

Philip G. Ziegler

Ethics and the Catastrophe of Grace – Faith’s Obedience in the Ruins of Religion

Abstract: With its emphasis upon the humanly catastrophic consequences of the radical transcendence of God and of divine grace, the second edition of Karl Barth’s *Romans* should be deeply inhospitable to ethics and utterly unaccommodating of the concerns of moral theology. And yet, across his exegesis of chapters 6 and 12 in particular, Barth both elaborates a fulsome account of the presuppositions of a Christian ethic and outlines a vision of Christian moral action as sacrificial and parabolic witness at once ‘impossible’ and yet ‘actual’ in virtue of God’s justifying grace. In conversation at key junctures with Kierkegaard, this essay examines the fundamentals of Barth’s radical evangelical ethics as we meet it on the pages of his controversial commentary.

1 The Catastrophe of God as the Presupposition of Ethics

In her fine new intellectual biography of Karl Barth, Christiane Tietz summarises the fundamental achievement of the second edition of his *Römerbrief* in this way:

[...] Barth took the Reformation doctrine of justification, that the justification of human beings before God depends not on the human but alone upon God, to its extreme. He smashed all human self-assurance and all religious precepts that had been taken as obvious. His concern was that first of all one “endures in this situation.” Precisely this was faith.¹

The insight that Barth’s 1922 reading of *Romans* represents an “extreme” republication of the evangelical teaching of *iustificatio sola gratia* is of fundamental importance as we turn in this essay to consider the treatment of ethics in this work of the early Barth. Writing to his friend and theological co-conspirator, Eduard Thurneysen, during the period when he is undertaking the thoroughgoing revision of the commentary, Barth observes that “the turn from Osiander to

1 Christiane Tietz, *Karl Barth: A Life in Conflict*, trans. Victoria Barnett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 130.

Luther is proving to be catastrophic compared to the first edition [...].”² A fresh encounter with Luther’s radical soteriology fuels the revision, a revision so thorough that Barth speaks of it with the same language he will adopt to describe the consequences of the advent of divine judgment and grace in Christ: *catastrophe*.

More important still is the fact that Barth’s extreme restatement of the reformational doctrine of justification elicited reactions closely analogous to those provoked by the teaching of the Luther of the 1520s. If in the case of Luther, critics like Erasmus saw in the gospel of justification by grace alone the abolition of the very conditions of possibility for human moral responsibility and striving, so too with the Barth of the second edition of the *Römerbrief*: from the earliest stages of its reception, Barth’s commentary was sharply criticised for allowing the hypertrophy of divine transcendence to obliterate any and all interest in human identity and agency.³ In a book filled with remarkable images, one of Barth’s particularly striking metaphors suggests just this when he says that “the activity of the community is related to the Gospel only in so far as it is no more than a crater formed by the explosion of a shell and seeks to be no more than a void in which the Gospel reveals itself.”⁴ So, why then is there any discussion of ethics in Barth’s *Römerbrief* at all and what possible form could it assume?

First and foremost, it is there because there is *paraenesis* in Paul’s letter and so commentary upon it must necessarily involve discussion of the Christian eth-

2 “Die Wendung von Osiander zu Luther macht sich gegenüber der ersten Auflage geltend wie eine Katastrophe [...]” Karl Barth letter to Eduard Thurneysen, 3rd of December 1920, in *Karl Barth – Eduard Thurneysen Briefwechsel*, Band I, 1913–1921 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1973), 448.

3 For summary account of such criticism, see John Webster, *Barth’s Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth’s Thought* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 11–19 and Archibald J. Spencer, *Clearing a Space for Human Action: Ethical Ontology in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2003), 13–32. Is it wrong to hear in Adolf von Harnack’s prominent public criticisms of Barth as a “despiser of scientific theology” an echo of Erasmus’s humanistic incredulity with Luther? See H. Martin Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology: An Analysis of the Barth–Harnack Correspondence of 1923* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972). For a recent restatement of the worry about the irrecoverable abolition of the “responsibility principal” by Luther’s soteriological doctrine, see Aku Visala and Olli-Pekka Vainio, “Erasmus versus Luther: A Contemporary Analysis of the Debate on Free Will,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 62:3 (2020): 311–50.

