CHAPTER SIX

Witness and the Word of God

In the last two chapters, we have examined two central responses to the postmodern situation, and concluded that neither theory, as such, can tell us with certainty what the *good* is and how we ought to practice it in the world. The crisis of postmodernity affects both the "supply" and "demand" of ethics, that is of moral knowledge and action, of truth and agency, and embodying and doing the good. Without a coherent moral ontology there is no coherent understanding of moral realism; we cannot have a coherent view of the good because we cannot account for the moral structure of the good. This chapter returns to a discussion of theology and ethics in Barth's thought, while keeping in mind the social and intellectual context described in the previous two chapters. In chapters 2–3, we discussed various developments in Barth's ethics, looking at both his early and later writings. This chapter returns to Barth's theology extending our analysis into other later writings, including the *Church Dogmatics*. Nevertheless, we continue the same line of reasoning developed in chapters 4–5 regarding the possibility of ethics within postmodernity. In a sense, therefore, we have returned full circle to the question raised in chapter one: how can we understand the task of theological and Christian ethics in postmodernity? In postmodernity, there remains a *crisis* of moral knowledge and action. This was not unlike Barth's experience of *crisis* in the aftermath of the World War I, in which the existing methodological types of Christian ethics proved inadequate

in addressing this crisis. For Barth, the answer to this crisis was dependent on God's action, which required a theological, rather than philosophical or scientific description and evaluation. We've seen how a nontheological account of moral realism by itself remains inherently ambiguous, since it cannot escape the immanent circularity of a "hermeneutics of suspicion" that challenges any claim of moral certainty and truth. Should Christian ethics begin with the Cartesian search for reflexive foundations of the good, as found in human reason or experience? If so, is this quest not problematic given the crisis of moral epistemology in postmodernity?

So far we've examined Barth's ethics in the context of the various historical events of the early mid-twentieth century. Our historical narrative led to a discussion how the debates over law and gospel and natural theology clarified the noetic or epistemological criteria for theological ethics. The principle discussion focused on the reality of the good as revealed in God's commanding action in the gospel. We further discussed Barth's theoretical and practical ethics, particularly the relationship of church and state, at various stages of his thought from the 1930s to 1950s. Rather than despairing about the prospects of the church in largely post-Christendom society, Barth welcomed the opportunity for the church to be an authentic witness to the civil community. In later chapters, we will return to an in-depth practical discussion of Barth's social ethics, something discussed in part in chapters 2–3. As stated above, however, now it is time to shift our focus to a more detailed study of the theoretical side of Barth's ethics. For this, we depart from the historical narrative and look at all of Barth's writings, particularly the *Church Dogmatics*. Barth planned to write ethical sections in each of five-part structure of the *CD*, including volumes on theological prolegomena, God, creation, reconciliation, and redemption. In the end, he completed the brief prolegomena section in *CD* I/2 (1938), the section on God and the divine command in *CD* II/2 (1942), and the ethics of creation in *CD* III/4 (1951), while he partially completed the ethics of reconciliation in *CD* IV/4 and *The Christian Life* (1958–61). Saying this, of course, does not imply that Barth's ethics must be restricted to these particular ethical sections of the *CD*. Anyone who has read Barth extensively knows that ethical themes flow throughout his theological writings as a whole, including his occasional theological, social, and political writings, some of which were discussed in chapter 3. Although it is important to examine all of Barth's mature ethical writings, the theological argument of the *CD* epistemologically drives us toward the doctrine of reconciliation in

CD IV/1–4. Barth's ethics of reconciliation serves as the "entry point" into his theological ethics as a whole. The ethical sections of *CD* II/2 and *CD* III/4, thus, need to be understood within the corpus of his later writings in *CD* IV/1–4. In addressing Barth's ethics, many Christian ethicists, unfamiliar with the complexity of Barth's theology, often begin their analysis with *CD* II/2 on the topic of God's command or *CD* III/4 on the doctrine of creation and ethics. In doing so, they fail to consider how these discussion belong to his theology as a whole, particularly the doctrine of reconciliation, which is the epistemological starting point for his ethics as a whole.

