

ON GENERATING CATEGORIES IN THEOLOGICAL ETHICS

BARTH, GENESIS AND THE *STÄNDELEHRE*¹

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Summary

Though the doctrine of creation is often invoked in Christian ethics, its relation to the book of Genesis remains obscure. The dominance of an ethics of principles among Christian ethicists and exegetes provides one reason for this obscurity in methodologically oversimplifying Scripture in order to make it more accessible for a specific type of modernist ethical methodology. The main emphasis of the article is to investigate the linkages Karl Barth drew between the book of Genesis and the doctrines of Christology and creation in his Church Dogmatics vol. III. While Barth makes important methodological advances on a Christian ethic of principles, his treatment of the doctrine of creation is found to underplay the distinctive thought structures of Genesis 1–4. A brief final section suggests that Luther’s doctrine of the three estates comprehends Barth’s best methodological insights, and in addition, was explicitly formulated as a reading of the biblical text of Genesis. Drawing on the work of Hans Ulrich, I conclude that an updated version of the Ständelehre addresses the systematic problems noted in a Christian ethic of principles and Barth’s doctrine of creation, so yielding a more biblically faithful framework within which a Christian ethic of creation can be developed.

¹ This is a revised version of the 2007 Tyndale Ethics and Social Theology Lecture. Thanks to Don Wood and an anonymous reviewer for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

1. Introduction

The aim of this essay is a narrow one, to grapple with a complex of methodological questions that underlie Christian ethics. Christians may agree in the affirmation of the Trinitarian God as creator, but often sharply disagree about the ethical claims such a confession might implicate. I will suggest that this question is one that is best resolved by investigating how basic moral categories are generated in Christian ethics, with a special interest in how these categories draw on and articulate the witness of Scripture.

My argument will proceed in four movements. First, I will indicate the prominence of ethical principles in modern secular ethical thought and indicate some of the conceptual weaknesses of such an approach. Second, I will show how a Christian ethic that construes itself as an ethic of principles is bound by the same problems because resting on the same basic conceptual frameworks as modern secular ethics. The body of the paper, third, is concerned with an extended engagement with Karl Barth's ethic of creation. He grasps the weaknesses of modern principal ethics, and the importance of close attention to the interrelation of the doctrines of creation and redemption. But his entirely appropriate conceptual privileging of the lordship of Christ is constricted by several methodological assumptions that make it difficult for him to take the *text* of Genesis seriously. The effect is to cut the content of his ethic of creation adrift from the categories and priorities offered in the book of Genesis. In a final section I will only hint at the fertility of a theological tradition that seems much more capable of doing justice to the main considerations I have raised. I will indicate how a sensitive formulation of the Lutheran tradition of the three estates is able to take the text of Genesis seriously in both its content and method, so allowing it to more deeply shape the fundamental categories of a Christian ethic of creation.

In a post-holocaust age in which the problematic nature of totalising narratives is taken for granted, contemporary accounts of Christian ethics must remain aware at every point of how they present the universality of Christ's claim. Christ's lordship is not a coercive tyranny, but is easily converted into one when reduced to a metanarrative which only Christians can know. The reduction is signalled by Christian claims already to know how history will unfold, or when assuming they have nothing left to learn about the moral life

because in possession of eternal moral principles. The affirmation that Jesus Christ is Lord 'of all' and that everything that exists is created through this one Lord must therefore be specified in such a way that Christians are allowed simultaneously to affirm that they *know* something crucial about reality, but that they also have something to *learn* from other creatures. Much, therefore, hangs on how we relate the doctrines of reconciliation and creation, and how we understand the register in which these doctrines are operative.

The book of Genesis is arguably *the* canonical book in which the universal forms of appropriate and inappropriate human action are most clearly set out. This is in no sense a denial that the Genesis account can be read as a back-projection of Israel's understanding of the covenant, and I would suggest, on theological and textual grounds, that it is precisely that. The authors of Genesis seek to convey the claim that what Israel was told by God in the covenant was not a parochial affair for the chosen people alone, but in fact reveals the meaning of the whole created universe. Covenant and creation were interlocked for Israel, which makes it all the more clear that the focus of the primeval history is the setting out of the formed activities and times in which all creatures properly receive the lives they have been given. But notice that it was Israel's particular *lordship* that gave it insight into the universal implications of a God who could so rule.

Christian theology approaches this question by specifying how it understands its relation to the covenant through Christ. But if it wants to make any claims about the forms of life in which all humans can flourish, the canon channels its thinking in the direction of defining this universality by reference to this account of beginnings. The regularity with which the New Testament writers make appeal to the Genesis account reminds us that understanding the claim of Christ always involves an account of creation, and that 'creation' is itself a confession and perception learned primarily through one biblical book. In Christian theology, *conceptually* speaking, it is the lordship of Christ over all things that warrants our reading Genesis in terms of a *doctrine* of creation. There are several New Testament books, such as Hebrews and John's Apocalypse, that stress the universal scope of Christ's lordship. But both books are *textually* dependent on concepts, categories and definitions that have already been set out in preceding canonical books. The intelligibility of the writer of Hebrews calling Jesus the great high priest is inextricably intertwined with the Old

Testament's account of the meaning and function of the temple, it having in turn deep architectural and symbolic linkages with Eden and the tree of good and evil. *Conceptually* Christ's lordship unites Christian perception of all reality, *canonically* Genesis is the book which sets the conceptual stage in which this historical lordship plays out.