4 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, ed. and trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 35. Throughout reference will also be made as necessary to the original German text of the most recent reprint of the 6th edition: Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Zweite Fassung) 1922*, eds. Cornelis van der Kooi and Katja Tolstaja, Gesamtausgabe II.47 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2015).

ical life.⁵ At another level it is there because Barth is crucially interested in thinking through the claim that “the problem of ethics is the problem of dogmatics.”⁶ The reality of God besets both discourses. This ensures that, as *theological* thinking, ethics is no less fraught with dialectical difficulty than dogmatics; it also ensures that as the conceptual rehearsal and expansion of the formula “God Himself, God alone,” dogmatics is inescapably self-involving and *existential*, ever concerned with “that unsearchable, divine relationship in which we stand.”⁷ As John Webster observes, for Barth “Christian dogmatics is inherently ethical dogmatics [...] precisely because its theme is the encounter of God and humanity.”⁸ Or, as Barth himself puts it, “if our thinking is not to be pseudo-thinking, we must think about life; for such thinking is a thinking about God” as the “depth and context and reality of life” and just so as its *Krisis*.⁹ No less than dogmatics, ethics has this *Krisis* as its decisive context: a context not only of ethical thought and deliberation but also supremely of ethical life.

It is well known that in the preface to the second edition, Barth quipped that his “system” in this work was “limited to recognition of what Kierkegaard called the ‘infinite qualitative distinction’ between time and eternity,” God and humanity.¹⁰ When we concentrate on the question of ethics, however, we find that Barth’s indebtedness to the Dane may in fact reach a little further still.¹¹ For Barth’s treatment of ethics in the commentary tracks closely Kierkegaard’s own developed distinction between what he styles first and “second ethics.”¹²

5 For an elegant defence of the claim that Barth’s text is in fact a commentary on Paul’s letter rather than “a hermeneutical manifesto, or a piece of irregular dogmatics [...] [or] an encoded set of sociopolitical experiences of directives,” see John Webster, “Karl Barth,” in *Reading Romans Through the Centuries: From the Early Church to Karl Barth*, eds. Jeffrey P. Greenman and Timothy Larsen (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 205–23, 205.

6 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 431.

7 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 424–25.

8 Webster, *Barth’s Moral Theology*, 8.

9 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 425.

10 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 10.

11 For extensive discussion of this relation with a concentration on Kierkegaard’s own developed ethics, see elsewhere in this volume, Claudia Welz, “Das Problem der Ethik in Karl Barths Römerbriefkommentar – im Vergleich mit Søren Kierkegaards Ethik der Liebe page (309-330).”

12 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, eds. and trans. Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980). For concise discussion see David R. Law, “Kierkegaard as Existentialist Dogmatician: Kierkegaard on Systematic Theology, Doctrine, and Dogmatics,” in *A Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Jon Stewart (London: Blackwell, 2015), 251–68, especially 261–4; and Philip L. Quinn, “Kierkegaard’s Christian Ethics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, eds. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 349–75.

This distinction, set out in the early pages of the *Concept of Anxiety* (1844), envisages the need to conceive of a distinctive ethics – one “which belongs to a different order of things” – because it presupposes the actuality of sin: as Kierkegaard puts it, it reckons with the impossibility of the natural moral life of virtue. Indeed, the second ethics begins with acknowledgement of the absolute “*shipwreck*” of all ethics upon the rocks of our infinite qualitative distance from divine righteousness.¹³ Not humanity at its worst, but precisely humanity expressed in the highest of its achievements – for Kierkegaard, in the metaphysically rationalised pursuit of the moral ideality of right and duty and good – collapses and comes to ruin on the jagged rocks of unrighteousness before God.¹⁴ The presupposition of distinctively Christian ethics is sin, the brutal reality of human contradiction of God – and so also and more fundamentally – our contradiction by God’s judgment.

