

RESEARCH ARTICLE

God's definite command? Some theological thoughts on a puzzling theme in Barth's ethics

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Abstract

One of the most puzzling features of Barth's ethics is the insistence that God's divine command encounters us so definitely and concretely that it simply requires immediate and unquestioning obedience. This article offers an interpretation of these comments by reading them through the framework of Barth's description of the secularity, one-sidedness and spirituality of God's Word in *Church Dogmatics* I/1. Such a reading suggests that Barth's comments are not promoting a foolproof and immediate way of adjudicating ethical quandaries but orient us to the commanding Lord who goes before us.

Keywords: Karl Barth; command; ethics; Word of God

One of the most puzzling features of Karl Barth's ethics is the repeated affirmation that God's divine command encounters us so definitely, specifically, and concretely that it brooks no interpretation or contemplation but simply requires immediate and unquestioning obedience. The command of God, Barth declares, 'always confronts us with a specific meaning and intention, with a will which has foreseen everything and each thing in particular, which has not left the smallest thing to chance or caprice'.¹ In this commanding event, the Christian 'will be and actually is told what is good and what the Lord requires of him – and with absolute definiteness, so that only obedience or disobedience remains, and there is no scope for his free appraisal and will in regard to the shape of his obedience'.² Confronted with God's command, there is no space for this free appraisal and will because the specific content of the command so embraces the details of our life and situation that 'it does not need any interpretation',³ it 'requires no interpretation to come into force'.⁴

The struggle to make sense of these comments is well-attested in reflection on Barth's ethics.⁵ Nigel Biggar, for example, bemoans that this commanding event 'barely finds footing in the lived experience of faithful Christians. After all, when did *you* last

¹Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (hereafter *CD*), 13 vols, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–75), II/2, p. 663.

²*CD* II/2, p. 704.

³*CD* II/2, p. 665.

⁴*CD* III/4, p. 12.

⁵See e.g. Robert E. Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), pp. 183, 199, 439–41; Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (New York:

hear an absolutely definite command of God?’⁶ More radically, Alexander Massmann proposes that Barth’s assertions in §38.2 are only comprehensible once we see that here Barth turns away from the electing God in Jesus Christ to an ‘abstract notion of totality and omnipotence’,⁷ a ‘thinly veiled theism’,⁸ which corresponds to Barth’s prohibition of scriptural interpretation insofar as the unilateral self-imposition of God’s Word annihilates ‘room for true human cooperation that involves an interpretive judgment on the biblical text’.⁹ Or again, the question as to whether or not we can ever hear and so know this definite command has been a point of tension between Paul Nimmo and Gerald McKenny.¹⁰ In response to McKenny’s book, *The Analogy of Grace*, Nimmo questioned McKenny’s reservations about our knowledge of God’s definite command. McKenny contends, for example, that ‘Barth denies that the specific command of God is accessible to human knowing. There is certainly no transparency here’,¹¹ and that the non-presence (veiled-ness) of God’s command ‘implies a lack of knowledge of the specific command of God in the present’.¹² In response, Nimmo points to passages in which Barth celebrates the concreteness and specificity of the command, observing that Barth ‘is also adamant that the command in all its presence and particularity is also transparent’.¹³ While acknowledging some of Nimmo’s reflections, McKenny has defended his conclusions. Observing that wanting to know God’s command as God knows it is to repeat Adam and Eve’s mistake of wanting to know good and evil like God, McKenny argues that ‘we are not now co-knowers with God of God’s command’,¹⁴ and that ‘Barth distinguishes the clarity of the command on God’s side from its opacity on ours’.¹⁵ On the whole, these various efforts indicate an ongoing uncertainty in handling this theme in Barth’s ethics.

Such attempts to engage and clarify Barth’s thought arguably represent the more sympathetic side of the reaction his claims have evoked. For others, the puzzlement evoked by Barth’s claims ultimately renders the entire edifice of his theological ethics unstable, above all because of its apparent incompatibility with substantive moral reflection. Oliver O’Donovan is not alone in his reprimand that ‘[Barth’s] formal account of

HarperOne, 1996), pp. 228–30; Stephanie M. Brettmann, *Theories of Justice: A Dialogue with Karol Wojtyła and Karl Barth* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2015), pp. 132–3.

⁶Nigel Biggar, ‘Karl Barth’s Ethics Revisited’, in D. L. Migliore (ed.), *Commanding Grace: Studies in Karl Barth’s Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), p. 30. See also Biggar, ‘Barth’s Trinitarian Ethic’, in J. Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), p. 214. Cf. Biggar’s attempt to understand God’s command in terms of personal vocation in Biggar, *The Hastening That Waits: Karl Barth’s Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), pp. 41–5.

⁷Alexander Massmann, *Citizenship in Heaven and on Earth: Karl Barth’s Ethics* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015), p. 248.

⁸Ibid., p. 251.

⁹Ibid., p. 247.