2. Why a Single Principle Is Never Enough in Ethics.

Ethical thought in general faces a challenge that cannot be escaped in Christian ethics—the problem of specifying what sort of thing an ethical claim is. The New Testament writers grapple with this question by carefully situating material ethical discussions in a manner that resists improper universalisation. This care might be summarised as a refusal of legalism, the tendency to expand the scope of moral claims beyond their proper limits, and also of antinomianism, the tendency to do the opposite, to reduce moral claims to a bare minimum or do away with them at all. Paul's teaching to the Corinthians on sexual behaviour provides a classic example of this structure: he simultaneously prohibits excessive licence (1 Cor. 6:12-20) as well as rule-bound restrictiveness within marriage (1 Cor. 7). In the ethics of the Reformation we see an attempt to take this New Testament mode of wide but direct guidance seriously. The freedom of obedience was emphasised, lending a larger scope to human judgement. This lent later Protestant ethics, however, a habit of formulating the task of Christian ethics in terms of a tight and often minimalist focus on Jesus' love command or the golden rule. The Reformers' insight was to emphasise the orienting core of Jesus' ethical teaching in his interpretation and reemphasis of the Shema. Jesus is depicted in Matthew 22:37-39 (and parallels) as linking two core precepts of the Torah: 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your might' (Deut. 6:5) with 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Lev. 19:18). But this refocusing of Christian ethics on a central orienting formulation was narrowed at the time of the Enlightenment to a sole principle shorn of any embedding in a rich account of the covenant, Torah, ecclesiology, and so on.

Joseph Fletcher's *Situation Ethics* represents a nadir of this trajectory, as an infamously flat-footed yet influential example of what

I will refer to as an ethical monoprice. A monoprice ethic is one in which an attempt is made to use a single principle to sum up the whole of Christian ethics. Fletcher interpreted Jesus' love command through a highly selective reading of Augustine, namely his injunction to 'love and do what you will'. In so doing Fletcher transparently baptised the philosophical consequentialist monoprice of act-utilitarianism. Fletcher concluded that Christian ethics was always a decision made in a concrete situation, in which one must interpret this single principle continually afresh. In so doing he thinned out the more biblically rich account of Christian love offered in Anders Nygren's *Agape and Eros*, which at least tried to ground its account of love in scriptural usage. Later Gene Outka developed a much more theologically and biblically sophisticated riposte in *Agape: An Ethical Analysis*. The aim in each case is to give some shape to moral deliberation, but not to overspecify it.

The problem is that monoprice ethics always run aground on the most contentious questions. We can see the point playing out amongst contemporary interpreters of Kant's ethics. Every undergraduate is familiar with the threefold categorical imperative of his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Kant is clear that he is reading the golden rule read as a monoprice in three iterations. But what has been lost to view to late modern ethics is that Kant himself did not stop with the *Groundwork*, but set it alongside the *Metaphysics of Morals* proper. In the *Metaphysics of Morals* he specifies what his monoprice meant for practices of property rights, marriage, procreation, the handling of servants, the right of the state to exist and with it the duties of the legislator, ruler and judge. In practice Kant's ethic was not proposing a monoprice, but was indicating the conceptual foundations of his whole moral system. He always understood the categorical imperative to need the further specifications of practical reason in order to treat many concrete ethical questions. For instance, if we call marriage a contractual relation, as Kant does, do we also say the same of parent-child relations? Kant says no, but it is impossible to make this distinction without an ancillary account of what distinguishes a parent and child from a husband and wife. Kant has no trouble bringing in these ancillary specifications, and does so in a relatively rational, ordered way. In this reliance on a range of subsidiary concepts and distinctions he reproduces the structure of accounts of covenant, Torah,

ecclesia (and so on) that the Christian tradition has understood to fill out the meaning of the Golden Rule.

This detailed framework of ancillary moral claims has dropped away in the reception of Kant's ethics by contemporary philosophical ethicists. Many modern ethics are often purely formal, proposing that talk of decision-making *procedure* can dispense with any substantive, material ethical claims. In effect, it is assumed that Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals* is rendered superfluous by his *Groundwork*. A modern liberal political thinker like John Rawls, who is heavily influenced by Kant, can reduce justice to a monopinciple again, in his case, what he calls the 'original position'.² The secularised version of the Protestant desire for a minimum of moral principles thus mutates in modern thought into the idea that if we can get our decision-making procedure right, we can retain a language of ethics in societies where there is no consensus about how to name the difference between man and wife, and parent and child. The effect is to retain a version of the golden rule shorn of its embedding in the full breadth of Christian doctrine.

The interesting recent development in philosophical ethics is that, under the guise of monopinciple ethics, the necessity of non-procedural claims about justice have begun to again appear necessary. Kant's *Groundwork* ever and again calls for the *Metaphysics of Morals*. So thinkers like the neo-Rawlsian Martha Nussbaum find themselves reconstructing non-procedural accounts of the practical differences between the disabled and the able, the first and the third world, and the human and the animal worlds so that their procedural accounts of justice may actually reach the goal of delivering justice in different sorts of contexts.³ Justice construed as the natural by-product of the deployment of a monopinciple simply will not work without these further specifications.

The problem is that with such specifications, secular liberal ethics immediately betrays its basic promise, to deliver a moral theory that does not make thick and therefore contentious ontological claims. The secular moralist is left on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, if

² This concept, also called 'the veil of ignorance', is expressly designed to repackage Kant's categorical imperative as a method for achieving justice that dispenses with Kant's more substantive ethical claims. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (rev. edn; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

³ Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

they do not specify their procedural principle of justice, procedural ethics display a marked tendency to produce distinctly unjust results. On the other hand, without further specification such theories also have no ability to address the burning moral debates of the day in which fundamental questions of our collective life are being renegotiated. What *are* marriage and procreation? What sorts of activities should be the remit of government, medicine or business? Such definitional questions cannot be resolved in a satisfactory way by monopinciples.

