

Graciously commanded: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth on the Decalogue

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Abstract

This essay examines and compares the treatment of the Decalogue in the theological ethics of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It argues that while both theologians orient their exposition of the Decalogue by attending to its primary character as divine self-revelation, approach it with a view to a Christian ethics of divine command, and frame their understandings in decisively christological terms, they differ markedly on the extent to which the commandments themselves can and ought to be understood as representing concrete divine commands.

Keywords: Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, commandment, Decalogue, law and gospel

Introduction

One of the very last of Bonhoeffer's prison writings is a brief commentary on the first three commandments of the Decalogue.¹ Much of the text is given over to theological remarks about the nature of the commandments as such. Bonhoeffer addresses the reality and import of the commandments as divine revelation, their gracious and permissive character, and their function as a specification of the space and shape of genuine human freedom with and before God. This short work displays Bonhoeffer's abiding concern to grasp the nature and role of the divine law for Christian existence in the context of a highly pressurised church and fragmenting modern world, a concern also manifest in other works (e.g. in the unfinished commentary on Psalm 119).² Bonhoeffer's final notes on the Decalogue thus shed particular light on the important theme of God's command and its relation to the law which is left underdeveloped in the *Ethics* manuscripts.³

Bonhoeffer composed these texts having first-hand acquaintance with Barth's 1935 provocative essay 'Gospel and Law' (and subsequent debates),

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education Underground: 1937–1940*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, trans. V. J. Barnett et al. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (English language edition, hereafter DBWE) 15 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), pp. 633–44.

² DBWE 15, pp. 496–526.

³ See 'The Christian and the Ethical as a Topic', in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. C. Green, trans. R. Krause et al. DBWE 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), pp. 378–87.

as well as the Swiss theologian's discussion of the Decalogue in the context of his programmatic treatment of theological ethics in §§37–9 of *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, whose page proofs he read and discussed with Barth during his wartime travels to Switzerland, and which he also had brought to him at some point during his time in Tegel prison.⁴ In the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth argues, somewhat counter-intuitively, that the Decalogue does not in fact contain 'concrete commands' but rather presents an analytic – we might say 'grammatical' – summary of the history of God's concrete commanding within the life of the people of God.⁵ Bonhoeffer's own view, I will show, reflects the influence of Barth's argument. Further, both theologians are crucially concerned to embed the Decalogue firmly within God's gracious self-revelation, and thereby to construe the act of divine commanding itself as an act of grace. The two differ, however, on the crucial matter of the *concreteness* of the Ten Commandments, that is, on the way in which they are and may become specific words of divine command for us. To appreciate this difference requires that we situate their respective remarks on the Decalogue in relation to their wider theologies of the Word, their understandings of the unity, distinction and relation of law and gospel, and so as part of their dogmatic accounts of the fundamental ethical situation in which the gospel places human beings.

This article attempts a reading of Bonhoeffer's 'Exposition of the First Table of the Ten Words of God' that hopes to illumine and specify the

⁴ Karl Barth, 'Gospel and Law', in W. Herberg (ed.), *Community, State, and Church*, trans. A. M. Hall (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1968), pp. 71–100. The Bonhoeffer *Nachlaß* includes two brief typescripts of theses (registered as A 57,10 and B 13,2) made by J. Mickley (a student in the fourth Finkenwalde class), in which Bonhoeffer reacts directly to Barth's lecture. See *Nachlaß Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1987), pp. 82, 125. In the Staatsbibliothek Berlin there is also a further uncollected and unpublished typescript of eight theses (NL 299, A57, 10), 'Thesen (wahrsch. Von Bonh) zu Barth. "Evg. u. Gesetz" bei Disputation Finkenwalde Winter 36/37', which confirms Bonhoeffer's direct engagement and interest in Barth's arguments. For discussion of Bonhoeffer's reading of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, see Andreas Pangritz, *Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. H. M. Rumscheidt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 62–9. For discussions of this as well as wider discussion of the matter of 'Law and Gospel' in Bonhoeffer's theology see Jonathan Sorum, 'Barth's "Gospel and Law" and Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*', in G. B. Kelly and C. J. Webong (eds), *Reflections on Bonhoeffer: Essays in Honor of F. Burton Nelson* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1999), pp. 210–27; Norbert Müller, 'Gesetz und Evangelium bei Bonhoeffer', in A. Schönherr and W. Krötke (eds), *Bonhoeffer-Studien: Beiträge zur Theologie und Wirkungsgeschichte Dietrich Bonhoeffers* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt Berlin, 1985), pp. 51–60.

⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), pp. 683–4.

proximity and differences between Barth and Bonhoeffer on the theological interpretation of the Decalogue in particular, and on the nature of the divine command more generally, a key concept in the doctrinal architecture of their respective theological ethics. In so doing it aims both to sharpen our understanding of the relation between the two theologians, as well as to bring out the material importance of their overlapping work on the character of the divine command as a matter of abiding concern in Christian ethics today.

Bonhoeffer on the 'ten words'

In his brief exposition of the 'first table' of the Decalogue of 1944, Bonhoeffer takes its revelatory character to be decisive. Working here as elsewhere as a 'biblical theologian', Bonhoeffer approaches the text as scripture, intent to discern its witness to the identity of God and God's saving action in the world.⁶ The immediate narrative setting of the Ten Commandments guides him to emphasise its character as divine self-revelation: the giving of the law is accompanied by 'thunderclaps, lightening, thick clouds, mountains shaking, and powerful trumpet blasts', and Bonhoeffer notes that the Decalogue is distinct from all other words of God in that its commandments are the only ones ever said to have been written by God, being etched into stone tables by God's own hand, as it were, and preserved within the ark of the covenant such that there can be no doubt that here we meet God's own 'word of revelation' (15, p. 633).⁷ As such they are also sharply distinguished from all other 'laws of life' which human wisdom and intelligence might recognise and distil from experience, for while 'there reason speaks; here God speaks'. And when God speaks he speaks not 'of life and its successes and failures' but 'of God's own self' (15, p. 634).⁸ As Bonhoeffer explains,

⁶ On the neglect of Bonhoeffer as a biblical theologian, see John Webster, 'Reading the Bible: The Example of Barth and Bonhoeffer', in his *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (London: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2016), pp. 89–90. In this section citations from Bonhoeffer's works are by volume and page.

⁷ This point of emphasis is supported exegetically by other interpreters, see e.g. Moshe Weinfeld, 'The Uniqueness of the Decalogue and its Place in Jewish Tradition', in Segal Ben-Tsiyon and Gershon Levi (eds), *The Ten Commandments in History and Tradition* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1990), p. 9.

⁸ In correspondence with Helmut Rößler in Dec. 1932, Bonhoeffer stressed this disjunction between the deliverances of human reason and the commandment. In relation to his claim that God concretely commands peace upon and from the church, Bonhoeffer writes, 'As for the question of whether the commandments can be accounted for: we cannot account for the commandment. What can be accounted for,

God's first word in the Ten Commandments is 'I'. Human beings are confronted with this 'I', not with some sort of general law – not with 'one should do this or that', but with the living God. In every word of the Ten Commandments, God speaks fundamentally of God's self, and this is their main point. That is why they are God's revelation. It is not law but God we are obeying in the Ten Commandments. (15, p. 634)

If the Ten Commandments are revelation – if they are the 'living words' of God (Acts 7:38)⁹ in which God himself is met – then, Bonhoeffer argues, they simply cannot be mistaken for abstract ethical principles. Rather, they are properly the medium of a divine–human encounter and as such inseparable from God's own person: the commandments cannot be parsed away from this encounter, as though they were a separate and distinct 'entity', perhaps the portable distillate of God's will. Rather, Bonhoeffer insists, 'the entire, living God is revealed in them as the one who God is. This is the main point' (15, p. 635).¹⁰ As he says at another place, the commandments are that by means of which God himself 'visits and besets human beings' (15, p. 505). Not the commandments as such, but the God attested in and by the commandments, is the heart of the matter.¹¹

Indeed, Bonhoeffer insists that we take the commandments as a kind of expansive gloss – moral, but also much more than moral – on the sense and significance of the Decalogue's opening word and claim: 'I am the Lord, your God, you shall have no other gods before me' (Exod 20:20).¹² We should understand that because the first commandment is 'the most important of all' and represents the 'key' to whole, it rightly controls the meaning of the rest, even as the other commandments elucidate

or better, demonstrated, is its content, which can never of itself lead to the hearing of the commandment'; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin, 1932–1933*, ed. L. Rasmussen, trans. I. Best et al., DBWE 12 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), p. 84. The point, it seems, is that offering up a reasoned account of the content of any particular commandment does not as such amount to receiving it as *the commandment of God*.

