is neither precedence nor recurrence” (III/4:16).

But in light of this, it is necessary to ask as well “what *ought* we to do?” Barth acknowledges the need for an imperative which directs our action in all ethical decisions. Yet this imperative, unlike Kant’s Categorical Imperative, is something which cannot find its location in our own selves, but must come from outside of us: “If there is an *ought*, it must not be the product of my own will, but touch from outside the whole area of what I can will of myself” (II/2:651). The issue is not whether we may prove or establish what the imperative is, but only whether we will or will not obey it. The question that we must ask ourselves when the emphasis is on this “ought” is not what it is that we believe will be in our own best interests, nor what we believe is in the best interests of our fellow humans or the world in general. Rather, the imperative must be rooted solely in the command of God.

But what is the source of this imperative? In light of his previous assertion that the command of God comes directly to us in our situation, what is the role of the scriptural commands, such as the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount? Barth’s approach to these questions is first to deny that scripture is generally in the business of handing out general moral principles. Rather, Barth considers the fact that one finds commands of God everywhere in scripture, and most of them are directed to-

ward individuals in individual situations—such as the command to Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and multiply,” or the command to Abraham to leave his country.

However, Barth does acknowledge that, at least in the cases of the Decalogue and Sermon on the Mount, we have general instructions to larger groups of people. But even so, Barth refuses to see these commands as imperatives in the sense of universal ethical norms. One cannot look backward to these commands and assert them as God’s will then, now, and forever. Rather, Barth sees them as “indicative.” They point to the state of redeemed humanity in the Kingdom of God rather than to the present situation of God’s commanding of fallen individuals in a fallen world. They are “summaries” rather than straightforward imperatives (II/2: 682). Speaking specifically of the Sermon on the Mount, he writes:

The Sermon on the Mount reckons with this powerful and fatal appearance by saying of those that weep that they *shall* be comforted, of the meek that they *shall* possess the earth, of those who hunger and thirst after righteousness that they *shall* be filled (Mt. 5: 4f.). That it is only an appearance, it attests by the fact that its overwhelming and decisive emphasis is not on the future but on the present. It says of those who are poor in spirit that theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven, and again of those who are persecuted for righteousness sake that theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven. Those who hear and believe the message, who do not see a future but a present transformation of the whole world situation, and therefore of that of man—the twilight of the gods completed, Satan falling as lightening from heaven—such begin to live on the basis of this change (II/2:688–9).

As Nigel Biggar puts it: “In Barth’s ethics the Bible’s primary contribution is in the form of narrative rather than ethical principles and rules” (Biggar 1993:105). This narrative tells us who the God is by whose grace we are saved and according to whose commands we are to act. As the quote above indicates, the commands represented in scripture assure us of God’s victory over death and evil and God’s present purposes of God’s creation.

Does this mean that we can take nothing from the scriptures to aid us in our moral reflection? No. Rather, Barth assures us that the ethical statements in scripture reveal something fundamentally true about *God*, in which we can trust in all our reflections. The directions given to us in scripture “do indicate the ‘prominent lines’ along which the commanding



of Jesus always moved *and always moves* in relation to individuals” (Biggar 1993:116).

In light of this, we must still ask the question again with a different emphasis, asking now “what ought *we* to do?” This emphasis captures the subjective and very personal aspect of moral reflection. As Barth points out, we cannot ask “what ought *one* to do?” in the abstract. The concreteness of all ethical decisions makes it imperative that we understand the question as related fundamentally to ourselves: “[T]he ethical question can be answered only as we make our own the necessary reflection of man on his confrontation by the divine command” (II/2:653).

Yet, even as we are addressed personally, we are addressed as persons *in relationship*. Thus, we cannot simply see the divine command as coming to us as isolated atoms. Rather, we exist as members of a covenant community which is rooted in God’s electing grace. Barth writes:

Even in the necessary testing of my conduct I cannot overlook or forget the fact that I am never alone, and never will be . . . . The one absolute thing which is the object of God’s command, and to which we are summoned when it is declared to us, is not something that I am and have alone, but only in the community and solidarity of many, perhaps all men. It is only as I detach myself as an individual that I can seriously ask: What ought I to do? But as I do so, I do not really detach myself. I return at once to the ranks from which I step out. For even as I step out in the moment of my decision, and even in the moment of my corresponding reflection, I still belong (II/2:655).