¹⁰For other attempts to explain what it might mean to know this definite divine command, see William Stacy Johnson, *The Mystery of God: Karl Barth and the Postmodern Foundations of Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), p. 163; David Haddorff, *Christian Ethics as Witness: Barth’s Ethics for a World at Risk* (Havertown: James Clarke, 2011), pp. 250–1.

¹¹Gerald McKenny, *The Analogy of Grace: Karl Barth’s Moral Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), p. 280.

¹²Ibid., p. 282.

¹³Paul T. Nimmo, ‘Reflections on *The Analogy of Grace* by Gerald McKenny’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68/1 (2015), p. 91.

¹⁴Gerald McKenny, ‘Response to Paul Nimmo’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68/1 (2015), p. 101.

¹⁵See also Gerald McKenny, ‘Ethics’, in P. D. Jones and P. T. Nimmo (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Barth* (Oxford: OUP, 2019), pp. 488–9.

the theological basis of ethics which, depending exclusively on the divine command – interpreted in the existentialist way as a particular and unpredictable –, was far too thin to support the extensive responsibility for moral deliberation which he would claim in practice and sometimes defend even in theory.¹⁶ Clarity around what Barth intends with these claims, then, is not only an ‘in-house’ problem but is necessary to remove what has proven to be a stumbling block for others interested in reflecting on the good life. This access is to be desired because, as Hinrich Stoevesandt observes, Christian ethics could be enriched if it took onboard the conviction that grounds Barth’s contentions, namely, ‘that God’s will does not leave us alone but goes with us, or rather, goes ahead of us on our paths’.¹⁷

This article proposes a way to dissipate this confusion, following a path recently modelled by Derek Woodard-Lehman. Responding to similar concerns about Barth’s account of practical reason, Woodard-Lehman observes that we have been looking for the answers to these questions in the wrong places. While there are hints of an account of practical reason in Barth’s ethics, Woodard-Lehman argues that these are more like the tip of the iceberg, the bottom of which is found in Barth’s prolegomenal discussion of the authority and freedom of the community under scripture in *Church Dogmatics* I/2. Here Barth offers an account of practical reason in which ‘the Word is received as the church interprets Scripture and speaks its confession. The church moves from interpretation to confession through the “common deliberation” of the entire community.’¹⁸ This description of practical reason provides the framework in which Barth develops his theological ethics, thus grounding the occasional reference to its processes.

The contention of this article is that we can make a similar move in order to shed some light on what it might mean to hear and know God’s absolutely definite command. That is, Barth’s comments concerning the concrete specificity of the God’s command and the rather perplexing connection these have to our knowledge of it can be illuminated by turning our attention to Barth’s prolegomenal discussions in which he reflects on the character of the Word of God. The discussion that proves helpful at this point is the final subsection of *Church Dogmatics* §5 (‘The Nature of the Word of God’), titled ‘The Speech of God as the Mystery of God’. In this discussion, Barth claims that the Word of God is only known in its secularity, one-sidedness and spirituality, three points that provide a framework for interpreting Barth’s comments about the definiteness of God’s command – a Barthian reading of Barth so to speak! In what follows, this framework will be clarified by a successive treatment of these three points, each accompanied by a discussion as to how this particular aspect of the mystery of God’s Word might assist our comprehension of Barth’s ethical thought.

¹⁶Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Leicester: IVP, 1986), p. 87. See also James M. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective: Theology and Ethics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 33; Robin W. Lovin, *Christian Faith and Public Choices: The Social Ethics of Barth, Brunner, and Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1984), pp. 40–2; William Schweiker, *Power, Value, and Conviction: Theological Ethics in a Postmodern Age* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 1998), pp. 168–9.

¹⁷Hinrich Stoevesandt, ‘Die Grundspannung von Rechtfertigung und Heiligung bei Karl Barth’, in E. Dekker, M. C. Batenburg and D. H. J. Steenks (eds), *Solidair en Solide: In Gesprek mit H. W. de Kniff* (Kampen: Kok, 1997), p. 114.

¹⁸Derek Alan Woodard-Lehman, ‘Barth and Modern Moral Philosophy’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Barth*, p. 523. See also Derek Alan Woodard-Lehman, ‘Reason After Revelation: Karl Barth on Divine Word and Human Words’, *Modern Theology* 33/1 (January 2017), pp. 92–115.

As will we see, Barth's reflections on the definiteness of God's command are not intended to promote a foolproof and immediate way of adjudicating ethical quandaries in any given situation. Rather, they are offered as descriptions of the way in which the living God acts among and toward his servants, as elucidations of a divine vitality that creates a context in which we must walk by faith and not by sight when making ethical decisions. Such a reading makes clear that, in contrast to denigrating human ethical engagement, God's gracious and concrete command calls forth moral reflection on the part of the Christian community, reflection which, in light of the Word of God, is characterised both before and after the fact by conscientious prayer and an openness to further divine guidance and illumination and correction.