⁹ Acts 7:38 speaks of the *λόγια ζώντα* given to Moses, echoing the language of Exod 20:1 and Deut 4:13.

¹⁰ In a lecture outline on 'confirmation instruction' prepared in 1936, he invokes this inseparability of the law from God: 'How can you recognise God's will? God has revealed his law to us. Only if God actually speaks his commandment to me can I know it – Mic. 6:8; Ps 119:18.' Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education at Finkenwalde, 1935–1937*, ed. H. Gaylon Barker, trans. V. J. Barnett et al. DBWE 14 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), p. 787.

¹¹ Cf. DBWE 15, p. 503.

¹² Cf. DBWE 14, p. 789, where Bonhoeffer suggests that the 'assurance' that accompanies the commandments is precisely God's declaration: 'I am', for 'thus speaks the one who is at both the beginning and the end, God, the Creator ... the Reconciler, Christ'.

and substantiate its force and significance (15, p. 635).¹³ Bonhoeffer expounds this claim by developing two fundamental themes: namely, the commandments as *grace*, and the commandments as *boundary* and *permission*.

First, then, the commandments are an event of divine grace. In the Decalogue, God speaks 'as truly of God's grace as of God's command', Bonhoeffer explains (15, p. 635). To be sure, these 'ten words' have the gravity of holiness and the bite of the law coming as they do from 'the Lord, the inaccessibly distant and powerful one', whose word brings life or death. But this same One is 'God, the Lord, the one who chose, created, and loved us, who knows us, wishes to be close to us, for us, and with us' and the commandments themselves signal that God seeks us and draws near (15, p. 636).¹⁴ As the God of the commandments is the saviour God of Israel, the God of the Gospel, so to be commanded in this way is itself grace. 'When [this] God says "I", this is grace', Bonhoeffer says (15, p. 635). The divine word of revelation is always a redeeming word; so too is the commanding revelation of the Decalogue which, by its very revelation gathers, saves and sustains those to whom it is addressed, namely 'to Israel, to his people, to the church. That is his grace' (14, p. 787).

To illustrate this reality, Bonhoeffer invokes the image of the tablets of the law travelling with the Israelites within the ark of the covenant. 'In the ark of the covenant, which is the throne of the gracious presence of God,' he writes, 'both tablets lie enclosed, encompassed, and enveloped by the grace of God' such that there can be no proclamation of the commandments which is not simultaneously the announcement of 'God's free grace' (15, p. 637). Covenant is not typically a controlling theological motif within Lutheran theology generally or Bonhoeffer's theology in particular; but here it stands as a ready shorthand for the fact that the commandments are utterly comprehended by the movement and purposes of divine grace, for God only commands those he saves (the law is 'in' the throne of grace), and the divine commanding itself is a mode of saving action (the throne of grace has the law at its heart).

This image echoes Bonhoeffer's view, expressed elsewhere, that (as he puts it) 'the gospel is superior to the law and is the true word of God' even

¹³ In a sermon note on Exod 20:12 (the fourth commandment) from 1936, Bonhoeffer makes precisely this hermeneutical claim: 'Everything depends on the first commandment' (DBWE 14, p. 645).

¹⁴ Cf. Bonhoeffer's identical emphasis elsewhere upon the evangelical force of the word that 'I am your God': with the commandments 'God is seeking us, wants to be your God' (DBWE 14, p. 789).

as 'by virtue of their antithetical character, law and gospel belong together, [and] are one as the word of God and of Christ' (14, p. 337). So it is that the commandments of the law are ever 'enclosed, encompassed, and enveloped' by grace and set in its service. There is a distinction between law and gospel here; and there is also a *taxis* in which law is fundamentally ordered to gospel. When Bonhoeffer speaks plainly of the commandments as divine grace, as we have noted, he does so acknowledging that the ordering of law to gospel has as its final aim the higher unity of both as the one gracious word of God in Christ.

