

# ***“Was sollen wir tun?”***

## **Theological reflections on aspects of the ethics of Karl Barth<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

*The author investigates some aspects of the ethics of the wellknown Swiss theologian Karl Barth. The article focuses on to the coherence between dogmatics and ethics, aspects of theocentricity and christocentricity, followed by an exploration of Barth's views on (homo-)sexuality and politics. Before concluding, a final question is discussed: did Barth practice what he preached? – that is the question regarding integrity. Although the author may not agree with some facets of Barth's theology, he has and shows appreciation for many of Barth's views on ethics.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

It is impossible to do justice to the ethics of Karl Barth in one small article. What I intend is not to fill the gap which Webster (1998:1, 9) observed when he wrote (in an overstatement?): “Close study of Barth's ethical writings is still in its infancy”; “a full account of Barth's moral theology is yet to be written”. I decided to highlight only some of the key features of Barth's ethics and to elaborate on its relevancy for South Africa today.

Barth is typified as “the greatest theologian of the twentieth century” (Bakker 1981:97) and his theology as the most significant systematic theological achievement of the twentieth century (Wentsel 1982:98). Van Niftrik (1949:26) argues that the effect of the revolution inaugurated by Barth, is most clearly seen in the sphere of ethics. According to Gustafson (1984:25)

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<sup>1</sup> I use the concept *ethics* in this article in a more general sense, referring to all human activities, and not in the strict sense of the word where *ethics* (or *ethos*) refers to only *one dimension* of human activities.

the ethics of Barth is “the most comprehensive account of theological ethics in the Protestant tradition” and Stob (1978:110) views Barth as “the most prolific and trenchant writer on Christian Ethics that the twentieth century has produced.”

The question arises: where to start with such an impossible project, writing on the ethics of Barth? I shall explain briefly how I approached my proposal. My presupposition is that one can only understand the theology of a theologian if one understands it against the background of his life, work and choices.

I first consulted the book of Eberhard Busch (1976) on the life of Karl Barth, with a map of Switzerland and Germany in front of me (see also Webster 2000:1-19). In so doing I could follow the different stadia in the life of Barth: born in Basel (1886), spending his early years in Bern; then started his theological studies (1904-1909), first in Bern, continued in Berlin (Von Harnack) and completed in Marburg (Herrmann). Then followed a period of pastoral work, first as vicar in Genève (1909-1911) and then as *Pharrer* in Safenwil (1911-1921). It was during this period, and after World War One (1914-1918), that he published the two editions of his famous *Der Römerbrief* (1918, 1922). In Safenwil he also became known as a “red pastor” because of his affection for socialism. And it was here that Barth completely redirected his theological method, from a liberal to a dialectical approach. When he saw his earlier tutors (inter alia Von Harnack & Herrmann) endorsing the war politics of Germany, he concluded: if their ethics are wrong, then also their dogmatical presuppositions cannot be in order (Busch 1976:93). After Safenwil followed a period of 46 years of lectureship (1921-1968), first in Göttingen (city of Ritschl) and Münster (1921-1930), then Bonn (1930-1935), where he started his thirteen massive volumes of *Kirchliche Dogmatik (KD)*. It was during this period that the well-known Barmen Declaration (1934) was published, formulated by Barth (Busch 1976:258), as a protest against Nazism and “German Christianity”. Barth’s lectureship was brought to an end in Germany (Bonn) because he refused to sign unconditionally the oath of loyalty to Hitler (Busch 1976:268). He returned to Basel where he continued his theological research (1935-1962), even after his retirement (1962-1968), until his death in 1968.

Secondly, I consulted two books which gave me a short overview of Barth’s whole theological “oeuvre”, the first one written at the beginning of his career, namely *Dogmatik in Grundriss* ([1946]; 1960), and the other near the end of his life, *Einführung in die evangelische Theologie* ([1963] 1979).

Thirdly, I reflected on the *Römerbrief* ([1922] 1967) because it clearly illustrates the turning point in Barth's theological approach and ethics.

Fourthly, I turned to the ethical material in the *KD* itself, especially *KD II/2* and *KD III/4*, although one should always keep in mind that, because of Barth's view of the unity of ethics and dogmatics, there may be other (implicit and explicit) ethical indications throughout the *KD*.

Fifthly (cf Biggar 1993:1-6) I considered Barth's early ethical reflections in Münster (1928-29) and Bonn (1930-31), *Ethik I & II* (Barth 1981a), which were not published during Barth's lifetime, because in them he still advocated the doctrine of orders of creation which he later rejected. It also gives us an insight into how Barth visualised his future approach to ethics: intertwined with dogmatics, dealing with the command of (1) God the Creator, (2) God the Reconciler and (3) God the Redeemer. Thus Barth planned to develop his ethical insights according to these three dimensions (cf *KD II/2:564f*, *KD III/4:1-34*; Barth 1981:1-12; Biggar 1993:46-96). Then there are his later lecture fragments, prepared by Barth to form part of *KD IV/4*, entitled *Das christliche Leben* (Barth 1976), published after his death (Barth 1981b). These fragments form part of the middle part of his ethics, namely the command of God the Reconciler – the first part dealing with the command of God the Creator and the third (not written) with God the Redeemer (which should have formed *KD V*). The planned material for *KD IV/4* should contain the following: (1) the foundation of the Christian life (on baptism, and published as *KD IV/4*, fragment); (2) an exposition of the Lord's Prayer (of which a discussion of the first two petitions were published in *Das christliche Leben*); (3) the renewal of the Christian life (on the Lord's Supper – none of it published).