3. Why Promises Are Preferable to Principles in a Christian Ethic

Scripture offers a vast range of moral claims that might be brought to bear, for instance, on a Christian ethic that wishes to begin with Jesus' love command, as Christian moralists have often pointed out. In so doing, however, they have often fallen prey to a mistake that undermines the whole of Christian ethics: the translation of the biblical language of command into the modern ethical language of principle. Let us be clear—there are no ethical principles expressly stated in Scripture, though there are many commands, in both testaments. Any Christian ethic, therefore, which sides with modern ethics in working from ethical principles (assumed to be universal by definition) is committed to a move that is highly suspect in theological terms in simply assuming the propriety of the categorical shift involved. This shift is categorical because of the way in which each is held and negotiated. When one hears and accepts a command the question can still arise as to what sort of conversion will be necessary for it to be obeyed, and furthermore *how* it is to be obeyed, that difficulty of perceiving what is to be done even when the command is received with a receptive heart. Kant, in contrast, was very clear that moral principles are not only self-evident, but will be, by definition, something that can be done.⁴ It may be difficult to *will* to do the right thing, but it is not difficult to see what the right thing is. An ethical principle is therefore a reduction and domestication of the biblical language of command that lies at the theological heart of Scripture.

⁴ This claim is usually formulated as 'ought implies can' suggesting that no one can have a duty to do the impossible. See Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, ch. 8.

Once Christian moralists commit themselves to an ethic of principles several exegetical difficulties immediately arise. One is to approach Scripture as a repository of 'timeless' moral truths specifying how the basic command to love God and neighbour is to be deployed. The problem with such an approach is that every part of Scripture is embedded in history, and our designation of some truths as 'timeless' betrays a platonic habit that tends to render history the dispensable vehicle for 'real' truths. On similar grounds, neither is the moral 'content' of Scripture really susceptible to summary. It is notoriously difficult to separate between so called moral, theological and cultic statements, for instance. The Christian ethicist committed to eternal moral principles is also committed to a view of Scripture that will see far too much of it as 'historical husk' to be discarded, and embarks on an impossible task of ferreting out of all the morally irrelevant passages of Scripture those that are valid for all time.

Take for instance Psalm 119:11, 15: 'Your word have I hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against you... I will ponder your precepts and fix my gaze on your paths.' Is there a difference between 'searching for eternal moral principles', 'summarizing the moral content of Scripture' and the Hebrew notion of 'hiding in the heart' or 'fixing my gaze on your paths'? Here the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is illuminating in refusing to solidify either Scripture or our moral concepts against the living claim of the person of Christ and the human lives claimed by his lordship. It is Christ who is the concrete unity which binds together all God's commands. To be transformed into Christ is thus to be a concrete example of their unity, a living self-involved interpretation of their unity.⁵ Here Bonhoeffer is not claiming that we must have a naive relation to Scripture, as some critics have claimed,⁶ but is stressing that the Bible is not a repository of moral guidelines to be mined and systematised as a conceptually finalised 'biblical ethic' possessed in the intellect as a conceptual construct. The whole Bible claims our whole being, or rather, God uses the space and diversity of the scriptural commands to make us aware that we exist

⁵ Bonhoeffer, 'On Psalm 119', *Meditating on the Word*, trans. and ed. David McI Gracie (Cambridge: Cowley publications, 1986):127.

⁶ Contra Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001): 99. 'Psychologically speaking, it is possible for someone who, in following Jesus, has become single-minded and free to be a person engaged in very complex reflection.' Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 320.

only within the sphere of his rule. Scripture is ‘hidden in our hearts’ when through it we develop knowledge of Christ in the form of lived certainty that has ‘fixed its gaze on your paths’.⁷ This is to take Scripture as a *promise* of divine presence into which we may live rather than a set of moral *principles* that we must rationally grasp and then enact.

Moral principles, as we modern understand them, are addressed to the rationality and demand the assent of the will. But as Hannah Arendt has pointed out,⁸ it was St Paul who broke open this simple relation of reason and will. Principles are always reductive of Scripture because Scripture itself tells us that our will does not unproblematically follow our rationality (Rom. 7:19) nor is our rationality itself infallible. These observations are meant to indicate that the hubris inherent in a Christian ethic of principles grows from its assurance that it can extract the timeless from the merely historical in Scripture and its assumption that once these principles are in hand what to do is clear and the will can be made to align with them. The emphasis is thus placed on the industriousness and conscientiousness of the agent in extracting principles and applying them in life. To cling to a promise, in contrast, focuses humans on the divine agent’s work. ‘Clinging’ does demand comporting one’s self with Scripture, but admits that this is always incomplete and so must be attended by the prayer that the agent’s action will be perfected and in full awareness that the effects of obedience must be made fruitful by God’s own intervention.

Scripture as God’s Word thus does not offer an ethical program but a heuristic, and a negative heuristic at that: it strips away our divergent self-referential hermeneutics to reveal our total dependence on God’s presence. In so doing it directs us to his real (as opposed to imagined) presence. This is why a catalogue approach to the moral passages of Scripture is doomed to failure: only when Scripture is ‘treasured in the heart’ in all its bewildering complexity will its true unity in Christ begin to emerge. This unity, again, cannot be in the first instance conceptual, though it will have conceptual content; it will be in Christ

⁷ See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* 6, ed. Ilse Tödt, Heinz Eduard Tödt, Ernst Feil, and Clifford Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005): 342-44.

⁸ Hannah Arendt, ‘Some Questions of Moral Philosophy’ in *Responsibility and Judgement*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2003), section III.

and in his meeting us in the course of making us real humans as we take real steps of faith in our historical context.