More briefly, the second theme Bonhoeffer develops in his exposition concerns the commandments as *boundary* and *permission*. Picking up on their negative formulation, Bonhoeffer notes that each subsequent commandment should be understood to be a consequence of the material claim of the first, as in: 'I am the Lord your God, *therefore* you shall not ...' All the commandments are, in other words, effectively suspended from the first, whose force is nothing less than to 'rescue us from falling prey to nothingness' and 'extinction' in a world without idols (15, p. 638). Here the controlling metaphors are spatial ones: tethered to this centre, the common arc of their several negations constitute and display the 'boundaries within which we can live in God's community' (15, p. 637). Put positively, God gives the commands in order to delimit the sphere in which human beings 'can be and remain close to God, for God, and with God' (15, p. 636). In this sense they must be received as the 'law of life' (14, p. 788), that is, the law within whose compass the people of God can and will live and flourish. That this is so is reflected in Bonhoeffer's judgement that the church's violation of the Ten Commandments is nothing less than 'apostasy from Christ', a self-destructive pulling away, turning against and departing from God and this sphere of life (6, p. 140).

Bonhoeffer had deployed this idea of the commandment as a boundary already in his *Ethics* manuscripts. In terms akin to those used here, he describes there how the commandment 'sets the boundary and creates the space within which it can be heard and fulfilled' and goes on to observe that the self-same boundary always 'originates from the centre and fullness of a life lived with the commandment of God', that is, a life centred upon the salutary acknowledgement that the Lord is God and all that entails (6, p. 386). The space thus won takes on a distinctive character, Bonhoeffer argues, as the commandments together constitute the very 'element' of the Christian life of faith: displacing our paralysing ethical anxiety because they warrant, authorise and allow 'authentic life and unreflective' spontaneous action within their scope (6, pp. 381–2). In short, the commandments grant 'permission to live before God as a human being' in a properly creaturely

freedom that is ‘generated’ and sustained precisely by God’s commanding action itself (6, pp. 382–3).

For these reasons, Bonhoeffer can venture the interesting formulation that ‘to the extent that the Christian is in Christ, he is no longer under the law but rather “in the law”. He no longer acts out of the demand of the law but rather out of the reception of the Holy Spirit’ (14, p. 336). What is arresting here is the identification of the law as the ‘site’ or ‘space’ in which the Spirit finds the Christian and is received and obeyed: the concrete direction of the Spirit and so the sanctification of the Christian life has its home ‘in the law’, not as demand – for as fulfilled by Christ the law ‘makes no more demands on those who are in Christ’ (14, p. 336) – but as permission and pathway.¹⁵ As he writes elsewhere, ‘It is God the Holy Spirit himself who makes for me the reality of what was true for Jesus Christ alone: my will is your word’ (15, p. 510).

We do well to note that in Bonhoeffer’s view the Ten Commandments themselves – precisely as the gracious revelation of God and inseparable from his saving presence – are and become the positive concrete command of Christ which is given, heard, discerned and obeyed within the bounded sphere they demarcate in their solemn, negative form. The church time and again is directly addressed by the Decalogue, judged, sustained and set free by its gift of God’s righteous and humanising direction. That Bonhoeffer understands this to be so is made forcefully clear by the litany of confession he composed in the *Ethics* manuscripts, ‘Guilt, Justification, Renewal’. In this text he rehearses in turn the manifold concrete ways in which the church of his time failed to hear and to heed each of the commandments, being guilty in the end of ‘violating all of the Ten Commandments’ and thus of forfeiting on its own proper life, authentic witness and responsible action (6, pp. 138–41). For our purposes, the salient point is this: Bonhoeffer believes that the Ten Commandments themselves can and do become the concrete claim and command of God addressed to the Christian congregation in and for this time and this place.

Barth: the Decalogue and the ‘grammar’ of the concrete command

Central to Karl Barth’s exegesis of the Decalogue is his consideration of the place and nature of the Ten Commandments within the wider biblical

¹⁵ Much of the exposition Bonhoeffer provides on the opening verses of Psalm 119 in his unfinished commentary upon that text attends to the way in which God’s word of Torah provides a ‘path’, and he associates this with the work of the Spirit; see *DBWE* 15, pp. 496–7. For insightful analysis and discussion of this text see Brian Brock, ‘Bonhoeffer and the Bible in Christian Ethics: Psalm 119, the Mandates and Ethics as a Way’, *Studies in Christian Ethics* 18/3 (2005), pp. 7–29.

witness to God's commanding action.¹⁶ Indeed, it is the decision to consider them as 'one among many' examples of God's commanding action attested in both the Old and New Testaments that raises the fundamental interpretive problem Barth confronts. For the manifold instances of God's commanding action share a common characteristic, namely that,

When God confronts man with His commands, what He wills is purely *ad hoc* actions and attitudes which can only be thought of as historically contingent even in their necessity, acts of obedience to be performed on the spot in a specific way . . . so that human decisions can only obey or disobey the divine decision. (p. 674)