In the sixth place one should keep in mind the many other books and articles of Barth which are of great importance for his views on ethics, too many to mention here, some of which I will refer to later on.

Lastly there are the many articles and books written on the ethics of Barth, of which I only mention Van Dijk (1966), Willis (1971), Biggar (1993) and Webster (1998; see also Kirsch 1972; Maeng 1974; Lovin 1984; Matheny 1990).

It is widely accepted that there is a clear development in the theology (and ethics) of Barth, from his earlier years of dialectical theology, to his later years of a theology of analogy with an emphasis on the humanity of God. There is, however, in spite of the discontinuity, also a strong trend of continuity in which the revelation of God in Jesus Christ forms a central part. Van Dijk (1966:10) even refers to an "astonishing continuity" in the theology of Barth (see Webster 1998:4-5, 19).

## 2. ETHICS AND COHERENCY

It is clear that, for Barth, theology forms an inextricable unity, which means that dogmatics and ethics should not be divided into two separate divisions of theology (*KD I/1:xii*). In this respect Barth imitates the approach of the Reformers (see Calvin) (*KD I/2:875-890*) who integrated dogmatics and ethics. Ethics is not concerned with what *man* is doing, but what *God* in Christ has done for man and what man should accept in faith (*KD II/2:595, 598, 603*).

Thus Barth emphasises the coherence of dogmatics and ethics; “Christian dogmatics is inherently ethical dogmatics” (Webster 1998:8). Dogmatics is ethics and ethics is dogmatics (*KD I/2:888; KD II/2:571, 575; KD III/4:1, 24, 34*). Although an *extrinsic* (or *superficial*) distinction between dogmatics and ethics is possible, it is better to avoid such a distinction (*KD I/2:889-890*).

To sum up: “For Barth, ethical questions are not tacked on to dogmatics as something supplementary, a way of exploring the “consequences” of doctrinal proposals or demonstrating their “relevance”. Dogmatics, precisely because its theme is the encounter of God and humanity, is from the beginning moral theology” (Webster 1998:8).

As far as I can judge, Barth is correct in his approach of emphasising the unity between dogmatics and ethics, doctrine and life, orthodoxy and orthopraxy. But he himself did not succeed in avoiding a distinction between an ethics of creation, an ethics of reconciliation and an ethics of redemption. To separate dogmatics and ethics is wrong; to make a distinction between the two, is the more promising approach. Rendtorff (1980:21) correctly warns against the danger of subordinating ethics to dogmatics (see Willis 1971:443).

## 3. ETHICS AND THEOCENTRICITY

Barth’s ethics can be called, in the real sense of the word, theocentric ethics, that is Trinitarian ethics. Barth’s (“voluntaristic”) ethics clearly signifies the priority of the transcendent God – over against the Kantian rationalistic ethics. According to Barth we discover what is right to do in a unique event of encounter with the living God and his special command to us here and now, and not as the conformity of human rationality to moral requirements of universal practical reason (Biggar 2000:214).

For Barth the subject of ethics is not what *man* thinks or does, but how *God* is and reveals God self through God’s Word. Barth’s ethics is fundamentally influenced by the doctrine of God (Gustafson 1984:27, 33, 42). The ethics of creation is closely related to the doctrine of God and that of election.

In his *Römerbrief* Barth rejected the subjectivism of Schleiermacher and refers to God as “die grosse Störung der Dogmatiker und Ethiker” (1967:424). That which disturbs human beings, are not words of human beings or church, but the gracious Word of God (1967:414). It is precisely because of this that the theme of *solī Deo Gloria* is of central value in moral actions (1967:417).

This is already clear from the more general as well as the more special definition Barth gave of ethics. In general sense it reads:

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. Because Jesus Christ is the holy God and sanctified man in One, it has its basis in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Because the God who claims man for Himself makes Himself originally responsible for him, it forms part of the doctrine of 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.

(*KD II/2:564; CD II/2:509*)

It is clear that ethics can only be theocentric ethics. “For the question of good and evil has been decided and settled once and for all in the decree of God, by the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Now that this decision has been made, theological ethics cannot go back on it. It can only accept it as a decision that has been made actually and effectively. It can only attest and confirm and copy it” (*KD II/2, 595; CD II/2:536*).

The task of special ethics is described as follows: “The task of special ethics in the context of the doctrine of creation is to show to what extent the one command of the one God who is gracious to man in Jesus Christ is also the command of his Creator and therefore already the sanctification of the creaturely action and abstention of man” (*KD III/4:1; CD III/4:1*).

The God that we know, is the God of revelation, the God of the Word. Humankind is doing what is good in so far as he or she is an obedient hearer of the Word and command of God (*KD III/4:2*). What is important to humankind, is knowledge of the Word, of which Jesus Christ is the centre (*KD III/4:24, 33, 42, 47*).