Here Bonhoeffer raises a point often noted, but its methodological implications rarely wrestled with in biblical scholarship.⁹ ‘How could I go through the length of [Psalm 119] and begin it ever anew, how should I not grow weary of this incessant repetition, if God should not enable me to see that each of his words is full of undiscovered, unfathomable wonder?’¹⁰ Wonder emerges only in *meditation* on Scripture, and meditation takes *time*: ‘There is no standing still. Every gift we receive, every new understanding, drives us still deeper into the Word of God.’¹¹ Because Scripture tells us we must meditate on it, Christian ethics is fundamentally questioned about its reliance on modern ethical (Kantian) conceptualities: ‘God’s Word is not a collection of eternally valid general principles that we can have at our disposal any time we wish.’¹² Nor is it ‘the sum of a few general statements that I can call to memory anytime I want but is the word of God directed to me, new every day, in the inexhaustibly rich process of interpretation’.¹³

Again this should not be understood as an espousal of *ad hoc* proof-texting, because Bonhoeffer has emphasised the continuity of God’s grace and thus the reliability of his statutes. What Bonhoeffer is emphasising, almost single-handedly in contemporary discussions of

⁹ In *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1993), J. Clinton McCann helpfully traces why historical and form critical approaches have flirted with, but not dealt directly with, the question (see pp. 16-21). Though McCann discerns the methodological importance of the Torah’s claim to contain all that is (chapter 1), he nevertheless does not explicitly ask what this means for our definitions of biblical scholarship and how we construe what we think words ‘mean’.

¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, ‘On Psalm 119’, in *Meditating on the Word*, tr. and ed. David McL. Gracie (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1986): 136. Bonhoeffer also develops this theme with explicit reference to Psalm 119 in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* 5, ed. Gerhard Müller, Albrecht Schönherr, and Geoffrey Kelley, tr. Daniel Bloesch and James Burtness (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996): 57-58 and 156: ‘[T]he apparent repetitions are in fact always new variations on one theme, the love of God’s word. As this love can have no end, so also the words that confess it have no end. They want to accompany us through all of life, and in their simplicity they become the prayer of the child, the adult, and the elderly.’

¹¹ Bonhoeffer, ‘On Psalm 119’, 132.

¹² Bonhoeffer, ‘On Psalm 119’, 132.

¹³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Reflections on the Bible: Human Word and the Word of God*, tr. Eugene Boring (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004): 72.

the role of the Bible in Christian ethics, is that the Bible can never be replaced in concrete moral deliberation by summaries of its moral content to which we turn in time of moral decision. To put his claim in the strongest possible terms, only in the historical flow of life do we really penetrate more deeply into the richness of God as given in the historically saturated Scriptures. We do so only as we cling to its claims as divine promises in which we may discover new ways for living as God the promise-keeper meets and illumines us. This progress is cut off if we refuse to spend time with the actual text of Scripture, or if we set meditation on Scripture aside because we believe we possess an adequate summary of its 'moral content'.

On this point Genesis is especially important in the context of the canon, as the Christian tradition realised very early. It is a relatively developed text with a clear interest in showing how adherence to the Law is coherent with the very fabric of created reality. My interest in reading Genesis is as an ethicist, to understand the place it plays as the back-story to the Decalogue and the New Testament. Categories, definitions, and descriptions of legitimate action are, I have suggested, a central interest of this part of the biblical canon. As a primeval history of all humanity, it is also an explication of the theological confession that the lordship of the particular person Jesus Christ is global. A christological ethic, grounded in the work of the cross, resurrection and teaching of Jesus (with its regular references to a reading of the creation account) ought not to be wary of looking to Genesis to develop its sensitivity for the categories and practical distinctions necessary to en flesh the love command. Such an ethic must not allow these categories to be cut loose from a christological heart, and so from a strong missiological thrust, by calling its readings of Genesis a search for an ethic for everyone, under headings like 'common grace' or 'created orders'. My interest is not in Genesis as a description of an inert world that can be grasped by any good reader, but in the book of Genesis as an account of how and where God meets and sustains creatures, a confession of faith.

4. Christ, Categories and Moral Claims: A Case Study of Barth's Ethics of Creation

Barth's ethics of creation is interesting for my purposes for two reasons. First, with Bonhoeffer, he is concerned to show how Christian ethics is basically an extended preparation for hearing the claim of Christ's lordship in real time. Christ's claim is *total* and *specific*. This situates Christian ethics as a discipline that seeks to facilitate each person hearing Christ's claim (and is thus not legalist, specifying all moral action) while indicating that Christ claims humans wholly for unreserved obedience in our lived existence (so avoiding antinomianism, letting freedom be cut loose from its source). Barth's is a content-rich ethic wholly distinguishable from a proceduralist decision-making ethic. It provides categories that illumine contemporary moral questions, and takes its orientation not from biblical proof texts, but from a full theological account of reality grounded in a reading of Scripture.

My second interest is in watching *how* Barth generates his basic moral categories. How do the overall patterns of ethical topics emerge in a doctrine of creation that begins with an exegesis of Genesis? How does a slim volume of exegesis fan out systematically to lay out the ethical categories and claims that belong to a doctrine of creation? Despite the deductive mode of argumentation in volume three of the *Church Dogmatics*, it is nevertheless, arguably, the least organised volume of Barth's *magnum opus*. Its relatively slim first volume pursues a close exegesis of the first two chapters of Genesis rich in scriptural detail and theological insight. There are strong hints about these chapters' ethical implications sprinkled throughout the discussion, but a full explication awaits the nearly 700 page final fourth volume.