The secularity of the Word

Barth's discussion of the mystery of God is presented as a theological caveat against theology's self-assuredness. Wishing to qualify this confidence, Barth notes that 'absolutely any theological possibility can as such be a pure threshing of straw and waste of energy, pure comedy and tragedy, pure deception and self-deception'.¹⁹ Why? Surprisingly, it is not finally due to the limited nature of human knowledge or even the blindness that sin invites into every theological formulation. Rather, the seriousness of this warning emerges from a proper appreciation of the transcendent God who speaks freely and sovereignly. As theologians who serve this God, 'we must accept the fact that only the Logos of God *himself* can provide the proof that we are *really* talking about him when we are *allegedly* doing so'.²⁰ Theology, of course, desires nothing more than to speak the Word of God, to declare it in truth and power. And yet it is the very burden of theology to confess that it cannot do so just because the sovereign freedom of this Word is not under our control. As such, 'all our delimitations can only seek to be signals or alarms to draw attention to the fact that God's Word is and remains *God's*', signals that stand in complete need of divine confirmation if they are to render their declarative service.²¹ Barth's discussion of the mystery of God's Word is offered to lay bare this dire need, to problematise – by drawing attention to three features – the notion that our theological propositions are immediately, innately and directly related to their content, and so to remind us that 'we cannot utter even a wretched syllable about the how of God's word unless the Word of God is spoken to us as God's Word'.²²

The first feature Barth expounds is that the Word of God remains God's mystery in its secularity. By secularity, Barth means that the Word of God only ever encounters us indirectly, cloaked in the mantle of something that is not God, even as God uses it for his self-communicative purposes. It is the case, then, that 'when God speaks to man this event never demarcates itself from other events in such a way that it might not be interpreted at once as part of these events'.²³ Rather, it is precisely in and through these secular events that God's Word is spoken in history. However, if God unveils himself by veiling himself in something that is not God, then God necessarily uses 'an unsuitable

¹⁹CD I/1, p. 163.

²⁰Ibid. The emphasis in this quote is Barth's own, as found in Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* (hereafter *KD*), 13 vols (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1932–67), I/1, p. 169. I have restored Barth's original emphasis through the standard use of italics and noted this alteration by means of a reference to *KD*.

²¹CD I/1, p. 164. *KD* I/1, p. 170.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid., p. 165.

medium for God's self-presentation', unsuitable in the twofold sense of something creaturely and something that participates in the realm of fallen humanity.²⁴ It follows that this creaturely garment which God consecrates for this ministry is not only not able to reveal God of itself but actively works against this. 'The secularity proper to God's Word is not in itself and as such transparent or capable of being the translucent garment or mirror of God's Word.'²⁵ That it is such a garment is only possible by divine miracle, only as the divine Word graciously condescends to be spoken in this creaturely form. The secularity of God's Word, then, secures the insight that the Word of God is truly spoken to us only as God is continually at work adapting and sanctifying these unsuitable media for his self-communicative purposes.

What grounds this claim? Barth's answer is the incarnation in which the Son of God enters into this twofold indirectness of sinful creatureliness, exposing himself to the very real danger that he will not be recognised as the Son.²⁶ In Christ, God has made this way to us and, in doing so, shown both the graciousness of God – for 'we are in this world and are through and through secular. If God did not speak to us in secular form, he would not speak to us at all' – and the way in which God wills to be found by us.²⁷ More precisely, because the Word's incarnation constitutes revelation, we learn here how God reveals himself and, correspondingly, that we cannot escape the secularity of God's Word, above all those forms to which we are authoritatively directed to seek God's Word: scripture and church proclamation. 'Hence', Barth concludes, 'the only sentence we can pronounce on the necessity and goodness of the relation in which God has set himself to us is one that seeks to repeat the reality of this relation', or more poetically, we are to seek God in the secularity where he may be found.²⁸

What happens if we read Barth's reflections on God's command through this lens? This account of the secularity of the Word of God suggests that the definite command of God, a command given 'in such a way that even in every visible and invisible detail he wills of us precisely this one thing and nothing else', will be heard only as that speech of God is veiled in secularity, above all, in the secularity of the Word's authoritative forms, scripture and the proclamation of the church.²⁹ It is in this way that the absolutely concrete command will encounter us and no other. If this seems an unlikely interpretation, it should be recalled that such a thought is not at all foreign to Barth's ethical reflections. In fact, specifying this framework helps us to make sense of a number of passing affirmations in which God's definite command appears to be mediated by some secular factor even though Barth does not pause to expound this relation or how it might be possible in light of his emphatic declarations about the definiteness and immediacy of the command. For example, Barth observes that the specific form of the divine claim which characterises God's command does not mean other immanent commands have no relation to God's command. 'It is indeed the case that ... the claim of God's command always wears the garment of another claim of this kind. An object with its question, the compulsion of a necessity of thought ... all these can actually be the

²⁴Ibid., p. 166.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Barth emphasises this danger when he treats this topic again in *CD II/1*, although there it appears under his discussion of the secondary objectivity of God's Word.