These ideas are a variant of the central argument advanced in his *Philosophical Fragments* published the same year (1844). There he argues that human beings are “not only outside the truth,” but exist “polemically against the truth” because the problem of knowledge is in fact identical to the problem of *sin*.¹⁵ As such it can only be resolved by the inbreaking of eternal Truth into the world of antagonistic untruth; and this has taken place in the paradoxical reality of the Saviour who “delivers” us into the truth in the moment of revelation that thought cannot think but to which faith can entrust itself. That moment is an event of eschatological *Krisis*: an event in which the sinner “becomes nothing and yet is not annihilated,” the “transition from ‘not to be’ to ‘to be,’” for which the human being owes the saving God “everything.”¹⁶ As these parallel arguments from *The Concept of Anxiety* and *Philosophical Fragments* show, Kierkegaard, before and in much the same way as Barth, conceives of the problem of Christian ethics strictly with reference to the singular crisis that befalls the fallen world of creaturely untruth in light of the advent in Christ of the God who is Truth.¹⁷ Any ethics pursued in the wake of *this* crisis can only be ventured as

13 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 20.

14 Kierkegaard compared nature of sin in this case to a vortex, which ancient philosophers considered the ‘moving something’ behind all motion which “no science can grasp.” *The Concept of Anxiety*, 20.

15 Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 15.

16 Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 30–31.

17 It is interesting that Kierkegaard is quoted and invoked by name several times in the course of Barth’s exposition of Romans 12 and following.

a “new science” grounded in repentant faith’s “dogmatic consciousness of actuality.”¹⁸

Interestingly, Kierkegaard goes on to observe that “the second ethics presupposes dogmatics but completes it also in such way that here, as everywhere, the presupposition is brought out.”¹⁹ I want to suggest in this brief paper that Barth’s thinking about ethics in *Romans* shares this very same shape: it is pre-eminently interested in establishing the presupposition of Christian ethics – namely, divine grace acknowledged as the catastrophe of all ethics and religion – and then going on to construe Christian ethics and reflection upon ethical life precisely as the “bringing out” or “setting forth” of that presupposition. The presupposition of both the reality and the discourse of theological ethics is the reality of God’s righteous grace on which all comes to shipwreck, and that alone. This is why for the Barth of the *Romans* commentary, as we shall see, ethics is and can be nothing but sacrifice and parable: it is the modest service of a Christian life to attempt to “tell the truth” about its utterly transcendent ground, possibility, and reality, and this means relentlessly pointing away from itself to God and towards God’s grace.

While Barth’s discussion of ethics is concentrated naturally around the exposition of *Romans* chapters 12–15, its decisive basis is in fact found in *Romans* 6.²⁰ Barth discusses that chapter as a whole under the rubric of “grace,” treating first of the power of the resurrection (v. 1–11) and second of the power unto obedience (v. 12–23). Of course, all of this has as its own decisive basis what has come before, namely, the climax of *Romans* 5:20–21 which announces the superabundance of divine grace that overreaches the hideous abundance of sin. The truth that “before God no flesh is righteous” erupts into view when all the givens of human existence (including its religious and ethical possibilities) are “catastrophically dissolved” by divine judgment, when they are shown to provide no way from Adam to Christ.²¹ Precisely in this dissolution and catastrophe [*Aufhebung und Katastrophe*] Barth contends, “grace is grace”: only where everything

18 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 20.

19 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 23–24.

20 Alexander Massmann reminds us that Barth put it to Thurneysen that *Romans* 6 was “the axle around which the entire letter revolves,” in *Citizenship in Heaven and on Earth: Karl Barth’s Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 34, quoted from *Karl Barth – Eduard Thurneysen Briefwechsel*, Band 1, 477. In addition to Massmann’s discussion of the ethics of the second edition of *The Epistle to the Romans* in *Citizenship*, 1–57, there is concise and insightful discussion in David Clough, *Ethics in Crisis: Interpreting Barth’s Ethics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 3–31, and Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 274–80.