It has been *made known* to humankind what is good (Mi 6:8) and he or she is called upon to repeat this Word and not to prompt it (*KD II/2:596*). Ethics is not concerned with human beings' use of the Word, but of the Word of God's concern with them, who is approached by that Word (*KD II/2:606-607*). It is God's will, as Creator, not to be without humans, and so we as human creatures cannot be without God (*KD III/4:115*).

“The answer to the problem of the ethical lies not in what man is doing or attempts to do. It is wholly in what God has done and continues to do for man and the world in Jesus Christ” (Willis 1971:29). Human beings are ultimately determined by God’s grace in Jesus Christ and their liberation is in the end an inexorable necessity (Biggar 1993:5).

Barth wholeheartedly rejects natural knowledge of God, which typifies his ethics as an ethics of revelation. Humans do what is good only when they obey the command of *God*. It is a sinful act – and Barth could sometimes emphasise the seriousness of sin (*KD* II/2:590; *KD* IV/1:214-222) – to find an answer to good and evil from *human’s* point of view and not to consider *God’s* gracious answer in Jesus Christ (*KD* II/2:573, 580; *KD* II/1:395 f; see also Berkouwer 1974:90; Zahrnt 1967:119f; Willis 1971:214-222). It could be expected that Barth would be a fervent opponent of Brunner’s concept of orders of creation (*KD* III/4:20f, 40f).

Barth also rejects Roman Catholic moral philosophy (as substructure) and moral theology (as topstructure), because it minimises sin, grace and the revelation of God (*KD* II/2:586-594). In the same way casuistry is criticised, because with it humankind is enthroned at the cost of God (*KD* III/4:9).<sup>2</sup>

It is clear that Barth opts for an ethics of the Word of God. Which Word? one may ask. How do we come to know the Word of God? Is the Bible a handbook of law with moral principles to be applied in different situations? Here we touch on Barth’s doctrine of Scripture (*KD* I/1).<sup>3</sup> Suffice it to say that in Barth’s view the Bible is not a book of law at man’s disposal; there *is* no (fixed) command of God, but God *presents* us *with* his command, God presents Himself as Commander (*KD* II/2:609; see also Van Niftrik 1949:119; Berkouwer 1971:63). This does not mean that the command of God is empty; what we possess, are no timeless truths, but the concrete command (*KD* III/4:12).

It could be expected that this form of Word ethics would invoke a lot of criticism. Bonhoeffer (1970:306, 312, 359) accused Barth of “revelation positivism”, while Gustafson (1984:31, 39) argues that Barth undercuts careful moral reasoning and that he indeed made use of non-Biblical material. Willis (1971:293) agrees that Barth’s ethics “leads to the exclusion of rational deliberation within the ethical situation” (see De Kruijf 1994:40-52 & McGrath 1994:123-143); “to what extent is it possible”, asks Willis (1971:202), “to draw a real distinction between divine and human subjectivity and agency ... so that

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<sup>2</sup> See the criticism of Biggar (2000:220-222) in this regard.

<sup>3</sup> See Runia (1962); also T Hart (37-56, on “revelation”) and F Watson (57-71, on “the Bible”), in Webster (2000).

man is established as a unique subject and agent capable of significant ethical action, that is obedience?"; "the most general reservation I have about Barth's ethics centers in the overtones of transcendentalism and actualism that run throughout it" (Willis 1971:428).

Although much of this criticism is true, we should always keep in mind that the coin has another side, to which Webster draws our attention. Barth's early approach "was directed, not to the entitlement of human action to exist, but to a moral culture whose authority and confidence rested on affirmation of axiomatic status of the processes of human self-realization" (Webster 1998:5). "From the beginning Barth believed that, *because of who God is*, we may not pursue talk of divine action in isolation from talk of the human ethical realm" (Webster 1998:19). Barth's first intention was to clear up "the idolatrous pattern of cultural-religious action, which required no serious talk of God as other than immanent to the teleology of human-realization" (Webster 1998:19). "Over against the assurance about human dignity of the human ethos which underlay bourgeois culture, Barth is urging that it is of God's action alone that we may predicate axiomatic status, radical liberty, self-existence" (Webster 1998:28). What Barth was denying, "is not that human action has any entitlement to exist, but that it can be considered as having self-evident status, on the basis of which we may proceed to erect some kind of assemblage of cultural forms, including notions of God. Barth's concern is not with the elimination of responsible human action, but with its placing or specification" (Webster 1998:37-38; 2000:147).

Thus, "those who have read (and assumed) Barth to be saying that human action is of only marginal significance have badly misconstrued him .... The dichotomy of theocentrism and anthropocentrism does not exist for him" (Webster 2000:160).