The central theological move of the first volume¹⁴ is to establish the theological claim that the two narratives of Genesis one and two are not accidental features of the text, but that they teach that creation is the external basis of the covenant and the covenant the internal basis of creation. In volume two Barth moves to explicate the covenant in terms of a christological anthropology. On his reading the Genesis narrative is not meant to be an exhaustive account of the whole cosmos, a

¹⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III.1, tr. J. W. Edwards, O. Bussey, and H. Knight (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958).

worldview, but is tightly focused on humanity within it. A Christian doctrine of creation cannot speak about all creation, but is primarily, even exclusively, concerned with anthropology, seeking a 'vision of the creaturely nature and essence of man'.¹⁵ Characteristically, Barth refuses simply to read off from our experience what it means to be human. Because we are creatures we are subject to the distortions of perception that come with this limitation. Barth's running question that yields the basic categories of an ethic of creation is therefore 'who am I?' a properly human question and put by humans.¹⁶ Barth suggests that to answer this question we must look to the one true creaturely man in order to reach a definition of humanity in general.¹⁷

The crucial move in his whole doctrine of creation is Barth's decision to equate a doctrine of creation with this christological anthropology. This orients his doctrine of creation as it is relevant for ethics on the task of describing the ethical agent. Real humanity is a creature with four basic attributes. Paragraph 44 develops the first anthropological specification: Jesus Christ is the real creature because he is summoned and chosen. He is the one elected to be real man and answers that call with complete abandon. To truly exist as human, therefore, is to be summoned by God, to be made a servant of his work. The second facet of Barth's anthropology, developed in paragraph 45, elucidates the conception of Jesus as 'man for others'. In Christ real humanity is revealed as perpetually engaged with their neighbours.¹⁸ Here the contentious claim is first introduced that the only *structural* difference in humanity that is analogous to this irreversible relationality is the male-female differentiation. The distinction between child and parent is bound up with but not intrinsic to this created differentiation, whereas the notion of race is an ethical non-category.¹⁹ Unlike Bonhoeffer, who calls the first pair the first worshipping community, and therefore the first church, Barth more cautiously suggests that the man-woman pair is an *analogue* of the Christ-church relation.²⁰

Barth's penultimate anthropological distinction, developed in paragraph 46, is between the soul and the body. Jesus' life and healings

¹⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.2, 38-40, 42-43.

¹⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.2, 150.

¹⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.2, 30, 53.

¹⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.2, 226, 243, 247.

¹⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.2, 286.

²⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.2, 229-318.

show that he both models and restores soul and body into ordered relations.²¹ The working analogy is between the structure of heaven and earth and the soul and body, the salient point being that heaven precedes and orders earth as the soul does the body.²² The final anthropological distinction of true humanity is that it is limited in time, a claim elaborated in paragraph 47. Jesus lives with and for God wholly, and so for other humans. In Christ we see that time is tied to service: real humanity has as much time as it needs for God and therefore for fellow humans.

By giving us the impression that he is developing a comprehensive theological anthropology in *Church Dogmatics* III.2, we rightly expect there to be some sort of conceptual necessity to the ethical sub-headings generated out of it, an expectation that Barth meets in the fourfold ethical discussion of *Church Dogmatics* III.4. Given its sheer bulk, I will not survey and analyse the spread of topics generated, but quickly draw attention to some plausible ethical categories Barth draws from his anthropology, some odd things it excludes, and at least one surprising ethical category it generates.

I do think there is a serious discussion to be had about whether worship and prayer ought properly to be understood as ethical *entailments* of a theological anthropology as Barth assumes, or whether they lie behind our theologising as its *premise and rule*. Nevertheless, there is a largely unobjectionable plausibility to Barth's exposition in paragraph 53 of the first anthropological specification, that real humans are summoned covenant partners. The biblical sabbath material is given a prominent role in delineating a sabbath ethos of renouncing faith in our own works. This situates discussions of the ethical duty to participate in collective worship. Because we are spoken to, Christians must also confess God, and here the entailed ethical categories are those of confession inside and outside the community of faith. Finally, the individual's response to God's summons yields a discussion of the ethics of prayer. The whole section is strongly oriented by categories of individual and collective, inside and outside, hearing and response. The treatment as a whole expresses the implications of sabbath in terms of an ethical elucidation of justification by faith alone.

²¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.2, 328.

²² Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.2, 368.

At least two oddities of the ethics volume are also illuminating. In paragraph 54 the ethical implications of the anthropological designation of humanity as being 'for others' are unpacked in concentric circles under the headings man and woman, parent and child, neighbour near and far. Under man and woman Barth discusses marriage, and sexual ethics as oriented by it. Under parents and children Barth frames the relation in terms of the fifth commandment to 'honour thy parents', having already stressed that the parent-child relation is not primarily a biological but a chronological relation. This leads into discussions of the ethics of parenting and the obedience of children. Considerations derived from our biological givenness are then reintroduced in a discussion of the ethics of Christian procreation, including questions of birth control, education and discipline. The final neighbour relation is to one's 'people', a grouping both cultural and biological, but which Barth for obvious biographical reasons tries to undermine as a moral category. Language, nationality and geographical location 'are not orders (*ordines*) of creation like the being of man and woman or parents and children'.²³ This rare lapse into the language of orders of creation,²⁴ highlights some conceptual ambivalence in Barth's intention to make man and woman the only 'structural' differentiation between humans, and in his procedure of working from the conceptual divisions of christological anthropology.