This gets to what John Webster refers to as the “moral space” in which Barth’s ethics operates (Webster 1995:216). Borrowing concepts from Charles Taylor, Webster understands moral space to be the realm or community in which the particularities of moral life are asserted as being real and genuine: “It is an account of what the good *is* rather than what it is chosen or desired to be” (Webster 1995:216). Barth’s understanding of the communal character of moral reflection, as something that takes place in light of the relationships we have with God primarily and also with our fellow human beings, constitutes what Webster refers to as a “moral ontology,” in which the reality of an ethics is accepted as a given of our life together (215).

But even in light of the moral space which we occupy and the community with which we engage in reflection, our work is not over, for if reflection does not flow into action, it is fruitless. Therefore, Barth offers one more

iteration on his question, this time asking “what ought we to *do*?” As Barth uses it, this emphasis makes explicit the fact that we are intimately involved with the moral choices we make: “In this respect it is important that ethical reflection is itself an ethical act, a moment of what we are and will and do and do not do as subjected to the divine command, or rather a special determination of each aspect” (II/2:658). Thus, by asking what it is we do in the context of this reflection, we situate ourselves with relation to the whole of our lives, actions, behaviors, etc. We are always being questioned as to our acting by God and judged in our doing according to whether we obey or disobey the concrete command of God given to us in our act of questioning as to the will of God.

Through the asking of this one question in light of the four-fold emphasis he puts on it, Barth attempts to provide a method by which we may come to act in obedience to the will of God. In doing so, we “testify that we ourselves are challenged by that supreme authority which makes all escape or neutrality quite impossible” (II/2:661). It is a question that we address, not to ourselves, as Barth emphasizes, but to God in expectation of God’s sovereign direction.

#### Spheres of the Divine Command

Another important aspect of Barth’s method is his reliance on what he calls “spheres” of God’s commanding. His discussion of this is intriguing precisely because he uses the term “spheres” to differentiate his approach to the ethics of creation from the approaches of Brunner and Bonhoeffer. Brunner prefers the traditional language of “Orders of Creation,” while Bonhoeffer prefers to speak of divine “mandates.” Barth considers both of these approaches but rejects them (although he is much more impressed by Bonhoeffer’s approach). In particular, he approves of Bonhoeffer’s emphasis on the vertical character of the imperatives, rather than the more horizontal approach implied in the doctrine of orders of creation: “Bonhoeffer’s ‘mandates’ are not laws somehow immanent in created reality and to be established at random by the moralist and proclaimed in a form which he himself discovers. On the contrary, they are ‘from above,’ like the divine command itself, and indeed with it, as the ‘form’ which is quite inseparable from it” (III/4:22).

Nevertheless, Barth prefers to speak of particular spheres in which God makes God’s commands. He points out that “[w]hen God and man meet as revealed in the Word of God, then definite spheres and relationships

may be seen in which this encounter takes place" (III/4:29). It is not a question of God commanding one set of things in one sphere and another in a different sphere. Rather, the one will of God commands human beings to do one thing, though in a diversity of ways: "The one will of God, without becoming disunited within itself, has different forms; and similarly His command, while it always commands man to do one thing, has different elements" (III/4:29).

These spheres and relationships are important particularly in light of the question we are putting to Barth about normativity. For these spheres demarcate the realm in which the question of God's command needs to be asked: "The reality in which the ethical event takes place is its reality in the spheres and relationships which arise and are revealed in this way. It is clear that neither the command of God nor the obedience or disobedience of man takes place apart from these spheres and relationships, nor can they be abstracted from them" (III/4:29). Barth identifies three spheres, which correspond to the three ways in which God relates to the world – as creator to creature, reconciler to pardoned sinner, and redeemer to redeemed (III/4:29).