21 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 186; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 179.

in Adam is “offered up as a sacrifice” do we find ourselves in Christ “in virtue of what one is not.”²² As von Balthasar described it graphically, Barth contends that “God’s infinite holiness invades the medium of total sinfulness like a white-hot iron hissing in a pool of water” in an event in which “the abysmal sinfulness of creation is stripped bare, but this happens only because this abyss is shown to be a counterabyss: the precipitous heights of God’s adoption of us as his children.”²³

So, when Paul in Romans 6:4 speaks of Christ being raised from the dead by the Father “so that we might walk in newness of life,” he is concerned with the “display” and “vindication” of the “seriousness, the energy, and the radicality” of God’s saving negation and dissolution of our being in Adam.²⁴ As Barth explains, “because it is the *last* word spoken over *this* human being, it is at the same time for the new human being a hinge, threshold, bridge and *turning point*.”²⁵ The power of the resurrection – understood by Barth here as an eschatological and hence incomparable “non-historical happening [*das ‘unhistorische Ereignis’*]” – “fills the void” brought about by the death of Adam in the death of Christ, at once rendering continuation in sin impossible while making “positive conformity” to Christ an “impossible possibility” for the new human being.²⁶ And this grace – now become the “unintuitable truth” of our lives – “cannot but press to concretion.”²⁷ Said differently, by its strictly asymmetrical contradiction of sin, grace works to “disrupt,” “revolutionise” and “overthrow” any accommodation, equilibrium or coexistence between the old and the new, precisely in order that faith may “stretch out towards” the sovereign reality of the new life in God.²⁸

It is only as those subjected to the power of the *futurum resurrectionis* that human beings even become capable of hearing the demand for obedience in service of God’s right. This is vitally important: the addressees of God’s claim and command are those who, in virtue of this power, “are what they are not,” and so those who in faith “dare to reckon [their] existence as the existence of

22 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 186.

23 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 82.

24 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 194, 190 (translations my own).

25 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 189 (translation my own).

26 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 195–97; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 200. As Barth explains, “sin is the (human!) possibility which the impossibility of grace has rendered impossible,” *The Epistle to the Romans*, 209.

27 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 222.

28 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 201, 207.

the new human being.”²⁹ Thus, Barth’s second ethics can only be an ethics of this new and second ethical agent, as it were; an ethics for those who have come to themselves again precisely because they have lost themselves fully “in God and in God alone,” i.e., an ethics for those placed “*under grace*.”³⁰ Those to whom Paul later addresses his *paraenesis* are just these: human beings overwhelmed by “the breach and disturbance” of their lives and who are thus “bidden to think of themselves as existentially under grace, as belonging to God, and as brought within the sphere of resurrection” and so to venture obedience.³¹ For such as these, the mood of the divine Word now also becomes imperative: a “different being and having and doing” is demanded of them.³² The quality of this demand is strange indeed. Barth explains that it claims from its hearers “what cannot be expected of them,” namely “the dissolution and radically new ordering of here and now”; in fact, it is a Word that “demands that which it assumes.”³³ More specifically, it demands that the non-historical reality of the resurrection become a “clear and directly intelligible event in our very own bodies” even now (Romans 6:14).³⁴

In this way, God’s revelation simultaneously opens and exposes the “great gulf” that separates grace, life, and holiness from sin, death, and all that is unholy; our encounter with this revelation presses us to acknowledge this gulf in life and in thought; it drives us to “attempt to draw up a system of ethics” by which to resist the “vitality of [our] morality” and to direct our new life.³⁵ But the all-too human knowledge involved in these efforts is itself always dissolved [*aufgehoben*] by its own divine origin and content, rendering the attempt impossible. It is amidst the ruins of the paradoxical failure of this highest religio-ethical endeavour of ours – *you must! you cannot!* – that Barth’s “second ethics”

29 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 211 (translation altered).

30 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 213. There is an important parallel here between Barth’s view of the emergence of this new and second ethical agent as a feature of Paul’s witness in Romans, and J. Louis Martyn’s claim that in Galatians, Paul’s *paraenesis* similarly presupposes a radically new ethical agent, see “Epilogue: An Essay in Pauline Metaethics,” in *Divine and Human Agency in Paul and His Cultural Environment*, eds. John M.G. Barclay and Simon J. Gathercole (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 173–83.

31 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 218–19; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 219.

32 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 222.

33 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 224.

34 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 224.