And this is no less true of the commanding actions of Jesus, Barth suggests, noting that all of them share this same 'essential character' since they are all 'no less fortuitous, contingent, unique and involved in space and time than the commands of God in the Pentateuch' (p. 675). In short, the concreteness of the command is an inviolable feature of it precisely as a command of God.¹⁷

It is against this backdrop that the highly distinctive nature of the Decalogue becomes apparent: by contrast with the contingency of divine commanding widely attested in the Bible, it appears to offer 'commands' that are 'addressed to an indeterminate number of [people]' and therefore 'appear to be concerned not with specific actions of specific [people], but generally with certain possibilities of action on the part of all kinds of [people]' (p. 681). Barth is not idiosyncratic in taking note of this; other interpreters regularly remark that the Ten Commandments are indeed 'one part of the legal material in Old Testament that least resembles law as we are accustomed to understand it'.¹⁸ The difference, once noted, is patent, but the question is what is to be made of it. Barth asks 'whether we have to interpret these special texts in the light of their historical environment, or whether, conversely, we have to interpret the historical environment in the light of a general ethical understanding of these texts' (p. 680 *alt.*).

While the traditional majority report follows the latter course and treats the Decalogue as a set of trans-historical ethical imperatives and principles, Barth himself decides against this line and suggests we ought to pursue the

¹⁶ The treatment of the Decalogue is concentrated in *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, pp. 673–700. Page references in this section of the article refer to this volume.

¹⁷ Paul T. Nimmo, 'The Command of God', in his *Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Barth's Ethical Vision* (London: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2007), pp. 17–40, provides expert discussion of Barth's understanding of the command of God as a 'concrete eschatological truth', and related issues.

¹⁸ Patrick D. Miller, *The Way of the Lord: Essays in Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 3, 5–6.

former instead. He does this convinced of two things. First, Barth takes it to be undeniable that, across the extensive testimony to God's commanding action, 'the theme of the Bible is something other than proclamation of ethical principles' (p. 680). Second, he is convinced of the unity of the biblical witness as scripture – that is, as a canonical collection whose very canonicity signals a unified witness to the one God of Israel – and thus also to its consistency. This allows him to appeal to overarching patterns of witness and to the controlling 'themes' of the Bible which should prove determinative in deciding the nature of God's commands. With this in mind, even though the Ten Commandments have the appearance of timeless and universal ethical injunctions or principles, this cannot be so since:

If we keep in view the theme of the whole Bible . . . it can be expected that this will be the theme of these special contexts, that even the divine commanding and forbidding of which they speak will therefore have the same meaning as in the rest of the Bible, and that in them, too, this theme will have to be understood historically and concretely, and not in general, non-spatial and non-temporal terms. (p. 681)

But how then to account for the distinctive form of the Decalogue if not in this way? Barth's answer is that the Ten Commandments represent 'collections or summaries of divine commands': as many rays of light are focused by a lens, or many threads gathered together into a single cable, so too here 'many particular commands are united and expressed in these comprehensive demands addressed to the people in the Old Testament and to the Church in the New' (p. 681). The metaphors are ones of concentration, repetition and intensification that suggest that the existence of the Decalogue in no way displaces or does away with the reality and primacy of God's contingent concrete commanding activity.¹⁹

While the Ten Commandments are not themselves concrete divine commands, their relation to such actual commands, Barth suggests, is not one of universal principle to local application, or eternal law to transient exercise. Rather, they are an announcement of the holiness of all God's commanding actions, a holiness that forms the essential background to every actual interaction between God and his people. They proclaim what

¹⁹ For it is 'not a code of detailed laws' but rather formulates 'those conditions required for membership in the community', in effect representing 'a distillation, so to speak, of the core demands made by the God of Israel on those covenanted to him'; Weinfeld, 'Uniqueness of the Decalogue', pp. 9, 11. Weinfeld emphasises this view later in the essay, comparing the Decalogue to the *Shema* in its form and function, and styling it as a 'sort of Israelite catechism', p. 20.

lies behind – or perhaps better, what is present within – all the specific commanding acts of God with all the ‘urgency and immediacy which characterises them’ (p. 683). In this way they exposit the ‘underlying character, presuppositions, and intentions’ of God’s dealings with humanity (p. 700).