How then are these spheres different from the orders of creation which Barth rejects? Barth's primary reservation seems to be that the theology of orders attempts to plot out too completely the map of God's will, whereas Barth wants to make a much more modest proposal: "These might very well be called orders or ordinances. But then there would always be the possibility of misunderstanding them as laws, prescriptions and imperatives. They are the spheres in which God commands and man is obedient or disobedient, but not laws according to which God commands and man does right or wrong" (III/4:29–30). Another concern was the relationship of the arguments for orders of creation to the Nazi programme. Nigel Biggar quotes Barth thus: "All arguments based on Natural Law are Janus-headed. . . . They lead to—Munich" (Biggar 1993:55).

However, Biggar makes an interesting point about the relationship between Barth's "spheres" and the "orders" of other theologians. He writes that in the doctrine of creation, "although we do not find anything that answers to the name of 'order of creation,' we do find much that corresponds to its substance" (1993:56). Barth's resistance to the terminology, argues Biggar, has more to do with the prejudices of his audience than to a problem with the terminology itself. Biggar thus concludes that "the concept of orders of creation is predominant throughout [the *Church Dogmatics*], albeit incog-

nito" (1993:58). This is an intriguing argument, which seems unlikely to convince most aficionados of Barth, but it nevertheless makes clear that there does exist in Barth's estimation some constant form of relationship between creator and creature, whether it is called orders of creation, mandates, spheres or what have you. This is of central concern for the issue of normativity, for it at least gives us something which we can point to and say "for Barth, this remains constant despite the diversity of God's commanding."

Let us take a moment to evaluate where we've been. The initial question with which we began was whether Barth could be said to have a method which allows of normative moral principles, based upon which we could exercise moral judgment. The answer, it seems, is now both Yes and No. On the one hand, we find that Barth sees God acting and commanding in certain constant ways—for instance, that the Decalogue and the Sermon on the Mount provide a reliable account of the "prominent lines" which the command of God takes in the world, based upon which, we may be able to evaluate ethical actions. We have also seen that Barth conceives of the divine command as coming to God's creatures in certain constant forms. Yet at the same time, Barth makes it clear that the command of God cannot be exhausted by the scriptural record, and that the command of God always comes to us anew in our reflection. He also makes it clear that the spheres through which God's command takes place "are not universal ethical truths, but only the general form of the one and supremely particular truth of the ethical event which is inaccessible as such to the casuistical grasp" (III/4:30).

Furthermore, Barth is insistent that the kind of questions which are most often put to Christian ethics are not the kind of questions Christian ethics should be in the business of answering: "To make decisions about the content of the divine command and good and evil in human action cannot be the task of ethics, nor can it be suggested to us by a knowledge of the spheres in which divine command and human action take place. More than the general form of the particular truth of the ethical event, more than the spheres in which this takes place, cannot be the content of this knowledge" (Ibid.).

Thus, although there are standards in Barth's method of moral reflection on the basis of which we may be said to base our judgments, Barth does not see judgment as a part of the ethical task. Rather, the only question is whether we will heed the command which God has given us and which we need only decide to obey or disobey. It is not a question of discernment but of discipline that is at the core of ethics for Barth, and thus he refuses to ac-

knowledge the argument that God's will is something that we may or may not be able to discern. Thus, we often must be forced back on our best judgment as limited creatures.

Let us now turn to see how Barth utilizes his method of moral reflection in a particular case, as we now turn to ethics and "Freedom for Life."

#### THE NORM AND THE EXCEPTIONAL CASE

Barth enumerates seven premises which he sees as essential to an ethics of life: first, that God addresses human beings as their Creator and Lord. Therefore, "man's creaturely existence as such is not his property; it is a loan" (III/4:327). Second, that human beings exist in a distinction between soul and body (328). Third, that God addresses human beings in their particularity, not abstractly (328). Fourth, human beings exist as creatures in time (329). Fifth, God is the source of human life: "As God addresses man, it is decided, and man is reassured, that his life possesses an origin" (329). Sixth, that humans are determined by God for freedom, and God is the Lord of that freedom (330). And seventh, that human beings are determined by God to be free in fellowship with one another, and thus humans cannot act as autonomous agents (331). These premises serve as the basis on which he argues in favor of or against particular ethical perspectives.