35 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 227–28.

arises on the only ground available: that of grace alone.³⁶ As he concludes, “That we conceive and grasp the possibility of that which is impossible” – namely, the work of ethics *coram deo* – “as our own proper task: that is the power of the *obedience* in which we *stand* because it is the power of the *resurrection*.”³⁷

2 The Great Disruption – *Die große Störung*

Now, it is in commenting on Romans chapters 12–15 that Barth sets out the actual contours of a second ethics consequent upon the “shattering disturbance of the gospel of Christ.”³⁸ For present purposes, these can be quickly sketched. The primary form of ethical action is *sacrifice*, understood as that surrender and renunciation of all our living and doing ingredient in the recognition of God’s deity, mercy and freedom; Barth says it is to make an “unconditional gift” of our entire concrete existence *solī deo gloria*.³⁹ Sacrifice is the underlying form of each and every particular ethical action, a permanent posture in which we point, as it were, “to that which alone is worthy of being called ‘action,’ namely, the action of God.”⁴⁰ By this sacrificial posture – which Barth later styles as *repentance* and then also as the “*worship*” and “*love*” of God – we demonstrate and confess the permanent and primal origin of all ethical action in the unfathomable grace of God.⁴¹ The negation and self-effacement of this “sacrifice” is fundamentally a pointing away, a pointing back to grace as the sole presupposition of the moral life as such; it is a repeated life-act whose very *Gestalt* declares “Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory” (Ps 115:1).

All our subsequent “secondary” action is suspended, as it were, from this “single thread.”⁴² Our actions still share in the “form of this passing world” and so depend for their ethical quality upon our “being overcome” by its “coming transformation.” The deity of God and the infinite eschatological interval mean that no human actions are ever in and of themselves fully shaped by the coming transformation; to the extent that they point to and make that future

36 “In point of fact, it is grace alone that is competent to provide human beings with a truly ethical disturbance [...] and must be permitted to make that absolute assault upon human beings without which ethics are completely meaningless.” Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 430.

37 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 229 (translation mine).

38 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 225 (translation altered).

39 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 431.

40 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 432.

41 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 436, 452.

42 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 433.

visible, they serve as “parables” and “testimonies” [*Gleichnis und Zeugnis*] of God’s own action.⁴³ This they can do only in virtue of their partaking “in the power and dignity” of that origin.⁴⁴ All such acts assume one of two decisive aspects. The first Barth calls “positive,” by which he means human willing and doing that “protests against the great error” of the sinful world and which “negates” and “contradicts” its *schemata*: love [*agape*] is this “supreme, positive ethical possibility.”⁴⁵ Though this love of neighbours “in itself,” Barth says, is “trivial and temporal,” yet as a *parable* of God it is “of supreme importance: for it is both the emissary of the unknown God and the *occasion* for coming to know him”; indeed, acts of neighbour love are an “ostensive analogue” of the divine election of those who perform them.⁴⁶ Here, one might recall the way in which Kierkegaard for his part recommended “the work of love in recollecting one who is dead” as the purest enactment of agape, being as it must a matter of pure demonstration undertaken without calculated concerns for utility or consequence.⁴⁷ The parabolic power of this is, I would suggest, closely akin to what Barth has in view.

The second aspect of ethical action Barth calls “negative,” by which he means human willing and doing that is congruent with the transformation of this world under grace and is determinately related to this new and coming world.⁴⁸ Again, what is decisive here is that all such relative and provisional acts are “pregnant with parabolic significance, powerful in bearing witness, capable of concentrating attention upon the ‘Beyond’.”⁴⁹ Human acts which, because they take their direction and shape from the new, refuse and interrupt and break open the continuities of the old aeon of sin – Barth develops the example of the love of enemies in this section – tell of their “primal origin” in the great disturbance of the grace of God.

43 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 434; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 458.

44 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 444.

45 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 451.

46 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 476 (translation mine).

47 Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, eds. and trans. Howard. V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 345–58. “The work of love in recollecting one who is dead is thus a work of the most unselfish, the freest, the most faithful love.” (358).

48 “When we reflect that the new world can be none other than the old world dissolved and overthrown by the victory of Christ [*die in Christus siegreich aufgehobene und umgekehrte alte Welt*], it becomes clear that, when the invisible operation of the old world becomes visible in dissolution and overthrow, we are in fact confronted with the operation of the new world.” Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 166; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 156.

49 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 461.

