The Problem of Karl Barth's "Command-Category" in His Doctrine of Theological Ethics

God's Command and Human Judgment

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A major current in Roman Catholic moral theology today is its effort to become more truly "catholic." Moral theology as a discipline is no longer satisfied with its previously isolated status, but now stands in relation to, and partially under the judgment of, biblical studies. Furthermore, the impact on moral theology of phenomenology and of existentialism in recent years has been considerable. The insights of these philosophies have shed new light on the meaning of man's Christian life.

Perhaps the most significant move toward greater catholicity in the field of moral has been the breakdown of the naive confessionalism which has deluded many Catholic moralists from the time of the Reformation until this century into thinking that Roman Catholic moral formulations could not be enriched by a study of Reformation insights. The Catholic moral theologian of today is beginning to see some glorious possibilities for speaking to the agonies of our day in a fresh and meaningful way by integrating his discoveries from Protestant thinkers into his own ethical viewpoint. He is finding too that he can do this without compromising his fidelity (where such fidelity is necessary) to the past.

It is no longer a strange sight to see books by Bonhoeffer, Barth, Troeltsch, Bennett, Gustafson and Fletcher—nor even by the classical Reformers: Luther, Calvin and Wesley—on the reserve shelf of the Catholic seminary library. These works are being read widely and, it is to be hoped, seriously by students for the priesthood. Nor in Catholic colleges across the country is it considered odd for readings in the Protestants to be assigned.

It is important, however, that the student who drinks of this new and heady elixir of pluralism in moral theology not lose his critical faculties in the process. Today, the issues at stake in moral theology are of such crucial pastoral importance that within the community of theologians a loss of the ability to make critical judgments could be extremely serious. This very real possibility (namely, of abdicating one's judgmental faculty in a flush of ecumenical enthusiasm) demands from the theologian a new sobriety and a new intellectual asceticism. The truth of God's Word to man is all that should really matter to him—not theological faddism, not popular viewpoints, not narrow loyalties to "schools" of theology, not emotional fears of the new.

With these thoughts in mind, let us now savor and then criticize the Christian ethical teaching of Karl Barth. The scope of what follows will be: first, to sketch-out Karl Barth's answer to the ethical question, "what ought I to do?" And second, to make some sort of critical evaluation of Barth's answer.

I.

For us to savor the full meaning of Barth's answer to the ethical question, we must first understand his reaction to 19th century

liberalism. For Barth, the 19th century liberals had spent themselves on a sinful, arrogant impossibility—the effort to make God in their own image. They were engaged in a massive self-deception of religious subjectivity which resulted in nothing more than a projected analysis of man himself, with his own self-styled needs and impulses as object of their quest. As long as theologians tried to find God within their own subjective experience, they would find only themselves—not God. And in the end they would destroy themselves. Always Feuerbach lurked in the wings—and well he might. He was *the* challenge to orthodox theology, and beside him even today's radical theologians are pale.

> If we try to equate the ethical question unequivocally and consistently with the psychological, or historico-morphological, or politico-juridical, or philosophico-historical question—to which the actuality of human behavior may also be subject—this means that we have not yet put to ourselves the ethical question, or have ceased to put it. (Church Dogmatics II/2 515)

The real meaning of revelation for Barth, then, is that God breaks to pieces that attempt of man to mirror himself in his search for God. God does not satisfy *our* self-styled needs nor fulfill *our* projects in life. His designs for us are His own; he gives Himself to us in Jesus Christ and that gift is self-authenticating. We cannot find proofs or persuasions for it. We must accept it in humble faith, or reject it in unfaith.

> So, then, as a result and in prolongation of the fall, we have "ethics", or rather, the multifarious ethical systems, the attempted human answers to the ethical question. (CD II/2 517)

Real ethics, *theological* ethics, is thus seen as the doctrine of *God's* command, and as nothing else:

> As the doctrine of God's command, ethics interprets the Law as the form of the Gospel, i.e. as the sanctification which comes to man through the electing God. . . . Its function is to bear primary witness to the grace of God in so far as this is the saving engagement and commitment of man. (CD II/2 509)

This "saving engagement," this imperative which is implied in grace is above all a *free* engagement; a "may", not a "must". The command of God sets man free. It does so by humanizing man as

only God can humanize. It sets man in his only true relationship (in which man's freedom consists) : a covenant-relationship with the Father in the Son.

Our analytic finesse, our native intelligence, our historical perspicuity—none of these can be the true starting points nor provide the final answers nor act as validating principles for genuine ethics.