Paragraph 55 draws on the anthropological character of real humanity as an ordered body and soul to deal with the classic questions of killing in suicide, self-sacrifice, abortion, euthanasia, self-defence, capital punishment, judicial punishment in general, tyrannicide and finally war. The oddity emerges because Barth has so strongly stressed that a doctrine of creation is an anthropology and *not* a full account of all creation, and therefore that Christian theology ought not to speculate too widely on the ontological status of animals.²⁵ This leaves us wondering at Barth's decision in the ethics to dwell on the distinction between human and non-human life, generating ethical discussions of the moral claim of our animal drives and the killing of animals, the ethics of sickness and the role of medicine, the ethics of joy in living and the power to will. Surely an ethic that is grounded in

²³ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.4, 301.

²⁴ Paul T. Nimmo, 'The Orders of Creation in the Theological Ethics of Karl Barth', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60 (1) (2007): 24-35.

²⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.2, 17, 71, 137, 173.

ontological claims cannot speak this fulsomely about killing animals and the animal nature of humans by reducing a doctrine of creation to anthropology alone.

A final puzzle is why Barth ends his ethics with a discussion of honour, or an ethics of protecting one's reputation. Structurally, honour must be an entailment of paragraph 47's claim that Jesus is the Lord of time. If fulfilled human time is the claiming of our individual particularities for God's service, it follows that here the ethical discussions are of the particularity of Christian life, my own birth and death as part of God's claim, my own skills and interests as part of God's claim, and finally, honour. Because our particularity is a divine gift, but in no sense a possession, we are to give honour to others' particular skills, and to hold lightly to our reputations.

All this is undoubtedly edifying material, but one is left wondering why 'honour' appears here in this way rather than in the earlier discussion of the relation between parents and children that Barth has so prominently organised around the Decalogue's 'honour thy parents'. Somehow the term honour has been transported out of that biblical context and into a new conceptual complex related to time. But in Genesis, is time not the interest of the sabbath command? If honour is a modulation of time, why is it not integral to the discussion of how we are to interpret the command to hallow the sabbath?

My best answer to this puzzle is that Barth's organisation of material has been influenced by his running but unacknowledged dialogue with Kant. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*,²⁶ Kant discusses appropriate rights to possess other humans analogous to rights to possess things. Here he deals with marriage (infamously, as the right to the lifelong use of the spouses' sexual organs), the parental right (and here the cringe comes when he allows infanticide for children born 'outside the law', i.e. illegitimately), and the rights of the master of the house (chiefly concerned with distinguishing what it means actually to own a servant, but not to *act* as if you do). Elucidations follow of problematic questions of whether money, ideas, inheritance, and, most importantly for our purposes, a good reputation after one's death are ours by right. Kant's interest is in preserving the Prussian culture of chivalric honour by making one's reputation *property* passed on from

²⁶ Part I section III.

the dead to those who survive, and which can by right be vigorously protected in activities like duelling.

Against this chivalric culture and Kant's defence of it, Barth's rereading of the concept of honour is as noteworthy as it is edifying. But what remains unclear is what it has to do with the book of Genesis. Barth's discussion at this point looks rather more like a confluence of polemic engagement and a conceptual scheme heavy on the dialectics of space and time, generality and particularity. The result is that a category and a set of ethical claims are generated that are rather disconnected from the specific language and associated thought structures of Genesis. If we let Genesis set the terms of a Christian ethical doctrine of creation, it is simply not clear if we need to talk about honour at all, and if we do, with which concepts it should be linked, and what sort of prominence it should be given.

Clearly, in this volume of the *Church Dogmatics* Barth's primary mode of reasoning is deductive, expanding out from the ontological being of Christ in a cascading pyramid of linked conceptualities. Theology cannot avoid using concepts, but as Barth himself often warned, needs to sit loosely on its concepts, always allowing them to be claimed by Scripture. Yet in his treatment of the ethics of creation there is evidence that the balance has tipped toward conceptual coherence rather than faithfulness to Scripture. An associated problem is that, by working with such a strong christological anthropology, Barth must do his heavy lifting by drawing on New Testament texts, primarily the Gospels. The peculiar contribution of the book of Genesis can seem to be lost in the process. All this suggests exploring less conceptually dense theological approaches, less beholden to deductions from ontological claims, and as a result, more free to follow Scripture. What is needed is a more highly developed theological exegesis of Genesis that is disciplined and non-reductionist, patiently attentive to the cluster of ideas that Genesis itself asks us to consider.

Barth is rightly sanguine about drawing on philosophical conceptualities, so his use of idealist modes of reasoning is not in itself problematic. Christian theology constantly incorporates and transforms secular and pagan conceptual materials and mental habits. Nor are the overlaps and non-linear organisation of Barth's material problematic in themselves, Christian theologians presumably having been accustomed to it by Scripture. The real problem becomes evident when moral categories as a whole come under debate, as is currently underway in

the debate about homosexual marriage. As Barth is the most eloquent modern theological defender of traditional heterosexual marriage, his thought has become host to the skirmishes between western moral theologians who care to submit this debate to the terms set by the theological tradition. On this issue at least it becomes a hostage to the sheer number of pages and volume of Barth's argument as he moves from Genesis to Christology and then to the anthropological sub-concepts he derives from it, the I-Thou and separation-in-relation conceptualities. Because this argumentation moves ever further from direct engagement with the Genesis account, critics like Graham Ward and Eugene Rogers are given room to prefer his basic anthropological categories that in fact drive Barth's account against his explicit exegesis of Genesis 1:27 ('male and female he created them') and 2:24 ('and so a man shall leave...') which he takes to refer to heterosexual marriage.²⁷

It is in these debates about basic moral categories, not only those about marriage but also those surrounding questions of the ethics of genetic modification or prenatal testing, that Christian theology must rediscover Scripture and through it the creation to which it witnesses. Barth's ethics of creation has its architectonic appeal, and is illuminating in many ways. But as a doctrine of creation oriented to ethics its profusion of categories may not allow Scripture's account of the basic determinants of the Creator on human moral action to emerge in their own prioritisation and weighting. My essential interest is in making sense of the moral categories as the *text* of Scripture puts them, and in a theological ethics that clings to Scripture as a promise for our present.