#### 4. ETHICS AND CHRISTOCENTRICITY

It is evident from Barth's writings that Christology plays a pivotal role in his theology and ethics.<sup>4</sup> Thus Barth's theology is correctly typified as a theology of God's grace in Jesus Christ (Busch 1976:223, 426; Van Niftrik 1949:101-105; Berkhof 1985:199). As Barth (1960:66) himself said: "Christology is the touchstone of all knowledge of God in the Christian sense, the touchstone of

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<sup>4</sup> The fact that in this article little attention is paid to Barth's pneumatology, does not imply that it is unimportant, see G Hunsinger in Webster (2000:177-194), with source references. See Biggar (1993:164): "A major theological correlate of this [very important] concept of vocation is the intimate presence of the living God to the individual human creature. Indeed, this correlate is one of the most distinctive features of Barth's theological ethics, which is characterized by a remarkable confidence in, and focus upon, the activity of the Holy Spirit." But "this pneumatological emphasis is carefully qualified ... by the definite Trinitarian scheme in which it occurs."

**“Was sollen wir tun?” *Theological reflections on aspects of the ethics of Karl Barth***

all theology”. “The whole work of God lives and moves in this one Person. He who says God in the sense of Holy Scripture will necessarily have to say Jesus Christ over and over again” (Barth 1960:39).

Willis (1971:4) summarises Barth’s ethics as follows: “For Barth, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ *is* the solution to correct human behaviour. This means that it is both ontologically and paradigmatically *prior*, and that human action in its widest ramifications and subtlest nuances can only comprise a recognition and acknowledgement and following of the action of God.”

Thus, “it is the obedience of Jesus Christ as humiliated and suffering Son of God that provides the paradigm of appropriate human action” (Willis 1971:202).

The Christocentric approach characterises the total “oeuvre” of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*; the covenant of grace and the reconciliation of human beings with God through Jesus Christ, is the basic pattern of Barth’s theology (Kupisch 1972:121-122). In Barth’s view the creation forms the “external basis” (*äusserer Grund*) of the covenant, while the covenant is taken to be the “internal basis” (*innerer Grund*) of creation and the “presupposition” (*Voraussetzung*) of reconciliation (*KD III/1:44f*).

The God of creation is the God who is gracious unto us in Jesus Christ (*KD III/4:38*). And this Jesus Christ does not only *supply* us with an answer, but *is* the answer to the moral question (*KD II/2:572*). Correct human action is in the full sense of the word a decision and act of God, in Christ, *that* Christ who is viewed to be at the same time the electing God and elected man (*KD II/2:598*).

“The ethical problem of Church dogmatics can consist only in the question whether and to what extent human action is a glorification of the grace of Jesus Christ. Theological ethics cannot consider a view of man that is severed from the life-centre, from the decision made in Jesus Christ” (*KD II/2:600; CD II/2:540*). “It is by Him that the conduct of all human beings is measured” (*KD III/4:260; CD III/4:232*).

Man’s sanctification is not to be found in man himself but in Christ (*KD IV/2:565-578*); the Christian character of a person is not to be sought in what he is doing, or not doing, but in what Christ has done for him – which evokes the question whether the subjective appropriation is not dissolved by the objective faith truth (Zahrnt 1967:70, 94).

As a Christocentric ethics, Barth’s ethics can also be typified as an ethics of grace. Ethics is by definition “ethics of grace”, or it is not theological ethics at all (*KD II/2:584, 592, 598*). To the question “was sollen wir tun?”, there is only one possible answer: “ We are to do what corresponds to this



grace. We are to respond to the existence of Jesus Christ and his people" (*KD* II/2, 640; *CD* II/2:576). Or in the language of the *Römerbrief*: "Die Gnade genügt, auch für die Ethik" (1967:423). Barth's *Kirchliche Dogmatik* is correctly described as a "hymn on God's grace" (Zahrnt 1967:113).

It is important, in this regard, to pay attention to Barth's view on the relation between law and gospel, which Barth reversed into: first the gospel and then the law (*KD* II/2:567). Because, how can you hear the law before first hearing the gospel? (*KD* III/4:55). The Word of God is gospel as far as its content, and law as far as its form is concerned. The law is the form in which the gospel appears (*KD* II/2:564). I can only come to know the law of God where the will of God appears to me in the form of grace. Knowledge of grace also precedes knowledge of sin. "In the strict sense there is no knowledge of sin except in the light of Christ's Cross" (Barth 1960:119).

Barth stuck to this view to the end of his career, namely to "the superiority of God's Yes over his No, the Gospel over the Law, the grace over condemnation, and life over death" – because Romans 7 is followed by Romans 8! (Barth 1979:94).

Barth's views on gospel and law evoked appreciation (Rendtorff 1980:53, 146) as well as criticism, especially from the side of Lutheran theologians (Thielicke 1965:192f), but also from Roman Catholic theologians (see Zahrnt 1967:101, who refers to Hans Urs von Balthasar).

Space does not allow us to elaborate on the critique on Barth in this regard (see Velema 1987:34-41). Suffice it to say that seldom is Christology developed to form the essence and core of Christian ethics as we experience in Barth.

It was his main ethical purpose – and his most valuable ethical achievement – to fashion an account of the moral life in terms of this vision [i.e. the message of Jesus Christ attested in the Bible]. His, of course, is not the only ethics that speaks in theological terms. But it is, perhaps, unique in the ethical seriousness with which it takes God as one who is actively engaged in personal relationship with his human creatures, and the human moral agent as one whose basic identity is given in that relationship.