THEOLOGICAL ETHICS: REALISM, COMMAND, AND AGENCY

In the following section, we return to the discussion of Barth's theological ethics. Since we already discussed the basic structure of his trinitarian command ethics, as worked out in his *Ethics* lectures, there is no need discuss this further. However, if we are going to understand how Christian ethics *is* Christian witness, we must discuss the various related topics in theological ethics that pertain to a comprehensive account of divine and human action. We must also relate Barth's thought to various other contemporary viewpoints, including his critics, so that we can see the various issues at stake in developing an ethics of witness. As mentioned earlier, Barth's first significant trajectory into ethics in the *Church Dogmatics* is the last part of the doctrine of God after he discusses at length the doctrine of election (*CD* II/2: 509–781). Here Barth develops, in much greater detail, the basic arguments in *Ethics*, particularly as it relates to God's gracious command as *claim* of God's election, as *decision* of God's sovereignty over the good, and God's *judgment*, which is always a judgment of grace. We are not going to discuss this large section in detail, but focus on particular issues that pertain to our study. Suffice it say, Barth reminds us that when Christian ethics engages in God-talk and its relation to ethics, it engages in theological ethics. One important topic in theological ethics is the moral framework or moral ontology that provides the structure for how we understand the knowledge of the good and moral agency. Who is God and how does God act in relation to the moral structure (moral ontology) of existence? Without God there is no good reason to affirm that reality itself is good. As we have seen in previous chapters, the problem with moral ontology in postmodernity is that there is no significant reason to claim reality itself as *good*, apart from a good *God*.

Theological Realism and Analogia fidei

All versions of theological and Christian ethics affirm some kind of moral ontology although this is understood differently in various approaches. Moral ontology is uniquely shaped by the distinct traditions of natural law, orders of creation, or divine command theory. In each theory, moral epistemology and divine and human relations are singularly understood and interpreted. Specifically, in each moral framework, there is an interaction of divine and human agency. First it must determine how God reveals the knowledge of good, and second how humans appropriate this knowledge and respond with appropriate action. Does God's agency work through an intermediately structure like "nature" or "creation" or does God directly command what is good? Does humanity use conscience and deliberation to ascertain the good, or does it simply adhere to what God has commanded in Scripture? These differences led to divergent viewpoints in theological ethics. As mentioned earlier, because of the various pitfalls that each of these options present, Barth finds reasons to reject all of them and instead begin with God's trinitarian action in the Word of God. The overarching problem with any moral theory that denies God's action is the empty *space* that is posited between God's revelation, either in nature, creation, or commands, and the self-deliberative moral agent, which is then *filled* by human reflection and action. Inasmuch as various moral theories give lip-service to God, they speak more about human reflection and deliberation than about God's commanding action. The method moves theological ethics from a theocentric to an anthropocentric position, thus, from theology to psychology and sociology. Barth rightly presumes that God cannot be a *free* trinitarian subject if God is limited to the act of creation and is not also the reconciler and redeemer, that is, the Son and the Spirit. Seeing the deistic potential of such a hyper-transcendent theology, Barth shifts the focus away from humanity's deliberation and action and toward God's revelation in the Word of God as trinitarian *Other*. Only in this revelatory event do we discover the *reality* of the good as reconciling and redemptive *grace*.

Without this starting point in the Word of God, theological ethics builds itself upon some *fictional* account of human moral agency and moral knowledge. Obviously Barth presumes that all forms and methods of ethics are obviously aware of the problem of good knowledge and action, but he says they are incapable of supplying a real and objective *answer* to this problem. Theological ethics cannot be placed side by side with other ver-

sions of ethics because it alone gives *witness* to the answer of the ethical problem raised by all versions of ethics. There is only one Word of God which supplies the answer to the ethical problem. If Christian ethics is to be both theological and realist, it must "continually begin again at the beginning," that is, with the Word of God (*CD* I/2: 868). Regarding this point, he writes:

> Comprehensively, ethics is an attempt to answer theoretically the question of what may be called *good* human action. Theological ethics such as it is attempted here finds both this question and its answer in God's Word. It thus finds it where theological dogmatics as the critical science of true church proclamation finds all its answers and questions. Theological ethics can be understood only as an integral element of dogmatics. The Word of God, with which dogmatics (and consequently theological ethics) is concerned at every point as the basis, object, content, and norm of true church proclamation, is, however, Jesus Christ in the divine-human unity of his being and work. Precisely for this reason, ethics cannot be understood and ventured as an independent discipline working on its own presuppositions and according to its own methods, but only as an integral element in dogmatics. (*CL*: 3–4)

Theological ethics cannot begin with some objectively neutral investigation into the "nature" of the good apart from the revelation of the Word of God. It remains problematic to equate God's command with some broader human ethic based on reason or experience, as this denies the *objective* reality of the good, which is established in and through the human-divine encounter *in* Jesus Christ. For Barth, as John Webster clearly says, "good human action is action which is most in accord with the way the world is constituted in Jesus Christ."[1] Christian ethics must refuse the temptation to see itself as a subcategory of a generic discipline called "ethics." Rather, its sees itself as a witness to divine action, which shapes not only the nature of good moral action, but more importantly, the origin and reality of the good in human life. Accordingly, a moral theory of human flourishing *apart* from the revelation of the Word of God is grounded in some fictive account of the moral person. Rather, it is the particular way humans are *related* to the trinitarian God, which establishes and nurtures our moral knowledge and moral agency. This human-divine relation begins with Jesus Christ. This is why there can be no objectivity or independence of ethical terms such as

1. Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, 219.

the moral subject, conscience, and command, apart from this revelation in the Word. To begin in another place invariably *reduces* these terms to some other viewpoint that disregards the Word of God—the revelation of the good. Only in the Word of God do we really and objectively discover who "God," and "humanity" truly are, and what the "good" really is. We cannot talk about any of these terms without also referring to Jesus Christ.

It is the theological realism unveiled in God's revelation in the Word of God that provides the basis for the understanding of moral ontology and moral realism. Christians assume that God has acted in some objective way, thereby establishing the moral structure of things (moral ontology) and the content of the good (moral realism). Just as moral realism refers to those statements of moral truth that remain objectively true independent of our apprehending them as "true," so too, theological realism refers to those statements about God that remain objectively true regardless of our subjective truth claims about them. As Webster further writes: "This highly objectivist account of knowledge is clearly an entailment of a prior conviction that God's act of self-manifestation is noetically fundamental and has priority over the functioning or malfunctioning of human cognition and consciousness."[2] The objectivity of Christian moral realism is grounded in the theological realism of God's gracious action, which subsequently establishes the moral ontology for Christian ethics. When ethicists, Christian or otherwise, seek to talk about a moral ontology deriving from the anthropocentric search for the good, they misrepresent the true and objective *good* reality of God and humanity in covenant-partnership. We saw earlier how difficult it is in postmodernity, where power defines the good, to establish some kind of moral realism and moral ontology based on reflexive knowledge. Without grace all that remains is power. So, we might ask: how can ethics be possible if it has false information about the goodness of reality? How is it possible if it misrepresents, from the Christian view, *who* God and humanity really are? How can Christian ethics be "Christian" without talking about Jesus Christ? It is this logic that leads Barth to say that "correct ethics can only be Christian ethics," and that a systematic or "scientific" account of Christian ethics cannot be "differentiated from theological ethics." "In the last analysis," he adds, "there is only one ethics, theological ethics" (*CD* II/2: 542). And the "aim of theological ethics" is "Christian doctrine of God, or, more exactly, the knowledge of the electing grace of God in

2. Ibid., 193.

Jesus Christ" (*CD* II/2: 543). All other forms of ethics, whether philosophical or religious, secular or confessional, general or particular, cannot be the foundation for Christian ethics because they deny the fundamental witness to this claim about God's reconciling action in Jesus Christ.

