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Response to Paul Nimmo

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I am grateful to the *Scottish Journal of Theology* for offering me the opportunity to respond to Paul Nimmo's article review of the *The Analogy of Grace*, and I am especially grateful to Dr Nimmo for his lucid and accurate overview of the book, his generous comments, and his thoughtful and challenging criticisms.[1] It is an honour to receive this careful and critical attention from the author of *Being in Action*, a study of Barth's ethics for which I have the highest regard.

Nimmo directs three important criticisms against claims or interpretations which appear in *The Analogy of Grace*. My response to the first criticism, which concerns human knowledge of what God commands, will defend the position I took in the book, while my response to the second criticism, which concerns the intersubjective character of God's commanding, will result in a retraction of my position as stated in the book accompanied by a discussion of the reasons (themselves still valid) which led me to that position. A third set of criticisms identifies certain sins of omission, highlighting themes which were overlooked or underdeveloped in the book. An adequate response would require a far more extensive elaboration of those themes than is possible in the space allotted to me, so I regret that a few cursory remarks must suffice.

Nimmo's two major criticisms go to the heart of my understanding of the command of God in Barth's *Church Dogmatics*.[2] His first criticism targets my claim that according to Barth there is no concrete and specific knowledge of the command of God. He adduces several quotes from *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, §38, in support of the contrary view that for Barth we do or at least can have such knowledge of God's command. My discussions of this issue appeared in several places in the book. Taken together they may not have been as precise

[1] An earlier version of this response to Dr Nimmo was presented at the annual meeting of the Karl Barth Society of North America in Nov. 2012. I am grateful to Professor George Hunsinger and Professor Paul Molnar for the invitation to present the response and to the members of the audience whose probing questions prompted me to reformulate several points.

[2] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–75), English trans. of Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1932; Zürich: EVZ, 1938–65). References to this text use the abbreviation *CD*, with the English and then the German page numbers.

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as they could be, so I will try now to clarify the senses in which for Barth we do and do not know what God commands.

First, all but the last of the quotes Nimmo adduces in criticism of my position do not have to do with our knowledge of God's command but instead make the point that God's command is addressed to us not as a general or indeterminate norm, which is then left to us to specify, but rather as a fully specified command. The reason why, for Barth, God's command comes fully specified is that (as §38 itself states) the command is not merely the expression of God's will but is God's decision on the moral character of our concrete actions.[3] If it were addressed to us as a general norm and not as a fully specified command, then it would be we, and not God, who decide what that norm requires in our particular circumstances, thereby deciding also on the moral character of our actions. Why would that be a problem? It is important for Barth to hold that it is God who decides the moral character of our particular actions because of the relationship between the command of God and election, which is the context in which *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, presents the command of God. To decide that an action is right or good or obedient is to decide that it fulfils one's determination by God to be God's covenant partner. In other words, it is to decide that this action satisfies the claim God makes on one as God's elect. As Barth puts it, the command 'not only subjects him to a requirement, but in so doing, places him under a conclusion. It not only demands that he should make a decision in conformity with it, but as it does so, . . . it expresses a decision about man.'[4]

To know the fully specified command of God is therefore not merely to know that the action we are considering is a good or obedient action. It is to know that we fulfil our determination as God's elect in the performance of it. For Barth, this is clearly knowledge that God alone is in a position to possess.[5] This brings us to a second point. The question for Barth in light of the specificity of God's command is how we should approach our own decision for or against a proposed action or course of action knowing that it is God (and not we) who decides its character as good or evil, obedient or disobedient. One way to approach our decision is to presume that we are capable of arriving at knowledge of God's decision on the character of our action. But as Barth asserts, this is to presume that we know the command of God just as God knows it, namely, as one who is able and authorised to decide what counts as fulfilling our determination as God's elect. In his

[3] *CD* II/2, pp. 631/701.
[4] *CD* II/2, pp. 631/702.
[5] See *CD* II/2, pp. 632–3/702–4.

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words, 'Our decisions would then run parallel to God's decision, and to that extent identical with it.'[6] Barth consistently uses the term *wissen* and its cognates to refer to this problematic presumption or desire to know God's command in this way, namely, as the capability and authority to decide and judge what counts in a particular case as fulfilling our determination as God's elect.