²⁷*CD I/1*, p. 168.

²⁸Ibid. *KD I/1*, p. 175, rev.

²⁹*CD II/2*, p. 664.

command of God veiled in this form.³⁰ Or again, note Barth's remark concerning the proclamation of God's good command: 'Those who have the task of carrying it out must remember that they have to declare something good – the very best – to others. And those who may hear it, and hear it rightly, have every reason to be grateful because the good – the very best – is announced to them.'³¹ Such a comment envisions God's good command encountering his people as it is mediated to them in secular form by those who have been tasked with its proclamation.

Perhaps most notably, it is to this proclamation and its ground, the biblical testimony, that Barth directs us for an answer to the question, 'What ought we to do?' This question is obviously directed towards God, and it is from God that we expect an answer – Barth has spent much ink hammering this point home. But to ask in this fashion means that

we must put it to Holy Scripture as the witness to God's revelation. That the sovereign decision of God concerning all of our decisions confronts us really and objectively in Jesus Christ is, as we have seen, the supreme criterion of all ethical reflection. But Jesus Christ cannot be separated from his apostles, from the whole witness which underlies the community of God in the form of Israel, and then of the Christian church. We hear him as we hear his witnesses. It is in their testimony that the divine command, as the sovereign decision God, is always to be sought and will certainly always be found.³²

If it is true that these assertions appear somewhat haphazardly in Barth's presentation in *Church Dogmatics* II/2, such randomness does not necessarily betray an inconsistency of thought, for it could also simply reflect Barth's particular focus in his general ethics on the divine character of God's command. If this is the case (and we will argue below that it is), then the presence of these assertions suggests that Barth's comments about the definite command of God, which is nothing other than the imperative of God's Word, may be legitimately read with the expectation that they are to be understood according to the secular character that God's Word always bears.

The immediate problem that drawing this connection between God's command and the secularity of the Word creates is that it stands in some tension with Barth's hostility against any interpretation of God's command: 'The command is full in itself. It is already interpreted and applied to myself and my circumstances, to my position at the moment ... I am not asked concerning my interpretation, but only my recognition and the consequent practical acknowledgement of the form in which it is given to me.'³³ The impression this protest against interpretation communicates is that we are simply to hear and obey apart from any hermeneutical process. But what can this mean if we hear God's command only in the garment of creaturely secularity and so must unavoidably undertake some act of interpretation to hear and know it, above all if this secular cloak is the biblical text?

³⁰Ibid., pp. 584–5.

³¹Ibid., p. 709. This dynamic of the Spirit's gift through prophetic communication is insightfully expounded in William T. Barnett, 'Blessed Interruption: On Pietism, Prophets, and the Life of Freedom beyond Autonomy', *The Covenant Quarterly* (2011), p. 68.

³²CD II/2, p. 661. KD II/2, p. 737, rev.

³³CD II/2, p. 667. KD II/2, p. 744, rev.

Approaching Barth's objection within the framework of the secularity of the Word suggests that we should make a distinction between *hearing* God's Word and our response to God's Word *already heard*.³⁴ *Hearing* God's Word directs us to that event in which the Word declares itself to us cloaked in secularity and is correspondingly known as we listen along the paths God has laid down for the hearing of his Word – revelation, scripture and proclamation – a listening that, as Woodard-Lehman has so lucidly observed, requires the interpretative and confessional practices of the church community.³⁵ Responding to God's Word *already heard* speaks of our obedient or disobedient response to what we have heard from God. Barth's comments against interpretation pertain to this latter moment of response: we must not distort that which has been commanded by further hermeneutical manoeuvres but must do as we have been told. Taking Barth seriously at his word about secularity, space is opened up between the definite command uttered by God and our responding obedience to the command *already heard*, a mediating space of *hearing* God's Word in which that interpretative activity so necessary to ethical reflection can occur.³⁶

The cogency of this distinction is strengthened by Barth's assertion that we are to be contemporaneous with those in the Bible as hearers of the divine command.³⁷ 'The command given to them and heard by them becomes directly the command given to us and to be heard by us. Their task becomes *our* task.'³⁸ If at first glance such a claim appears to instruct us to hear in a rather direct and straightforward way the commands in the Bible as our own, Barth distances himself from this implication. What we have in the Bible is not 'a kind of supernatural register or arsenal containing all sorts of counsels, directions and commands' so that we 'have to be on the lookout for direct hints ... consult[ing] it as a kind of box of magic cards'.³⁹ Rather, Barth's comments are directed to the biblical text in its service as the words in which God permits his Word to resound throughout history. In this capacity, the biblical witness is the means by which we are actually confronted by the commanding God. It is this 'Lord in the fulfilment of his work'⁴⁰ who encounters us in the words of his servants, who, in these words, is 'rich over all and for all, abounding in counsels and purposes for all, and working in all things ... He is rich as he lives and acts and speaks. If he is present with them, confronting them alive, acting and speaking, then concrete commands are issued.'⁴¹

³⁴While this is not a distinction Barth himself explicitly makes, something like this is necessary here to make sense of Barth's apparently contradictory claims. Without it, we are faced with Massmann's troubling solution to this tension, namely, that Barth reworked the hermeneutic of *CD I/1* in response to how the German Christians handled Scripture, moving away from a more open sense of encounter with the text and towards the conclusion that, 'in the self-imposition of God's word, there is no room for true human cooperation that involves interpretive judgment on the biblical text'. Massmann, *Citizenship in Heaven*, p. 247.