Barth's emphasis on the essence of humanity in general, a definitional question, is not beside the point in a theological ethics. But it does have a primarily systematic interest rather than a more bluntly ethical question like: 'Where does Scripture suggest creatures ought properly to seek sustenance?' One can imagine the latter question having less investment in developing a comprehensive anthropology

²⁷ Eugene Rogers in *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) and Graham Ward, 'The Erotics of Redemption—After Karl Barth', *Theology and Sexuality* 8 (1998): 57-72 are the most well known examples of this turn in the discussion. For a detailed summary and critique of their position and that of Barth, see Chris Roberts, *Creation and Covenant: The Significance of Sexual Difference in the Moral Theology of Marriage* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), chs. 6 and 8.

than has Barth. My suggestion is that to put the question this way can yield a more modest and therefore powerful account of the ethical implications of a doctrine of creation, and more importantly, can submit itself more transparently to the questions raised by the configurations of the text of Genesis. Even if we agree with Barth that in Jesus we see the ‘real human’, Genesis must be allowed its proper say in defining the *content* of that statement, shedding its own light on Jesus’ creaturely life.

Barth focuses his account of creation on what it says about the human ethical agent,²⁸ but Genesis, arguably, situates agents not primarily by *describing* human agents alone, but by *addressing* agents directly to inform them that their agency, whatever its ontological shape, is bounded by and bonded to God’s works outside of the human creature, to tell them that they can meet Christ in creation only in certain ways and places. In Barth the concept of ‘Word’ is increasingly focused on the being of Christ, which may obscure the way ‘Word’ in Genesis seems literally to mean 1) the speaking of the present God and 2) God’s commands, which we later know as Torah, then Scripture. We encounter Christ in the description of his creative works, and thus we discover the christological meaning of creation in attention to its scriptural recounting. The biblical account, materially, is less interested in looking at humans to *define them anthropologically* than in reminding them that they are held in place in creation by *hearing and obeying God’s Word*.

5. What Genesis Demands of Christian Ethics

There are a vast array of interpretive options when reading a text like Genesis one and two, but in this concluding section I will return to these chapters to suggest the basic category questions I believe they offer to a theological ethic. Put in the barest possible terms, it seems that Genesis one and two have at least four intertwining concerns. The first is the emphasis on God as a speaker and humanity as a hearer and responder. The first narrative highlights God’s creating through speaking, beginning with the Bible’s third verse, and culminating in the ‘and the Lord commanded the man’ of 2:16-17. The physiognomy of *God as creative speaker* and *humanity as good or derelict hearers*

²⁸ Nimmo, ‘The Orders of Creation in the Theological Ethics of Karl Barth’, 34-35.

remains prominent throughout Genesis 1–4. I would locate the image of God language of 1:27 within this conceptual cluster.

The other three emphases emerge by observing what God *blesses* in the course of his creative work. The second emphasis is on the sabbath account of 2:1-3 that joins the two narratives. Here a specific divine-human relationship articulates *time*, an order of precedence orienting humans toward God on their first day. The third set of concerns has to do with the divine provision of *sustenance* for creatures. As Barth nicely puts it, the sequence of the first creation account shows the table being laid for humans and animals through the creation of fruit and seed bearing plants (1:11-12). Animals and humans are then together invited to partake in 1:29-30. Here human and nonhuman life are conceptually distinguished and related on a horizontal plane within a primary, vertical and ongoing dependence on divine sustenance. The fourth emphasis is on *procreation as a divine blessing* in 1:22 and 28. Human fertility is again linked to but distinguished from animal fertility, most notably by the dominion given to humans that is also conceptually tied to the blessing of fertility.²⁹ Fertility is in this constellation named explicitly as another sphere of divine provision. The focus of chapters 1–2 is therefore on *hearing and responding*, the *ordering of human time* with God, *awaiting God's daily sustenance* and the divine promise to *sustain the generations of biological life*.

There will, to be sure, be much work to do in interpreting and specifying the meaning of these four conceptual clusters, but it seems to me that this is a minimum set of ethically important categories or designations presented by the text. This cluster is compactly and elegantly expressed here as nowhere else in Scripture, and reverberates through the whole canon.³⁰ The New Testament is no less concerned than the Old to understand sexual practices and eating as powerful sites of social contest within which Christians either accept or challenge the world's social patterns.³¹ Though the religious meaning of the Israelites' and the New Testament Christians' sexual and culinary practices appear to be construed in a variety of ways in Scripture, it is remarkable that both practices receive constant attention as the biblical

²⁹ Jeremy Cohen, *'Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It': The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

³⁰ Cf. Frank Crüsemann, *The Torah: Theology and Social History of the Old Testament Law* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), chapter seven, esp. pp. 290-301.

³¹ 1 Corinthians 5–8, for instance, is clearly concerned with both questions.

writers attempt to elucidate the ethical implications of being God's chosen people.³²

In a few final paragraphs I can only offer a sketch of a recent and provocative account that generates its main ethical categories by close attention to the interrelation of these four emphases. In his *Wie Geschöpfe leben: Konturen evangelischer Ethik*,³³ Hans Ulrich has suggested a strikingly original reworking of Luther's *Drei Stände Lehre*. Ulrich uses a range of terminology to re-express Luther's thinking, but emphasises the key idea of 'Stiftung', 'foundation' to draw attention to how the dynamics of God's taking action within his creation founds ordered ways of life. This formulation stands in contrast to the discourse of created orders and 'Ordnungsdenken' with its semantics of essential stability. 'Stiftung' instead emphasises how the divine *giving* reveals the *givenness* of creaturely reality, while recalling that any stability created by God's Word is likely to be easily threatened by human inattention. The aim of such an ethic of createdness is to generate productive criticism of given social structures, not to validate them, as has so often been the case with the conceptuality of orders of creation. The theologically determinative connection then is not the familiar linkage of 'Stiftung' and 'Ordnung' ('institution' and 'order') but between 'Stiftung' and 'Gebot' ('institution' and 'Torah'), the living commandment.