However, we might approach our own decision in a very different way, namely, by asking after God's command rather than presuming that we are capable of arriving at it on our own. 'We must ask what the command of God is, and what we are to do, without having an answer ready and being able to furnish it ourselves.'[7] In this activity of asking Barth recognises a legitimate sense in which we know God's command. According to this sense, which is consistently designated by the word *kennen* and its cognates, we know God's command as that which we must ask of God. 'Those who ask after it already know it.'[8] This is admittedly a somewhat cryptic point, but it is repeated in similar terms throughout Barth's discussion of the ethical question, 'What should we do?' which is of central importance for the issue at hand.[9] What is clear is that we do not know God's fully specified command except as God gives it to us, so that our knowledge of it cannot be abstracted from the activity of asking after it. We can never leave off the activity of asking God, which is to say that ethical reflection must consist in a perpetual practice of prayer.

In short, while God's command is addressed to us as a fully specified command, our knowledge of it as hearers in no way coincides with God's knowledge of it as commander. This conclusion is also the upshot of one of the most central and persistent themes of Barth's ethics, namely, his insistence on the sinfulness of the human presumption to know good and evil and the destruction of both self and other which this presumption brings in its wake.[10] In the context of *Church Dogmatics*, §38, this point is perhaps most explicitly made in a remark on conscience (*Gewissen*), which Barth defines as 'the totality of our self-consciousness insofar as it can receive and then proclaim the Word and therefore the command of God that is given to us, insofar as we . . . can become co-knowers (*Mit-Wisser*) . . . with God'. Barth affirms that the 'Word and command that are given to us is as such

[6] *CD* II/2, pp. 644/717.
[7] *CD* II/2, pp. 645/718.
[8] *CD* II/2, pp. 652–3/727.
[9] The discussion covers *CD* II/2, pp. 644–61/717–37.
[10] For thorough treatments of this theme based on the prohibition regarding the tree of knowledge and its violation in Gen 2:16–17 and 3:1–6, see *CD* III/1, pp. 257–66/292–304, 284–8/325–9, and *CD* IV/1, pp. 445–53/494–503.

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the promise that we can become this.'[11] But the reference to the promise makes clear that our co-knowledge with God is eschatological, and thus not our present possession. We are not now co-knowers with God of God's command. It is therefore unsurprising that Barth distinguishes the clarity of the command on God's side from its opacity on ours. 'The obscurity of God's will in a particular case always arises on man's side, not on God's.'[12] Thus, while '[f]rom God's side nothing is hidden at this point', there are 'embarrassments and misunderstandings caused by the human element in the proclamation and hearing of the command'.[13] Barth therefore takes note of the 'unavoidable risk' (*nicht zu vermeidenden W a g n i s*) involved in human hearing and proclaiming the command of God and stressing the need to rely on God's forgiveness as one approaches ethical decisions.[14]

Those who are puzzled or troubled by Barth's denial that God's fully specified command is ever fully transparent to us may consider four things. First, most moral theologians and moral philosophers have cautioned against the presumption that we can know fully specified moral requirements with certainty.[15] Second, in introducing his 'special ethics' in *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, Barth insists that we may know a good deal indeed about God's command. Our confidence in our judgement of what God will command in a particular case is directly proportional to our scripturally based knowledge of the 'spheres' (or 'domains') in which God commands, to the point that a thorough knowledge of these spheres – admittedly an ideal scenario – would give us a near approximation to the fully specified command.[16] Third, we do not need knowledge of the fully specified command in order to be in an obedient relationship to God. With his notion of 'ethical reflection' (*ethische Besinnung*) Barth stresses that the proper response to our knowledge that it is God who decides on our decisions is to ask concerning God's decision.[17] Asking is the activity which corresponds to God's determination of us as God's covenant partners (while respecting the distinction between God's knowledge of good and evil and ours) and is therefore itself obedience to God's command. 'When we ask concerning it', Barth says, 'we obey it'.[18] Finally, Barth assures us that, in the very act of asking after God's command, we may be said to know that command and to be guided by it: 'in the very

[11] *CD* II/2, pp. 667/744 (trans. altered).
[12] *CD* III/4, pp. 12/11.
[13] *CD* II/2, pp. 704/786, 709/792.
[14] *CD* III/4, pp. 9/8 (emphasis original, trans. altered).
[15] A notable example is St Thomas Aquinas. See *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q 94.4.
[16] *CD* III/4, pp. 30–1/32–4.
[17] *CD* II/2, pp. 643–5/716–18.
[18] *CD* II/2, pp. 645/718 (trans. altered).