Later in the *Church Dogmatics* Barth, like Bonhoeffer, reaches for a spatial trope when he explains that in these texts ‘the area is marked out in which concrete divine commandment and prohibition take place. They show its bounds by telling what is impossible in this area.’²⁰ What is impossible – what shall not be – is that which contradicts God’s holiness and lordship. The commandments delimit the sphere in which God, as the Subject who commands and prohibits personally and concretely in time and space, engages humanity as the recipient and object of this commanding action; that is to say, they delimit ‘the sphere within which the life of the divine community will be fulfilled under the control of the Spirit’ (p. 699).

We capture something of Barth’s distinctive emphasis here if we think of the Decalogue as at one and the same time both *revelatory* and *grammatical* in nature. As grammatical, the Decalogue functions *a posteriori* as a descriptive or programmatic summary of the pattern of the history of God’s specific commanding activity.²¹ In this way, the Ten Commandments, though not concrete commands, may still be thought of as rules, namely *grammatical* rules – what Barth calls ‘the solemnly proclaimed self-qualifications of God’ (p. 683) – that are ‘read off’ the historical drama of salvation and which articulate the patterned faithfulness of divine commanding – its form or structure – and thereby mark out the space in which God has, does and will contingently command his covenant people. And just as grammar does not displace actual speech, so too the commandments do not displace actual divine commanding. Whereas the object of the divine command is ever the obedience of the specific individual to whom it addressed, the Decalogue has as its object the description of the shape or *ratio* of that divine commanding. Barth thinks of the Ten Commandments as a kind of second-order discourse, i.e. a discourse which describes and exhibits the decisive features of the first-order discourse of actual divine commanding but precisely in so doing is not be confused with it: as grammar does not express, so the commandments do not command.

Though given in the imperative, Barth argues that the force of the Decalogue is most properly indicative. As he explains,

²⁰ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), p. 12.

²¹ *Ibid.*

The whole history of Israel develops . . . within the framework provided by the revelation of the law, but not as if this framework were itself the picture: for the latter consists in the special concrete events of divine commanding and forbidding, of human obedience or disobedience, not envisaged by the Law as such. (p. 686)

Precisely by demarcating the space of obedience negatively as they do, the commandments display the fundamental form of God's concrete command and direction, namely the form of *permission*: the commandments attest in this way that God releases and liberates his human covenant partners for life, obedient service and faithful witness (p. 585).

At the same time as it is grammatical in this way, the Decalogue is also *revelatory*. Barth contends that the Ten Commandments are a revelation, not of general ethical precepts, but rather, of the identity and person of the God who commands. The first commandment provides the key to whole: in it God 'speaks of himself and his sovereignty, of his essential nature in contrast to other lords' and thereby 'declares himself to be the Subject of all these special summons, the One who has the power and right to confront the individual in these specific addresses with binding commands and prohibitions because he is the Lord of the people' (p. 682). But what the preface to the Decalogue attests directly, all the commandments also manifest indirectly: the holiness and sovereignty of God is analytic in each commandment as well as in the whole. We might say that, taken as a whole, the Decalogue 'shows' what is only 'said' in the preface, namely, that 'I am the Lord your God'. In this way the commandments attest to God's revelation as the holy One, the sovereign Lord of Israel, their serial imperatives repeatedly confronting us with the God whose 'decision and choice . . . has already been made concerning us'.²²

For Barth, then, to acknowledge the commandments as God's self-revelation is to receive them aright as a display of the structure of the 'law of the Spirit of life' (Rom 8:2) by which the Christian life is concretely directed, a dense, summary restatement of the pattern of all salutary divine commanding that is the 'law of grace' (p. 592).

Some observations and conclusions

It will be apparent at this point that the approaches to the Decalogue taken by Bonhoeffer and Barth are closely aligned in key respects.

First, drawing out the importance of the preface and first commandment, both theologians emphasise its fundamental character as witness to divine

²² Barth, *Ethics*, p. 329.

revelation, and thus take disclosure of the identity and purposes of God to be the decisive import of the Decalogue as a whole. If the Ten Commandments are an occasion and medium of divine self-revelation, then they are thereby also supremely *personal* and supremely *gracious*, for they facilitate a human encounter not with law *as such* but rather with the God of the law, who is the Lord.²³ In and through their witness is met the holy and saving God of Israel in his merciful approach to his people. Both thinkers subordinate the meaning of the text as law to its meaning as revelation and seek the significance of the former only within the reality of the latter.