> In virtue of the fact that the command of God is the form of His electing grace, it is the starting point of every ethical question and answer. (CD II/2 519)

> (Ethics) has to be on its guard against conferring on man the dignity of a judge over God's command. It will be absolutely open to all that it can learn from general human ethical enquiry and reply. It can be absolutely open because it has nothing to fear from this quarter. But it must always be absolutely resolved to stick to its colors and not allow itself to be hindered in its fulfillment of its task. The attempt to set up general ethics as a judge and to prove and justify theological ethics before it can only disturb and destroy theological ethics (CD II/2 575)

The command of God—given by God in freedom, accepted by man in graced freedom—only this can answer the question "what ought I to do?"

In what way do the commands of God come to us? The Word of God always comes to us as an event, never frozen into a system, never hardened into fixed principles, never imposed upon us with the hard, right hand of autocracy. It comes in the free encounter between God and man. It comes with "absolute definiteness" (CD II/2 704) and clarity. It does not come in the form of general principles to be "applied" by us.

> God is present to the world and each individual, and confronts him in the smallest of his steps and thoughts as his Commander and Judge. (CD II/2 669)

God does not say to us, "Do good and avoid evil," and then leave it to us to work this out in the concrete order. We receive His command in all its particularity and concreteness.

> The Law of God cannot be compared with any human law. For it is not merely a general rule but also a specific prescription and norm for each individual case. (CD II/2 663)

Moreover, the divine command is *absolutely sure,* absolutely unquestionable, absolutely identical with what I can and ought to do

at each particular time. It cannot be authenticated, as it were, "from without."

> We cannot, therefore, want to know about the command in such a way that we survey it detachedly from without, *making sure of its contents,* forming an opinion about it and finally adopting an attitude towards it. (CD II/2 658: italics mine)

Nor can it be questioned without sinning by making the idolatrous attempt to pass judgment upon God.

> The command about which we ask is the command under which we stood and stand and will stand. To ask concerning it is to ask concerning the One who was and is and will be our Judge. (CD II/2 658)

Needless-to-say, a great deal more could be said about the Barthian formulation of ethics as the doctrine of God's command. Still, what we have said should provide us with a sufficient basis upon which to make a critique.

II.

I have only one real question to ask Barth about his understanding of ethics as the response to God's command. The question, of course, is not new. (See for example, John Bennett's formulation of the question in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review,* November, 1962, p. 74.)

The question I have is this: is it possible that one could be absolutely, subjectively *certain* that one had heard the command of God, when *in fact* one had heard only the echo of one's own desires? The testimony of history seems to answer this question with a "yes." (The history of religious fanaticism is a long and not so venerable one. And it is usually characterized by its insistence on a Biblical authenticity and by an immediate divine authorization, i.e., by an absolute "certainty" of the divine command.)

If indeed the answer to this question is "*yes*", then we are justified in asking for some criteria of judgment regarding the encounter between God and man. But in asking for such criteria we must insist upon this: these would not be criteria whereby we would judge God, but ones against which we could measure our own sinful subjectivity.

For Barth, of course, to "question" or seek to certify the divine command is the worst sort of human pride. God's command needs no human ratification. It is self-authenticating. And this can hardly

be quibbled with. The real issue at stake is the form under which the divine command is received. Also at stake is the clarity or luminosity with which it is received, or apprehended.

So terrified of idolatry is Karl Barth, so overpoweringly conscious is he of the first Commandment, that he has excluded all possibility for a genuine, authentic or accurate determination of God's will through human instrumentality. He has done this for the sake of saving the "one really valuable Pearl"—the pearl of God's sovereignty. *Soli Deo gloria!* Even the instrumentality of the self seems to have been diminished to such a degree that man is reduced to a passive receptacle, a receptacle which does little else besides say "yes" or "no" to what is put into it. If it says "yes", it *does* what is right surely, but it does not seem to me to have *decided* the right thing. It has *accepted* the right thing previously decided for it by Another. What is so wrong with that, Barth might ask. I shall try to explain what I think is wrong with it.

I am not, first of all, personally convinced that we must go to such lengths to preserve the sovereignty of God *in our own minds* that we cannot give a meaningful explanation of the structures of human psychic experience which enter into our ethical decisions. If we are to remain human, it must be *we* who make the decisions. (This is not to say of course that we could *make* such decisions nor *effect* them apart from God's grace, *nos sanans et elevans.*) Simple ratification or rejection is not enough to account for the facts of our own experience of making ethical choices. And if it is *we* who make the decisions, then we ought to be able to give some sort of explanation as to how this process works. What I am complaining about, in effect, is the lack of a section in Barth's synthesis which would correspond, or be analagous to, those tracts in traditional Roman Catholic moral theology, where the role of psychic and emotional elements in man's moral life are taken into account.