The divine establishment of churchly order reveals in a paradigmatic way how divine speaking, caring and governing does, in fact, generate stable social structures in which human life can flourish. Sin on this account is contempt for the activity of God rather than the breach of some ontological order or law of nature. Neither is sin indebtedness to an eternal order within which we might conceive of compensation for

³² On this topic one must keep in mind how our perception of these matters is shaped by our place within the slow evolutions of emphasis in the Christian tradition from questions of continence in eating to continence in sexual activity. 'It is very, very interesting to see the move, the very slow move, from the privileging of food, which was overwhelming in Greece, to interest in sex. Food was still much more important during the early Christian days than sex. For instance, in the rules for monks, the problem was food, food, food. Then you can see a very slow shift during the Middle Ages, when they were in a kind of equilibrium... and after the Seventeenth Century it was sex.' Michel Foucault, 'On the Genealogy of Ethics' in *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984*, vol. 1, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, tr. Robert Hurley et al. (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1997): 253.

³³ Hans Ulrich, *Wie Geschöpfe leben: Konturen evangelischer Ethik* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2005). All translations mine.

some of the breaches we might commit. Sin is the denial of honour that belongs to God; the renunciation of sin the public, worshipful love and reliance on God that generates a social order. God's eschatological Word plays this structuring role in all regions of human social organisation by indicating the promises to which we may fruitfully cling to await divine action, waiting for our times to be taken up into God's time. This interpretation of Luther's doctrine refuses to allow the estates to be defined outside of the economy of the living working of God. Their role is to serve as a divinely-given aid to developing attentiveness in every area of life to God's care.³⁴

The relevance of this conceptuality for our discussion is illuminated by Oswald Bayer's remark that, 'The 'doctrine of the three estates' is really a hermeneutic of the primeval history in the book of Genesis, a way of expounding that text which appropriates the social dimensions of creation and sin for Luther's contemporary setting.'³⁵ Ulrich sees the theory of the *Stände* as encapsulating a deep grammar of Scripture in the recurring biblical emphasis on the divine provision for human *salvation, co-operation, feeding, and governance*. The institutions are a biblical hermeneutic not *summarising* Scripture or collating scriptural *proof texts*, but *disclosing* the deep semantic continuities of Scripture of relevance for orienting Christian living. That with which we see God concerned in these opening chapters of the Bible tells us something about how God wishes his relation to all creatures to be understood. As a result, Ulrich comments, theological investigation is given a question that differs sharply from that of philosophical ethics. 'Inquiry is directed towards how, in all that humans do (working, praying, ruling), they may remain aware of the multifaceted way God forms and sustains human life.'³⁶ He continues,

[The] Word of God...contains the promise that human life may be creaturely and will ever again be freed to be creaturely. While humans can only submit to necessities of life, they can understand, fear and love God's command, because accepting this command is accepting God's assistance and rescue. In the command God offers a covenant, exposing himself. He is not a world-creator who has retreated into himself. In the command God appears in his faithfulness to this community with his creatures. This faithfulness constitutes God's justice. The faithfulness of

³⁴ Ulrich, *Wie Geschöpfe leben*, 109-10.

³⁵ Oswald Bayer, 'Nature and Institution: Luther's Doctrine of the Three Estates' (forthcoming): 2.

³⁶ Ulrich, *Wie Geschöpfe leben*, 107.

God stands against the momentum of the continuity of beings and their terrified struggle for self-preservation.³⁷

The institutions, then, name the love of the creator God as embodied in those stable forms of life God has given for *all* humans to await divine sustenance.³⁸ Ulrich summarises, ‘This is not a discourse about the borders of the human in distinction from God, but a sharpening of our view of what *God’s* care and lordship is.’³⁹ The task of Ulrich’s account of ethics is to offer a vision of Christian ethics as a doorman indicating the open doors of the promises in which real human life can take place. It arises from sustained meditation on God’s promises to care for and rule human life, rather than anthropological description.

Such a revised account of the estates does not claim to account for all known forms of social structure, setting out on the project of finding new biblically- or transcendentally derived estates to supplement the basic realms of the *ecclesia*, *oeconomia* and *politia*. When we think of the estates as descriptions of ontological realities somehow enduring in abstraction from God’s activity, the primarily heuristic role of the doctrine is masked. If this heuristic role is basic, contends Ulrich, the institutions can claim neither to regulate every possible form of human behaviour nor to describe behaviour that already exists. They express faith’s understanding of the scriptural promises of inhabitable places in a desert whose limits theology has no remit exhaustively to explore. This is to take seriously the prayer of the psalmist that God might ‘*Explain* to us how to *keep your precepts*, that I may *meditate on your marvels*.’ (Ps. 119:27, NJB.) It is enough that God has spoken promises to us in which we can live, directing us to the places where God’s will is done and we may thankfully receive the wonder of our daily bread.

³⁷ Ulrich, *Wie Geschöpfe leben*, 112.

³⁸ Ulrich, *Wie Geschöpfe leben*, 103.

³⁹ Ulrich, *Wie Geschöpfe leben*, 355.