(Biggar 1993:165)

Thus Barth's ethical method proceeds from the Bible with its notion of salvation history in Jesus Christ, into a systematic Trinitarian theology and then on to ethics (Biggar 2000:224).

## 5. ETHICS AND (HOMO-)SEXUALITY

Because of the world-wide discussions on homosexuality, as for instance in the Anglican Church as well in the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, I have decided to have a look at what Barth has to say on this subject. Does his theocentric and Christocentric ethics offer us a way out of the moral labyrinth in which we find ourselves today?

It is intriguing to note that Barth discusses the notion of homosexuality in his *Kirchliche Dogmatik III/4* where he deals with the command of God the Creator (and not under the command of God the Reconciler [uncompleted] or God the Redeemer [not started]). As we know, the motto here is *freedom*, freedom before God, freedom in the community, freedom to life and freedom in “limitation”. Under “freedom in the community” Barth elaborates on: husband and wife, elders and children, the far and the near (people). The theme of homosexuality forms part of the subdivision “husband and wife” (*KD III/4:127-269*).

A few features typify Barth’s ethics of marriage: “Humanity which is not co-humanity is inhumanity” (*KD III/4:128*; also 183). Therefore, “coitus without co-existence is a demonic affair” (*KD III/4:148*). Married life is exclusive, no third person may be part of it (*KD III/4:203, 218*).<sup>5</sup>

Homosexual relationships are dealt with within this context (*KD III/4:184-185*) – and rejected by Barth in no uncertain terms. Homosexuality “is the physical, psychological and social sickness, the phenomenon of perversion, decadence and decay, which can emerge when man refuses to admit the validity of the divine command in the sense in which we are now considering it” (*KD III/4:184*; *CD III/4:166*). It is described as humanity without co-humanity, against the command of God, against nature (*widernatürlich*) (sic!). A husband can only be truly husband with his wife, and a wife can only be truly wife with her husband.

What is remarkable in this approach is the total absence of any kind of Christology – while an appeal is made to a certain kind of natural theology (*widernatürlich*).

In the latest discussions on this issue there is a whole range of pressing questions, such as: when the Bible refers to homosexuality, does it refer to homosexuality *as we know it today*, or to homosexuality encapsulated in the pagan religion and culture of ancient times?; do the text-references in the Old Testament refer to homosexual practices or to heterosexuals who were involved in homosexual practices?; should all human actions that are *contra naturam* be disqualified as immoral?; what are the consequences of

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<sup>5</sup> On the problematic relationship between Karl Barth and his “secretary”, Charlotte von Kirschbaum, see Busch (1976:198-200) and Köbler (1991).

the distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual practice?; given that a person is born with a homosexual orientation, and, after many efforts, does not change, what options are open for such a person to live a fulfilled life?; how should the church deal with a “married” homosexual couple who continue to confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour (excommunication)?; where should we set the confines of the Christian church (should the church exclude all homosexual couples?); what are the implications of the reconciling work of Jesus Christ for homosexual persons?; does the fact that Christ, during his lifetime, reached out to the marginalised and outcasts of society, have any significance for dealing with the homosexual person today?

In the present theological research on homosexuality in South Africa, there are those who reject it straightforward as a contradiction of the clear Biblical truth (Heyns 1986:164-168; Kretzschmar 1998:66-67; Masango 2002:956-972; Nel, 2005:365-378; Vorster 2005:569-592; Van Rensburg 2006:745-769; Potgieter 2007). On the other hand there are those, with different nuances, who consider it acceptable, arguing from the perspective of Christian love, the church as an inclusive community of love and Christ’s example of inclusive love for the marginalised (Jakobsen 1997:9-27; Barnard 2000:81-123; Geysers 2002:1655-1677; Dreyer 2004:175-205; 2006:445-471; De Villiers 2006:54-78; see Snyman 2006:715-744; Du Toit 2007:161-171).

There are also those who plead for an ongoing debate characterised by spiritual maturity as well as careful and continuous listening to the arguments on both sides (Anthonissen & Oberholzer 2001; Buitendag 2004:61-81; König 2005:85-89; Smit 2006:218-228; Du Toit 2006:452-454; Snyman 2006:968-981). For the difference in approach does not lie in the rejection of the *authority* of Scripture, but in a different *explanation* of the authoritative Word (Du Toit 2006:452; Smit 2006:221). In this regard it is not helpful to demote and disregard the Bible as normative text, as is done by Müller (2007:15), who argues that Paul “was a child of his time with only one frame of reference and that is a male controlled discourse.”

Ethicists hope that exegetes will soon come to clarity as far as the Biblical teaching is concerned – see, for instance the difference in the interpretation of the Old Testament material between Nel and Snyman.<sup>6</sup> This must include a Christological interpretation of the Old as well as the New Testament, for Jesus Christ is God’s last and final and highest Word spoken

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<sup>6</sup> Snyman (2006: 979) concludes that the texts in Leviticus refer to male heterosexual persons who participated in homosexual practices (in family circles). It is unlikely that permanent homosexual relations, as we experience it today, are referred to; Du Toit (2007:169) argues that what Paul described as “unnatural relations” in Rm 1:25-26 refer to *heterosexual* men and women who were guilty of *homosexual* practices.

to humankind (Heb 1:1-2). No explanation of Scripture is acceptable which ignores or neglects the person and the work of Jesus Christ.