³⁵Woodard-Lehman, 'Barth and Moral Philosophy', p. 524.

³⁶It is just this mediating space that Jason Fout thinks is missing in Barth's account. See Jason A. Fout, *Fully Alive: The Glory of God and the Human Creature in Karl Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Theological Exegesis of Scripture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 74–93.

³⁷See Paul T. Nimmo, *Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Barth's Ethical Vision* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), pp. 33–5.

³⁸*CD II/2*, p. 706. *KD II/2*, p. 788.

³⁹*CD II/2*, p. 704.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 705.

⁴¹*Ibid.* *KD II/2*, p. 787, rev.

God's definite command is, therefore, issued to us not by the Bible *in abstracto* but by the God who speaks as the Lord in and through its witness so that the God who spoke then and there is now eloquent once again here and now among us. But if this is so, then this event brings in its train the necessity of hearing of God's Word through a communal practice of responsible and patient exegetical reasoning.⁴² Put differently, that God's specific command sounds forth in the biblical text entails the whole complex of ecclesial interpretative practices Barth envisions in our hearing of this Word in scripture. If, therefore, we are to do justice to Barth's allergy to interpreting God's command in this context, we are required to make a distinction between this *hearing* and our response to God's Word *already heard*.

The one-sidedness of the Word

We may very well ask whether we can really read Barth's comments about the definiteness of God's command in this way. After all, Barth is happy to speak of 'the divine command as the judicial divine decision confronting all our own decisions [which] is given to us with concrete *fullness* and *definite* content', without any qualifying additions.⁴³ An answer to this question is provided by the second feature of the mystery of God's Word that Barth elucidates: the one-sidedness of God's Word.⁴⁴ This concept derives from the veiling and unveiling of the Word of God brought about by its secularity. The secular path of God to us entails the unveiling of God's Word only as it is veiled and the veiling of God's Word as it is unveiled, the divine content only in its secular form or the secular form as the form of the divine content. It is helpful to stress that, for Barth, the Word of God is truly God's speech only in the unity of secular form and divine content. 'The secular form without the divine content is not the Word of God and the divine content without the secular form is also not the Word of God. We can neither stop at the secular form as such nor can we fly off beyond this and try to enjoy the divine content alone.'⁴⁵ In this setting, the one-sidedness of God's Word recognises that we can only ever directly consider one of these aspects in our theological reflection on the Word of God: 'We are set in the greatest clarity in relation to the one, in such clarity that we have very distinct and in themselves clear thoughts regarding what is said to us.'⁴⁶

Note, this one-sidedness does not mean that the other side is separated or lost from what is before us in our listening to the Word of God, but that it is hidden in that which is clear at present:

The speech of God is and remains a mystery to the extent that its totality, just as such, and hence with all the weight and seriousness of God's Word, is always *revealed* to us only on *one* side and always remains *hidden* on the *other* side ... In what is manifest to us the hidden side is always contained, but as a hidden side, so that we can grasp and have it only as such, i.e., only in faith.⁴⁷

⁴²See Woodard-Lehman, 'Reason After Revelation', pp. 102–4.

⁴³CD II/2, p. 662. KD II/2, p. 738, rev.

⁴⁴For a discussion of this concept as it concerns Barth's handlings of apparently contradictory biblical texts, see George Hunsinger, 'Introduction', in G. Hunsinger (ed.), *Thy Word Is Truth: Barth on Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), pp. xv–xix.

⁴⁵CD I/1, p. 175.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 174.

⁴⁷Ibid. KD I/1, p. 181, rev.

That is to say, it is only as God guarantees by his own miraculous speaking that what we have in the secular form really is the divine content, and, conversely, the divine content we enjoy is only ours as it is mediated in and through its secular form. In and of itself, however, our thinking can only ever be one-sided, focused on either the divine content or the secular form.