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fact that we ask we will receive the knowledge of God's command; in the very fact that we desire this knowledge, what we are and will and do and do not do will be directed by the command of God'.[19]

Nimmo's second criticism questions my claim that for Barth the concrete command of God is always given from one person to another. He argues that a key passage in *Church Dogmatics,* III/4, where Barth asserts his agreement with the intersubjective character of casuistic ethics, supports my view only if we accept a mistranslation of a crucial phrase, and he also observes that Barth makes no systematic use of the position I attribute to him. The short response to this criticism is that Nimmo is right: Barth does not assert the position I attributed to him, and I am grateful to him for pointing it out. I should have considered the unlikelihood that Barth would restrict the freedom of God in the way my claim does. I also should have considered that Barth treats occasions of ethical decision (most obviously, some cases of suicide) when either one is inevitably alone or the intervention of others would be inappropriate. But most of all I should have considered that few of the discussions in *Church Dogmatics,* III/4, of what is required of those who face a *Grenzfall* or boundary case – the points where Barth most clearly draws on casuistry – make reference to an intersubjective context (the case of abortion is an exception) and in some cases imply, quite to the contrary, that the one faced with such a decision is at least in a literal sense alone before God.

Why, then, did I insist that the command of God is always heard in an intersubjective context? My case did not rest on the translation error Nimmo points out; rather, I took my cue from the major premise of the passage in question, which reads: 'The individual with his actions is not an atom in empty space, but a man among his fellows, not left to himself in cases of conscience nor in a position to leave others to themselves.'[20] The inseparability of the individual from her fellow human beings asserted in this statement is a fundamental and persistent theme of Barth's theology, and it seemed unlikely to me that it would fail to hold at the very point where the command of God is actually given and heard. I was encouraged in this view by a passage in *Church Dogmatics,* II/2, where Barth discusses ethical reflection or deliberation. He writes, 'I have to answer for myself, but before the judgment seat at which the secrets of all our hearts must be disclosed. I go forward to the decision [of God] whether I am good or bad, yet I never do so alone, but always in the midst of a great company. Even in the necessary

[19] *CD* II/2, pp. 648–9/722.

[20] *CD* III/4, pp. 9/8.

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testing of my conduct [before God] I cannot overlook or forget the fact that I am never alone, and never will be.'[21]

This strong assertion of human solidarity under God's command is a paradigmatic description of the solidarity of human beings as covenant partners under the command of God. Nevertheless, this assertion is made by Barth in the service of a somewhat technical point, namely, that to ask the concrete ethical question, 'What should we do?' is, properly speaking, to ask after a command which is valid unconditionally: that is, a command which, while addressed to me in all my personal circumstances, is not rendered valid by its adequacy to these circumstances. It follows that I do not legitimately ask after the command of God if I suppose from the outset that it must conform to the exceptional features of my situation. It is therefore in principle a command which is valid for everyone and not one which addresses me (or my group) as a special case. 'That the universally valid command of God applies to me and affects me in a very definite way cannot be taken to imply that I can treat it as conditioned by the peculiar factors of my personal situation; that I can secure and fortify myself against its universal validity as it certainly applies to me too.'[22] When I properly ask after God's command, then, I treat my particular circumstances as potentially anyone's. Barth therefore ascribes to the command of God the formal universality of Kant's formula of universal law: while God's concrete command is always specified to my personal circumstances, its validity is independent of these individuating features, so that in principle the command given to me is given to everyone.

This passage caused me considerable difficulty. It is, first, not clear how a fully specified concrete command can have universal validity. (For Kant, it is maxims, not commands, which are tested to determine whether they can be willed as universal laws.) But more to the present point is that for Barth the command, as fully specified, is in fact given only to me, while the purely formal universality it involves is capable of constituting only an abstract community. In other words, Barth seems in this crucial passage to leave us with the moral subject of a certain kind of liberal theory: a radical individual who is at the same time a member of a purely formal universal community. The solidarity he attributes to the person who stands before God's judgement seat, goes forward to God's decision and tests her conduct ('I am never alone and never will be') seems to dissolve between these two poles. Yet Barth nevertheless insists that in asking the question 'What should we do?' we are constituted as covenant partners: 'This *we* of the ethical question is not an

[21] *CD* II/2, pp. 655/729.
[22] *CD* II/2, pp. 656/730.