Second, approaching the Decalogue as a text of Christian scripture, both Bonhoeffer and Barth advance this understanding of the revelatory character of the 'Ten Words' in a manner which is christologically controlled. For Christian faith, the question of the law and the command of God properly arises within an acknowledgment that the world is elected, judged and saved by God in Christ, the one in whom the law is fulfilled, in whose life and death the divine command has been truly heard and faithfully obeyed. For both, the necessity of receiving the Decalogue as *grace* finally turns upon and is funded by the fact that the God of Sinai is the God of the gospel, the God who reveals himself to be *for us* in Christ. As the image of the tablets of the law in the ark of the covenant – an image explicitly invoked by both theologians – suggests, to receive the commandments in Christ in this way is but to reiterate the experience of the people of God that the salutary claim and direction of God is always good, being 'enclosed, encompassed, and enveloped by the grace of God', as Bonhoeffer himself says.²⁴

The idea of the Decalogue as revelation and grace as developed by both Bonhoeffer and Barth is, I would suggest, a theological commentary and conceptual expansion upon the second article of the Barmen Declaration of 1934. The main part of that article reads:

As Jesus Christ is God's assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins, so, in the same way and with the same seriousness he is also God's mighty claim upon our whole life. Through him befalls us a joyful deliverance

²³ As Barth says in so many places, 'The Word of God, when it addressed to us and when we are allowed to hear it, demonstrates its unity in that is it always *grace*, i.e., it is free, non-obligatory, undeserved divine goodness, mercy, and condescension' ('Gospel and Law', p. 72, cf. pp. 80, 82, 83).

²⁴ Barth writes at the outset of his 'Gospel and Law' essay of how, 'the Law would not be the Law if it were not hidden and enclosed in the ark of the *covenant*' (p. 71; cf. p. 80). It is not at all unlikely that Bonhoeffer had these comments in mind when he drew upon the same image.

from the godless fetters of this world for a free, grateful service to his creatures.²⁵

Written as they are in the personally pressing and theologically formative context of the German church struggle, these reflections on the Decalogue – and their work on theme of the law more generally – uphold the inviolable connection of Israel and church, and the perpetual validity of the Old Testament as Christian scripture at a moment when both claims were viciously contested. They do this by forging material theological connections between the exposition of the Decalogue and our acknowledgement of ‘God’s mighty claim upon our whole life’ that simply is Jesus Christ. Their common development of the motif of the commandments as liberation and permission is undoubtedly in the service of deepening and filling out the claim that the Christian life is marked by ‘joyful deliverance for free and grateful service’.

Third and finally, both Barth and Bonhoeffer share a fundamental concern for the *concreteness* of the divine command and an appreciation of its total, personal claim upon the human being who receives it. This reflects their equally shared commitment to conceiving of the Christian life only with immediate and relentless reference to the effective presence of the living and sovereign God in Christ. Bonhoeffer speaks for both when he writes that ‘this Christ has the power to command us . . . and being Christ, he gives very concrete commands’.²⁶ The latter remark is key: because Christ is Christ, the command is concrete; or we might say: it is the very nature of Christ’s commands to be concrete. The commandments of the Decalogue are, for both, conceived in relation to the reality of the living, commanding and concrete address of the word of God that is the heart of the matter of theological ethics.

As we have seen, Barth’s exegetical approach sets the Decalogue apart as an *a posteriori* summation of the pattern and ‘grammar’ of manifold, specific and contingent divine commands. As such they intimate the fidelity and constancy of God’s direction and prohibition, and they map the field whereupon God has, does and will command. In this way they render ‘the moral ontology which underlies the encounter between God and the ethical agent’.²⁷ But the commandments themselves are not envisaged by Barth to be concrete commands. He can say plainly: just what Christians are to do or not to do in any given particular circumstance is not told to them in the

²⁵ The Barmen Theological Declaration, Article 2.

²⁶ Bonhoeffer, *DBWE* 12, p. 83.

²⁷ Nimmo, *Being in Action*, p. 30.

Ten Commandments.²⁸ So while the Decalogue can and does provide the structure of Barth's elaboration of the ethics of creation in *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, it does just that: it serves, demarcates, orders and 'maps' the field upon which the concrete command of God the Creator will be spoken, and so is to be anticipated, heard and obeyed.