Barth maps this distinction onto what he calls realistic theology and idealistic theology, both of which he identifies as bad theology even as he admits that our theology never escapes these categories: 'What is discernible by us is always form without content or content without form. Our thinking can be realistic or idealistic but it cannot be Christian.'⁴⁸ This realist-idealist distinction receives further elucidation in an essay from 1929 titled, 'Fate and Idea in Theology'. This article begins from the recognition that the theologian necessarily sets to work with realist or idealist categories. Realist categories operate on the basis that God truly has made himself accessible to our experience, that God has 'entered into our own particular mode of being, that of nature and history',⁴⁹ and so has given himself to become an object of our knowledge. Realistic theology, therefore, proceeds with a focus on the reality of God as it is present to us in the world we know, the world in which the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us. On the other hand, the idealist seeks for the ontological and noetic presuppositions of that which is given and objective to us. In this way, idealistic theology regards reality as transparent and seeks the truth that shines through it:

Isn't all theology a matter of understanding, a matter of rendering to ourselves an account of God in the form of human concepts, in other words, in the form of intellectual work, by abstracting from the given and interpreting the given ... Isn't all theology necessarily idealist to the extent that thinking about God's given reality always involves referring to its non-given truth?⁵⁰

However, Barth also sees problems on both sides. Realistic thinking is harried by the fact that God's givenness in reality cannot be understood as a static and generally accessible presence but only as 'the event in which God comes to us in his Word, an event over which God has sole control, and which is strictly momentary'.⁵¹ God is distinguished from anything we might have at hand by the fact that God *comes*, and so 'we can think and speak realistically only by presupposing the act-character of God's reality'.⁵² Idealist theology, on the other hand, is harried by the fact that even the most lucid, rigorous critical reflection on the truth is not in itself the Word of God but merely bears witness to this Word 'by granting that God's truth finds access to us in one single particular event and that this event is definitive ... In fact, as a Christian theologian he will have to regard it as the divine possibility actualised in Christ, or in the biblical and ecclesiastical witness to Christ'.⁵³ Put differently, idealist theology never produces the Word of God but serves it with its ministry of attestation, a ministry that is only

⁴⁸CD I/1, p. 175.

⁴⁹Karl Barth, 'Fate and Idea in Theology', in *The Way of Theology in Karl Barth: Essays and Comments*, ed. M. Rumscheidt, trans. G. Hunsinger (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 1986), p. 35.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 45.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 40.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid., p. 48.

ever validated as the Word speaks these truths through those particular means God has ordained as ministers of his self-address.

These reflections help us to grasp Barth's assertions concerning the one-sidedness of God's Word. Our theological thinking may fall on the realistic side, having before us the secular form of God's Word, the media of revelation. However, as realistic theologians we must remember that a divine act is required for this truly to be God's Word, trusting this will and does take place without being able to demonstrate it or produce it ourselves. Alternatively, our theology may fall on the idealistic side with our articulations and critical descriptions of the divine content of the Word of God. However, as idealistic theologians we must remember that even our most brilliant and insightful formulations of this truth are only truly God's Word as this is transcendentally communicated to us in and through a particular encounter with one of the secular forms of God's Word. One-sidedness means we can only ever be one or the other, retaining one side in our field of vision while entrusting the other to God's hands: 'Believing means either *now* having the divine content of God's Word even though nothing but the secular form is discernible by us or it means *now* hearing the secular form of God's Word even though only its divine content is discernible by us.'⁵⁴

How does this account of the dialectic of theological thinking shed some light on Barth's comments concerning the definiteness and specificity of God's command? The one-sidedness of God's Word instructs us to see that when Barth speaks of the absolutely definite and utterly concrete command of God, he is not describing our experience but attesting divine activity.⁵⁵ Using the categories above, Barth's articulations of this concept are one-sided 'idealistic' summaries – i.e. formulations reached by critically piercing through those secular forms of revelation, specifically, the biblical witness – of the character of God's command. It is the divine content, the truth of the Word of God, that Barth is referring to when he maintains that the Christian 'is always confronted by the whole and clear and specific command'.⁵⁶ Furthermore, the one-sidedness of all our theological thinking entails that such idealistic claims hide within them their dialectical opposite, something that must be taken into account when we consider how we actually encounter and therefore hear the divine command. Indeed, such an inclusion prohibits a direct translation of these statements into our experience. Rather, if what Barth sets before us here is the divine content, such content will only be communicated to us as God's Word as it cloaks itself in its secular form. If we will to hear such definite commands, then it will only take place as we retrace the way already traversed, as we complete that recollection of the secularity of God's Word, returning immediately to Christ, his witnesses and his proclamation in the church and listening once more in this space.

From this perspective, Barth's descriptions of God's definite command are not intended as existential descriptions of our encounter with God's Word but actually function as the theological basis for that return to and engagement with the command's secular form, a return that includes all the reflective processes such recourse requires. In other words, the clarity and definiteness of God's command funds ecclesial and exegetical ethical reflection: God's concrete commanding does not override or render unnecessary human engagement but calls forth human endeavours to listen faithfully to those authoritative forms of revelation in which God deigns his command to be

⁵⁴CD I/1, p. 176. KD I/1, p. 183, rev.

⁵⁵See Matthew Rose, *Ethics with Barth: God, Metaphysics and Morals* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), p. 94.