Barth suggests that precisely because all such acts are never anything more than relative parables, demonstrations, and testimonies, they call into question the conceit of every absolute ethics: such an ethics of grace is first and foremost “the final protest against every high place human beings can occupy” and “the axe laid at the root of *our own haphazard conceits*.”⁵⁰ We note again that Barth’s interest is that these acts *tell*: they tell of their origin in the coming world, they tell of their own impossibility and relativity, and, most importantly, they tell of the God whose action is and will establish the right and the true. Here again Kierkegaard presents a parallel instance in what Sylvia Walsh has styled his “inverted dialectic” of the Christian life in which the “essentially Christian” thing is best attested by the negative qualities of faith’s existence, including “dying to the world” and “self-denial.”⁵¹ As Thurneysen rightly discerned, this view of moral action incited by the forceful assertion of divine grace, “means – *with Luther and Dostoyevsky and against Franciscanism and Tolstoy* – seeing the *regnum Christi* in the midst of his enemies [...]” among whom we ourselves are ever in some important sense yet to be counted.⁵²

3 Some Commentary and Conclusions

As Barth himself emphasises in the preface to the second edition of his commentary, the work is but a “prolegomena” and “no more than a prolegomena,” and this is certainly true also of the treatment of ethics.⁵³ Barth does not elaborate an ethics here; rather he merely lays out the coordinates and orientations within which that task might be undertaken. Yet, perhaps prolegomena is all that is ever really possible for such an ethics of grace. As Barth writes, “God is God: this is the presupposition of ethics. Ethical propositions are only ethical as expositions of this presupposition, which may never be regarded as a thing already known, or treated as a basis of future routine operations, or as something from which it is possible to hurry on to a new position.”⁵⁴ The upshot of this re-

⁵⁰ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 467, 466.

⁵¹ See Sylvia Walsh, *Living Christianly: Kierkegaard’s Dialectic of Christian Existence* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2005), 9.

⁵² Eduard Thurneysen, “Das Römerbriefmanuskript habe ich gelesen.” *Eduard Thurneysens gesammelte Briefe und Kommentare aus der Entstehungszeit von Karl Barths Römerbrief II (1920–1921)*, ed. Katja Tolstaja (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2015), 192–93.

⁵³ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2–3.

⁵⁴ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 439.

fusal of theological ethics to possess and dispose over its presupposition is that the essential quality of the moral life remains properly incalculable:

Since the true conformity to Jesus is no human quality or activity, it cannot be either compared or contrasted with these experiences or dispositions. It nowhere swims into the ken either of the historian or of the psychologist, and no [one] can claim to possess it directly. The life of ours which is positively conformed to Jesus is the life which is hid with Christ in God, and which is only 'ours' here and now as the eternal future.⁵⁵

Just as Kierkegaard's "second" and peculiarly Christian ethics emerged on the other side of our shipwreck on the actuality of sin – a reality that cannot be accessed or comprehended "with metaphysical light-mindedness or with psychological concupiscence"⁵⁶ – so too Barth's second Pauline ethics emerges out the catastrophic event of grace which resists natural comprehension by historian and psychologist alike. The reason it does so is that – for Barth, as for the Dane – Christian ethics is fundamentally determined by acknowledgment of the "concrete eschatological context to which our lives own their reality," as Ingolf Dalferth has put it.⁵⁷ Barth's treatment of ethics in the *Römerbrief* looks to call to mind that "Christian theology proceeds upon the quite different premise that we ourselves have been contextualized; and not just conceptually, but actually."⁵⁸ This theological labour is Barth's preoccupation here: contextualising ethics in the "strange new" world announced in the gospel of God Paul preaches.

Within the eschatological context Barth describes, "second" ethical life is a strictly unnatural performance of an existence whose love and service is transparent to its true and only source, namely the grace of God, telling by its forms and commitments, actions and postures ever so many parables of the reign of the God who is God. To adapt a phrase of Barth's own, grace is not a predicate of life, but life can and will be a predicate of grace. The task of ethics is pre-eminently indicative in this register, as moral actions point and display the truth about the judgment and grace and love of God in and over human affairs. Barth's dialectical ethics is an "ethics of witness" because it is properly preoccupied with God, God's doing, and the claim of that doing upon women and men.⁵⁹

55 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 197.