The command of God presumably respects our human natures which have come from the hand of that very same God who gives us His commands. *What happens* when God addresses me? I do not find an answer to this question in Barth's work. Barth, it seems to me, has driven an intolerable wedge between God and ordinary experience. Barth's God speaks to us *only* in a "special" encounter. In short, in order that we welcome and acknowledge the Word of God, Barth seems to be asking us, in the name of God's sovereignty, to

deny the value of our *personal* God-given powers of discernment, and to deny the value of that *corporate* Christian discernment to which each baptised Christian, as a member of the Church, is entitled to look upon as his birthright.

I wonder if Christian theology is not today paying the price for this neo-orthodox overstress on the sublimity of the transcendent. Having excluded the possibility of any meaningful norms for ethical decision apart from the direct, unimpeded and unmediated influx of the divine, men find themselves in an awkward position when this divine invasion does not find itself authenticated in the arena of their own religious experience. The fact that Barth has so stressed the tension between God and creature, divine holiness and sin, seems to me to be at least a significant factor in the current assertions of "God is dead" theology. Radical theology, in short, may be partially accounted for as a reaction to the "special encounter" assertions of neo-orthodoxy. The "special encounter" is simply not verified in the religious experience of the modern man. From a land of 19th century confused immanentism, Barth tried to lead Protestant theology into a desert of violent dualism.

The univocal God of man's own self-projections (the 19th century God) will not do. The equivocal God of the neo-orthodox—the God of the special religious encounter—will not do either. Nor do I believe that we should call for a re-birth of the 13th century analogous God (for reasons better explained by R. J. Nogar in his *The Lord Of the Absurd,* New York, 1966). Nor do I think that we are in for a new Pentecost of Aristotelian metaphysics as a structure on which to hang our Bible, or as a club with which to beat the radical theologians. But I do think that we come closest to describing the task of addressing the *Gottesproblem* when we say that we shall have to see God as somehow "analogous to the analogous God." (For an interesting fuller discussion of the tensions we have been discussing, see E. R. Fairweather's brilliant little article, "Christianity And the Supernatural" in *New Theology No. 1,* New York, 1964.)

It may be noted in the interest of fairness that the God of post-Tridentine Catholic moral theology was as much a God whose "commands" could not be authenticated by the ordinary Christian as is Barth's God. At least Barth emphasizes over and over again the unmediated personal "encounter" of every Christian with the will of God. From modern (i.e. post-Reformation) Roman Catholic

theology, on the contrary, one could easily get the impression that the will of God was left to the *periti* to discover (in nature and in the Bible), to codify, to systematize, to classify in their case books. It was left to the hierarchy to explain this in simple but authoritative form. And it was left to the ordinary Christian to obey. This characterization is perhaps a caricature and therefore oversimplified. But it remains true enough to provide us with a model which can act as a salutary antidote to our reactions against Barth's "direct access" formulations. Such a model can also act as a warning signal for us in our attempts to formulate alternatives to Barth's proposals.

The hair-splitting "moral systems" regarding the question of certitude which have developed in the Roman Catholic tradition: rigorism, tutiorism, equi-probabilism, probabilism, probabiliorism—show easily enough the dangers of the human enterprise when it is too freed from a consciousness of divine immediacy. Casuistry was an attempt to supply an answer to a genuine need in Roman Catholic theology yet it was not without its perils.

Permit this writer one final (and briefly put) salvo at Barth's doctrine of theological ethics. It seems to me that we might question the adequacy of command-obedience as the central, structuring biblical category. Certainly, command-obedience is a genuine, valid and necessary biblical characterization of the moral situation. It would seem, however, that a fuller and deeper biblical morality must also call into play the categories of covenant-love and stewardship. These would seem to exalt the human part of Christian life a good deal more than Barth would be inclined to permit, but these ideas are in the Bible, and seem to me to be not only prominent but crucial.

I trust my criticisms of Barth have not been unwarrantedly negative. But we have passed the stage of false ecumenical irenicism. There is much, of course, that could be said about Barth's positive contributions to contemporary theology. Yet we must do *more* than celebrate Barth's achievements. Karl Barth would have it no other way. To God *alone* the Glory.