Bonhoeffer, as we have also seen, views the commandments in their solemn negative articulation to delimit the realm within which specific and positive divine commanding takes place. But unlike Barth, Bonhoeffer suggests that the Ten Commandments themselves can and do become God's concrete command, specifically and contingently addressed by Christ to Christians here and now, then and there. Both the fragmentary positive expositions begun in the 1944 essay but even more the quite specific confession of sin offered up in 'Guilt, Justification, Renewal' indicate this clearly enough. While moral ontology remains Barth's overriding concern in the specific texts we have considered, Bonhoeffer's concern with the Decalogue overreaches moral ontology as a 'second-order discourse' and presses directly into the primary matter of proclamation itself.²⁹ Or, we might say more precisely, because Bonhoeffer's discussions of the commandments never finally leave off the first-order discourse of proclamation, catechesis, pastoral edification and prayer, they remain alert and supremely interested in the question of whether and how we might discern the command in and through the commandment. His exposition of the 'Ten Words' in particular has as its explicit near horizon the preaching of the commandments.³⁰ For this reason it is undertaken in the firm hope and expectation that the Decalogue lies fully in God's hands and is at God's disposal to be 'used' by him in the Spirit's power in the proclamation of the Word.³¹ For Bonhoeffer, we might say in the words of Gerhard Forde, the

²⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, p. 12. Of course, the Decalogue, like all scripture, can become God's living address and so the commanding Word of God; this is a feature of it as scripture. But it is not in any way uniquely fitted for such 'becoming'.

²⁹ This is not to say that Barth is in any sense disinterested in or detached from theology's horizon in proclamation; quite the opposite is the case overall, of course. But in this particular and related expositions of the Decalogue itself, it does not press in so formatively as with Bonhoeffer. It may also be that it is precisely Barth's view of theology as more strictly second-order discourse, critically assessing the substance and form of Christian proclamation, that distinguishes him here from Bonhoeffer, for whom the relation of theology and proclamation – second- and first-order discourses – is perhaps less clearly demarcated.

³⁰ Bonhoeffer, *DBWE* 15, p. 637.

³¹ This theme is nicely developed *inter alia* in Bonhoeffer's 1941 position paper on the 'Primus Usus Legis', where he stresses that the law is singly preached but triply used by God such that the question of the *usus legis* has to do with 'different effects of the

'move to proclamation is itself the necessary and indispensable final move in the argument'.³²

Writing in *Theologische Existenz Heute* in 1935, the Reformed theologian and ethicist Alfred de Quervain prefaced his own account of the Decalogue with this claim: 'Whoever receives God's command as a member of the community of God's witnesses hears of God's faithfulness and mercy' under the promise of which it is right consistently to translate the imperative 'shall' of the commandments with the indicative 'will'.³³ For the people of God will hear and obey the concrete direction of the Lord because and to the extent that, by grace, they live and are preserved within that space of freedom marked out for them by the commandments. Both Barth and Bonhoeffer suggest that to inhabit the Decalogue in this manner is to be led by Christ and pressed by the Spirit to explore 'the pathways and patterns' of human living that trace 'the obedience of faith in a world made and redeemed . . . shattered and shaped . . . for being human in', as Paul Lehmann once put it.³⁴ For this reason both draw hope from the Psalmist's praise of the Law: Barth insisting that such praise 'will not grow old throughout all eternity',³⁵ and Bonhoeffer affirming – in relation to Psalm 119:20 ('My soul is consumed with longing for your commands at all times') – that Christian life is graciously commanded, knowing 'God's word as the power over our life that does not release us, even for a moment' and trusting in the promise that 'this "at all times" is not an exaggeration but can be understood as a reality'.³⁶

one single law' when we acknowledge that the 'subject of the use of the law must be seen to be not the preacher but God' (DBWE 16, p. 585). Elsewhere Bonhoeffer similarly asserts that 'the *usus legis* is not in the hands of the church but rather in God's hands' (DBWE 14, p. 337).

³² Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), p. 5.

³³ Alfred de Quervain, 'Das Gesetz Gottes: Die erste Tafel', *Theologische Existenz Heute* 34 (1935), p. 6. Barth explicitly appeals to de Quervain's treatment of the commandments in this volume and its second partner volume – 'Das Gesetz Gottes: Die zweite Tafel', *Theologische Existenz Heute* 39 (1936) – in support of his own account, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, p. 883.

³⁴ Paul L. Lehmann, *The Decalogue and a Human Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 18, 19.

³⁵ Barth, 'Gospel and Law', p. 81.

³⁶ Bonhoeffer, DBWE 15, p. 525.