Given these premises, why could Barth not maintain that respect for life always entails its protection and preservation against those things which threaten it? Barth's chief objection to this point of view is that it asserts that God's will for human beings must at all times speak in favor of life's preservation, a statement which Barth does not see as legitimate:

Is it really true that the command of God in all cases and circumstances contains the imperative that man should will to live? Must not this imperative in some cases at least be formulated in what is from the literal standpoint a very paradoxical sense if it is really to be understood as the command of God? Understood in its most literal sense, it is hardly an unconditional and absolutely valid imperative which as such has necessarily to be included in every form of the divine command. Precisely as the command of God, does it not have a restricted validity, since the God who commands is not only the Lord of life but also the Lord of death? Is it really so un-

thinkable that, when his command summons man to freedom before Him and fellowship with his fellow-men, it might include a very different imperative, or this imperative in its most paradoxical formulation, to the effect that man should not will to live unconditionally, to spare his life, to preserve it from death, but that he should rather will to stake and surrender it, and perhaps be prepared to die? (III/4:334–5)

As life is a loan from God, it cannot be declared as an absolute value. Rather, it must be put at the service of God, and this may not only involve its preservation, but sometimes its sacrifice as well.

Turning to the issue of the command of God in the specific case of the protection of life, Barth considers several issues, including suicide, abortion, euthanasia, self-defense, the death penalty, and war. The assertion which serves as the basis of his arguments in this section is the following: “If the command of this protection is unconditional, the protection still has its inner norm in the will of God the creator who enjoins it on man, in the horizon which is set for man by the same God with ordination to eternal life. Thus the protection of life required of us is not unlimited nor absolute” (III/4:397–8). Barth’s concern is to leave life in the sphere of God’s free relationship to God’s creation. However, he emphasizes that “with this self-evident modification [i.e., that God as the creator is the Lord of life] it is commanded absolutely” (398).

However, if it is commanded absolutely in light of this modification, how are we to determine when we are required to sacrifice life in light of the command of God? Barth writes: “Its difficulty lies in the fact that it cannot be completely excluded, since we cannot deny the possibility that God as the Lord of life may further its protection even in the strange form of its conclusion and termination rather than its preservation and advancement” (III/4:398). Biggar comments on the problematic nature of Barth’s position on this point:

[Barth] thereby implicitly treats the Sixth Commandment as an absolute rule in the sense that it holds in all *appropriate* cases. Unfortunately, Barth obscures this logic by insisting that the command to protect life is unconditional—that is, applies in *all* cases—but that “protection” has its “inner norm” in the will of God. In other, voluntarist words, God decides what protection means and involves; and although

it usually means what we assume it to mean, sometimes it means something quite extraordinary (even nonsensical) (Biggar 1993:119).

Thus, for instance, Barth allows for the possibility that abortion may be acceptable only in those cases where the mother's life (or health) is in danger. But Barth is careful to insist that if the decision is to be made in favor of abortion, "these will be situations in which all the arguments for preservation have been carefully considered and properly weighed, and yet abortion remains as *ultima ratio*. If all the possibilities of avoiding this have not been taken into account in this decision, then murder is done. Genuine exceptions will thus be rare" (III/4:421). This points to an aspect of Barth's moral theology that we will see repeated in other examples of the preservation of life – namely that when life must be taken in these "exceptional cases" it is not considered by Barth to be murder, and thus not sinful. As it is positively commanded of us by the sovereign grace of God it cannot be a sin, since sin, as Barth has defined it, is constituted only by disobedience to the divine command.

We see this operating in another example in the case of self-defense. Barth spends considerable space considering the arguments in favor of a nonviolent ethic on the basis of scripture, including the arguments advanced by Gandhi and Tolstoy. And in fact he agrees that, in light of the gospel the innate human desire toward the protection of our life and property is to be resisted: "As forcefully as it can, the command of God tells us that this instinct is wrong and not right. What is at stake in the sanctification of man by the command is the most radical purification of this instinct, its transformation from arbitrariness, and therefore its obedience" (III/4:433).

