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The Barthian Inversion: Gospel and Law

By THOMAS COATES

Is the influence of Karl Barth on the wane? One of Europe's foremost Lutheran theologians, Oscar Cullmann of the University of Basle, is of the opinion that it is. He attributes this development to Barth's postwar neutralism, which has struck an unresponsive chord in the hearts of those who discern in the Communist ideology the negation of every Christian principle.

Be that as it may, it would be unfortunate if the ideas of Karl Barth and his impact upon contemporary thought should become an arena for political rather than theological debate. Nothing, we are sure, could be farther from Barth's own conception of his mission and his message to the modern world.

Meanwhile the genial Swiss continues to hurl his Jovian thunderbolts from his theological Olympus. And as their impact reverberates through the world of Christian thought, he keeps plugging away, unruffled and serene, at his architectonic dogmatic masterwork.

One of these thunderbolts that has disturbed the theological aplomb of his contemporaries is his ingenious inversion of the accepted Law and Gospel relationship into one of Gospel and Law. After one has recovered from the first shock, one realizes that this conception is, after all, only a logical outgrowth of Barth's monolithic theological system.

The Christian, as Barth views his situation, lives "between the times." That is to say, he lives in the period between our Lord's ascension and His final coming to Judgment. In this world the

victory of Christ has already been won, but we must still await its final consummation. In one of his well-known writings he compares the position of Satan to that of a chess player who has lost the game but persists in playing it out, unwilling to face the fact that his every move can be successfully checkmated by his opponent, whose victory is assured.

Harking back to Luther's delineation of the Christian as *simul iustus et peccator*, Barth sees that the situation resolves itself into a perennial, lifelong struggle between the new man and the old Adam in the Christian life. This is the theme of St. Paul's classic seventh chapter of Romans. The righteousness of Christ, given by grace and prompting the Christian always to holy life and pure ideals, must always be posed against the corrosive influence of his sinful flesh. Small wonder that St. Paul, in the throes of spiritual agony, cries out: "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" But the victory of the new life is assured, for the Apostle can immediately add: "Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!"

Since this is the case, Barth contends, the indicative of salvation, "You have risen with Christ," must always be translated into the imperative of duty: "Die to sin, and live to Christ." The indicative and the imperative must coalesce. The Gospel must express itself as Law, or, to put it another way, the Law is a form of the Gospel. Law and Gospel are two ways of speaking, but their content actually is always the same.

This conception forms an essential part of Barth's treatment of Christian ethics, which, characteristically enough, he treats as a part of the doctrine of God. In his preface to this discussion, Barth states:

As the doctrine of God's commandment, ethics explains the Law as the form of the Gospel . . . i. e., as the sanctification bestowed upon man by the God who has elected him. . . . It belongs to the doctrine of God because the God who claims man for Himself, at the same time . . . assumes responsibility for this man. Its function consists in the fundamental attestation of the grace of God, in so far as this grace is the salutary bond and obligation of man.¹

The Law, accordingly, is the form of the Gospel. There is no Law in and for itself and no Gospel in and for itself. There is only

the one Word of God. When God speaks in the Gospel, that is the expression of His will and is therefore Law. The Law is the "form and structure" in which the Gospel meets us. Thus, Barth writes: "The grace that rules is indeed the grace that commands. The Gospel itself and as such has the form and structure of the Law. The one Word of God is both Gospel and Law. . . . It is first Gospel and then Law."²

"The Word is first Gospel and then Law!" Barth's extended treatment of this basic concept in his *Kirchliche Dogmatik* is an elaboration of his treatise of 1935 entitled *Evangelium und Gesetz*. He supports his argument by citing the structure of the Ten Commandments. They do not begin with "Thou shalt not. . . ." They rather begin with the declaration of divine grace: "I am the Lord, thy God, who hath brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."

Theological ethics, says Barth, is concerned wholly with God's grace, which has been accomplished in election. "It is an ethics of grace or it is not theological ethics."³ It is not primarily concerned with man, with his ethics, or with his nature. Its basic assumption is that man — every man — to whom God's Word is addressed, does not exist for himself or belong to himself. "He exists because and in that Jesus Christ exists."⁴

Man exists as the predicate of the Subject, who is Christ. He is "the sanctifying God and the sanctified man in one." Thus the whole question of human ethics involves man's relationship to Christ. Hence dogmatics cannot be isolated from ethics, as though the one related to God and the other to man. "We shall have to refrain from all those divisions and classifications which proceed from the presupposition that dogmatics indeed deals with God and with faith in Him, but that ethics is concerned with man and his life."⁵

God's grace in Jesus Christ, accordingly, is at the same time God's commandment. God's commandment cannot be understood without reference to Christ, to grace, to election.

Barth disputes the statement: "*There is a commandment of God.*" On the contrary, he declares: "No! *There is no commandment of God. What there is is not as such the commandment of God.*"

Rather, this is the fact of the matter: *God gives His commandment.*"⁶ Therefore, when we speak about God's commandment, we are in reality speaking about an event.

This statement brings us back again to Barth's basic premise: The Law does not exist as something independent of the Gospel. Rather it is "enclosed in the Gospel." "The Law is wholly enclosed within the Gospel: not a second (Law) beside and outside the Gospel, nor a strange (Law) that preceded the Gospel, or that followed it, but the claim that the Gospel itself and as such directs to us: the Gospel itself, in so far as it has the form of a claim which has been directed to us."⁷

Now, where do we confront God's commandment, and how are we to discern it? Barth does not refer us primarily to the Decalog or the Sermon on the Mount, which may too easily be conceived as abstract or independent ethical formulations. Rather the content of the commandment is to be found in Christ — not in Christ as an ideal, to be sure, but in Christ in His fulfillment of God's will in us and for us.