In the meantime different scenarios open up for homosexual persons: The first option is a (unfulfilled) life of celibacy – but it is an option sometimes unbearable, even for Christians. Another option is a celibate life in a commune where Christians could take care of and support each other, and to a certain extent fulfil their need for friendship. But it is doubtful whether this would be a satisfactory and realistic solution. And then there is the option of a permanent bond, legalised in court – but this presupposes Biblical substantiation. In this almost desperate situation of no clear solution, some suggest that every person and every congregation has to decide on its own (König 2005:96, 98). But this could hardly be a permanent solution, for what is viewed wrong and sinful in one congregation cannot be morally right in the next.

While the theological debate is continuing, nearly all theologians agree that special pastoral care should be taken of homosexual persons and that they should feel welcome as full members of the church of Jesus Christ. I am sure that the Holy Spirit will lead the church of Christ to reach a satisfactory solution to this burning issue, even if it may be a very painful process.

I have taken freedom to elaborate on the question of homosexuality because it is a burning issue in the churches today, and because, as far I can judge, Karl Barth, strangely enough, distanced himself from his Christocentric approach in his discussion on homosexuality.

## **6. ETHICS AND POLITICS<sup>7</sup>**

The question has been raised whether Barth's ethics has any relevance for a real political situation. His answer was: where you argue theologically, you argue implicitly or explicitly politically (Busch 1976:305; see Webster 2000:141-163). His theology has a strong political dimension and he grounded his political choices on the Word of God (Kupisch 1972:138, 140). This is clear from the strong Christological formulation of article 1 of the Barmen Declaration of 1934 (which was not in the first place directed against state absolutism, but in favour of the purity of the church and the gospel), as well as his blaming the German Church who suffered from Luther's errors on law and gospel, church and state (Kupisch 1972:131).

Brinkman (1982) concludes, with Marquardt (1972), that Barth throughout his whole lifetime revealed a positive relation between the gospel and socialism (see also Gollwitzer 1972:11, 41). Brinkman also illustrates how Barth combined his socialist choices with his theology in concrete situations.

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<sup>7</sup> I did not touch here on the topic of Barth's view on "war and peace", see Van Wyk (1991:48-49), Biggar (1993:92-96) and Werpewowski (2000:237-240), with source references.

Barth believed that a non-political Christianity is impossible (Werpehowski 2000:228-242). On the other hand it is intriguing that Barth revealed certain reservations in his theological discourses. Thielicke (1983:585) referred to the fact that Barth, during his years as professor in Bonn, refused to discuss politics during lecture time!

Barth did not reach the point of providing us with a detailed discussion on the state in his *KD*. He did not discuss political authority in his ethics of creation (*KD* III/4, 1951), but only fragmentarily in his ethics of reconciliation (Barth 1981b:205f; *KD* IV/4).

The command of God to the state does not fall within the special ethics of creation because the state is not an order of creation (*Schöpfungsordnung*), but a genuine and specific order of the covenant (*Bundesordnung*). This means that the state, and the command of God to it, form a part of the doctrine of reconciliation (Willis 1971:392; Biggar 1993:61).

One of the most complete statements of Barth on church and state is his study on *Christengemeinde und Bürgergemeinde* (Barth 1946; see Zahrt 1967:182-196; De Kruijf 1994:31-39; and esp Willis 1971:391-427).

Both the church and the state are provisional orders established by grace. The church is that place within human society where God's action is recognised and proclaimed, while the state forms the other side of God's patience and provides the ordered context within which the collective life of human beings can be maintained and the gospel preached. The service of the church to the state is directed toward the establishment and maintenance of a just political order. The intercession of the church on behalf of the state can, on occasion, take the form of criticism, opposition and, in extreme cases, even revolt.

The relation between the church and the state may be likened to two concentric circles the centre of which lies in the event of reconciliation accomplished by Christ. Within the creaturely sphere, both church and state are placed in the service of God as "agents of reconciliation". The state cannot undertake to instruct the church in the performance of its task of preaching the gospel, nor seek to effect a reform in its order and life; the church cannot attempt to become a political power in its own right, lobbying for special attention and privilege. Barth uses the "analogy model": the state is an image, a correspondence and an analogue to the Kingdom of God which the church proclaims and believes in. Because the church is grounded on the Incarnation and the compassion God shows to man in Christ, the church will be primarily concerned, in the political sphere, with what is human, with humankind in the full range of his or her individual and collective life, rather than with principles, programmes and causes. The church will therefore concern itself particularly

with those who are economically, socially and politically poor and weak in society; it will also stand resolutely against dictatorship in principle (sic!) of the totalitarian state; also for freedom of expression and in opposition to censorship. The analogue to this in the state is the proper separation between its various functions and “powers” (legislative, executive and judicial).