⁵⁶CD II/2, p. 671.

heard in history.⁵⁷ It is no surprise, then, that the position which Barth thinks the concreteness and definiteness of the divine command calls us to adopt is that of devoted ecclesial readers of the prophets and apostles. So Barth: ‘The concreteness and definiteness of the divine command need not be our concern’, just because ‘as the Word of God who is eternally rich, and speaks with living power in his eternal riches, it has these qualities in itself and therefore for us’.⁵⁸ But, precisely as such, it is there ‘to be perceived by us if only we will listen to it, if only we will allow ourselves to be called to the place where it calls us, if only we will again allow ourselves to be addressed as those to whom it was given then and there’, which is all simply to say ‘that we really agree with the biblical witness’.⁵⁹ Again, then, we can see that attention to Barth’s description of the Word of God, this time in its nature as one-sided, helps us to make sense of this more puzzling aspect of Barth’s theological ethics by directing us to the fact that theological statements concerning the divine content of God’s Word contain their dialectical counterpart hidden within them and so should not be directly translated into our own experience but recognised as the full and true Word of God only as such content is united with its secular form.

The spirituality of the Word

A final question concerning this definite command arises. If we always encounter this command in secularity, and if even our reflections on this encounter can only ever be one-sided, can we ever actually know this command?⁶⁰ The final feature Barth explores under the mystery of the Word of God, the spirituality of the Word, provides an answer to this question. The spirituality of God’s Word refers to the fact that, where it is heard and believed, the Word itself is the final and ultimate ground of this event. Put differently, the definitive criterion by which our hearing and faith in God’s Word is proved a true hearing and faith, the decisive ingredient that makes our listening actual engagement with the Word of God, is the gracious activity of that Word. It is ‘spiritual’ because, for Barth, this is also a reference to the Holy Spirit who is always at work not only in the giving of the Word but also in our hearing of the Word. Only where the Spirit is present, more precisely, only because the Spirit is present, is there true hearing of and faith in God’s Word. As such, ‘we must believe in our faith no less than in the Word believed, i.e., we can only understand our conduct in relation to the Word of God – especially when we think we can and should regard it as a positive relationship to it, that is, when we *confess* our faith – as *positive* only as it is made possible and actual by God, only as a miracle of the Holy Spirit and not our own work’.⁶¹ This is not to divest faith of its human character. Barth is well aware that faith is also a human experience accompanied by various attitudes and thoughts that are very actual in our lives. However, in and of themselves, none of these experiences or attitudes or thoughts

⁵⁷Cf. John Webster, *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), pp. 65–6.

⁵⁸CD II/2, p. 707.

⁵⁹Ibid. KD II/2, p. 789, rev.

⁶⁰This question of whether or not God’s command can be unambiguously heard has plagued interpretation of Barth’s ethics, and even Nimmo has suggested that ‘this matter of the audibility and the intelligibility of the command of God cannot easily be settled, whether theoretically or phenomenologically, and the charge [referring to Gustafson’s and Willis’ critiques of Barth’s confidence that we are clearly confronted with definite divine commands] must consequently be left open’. Nimmo, *Being in Action*, p. 78.

⁶¹CD I/1, p. 182. KD I/1, p. 190, rev.

guarantee that we are dealing with the Word of God. They are not ‘necessarily and unequivocally the sign of its reality’, for this is decided spiritually – by the Holy Spirit – and not by anything that might be present on our side of the equation.⁶² So Barth: ‘One cannot lay down conditions which, if observed, guarantee hearing of the Word.’⁶³

If the Word of God is spiritual, if ‘the search for a receptacle of human experience, attitude and teaching which would be undoubtedly and unequivocally the receptacle of divine content ... is pointless’,⁶⁴ does this mean that we can never actually or confidently know the Word of God? If such a conclusion is tempting, it risks missing the fact that, for Barth, there is a confident and concrete hearing and receiving of the Word of God: the knowledge of faith.⁶⁵ For Barth, to know in faith refers to that acknowledgement of God’s Word which includes the recognition that it is only God’s free and gracious speaking that confirms our knowledge as true. It is to confess what one has heard from God with the awareness that we cannot of ourselves by some appeal to creaturely factors (reason, emotions, circumstances, etc.) produce or bestow any validity upon our testimony but must entrust ourselves with humble hearts into divine keeping which alone can affirm our confession as a true hearing of God’s Word.⁶⁶ If such confirmation is not under our control neither is this act of entrusting a passive optimism. Rather, to the extent that we are responsible, our confession ‘can be attested in the realm of humanity ... by appeal to proclamation by the church, to Holy Scripture and to revelation in the form of interpretation of this threefold form of God’s Word’.⁶⁷ To know God’s Word in faith, therefore, means to attend closely to those media of revelation that God employs, attempting to pierce through these secular cloaks to hear the divine content resonating within, and then making a confession of what we have heard in the awareness that it is only by a divine miracle that what we confess is attested as a true hearing of the Word of God.