In recalling Barth's analogy of the Israelites' annexation of Canaan as a description about the relation of Christian ethics to other versions of ethics, let us think about what this says about faith and ethics. One important aspect of this analogy is that the Israelites were a people of *faith* who believed that God had given them the gift of the covenant. This covenant-partnership, of course, extends to all humanity in the electing grace of God in Jesus Christ. In this divine-human act God elects "man to be His creature and His partner. Even more, He wants him to be His *child*" (*HG*: 82). As children of God we are given the gift of freedom and faith. "Human freedom is the God-given freedom to obey. *Faith* is the obedience of the *pilgrim* who has his vision and his trust set upon God's free act of reconciliation" (*HG*: 82). Having faith is not an innate capacity that persons can nurture through good works, but comes only with the knowledge of our covenant-partnership with God. "Faith is not one of the various capacities of man, whether native or acquired" (*CD* I/1: 238). Yet, as a gift of grace, faith opens up our capacity to understand the good as revealed in God's Word. This knowledge is *noetic* but it is also *ontic,* namely it is knowledge that shapes and transforms one's *being* in relation to God, others, and the world. In *CD* I/1, he writes:

> In believing he can think of himself as grounded, not in self but only in this object, as existing indeed only this object. He has not created his own faith; the Word has created it. He has not come to faith; faith has come to him. He has not adopted faith; faith has been granted to him through the Word. As a believer he cannot see himself as the acting subject of the work done here. It is his experience and act. He is not at all a block or stone in faith but a self-determining man. . . . In his freedom, in the full use of his freedom as a man, he must see himself as another man that he had no power to become, that he still has no power to become, that he is not free to become or to be (though he is free as he becomes and is), in short, that he can be only by being this man. Man acts as he believes, but the fact he believes as he acts is God's act. Man is the subject of faith. Man believes, not God. (*CD* I/1: 244–45)

It is in this section in *CD* I/1, where Barth's makes his famous distinction between the "analogy of being" (*analogia entis*) and the "analogy of faith" (*analogia fidei*). The first approach, the *analogia entis*, mistakenly assumes that because humans share in God's being through their created nature as *imago Dei*, then it becomes possible to have knowledge of God (or the good) from that standpoint of our creaturely faculties including reason and experience. Regarding moral knowledge, this presumes that persons can objectively discover the human good through natural reason or experience or through some "moral order" established through God's creation (order of creation). In short, the *analogia entis* claims to know God or the good apart from God's own self-revelation in the Word of God. In contrast, the approach that Barth prefers is what he calls the *analogia fidei*, which posits the analogy, not between divine and human being, but between divine and human *action*. By God's action of grace and the corresponding human action of faith, the believing person is shaped noetically and ontically by God's grace. This means that humanity can have knowledge of the good and the power to act upon this knowledge in freedom. Ethics is now truly possible, not just as a theory or standard of human behavior, but as a real possibility of knowing and doing the good. "Christian ethics has to do with man, who is wholly lost, wholly rescued and therefore is claimed as the whole man" (*GHN*: 114). All this is possible because of God's grace, which establishes the true structure or moral ontology for ethics. As Stanley Hauerwas writes: "Barth's development of the *anlogia fidei* was not an attempt to develop a theory or method of analogy based on prior metaphysical claims but an attempt to display the metaphysical claims intrinsic to theological speech."[3] Therefore, in contrast to the *analogia entis*, which begins with human experience and reason and then correlates the inner world of faith to that objective world, Barth begins with the objective world of faith *analogia fidei* and then integrates the outer world of human experience and reason. We discover moral knowledge and action in our encounter with the Word of God. In God's trinitarian action we are given the freedom to respond in faith to this objective world of God's gracious command.

Although natural law cannot be the basis for our human moral knowledge of the good or guide for moral action, the Word of God reveals what is morally true for all persons. The simple error of any form of Christian naturalism is to begin with the *analogia entis* instead of the *analogia fidei*.

3. Hauerwas, *With the Grain*, 189.