For Barth the “humanity of God” is the source and norm of human dignity and human rights (Busch 1976:380) and therefore “humanness” is the criterium for all human political decisions. The fellow human being is the barrier and the door, there is no way that should bypass this (Barth 1927:53; see Kruger 1971). God is partisan for the poor (*KD II/2:200*). Because of the humanism of God Barth also rejected anti-Semitism and racism (Zahrnt 1967:106).

An interesting question is how Barth judges *Nazism* and *communism*. It is clear that Barth wholeheartedly rejected Nazism as a totalitarian system. Barth had even gone so far as to say that the church not only has to support the war effort against Nazism, but has to participate actively in military duty; every human being who fights against Hitler, fights the cause of Jesus Christ (Willis 1970:410).

While Barth rejected Nazism he did not do the same with communism. Why?

Barth was sharply criticised for his stance on communism. Brunner asked: “why did Barth remain silent on communism?” and Reinhold Niebuhr: “why did Barth keep silent on Hungary?” (Busch 1976:369, 397; Kupisch 1972:136-138).

What was Barth’s reaction? As we know, Barth rejects an “ethics of principles” and emphasises the uniqueness of each situation. It is always dangerous for the church to align itself with the Western value structure. Consideration must be paid to the fact that communism seriously wrestled with the social question. “Communism, unlike National Socialism ... has made no move to replace Christ and the Church by claiming for itself the status of a new revelation” (Willis 1971:414-415; see Werpehowski 2000:229). Nazism was idolised in the West, which was not the case with communism in the East; people who have a good conscience, and whose democratic and social life are in order, should not be afraid of communism, especially not the church (Busch 1976:369, 396). The stance of anti-communism on principle is a greater danger than communism itself; God is for the communists, and Christians should also be for communists, although they reject communism (Busch 1976:397). Communism never camouflaged itself in the cloak of Christianity, and is not so much anti-Christian than a-Christian.

It is clear that the major factor in Barth's opposition against Nazism lies with the temptation it carried for the church of Christ, and his fear for anti-communism in the fact that a rejection of communist ideology would lead the Church too easily to embrace that of the West (Willis 1971:417).<sup>8</sup>

A last facet I intend to reflect on is what Barth has to say on the struggle for human righteousness in what should have been part of *KD IV/4* (Barth 1981b:205-271).

In his earlier years Barth sharply attacked cultural optimism in Protestantism (see the magazine *Zwischen den Zeiten*, Zahrnt 1967:28, 41). We as humans can never change the world, all we should attempt is to be witnesses of God (Busch 1976:371, 441). Human beings can never bring the kingdom of God into realisation or prepare it (Van Niftrik 1949:114; Busch 1976:460). The coming of the kingdom of God is totally independent from (and is never the result of) human action; we can only pray for the kingdom to come. The Christian ethos carries with it an eschatological tension, with the result that it is impossible that the world could develop in an evolutionary way into an entrance-hall of the kingdom; the kingdom always surpasses our human socialism (Gollwitzer 1972:8, 38, 39). The New Jerusalem has nothing to do with the new Switzerland and with the revolutionary future society, but it dawns on earth in the freedom of God, when the time is ripe (Busch 1976:121-122).

These views of Barth evoked a lot of criticism. The "fundamental deficiency" in his theology, it is said, is the fact that he did not consider seriously enough, yes, almost destroyed, the notion of "history" (Zahrnt 1967:109-127; Heron 1980:95; Thielicke 1983:437, 590, 594). De Jong (1952/3:44) agrees: The main objection against Barth's ethics is the way in which he relates world and history to the Cross and Resurrection as end and fulfilment – a type of eschatology, therefore, which minimises reality and the continuation of history.

Eschatology typifies Barth's earlier and later reflection on ethics. In *Das christliche Leben* (see Biggar 1993:76-81) genuine prayer for the coming of God's kingdom should be accompanied by actual responsibility for the rule of human righteousness. Although: the hastening toward the coming kingdom is in no way an attempt to anticipate what only God could begin and finish. The Christian's responsibility for human righteousness usually takes the negative form of a revolt against lordless powers that represent disorder. "Although Christian action can never be identified with God's kingdom, being only relatively righteous, it can be analogous to it, in so far as it derives from the

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<sup>8</sup> It is also possible that his friend Josef Hromadka played a role in Barth's approach to communism.

event of the kingdom in Jesus Christ and hastens towards its manifestation in him” (Biggar 1993:78).

## **7. ETHICS AND INTEGRITY**

A final question must be asked: Did Barth practise what he preached? – a question which, as far as I can see, did not receive the attention it deserves.

If we consider Barth’s views on ethics, on the one hand, and the concrete “choices” he made, on the other hand, or more precisely, the commands of God he obeyed and followed, do they correspond? Is there a correlation between Barth’s ethics and his ethos? In other words, integrity?

I refer only to three instances in this regard. The first is his option for socialism while he was a pastor in Safenwil, as well as his struggle for human righteousness, a theme which he developed in more detail in a later stage in his book on the Christian life (Barth 1981b). Secondly, reference should be made to his opposition against Hitler’s totalitarianism and Nazism and the “German Christians”, which was the direct cause of the publication of the Barmen Declaration in 1934, written by Barth, as we have seen, and which clearly stated that Christ is supreme Lord. Thirdly, it was Barth’s unwillingness to sign a document in which he would have declared unconditional obedience to Hitler, that cost him his lectureship in Bonn. It seems that, in the light of the abovementioned, Barth’s theocentric and Christocentric ethics can hardly be described as transcendentalistic or actualistic or irrationalistic. Barth’s personal prophetic witness in society, his stance for the gospel of Christ and the kingdom of God, intercept most of the critique brought against him.