Nevertheless, he also allows that there may be the exceptional case in which, when called upon to defend our lives or property, "we can be just as useful and serviceable to [God] in the execution of such orders" (434). However, this is not to be understood as a blanket permission to execute all intruders or assailants. Rather, "it exists only for those who have fully heard the command which in the first instance points in a very different direction, and who have thus allowed themselves to be completely deprived of the 'right' of what is called self-defence" (435). Thus, "he alone may do so who is not only 'entitled' but actually ordered to do this because he has heard the command of respect for life as the command of the living God and cannot therefore give free rein to the wickedness of his neighbor" (436).

To take but one more example (there are several that we could adduce), let us now look to the question of war. Barth acknowledges that modern military technology and tactics have made war a problem for everyone, and not just for “the so-called military classes.... To-day everyone is a military person” (451). Barth rejects those arguments in favor of war which rest on national self-interest or general self-justification. These replies “constitute a flat betrayal of the Gospel” (455). Barth writes: “All affirmative answers to the question [of whether war is justifiable] are wrong if they do not start with the assumption that the inflexible negative of pacifism has almost infinite arguments in its favour and is almost overpoweringly strong” (III/4:455).

War is a question of what is or is not the appropriate function of the state. Barth insists that the state’s primary function is the preservation and promotion of life: “According to the Christian understanding, it is no part of the normal task of the state to wage war; its normal task is to fashion peace in such a way that life is served and war kept at bay” (458). Is there any circumstance under which Barth would allow for the possibility that the waging of war may come under the positive command of God? There is one— when it involves the self-preservation of a nation against outside aggression:

Indeed, it is only in answer to this particular question that there is a legitimate reason for war, namely, when a people or state has serious grounds for not being able to assume responsibility for the surrender of its independence, or to put it even more sharply, when it has to defend within its borders the independence which it has serious grounds for not surrendering. The sixth commandment is too urgent to permit the justification of war by Christian ethics on any other grounds (461).

Why is this the case? Barth answers that the state has “responsibility for the whole physical, intellectual and spiritual life of the people comprising it, and therefore their relationship to God” (462). The state cannot abrogate that responsibility and put its people, and in particular their relationship to God, at risk.

In addition, Barth leaves open the possibility that a state may also come to the aid of another nation with which it has a treaty. Barth’s conclusion therefore is that “at such a time Christian ethics cannot be absolutely pacifist” (462). He argues that “should the command of God require a nation to



defend itself in such an emergency, or in solidarity with another nation in such an emergency, then it not only may but must do so” (462).

In all of these cases, we see that Barth’s initial position is that scripture enjoins us to protect life in every case. But, consistent with his position that the command of God cannot be captured and made into human property, he allows for the possibility that in certain cases the command of God may enjoin us to act in a way which would deprive someone of their life. If we sincerely come to God with the four-fold question “what ought we to do?” in our minds, we must leave open such possibilities, rather than preempt the sovereign will of God. Furthermore, as God relates to us in the sphere of Creator to creation, Barth insists that our lives are not an absolute, but a gift or loan from God, and therefore can be demanded of us by God at any time.

Even if we grant Barth his first point—that we must leave open the possibility that God in freedom may command us to deprive someone of their lives—can we grant his second point? In light of the material we’ve already discussed, his arguments about the gift of life as a loan do not seem to imply what he argues they do. Let us take his position in “Respect for Life” as given. The only conclusion that we can validly draw from this section is that we may not value *our own* lives above the command of God. As *our lives* are a gift or loan from God, we are obligated to sacrifice them under God’s command if God so wills it. However, the fact that our lives are given to us as a loan implies nothing about how we ought to behave *vis-a-vis* the lives of others. There is nothing in Barth’s arguments on the respect of life that would imply that we have the right to return to God that which God has loaned *someone else*. There is a difference between *giving* our lives to God, and *taking* a life under the command of God. God has not given *me* the life of another as a gift to do with as I will. I have only been given *my* life, and based upon Barth’s arguments, that is the only life that I can offer to God. This is especially striking since Barth only deals with the issue of suicide as a form of the surrender of one’s life in this section, while not dealing with such things as putting ourselves in danger for the sake of another. The question with which Barth contends in the sections under consideration has not to do with the disposal of *our lives*, but with how we may be commanded to dispose of the lives of *others*!