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unqualified *we* but the highly qualified *we* of those who . . . are elected in Jesus Christ to be covenant-partners with God and therefore placed under the divine command.'[23] To ask the ethical question in the solidarity of covenant partnership seems to involve an intersubjective bond which is lacking in the combination of individuality with formal universality.[24] So it seemed to me that Barth must have meant, in *Church Dogmatics,* III/4, to present the case of conscience as the concrete instance in which the question 'What should we do?' is posed in genuine, concrete solidarity with our fellow covenant partners.[25]

With this background in mind, allow me to repeat the major premise of the passage in *Church Dogmatics,* III/4: 'The individual with his actions is not an atom in empty space, but a man among his fellows, not left to himself in cases of conscience nor in a position to leave others to themselves.' This sentence seemed to me to express precisely the covenant solidarity which had dissolved between the poles of radical individuality and formal universality. I therefore concluded that what Barth had in mind is a procedure in which one always hears the command from another, though never without testing before God what one hears from the other. If this were the case, Barth's position would be fully consistent. As formally universal, the command I receive is in principle given to everyone, so it can be heard by me from potentially anyone, and as it is given to me as one among my fellows, it comes to me not merely in its formal universality but in the solidarity of the covenant, and thus from another person. However, the subsequent analyses of ethical issues in *Church Dogmatics,* III/4, do not support this conclusion.

Where does my concession to Nimmo's criticism leave me? I could try to argue that the command of God is *in principle* always given through another, even when the person who hears it is *in fact* by herself, pleading that Barth's unambiguous rejection of 'an attempted humanity in which the fellow-man has no constitutive function' must surely not fail in the very encounter with

[23] *CD* II/2, pp. 656/731.

[24] This distinction between intersubjectivity on the one hand, and the combination of individuality and formal universality, on the other hand, recalls Jürgen Habermas' argument for discourse ethics against what he described as the 'methodological solipsism' of Kant's moral theory. See Habermas , *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

[25] I also considered this judgement to be supported by Barth's analysis of 'the basic form of humanity' in *Church Dogmatics,* III/2, where Barth identifies our being with our fellow humans as the most fundamental feature of our creaturely being (*CD* III/2, pp. 226–31/270–6).

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God in which God's command is given and heard.[26] I could then try to account for points in *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, where Barth seems to regard the hearer of the command as alone before God by ascribing them to the necessary activity of testing before God what one hears from another (an activity that Barth quite clearly describes as occurring between the individual moral agent and God). I believe that an argument along these lines would show Barth's position to be both consistent and plausible. However, there is insufficient evidence to claim that Barth himself made such an argument. I must therefore agree with Nimmo that these texts do not support my claim and conclude that while it is reasonably clear how God's command in Barth's theology constitutes the human moral subject in relation to her divine covenant partner, it is not clear how it constitutes her in relation to her fellow human covenant partner.

Finally, I turn briefly to the sins of omission Nimmo points out. Nimmo is well aware that nearly every significant claim or theme in Barth's *Church Dogmatics* implicates nearly every other significant claim or theme, and his urgings here are accordingly gentle. He is right that I evaded the debate over whether Barth ultimately reads the incarnation back into God's eternal self-determination. It was clear to me that it would have taken an entire chapter to work through the issues raised by that debate, and I concluded that the implications of those issues for Barth's ethics were significant but indirect. I do regret, however, that my preoccupation with the moves Barth makes with justification and sanctification led me to ignore the significance of vocation. As the Conclusion to *The Analogy of Grace* suggests, my interest in Barth's moral theology arose in part from my conviction that his treatment of justification and sanctification finally overcame the failures of the Lutheran and Reformed traditions to offer a fully consistent account of grace and ethics, thereby presenting us for the first time with an alternative which is worthy of a dialogue with the Augustinian-Thomist tradition. It now strikes me that greater attention to the theme of vocation would have made it even more clear that (and how) Barth transcended the limitations of his great forebears. That, perhaps, is a task to be taken up in the future. But for now, I will end where I began: by thanking Paul Nimmo for his exceedingly thoughtful, generous and challenging engagement with *The Analogy of Grace*.

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[26] CD III/2, pp. 231/276.

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