It could be asked, by way of comparison, why Anglo-American ethical systems, like hedonism, utilitarianism and pragmatism, to mention only these, failed so dismally in times of crisis? For instance during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 and during the American-Iraq War of 1993, which were both clearly unjust wars of aggression.

To criticise the ethics of Barth is one thing, to obey the actual command of God in one’s own socio-political situation, as follower of Jesus Christ, another.

## **8. ETHICS AND ACTUALITY**

Did Barth exercise any substantial influence on (the ethics of) South African theologians during the years of apartheid when racism, discrimination and exploitation was the order of the day? Durand (1988a:121-137) blamed the Afrikaner Reformed churches for not learning from and listening to the criticism of Barth on religion, natural theology and the prophetic witness of the church in society. Engelbrecht (1978:199) also deplores the fact that some



theologians distanced themselves from Barth – referring to “Barthians” and “Barthianism” – and thus missed the vital and healthy influence of Barth.

While theologians of the Dutch Reformed Church, like J Lombard and A B du Preez, followed Barth closely, others, like J A Heyns, W D Jonker, A König and J J F Durand, took a more critical stance – albeit with different nuances.<sup>9</sup> While theologians of the Die Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika were, in general, very critical on Barth, theologians of the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika developed great appreciation for Barth (F J van Zijl,<sup>10</sup> B J Engelbrecht, H P Wolmarans<sup>11</sup> (see Van Wyk 1991:51-53). What remains an interesting question is why Hervormde theologians, influenced by Barth, were not in the forefront of protest against the ideology of apartheid.<sup>12</sup> It is, however, an encouraging sign that some of the younger Hervormde theologians, who argue from a Barthian perspective of “revelation theology” versus “natural (national!) theology”, are willing to accept the new challenge lying ahead of all of us (Buitendag 2006:787-817).<sup>13</sup>

A close examination reveals that in general Barth exercised a far greater influence on English than on Afrikaans speaking theologians in South Africa (see Villa-Vicencio 1988a, 1988b; De Gruchy 1991). Especially Barth’s political ethics made a great impact in this regard, whether one would refer to a prayer for a change of government (Villa-Vicencio 1988b:153-154), or a church which should side unequivocally with the oppressed (Villa-Vicencio 1988b:181; De Gruchy 1991:132-133), or that salvation implies liberation (De Gruchy 1991:179), or the question of a new confession (De Gruchy 1991:209-219)<sup>14</sup> – the theology of Barth always functioned as a substratum and indicator for new orientation. It would not be wrong to conclude that the theology and ethics of Barth (and Bonhoeffer) played a decisive role amongst

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<sup>9</sup> For Barth and Afrikaner Calvinism, see inter alia De Gruchy (1991:71-73, 96-97).

<sup>10</sup> See Van Zijl (1999: 419): “It is my conviction that the reflection of Dialectical Theology, á la Barth, in our theology is extremely tenuous.”

<sup>11</sup> See Strauss & Botha (2002:1177): “Although he [Wolmarans] never made a thorough study of Barth”.

<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that one of the few (early) critics of apartheid in the Hervormde Kerk van Afrika (NHKA) was not a theologian but the jurist J D van der Vyver who studied and lectured at the former Potchefstroom University for CHE.

<sup>13</sup> See Buitendag (2006:792): “We honestly confess that apartheid is indeed a sin and that any attempt to justify it in accordance with the Bible is nothing less than a heresy.”

<sup>14</sup> See the Belhar Confession of 1986. For the influence of Barth on Beyers Naudé, see Ryan 1990 (on civil disobedience, 152).

English speaking theologians in their struggle against apartheid in South Africa.<sup>15</sup>

## **9. CONCLUSION**

I have highlighted some of the key features in the ethics of Barth, of whom, of course, much more can be said. My conclusion is that in the ethics of Barth, the main characteristics of the Reformation of the sixteenth century are kept intact: *soli Deo Gloria, solo Christo, sola gratia, sola fide, sola Scriptura*. Which does not mean that I agree with all aspects of Barth's ethics (and theology), for instance his actualistic doctrine on Scripture as well as his doctrines on baptism and election.

What is attractive in his ethics is that he practised what he preached. In crisis moments of human history, he chose to obey God and the Word of God instead of man and the word of man, to listen to the true gospel instead of cultural religion, to follow Jesus Christ instead of the *Führer*, to side with the powerless instead of the structures of power, in short, to oppose what contradicts the gospel of Christ and to obey what God commands.

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<sup>15</sup> Although the influential book of the De Gruchy's includes only one explicit reference to Barth (2004:138).

<sup>16</sup> In most cases I followed this “standard” English translation, but not always.

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**“Was sollen wir tun?” *Theological reflections on aspects of the ethics of Karl Barth***

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