But I do not think we can even grant Barth his first point—that God’s positive command may be such that we may be obligated by obedience to take the life of another. As I have pointed out, the implication embedded in Barth’s arguments on this score is that in such circumstances the taking of life is not

sinful, but a righteous act in obedience to the divine command. Furthermore, since we cannot claim to be ignorant of the divine command, we cannot make an appeal to the ambiguity of the human situation to assert that we may not have a clear picture of *what* precisely the will of God might be. Thus, Barth neglects the tragic aspects of ethical decision-making.

There are three options that Barth allows for: Either, (1) We hear the command of God according to the norm of scripture and obey it; (2) We hear the command of God in one of these exceptional cases and obey it; or (3) We hear the command of God and *disobey* it. Of these three options, only the third is considered sinful by Barth. If the command of God requires that we take life, then this is not murder, but rather a justifiable act of homicide (III/4:400).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for whom Barth expressed so much admiration, probably came closer to an actual act of homicide than Barth ever did, and yet his own position on this issue made no such appeals to justification. Rather, he recognized the tragic and ambiguous character of those situations in which such a choice is necessary. He wrote:

If someone sets out to fight his battles in the world in his own absolute *freedom*, if he values the necessary deed more highly than the spotlessness of his own conscience and reputation, if he is prepared to sacrifice a fruitless principle to a fruitful compromise, or for that matter the fruitless wisdom of the *via media* to a fruitful radicalism, then let him beware lest precisely his supposed freedom may ultimately prove his undoing. He will easily consent to the bad, knowing full well that it is bad, in order to ward off what is worse, and in doing this he will no longer be able to see that precisely the worse which he is trying to avoid may still be the better. This is one of the underlying themes of tragedy (Bonhoeffer 1955:67).

Yet even in spite of the tragic possibilities inherent in this situation, Bonhoeffer prefers it to the other options available. Indeed, Bonhoeffer would go so far as to assert that what it means to be formed in the image of Christ is to be willing to take on guilt and sin for the sake of another:

If any man tries to escape guilt in responsibility he detaches himself from the ultimate reality of human existence, and what is more he cuts himself off from the redeeming mystery of Christ's bearing guilt without sin and he has no share in the divine justification which lies upon this event. He sets his own personal innocence above his responsibil-

ity for men, and he is blind to the more irredeemable guilt which he incurs precisely in this ; he is blind also to the fact that real innocence shows itself precisely in a man's entering into the fellowship of guilt for the sake of other men. Through Jesus Christ it becomes an essential part of responsible action that the man who is without sin loves selflessly and for that reason incurs guilt (1955:241).

Thus, for Bonhoeffer there are two options, not three. Either we obey the command of God and preserve life, or we disobey it and destroy life. But if we chose to incur the guilt implied by murder we should do it for the sake of our fellow human beings. We should be willing to trust in God's grace even in our disobedience, in precisely those situations where obedience is impossible.

The influence of Reinhold Niebuhr is evident in Bonhoeffer's position. Niebuhr made the distinction between the Christian ethic of love and a rational ethic of justice. While love is always oriented to the neighbor without concern for the self, an ethic of justice is based on a principle of reciprocity (cf. Niebuhr 1932:57). An ethic of love rooted in the ethical teaching of Jesus (which for Niebuhr provides the norm for Christian ethical reflection) can have no part in violence, but must rather be rooted in forgiveness:

Men are enjoined to "love their enemies," to "forgive, not seven times, but seventy times seven," to resist evil, to turn the other cheek, to go the second mile, to bless them that curse you and do good to them that hate you. In all these injunctions both resistance and resentment are forbidden. The self is not to assert its interests against those who encroach upon it, and not to resent the injustice done to it. The modern pulpit would be saved from much sentimentality if the thousands of sermons which are annually preached upon these texts would contain some suggestions of the impossibility of these ethical demands for natural man in his immediate situations. Nowhere is the ethic of Jesus in more obvious conflict with both the impulses and the necessities of ordinary men in typical social situations (Niebuhr 1935:28).