56 Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 20.

57 Ingolf U. Dalferth, "Karl Barth's Eschatological Realism," in *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays*, ed. S.W. Sykes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 27.

58 Walter Lowe, "Prospects for a Postmodern Christian Theology: Apocalyptic without Reserve," *Modern Theology* 15 (1999), 23.

59 See McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 275–76, who cites Ruschke, *Entstehung und Ausführung der Diastaseologie*, 81 in support of this claim. Paul

In Barth's own words, by paying attention and acknowledging the Word of God as our decisive eschatological horizon and environment, all our ethical thinking and doing is incited to "make room for the work of God" in a posture of joyfully astonished repentance.⁶⁰

Conceived in this way, the specifically *ethical* quality of our actions is their capacity, by grace, sacrificially to witness to the great disruption and coming transformation of the world that occurs when God in his eternity crosses our time. As both our primal origin and ultimate destiny, God's righteous grace is and remains "Infinitely qualitatively different" than the world and the lives it interrupts and redeems, paradoxically real and effective precisely in its refusal to be assimilated or naturalised. It is for this reason that, just like the human agents who perform them, particular ethical actions are and remain 'what they are not': when faith confesses that by grace we "are what we are not," it also acknowledges that by grace we "do that which we cannot," namely, parabolic acts that truly correspond to our gracious election and the coming Kingdom. As we noted at the outset, what is involved here for Barth is the logic of imputation set in an eschatological key: human moral actions that tell the truth about God, God's own action, and God's purposes in acting, simply do not possess the truth of which they tell. If nevertheless they do speak truly of the God who is God – and Barth thinks they can and will do so – then this is an "impossible possibility," properly a miracle, like the miracle of faith itself. This is why all such actions must be "sacrificed" even as they are performed: for moral life *under grace* simply is and can only be an unending "*Non nobis Domine...*".

There is, I think, an abiding lesson to be learned from Barth's discussion of ethics in the second edition of the *Römerbrief*: whatever account we might give of theological ethics, the Christian moral life is uniquely burdened with the need to be utterly transparent to the outworking of the world-dissolving and remaking grace of God that is its only possibility and promise. The distinctive eschatological register of Barth's commentary – and here perhaps the genre of biblical *com-*

L. Lehmann's later programme in theological ethics makes this theme – i.e., the essentially parabolic character of Christian moral action – its centre piece, see *Ethics in a Christian Context* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963). I re-formulate this idea afresh in relation to impulses drawn – once again! – from recent work in Pauline exegesis, see Philip G. Ziegler, "Parabolic Life – Toward an Ethics of God's Apocalypse," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 34:4 (2021), forthcoming. **60** Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 437. On this, see Michael Weinrich, "Karl Barths Weg von Krisis zur Kritik: Klärung der Perspektive – kein Richtungswechsel," *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 32:1 (2016): 71–94, 93.

mentary itself becomes supremely meaningful⁶¹ – affords him an arresting idiom in which to republish the radical truth that human actions, no less than human beings themselves, are justified by grace alone, that their quality *as ethical acts* is extrinsically imputed to them graciously, or not at all. Barth's second ethics is ambitious to be an ethics of *eschatological* grace, which is to say an ethics that never betrays or belies or fails to announce that it exists miraculously amidst the ruins of Adamic existence, being itself the impossible possibility of the catastrophe of divine grace, and ever pressing to enact all-too-human parables of the Kingdom of God. As sacrifice and parable, it looks to “set forth” and “bring out” its dogmatic presupposition, namely, that “Grace suffices, even for ethics.”⁶²

61 “The new world of the Bible, about which Barth wrote with such astonishment in *Romans*, is the new world of *God*; exegesis cannot capture that reality, and it can never be transformed into a mere textual *positum* [...] biblical commentary is to be one of the places in which the church's theology registers the fact that its life is always open to devastation and renewal by the Word of God. From that devastation and renewal there can be no deliverance, not even a scriptural one.” Webster, “Karl Barth,” 223.

62 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 437. “Die Gnade genügt, auch für die Ethik,” *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 461.