If we now return to Barth’s remarks on the command of God and read them in light of the Word’s spirituality, we find that this has a significant impact on what it means to hear God’s definite command. In particular, if hearing such a command is simply confessing the imperative force of the Word of God as encountered in the forms of revelation, then this is carried out on the presupposition that our hearing is true only by divine grace, by the work of God’s Spirit, and, therefore, in faith. The command’s truth, Barth writes, ‘is spiritual truth, i.e., truth which is revealed and operative in the presence and work of the Holy Spirit’, and this has the consequence that ‘apart from faith and therefore from the Word of God, in ourselves therefore – in our conscience, thought, volition or emotion – or in some kind of special experiences – we cannot expect to find a point or points where we are in such agreement with the command

⁶²CD I/1, p. 183.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 184.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 183.

⁶⁶Barth captures this well a little further along in his prolegomena: ‘To have the Holy Spirit is to let *God* rather than our *having God* be our confidence. It lies in the nature of God’s revelation and reconciliation in time ... that “having *God*” and our “*having God*” are two very different things, and that our redemption is not a relation which we can survey in its totality ... In faith we can understand it only as it is posited by God. Faith is understanding it as posited and indeed fulfilled and consummated by God, but not by us, not in such a way that we may see ourselves in the being which corresponds to this fulfilment and consummation by God.’ CD I/1, p. 462. KD I/1, p. 485.

⁶⁷CD I/1, p. 185.

of God'.⁶⁸ Put differently, there is no criterion in our immanent existence that can definitively ensure that our confession of God's command is a true hearing. This does not mean that we do not hear anything or that we are excused from the task of responsibly and faithfully listening, but that the final validity of any such process is committed to God's hands. That our confession really is a true hearing, 'God, and only God, will decide in his own good time. But it is still the case that our deeds will have been a doing of the will of God or not. Necessarily, therefore, our present deeds must be accompanied by a searching question as to the will of God in regard to our future deeds.'⁶⁹ In light of its spiritual nature, then, Christians know this absolutely definite and utterly concrete divine command only under the mode of faith; that is, coming from a close listening to the media of revelation, Christians confess the will of God, well aware of the fact that they can do so only by prayerfully entrusting themselves to God's promise that their hearing is a true hearing.

A concluding story

To conclude these reflections, it is helpful to indicate how this approach to Barth's comments on the definiteness of the divine command allows us to understand a striking conversation Barth had with the Kirchlichen Bruderschaft in Württemberg in 1963. One of the participants, Walter Schlenker, raised a query driven by the division between Christians over which political party to elect in a recent German election. Schlenker notes that Barth places great emphasis on the directness and concreteness of the Holy Spirit's direction, quoting the following passage from *Church Dogmatics IV/2* that celebrates the singleness and clarity of the divine command:

What we are given in [the Spirit's instruction] is not merely general principles and lines of action which leave plenty of room for selection in detailed interpretation – as if it were not the details that really matter! On the contrary, he shows us the only good possibility which there is for us here and now in the freedom of our point of departure and which we not only may but must select and grasp in all circumstances.⁷⁰

This concrete, specific hearing, Schlenker laments, was simply not the case during the election.⁷¹ Barth's response to Schlenker's interpretation of this passage is as follows:

This is not what was meant in the beautiful passage that you have read out. I hope that no one has understood it in this way: that some honest man or capable woman sits and listens, and hush! the Holy Spirit comes and demands absolutely concrete obedience that one now has to perform. Rather: indeed, the Holy Spirit! – naturally, it simply does not proceed without the Spirit. However, the Spirit must certainly be prayed for and when one prays for the Spirit, then, as I said this morning, work must be done – also in this matter. The work consists in this case in the fact that one undertakes political reflections in which one quite soberly sets the things next to each other and says: so-and-so and so! very aware that we do not

⁶⁸CD II/2, p. 603.

⁶⁹CD II/2, p. 639.

⁷⁰CD IV/2, p. 372.

⁷¹Karl Barth, *Gespräche 1963*, ed. E. Busch (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2005), pp. 78–9.

find ourselves in heaven, but on the earth, 'in the still unredeemed world', with this whole party system. However, we are not altogether abandoned here. There could also be a whisper of the Holy Spirit, in obedience to whom we then take our steps, now to the left, now to the right, in the awareness that it will not be something perfect but something for which we can take responsibility.⁷²

For some readings of Barth's ethics, just this sort of practical guidance and reasoning is exactly what is missing in Barth's thought. How are we to understand this seeming contradiction? Such a conundrum is overcome – actually, it does not even arise – when we read Barth's ethics in the framework provided by his exposition of the mystery of the Word of God. This framework – one which teaches us that the Word of God is always encountered in its one-sided secularity and confirmed exclusively in a spiritual manner – allows us to see that Barth's celebration of the definiteness and concreteness of the divine command does not exclude a place for the task of listening to the Word through the normal process of ecclesial and exegetical reasoning. Rather, this definite command, understood in its one-sidedness as the divine content that always encounters us cloaked in secularity, actually grounds the task of listening closely to those ordained media of revelation, a task undertaken in the confident hope that the Spirit will inspire, maintain, forgive, and so make good our penitent and joyful acts.

⁷²Ibid., pp. 82–3.