Niebuhr understands this kind of ethic of love to be an "impossible possibility" for humans under conditions of sin, and therefore he rejects it as a basis for social ethics (except insofar as it stands as a judgment on all human acts, which must of necessity fall short of it). This love is not a possibility within history, and so we must be content with an ethic of justice on the social level: "Since this possibility [of a love ethic] does not exist, it is not

even right to insist that every action of the Christian must conform to *agape*, rather than to the norms of relative justice and mutual love by which life is maintained and conflicting interests are arbitrated in history” (Niebuhr 1964 II:88).

For Niebuhr, there is no question of arguing, as Barth does, that the command of God comes to us from moment to moment and may be different in different contexts. Rather, the command of God to love, not only our neighbors but our enemies *is* the normative principle on which ethics is based. However, it is the “impossible possibility” of the human situation (Niebuhr 1935:73). Thus, we must rely on the forgiving grace of God in light of our status as sinners.

Why should we prefer this tragic view of the human ethical situation to Barth’s? After all, the chief benefit of Barth’s ethics is that it recognizes that the sole norm of our action is God’s command—everything else is disobedience and therefore sin. Isn’t this perspective preferable to one that asserts that it is ever in any sense acceptable for human beings to sin?

First, both Bonhoeffer and Niebuhr would deny that sin is “acceptable” in the sense of justifiable before God. Rather, it is only acceptable in light of the ambiguity of the situation—an ambiguity which Barth denies exists. Furthermore, the acceptance of guilt on the part of the agent under these circumstances is done in full recognition of the gravity of the act committed. This is something that is fatally lacking in Barth’s analysis.

Given Barth’s three options—obey the scriptural norm, obey the command in the exceptional case, or disobey—there is no room for the recognition of the tragedy of human life which is ended in a situation of abortion, war, or self-defense. How can there be, when the action was positively commanded by God? The preservation of life which is entailed by the respect we are to show toward it is only applicable in the realm of God’s sovereign will. Where God wills death, how can it be mourned? Where God calls for execution, how can one claim that it is sorrowful? Where God is the one who signs the death warrant, where can the sense of tragedy lie?

On the other hand, the position taken by Bonhoeffer and Niebuhr allows one to recognize, first, that there is a norm to which human beings may point—a Christological norm—which calls us to love our neighbors and respect life under all circumstances. The realization of the impossibility of fully and consistently fulfilling the obligations of this norm is what allows the agent to fulfill that obligation as fully as he or she is able. That this involves the acceptance of his or her status as a sinner is a reality of living in a

fallen world, and points at least as seriously to the necessity for God's grace as Barth's theology does (perhaps more so!).

### CONCLUSION

The objective which we set ourselves at the beginning of this paper was to explore the implications of Barth's ethical method for the problem of normativity. Barth's understanding of normativity was rooted firmly in the sovereignty of God as the electing God of grace who reveals Godself as our Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer and was encapsulated in moral reflection on the question "what ought we to do?" However, we found that in its application this method was insufficient to deal with the complexity of moral decision-making precisely because it refused to acknowledge, on the one hand, the ambiguity of the human moral situation in light of our status as fallen creatures, and, on the other hand, the possibility that humans may be obligated in light of our fallen situations to act in a way which is contrary to the command of God.

Barth's refusal to allow for a norm which would in any sense "bind" God's sovereignty blinkers him with regard to the importance of an ethic of love as a critical principle for moral reflection. That we cannot achieve this norm is no judgment on the existence of the norm, but is a judgment upon us as sinners. Nor does it bind God to argue that this norm stands at the bottom of all ethical reflection. Rather, insofar as any Protestant theological ethic must be based on the witness of scripture, an exegesis of the assertion that "God is Love" (1 John 4:8) ought to be sufficient to allow us to make a start at developing an ethic with God's love as its chief norm, which we are called to emulate even in the midst of our fallen condition.

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