God's commandment is His claim upon us. But this claim is essentially a permission, "the granting of a quite definite freedom." The liberty that we have received as God's children is not an invitation to license. On the contrary, the bounds within which our Christian life is confined constitute the supreme form of liberty. Man no longer exists for himself, for the simple reason that God exists for man. That which God requires of man is solely that he continue in what has been prepared for him in and through Christ.

Hence we stand under an obligation and a permission at the same time. According to this conception, we cannot reduce God's commandment — i. e., His permission — to a principle. Rather the obligation and the permission are welded together in the fact that Christ has fulfilled the commandment: "The spiritual nature of the commandment, in which its obligation and its permission are one, nevertheless consists in its fulfillment, which has occurred in Jesus Christ. His Spirit is indeed the spirit which drives the children of God into freedom, which as such is true obedience."⁸

Barth now confronts the question: Precisely what is God's commandment for us? It is not a "general rule." It is not an "idea of

the good." It is not the "categorical imperative." All of this is too vague, too indefinite. God's commandment is concrete.

And this commandment is attested in Holy Scripture, which does not concern itself with "the proclamation of ethical principles, but with the actualization of God's gracious election."⁹

Barth had previously adverted to "summaries of God's commandments," e. g., the Decalog and the Sermon on the Mount. These are not general moral principles, but they are part of God's covenant of grace, divinely ordered and perpetually valid.

They belong . . . to the history of the covenant of grace and to its conclusion, in so far as they aim at the activity of man in his relationship thereto. Therefore, they aim precisely at the individual and concrete, that God will command and forbid to man with respect to his activity in this relationship. They define God as the Subject and man as the object of the most personal election of grace: God as the Lord and Head and man as member of the body of His congregation, Israel and the Church.¹⁰

Now, what has all this to do with modern man? Obviously, these summaries are not ethical abstractions, moral ideals. Barth goes to great lengths to safeguard against any such notion. On the contrary, we are to identify ourselves with those men to whom these precepts were originally given and become their contemporaries and comrades: "The Bible wants us to become contemporaneous and homogeneous with those other men with respect to God's commandment, the publication and understanding of it, as well as our situation over against it. It wants us to be every bit the companions of those men in relation to God's commandment."¹¹

This occurs when God's commandment is for us, as it was for them, "always a concretely definite and plenary demand."¹² This, however, is not merely a matter of instruction. It is rather a mediation to us of God's revelation in the Biblical witness. The Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount concern us not merely indirectly but directly. "The God who spoke and dealt with them is, by virtue of their testimony, also *our* God. And thus also the commandment given to them and heard by them is immediately the one given to us and to be heard by us, and their mandate is immediately *our* mandate."¹³

Allen has a trenchant delineation of this concept of Barth's:

"In the Bible, God's commands are always dated; they are integrally related to the specific circumstances in which the recipient stands. That does not mean that they are of no significance for ourselves today. What happens when we read the Bible is that God makes of it the vehicle of revelation and shows me, through what He asked of Samson or Paul long ago, what He asks of me here and now. Just because God is God, His commandments are not a disconnected series of injunctions; there is a unity about them which is that of His character and purpose."¹⁴

Another commentator, Cornelius van Til, interprets Barth's thought in similar fashion: "As it is with the free man in Christ, with the man in whom the freedom of God comes to expression, that we deal, so the only standard that meets the situation is the momentary revelation of God to man. And this moment-by-moment revelation takes place only as man responds to God. God's will comes to expression only as man's will comes to corresponding expression. It is thus that the covenant taken as law is grace and taken as grace is law."¹⁵

The concluding section of Barth's discussion of God's commandment, and indeed the conclusion of his entire doctrine of God, deals with "the commandment as God's judgment." Early in this section he takes up the idea of reconciliation, which he equates with "God's judgment in His commandment." For, since God accomplishes this judgment in Jesus Christ, this judgment is the proof of His love for man.

Barth argues that the very fact that God does not remain aloof from us or indifferent to us, but that He confronts us in and with His commandment, demonstrates that He fain would be "God with us," our Immanuel.

The death of Christ is an "actual demonstration by God," which finally and fully reveals the claim which His commandment has upon us and the judgment which it involves. This, however, should not move us to despair nor to "stare bewitched at our load of guilt." For the condemnation befalls us in the person of Jesus Christ, so that there remains for us the forgiveness of sins. To be sure, in beholding the forgiveness of our sins in Christ, we are confronted by the awful reality of our sin: "Just the forgiveness of our sins

in Jesus Christ is God's judgment upon us, and the revelation of forgiveness is at once the revelation of our sin." ¹⁶

And thus Barth reverts again to Luther's watchword *simul iustus et peccator*. To be forgiven means simply that our righteousness in Christ ultimately prevails over our sinful estate:

In the one judgment of God we are both *semper peccatores, semper iusti*. That is the forgiveness of sin: that these two predications are not mutually exclusive, nor confront one another in a dialectical balance, but in a preponderance of the second over against the first; that their order cannot be reversed; that God never makes evil out of the good, but rather good out of the evil; that, accordingly, the *semper iusti* is the second and last word that is here to be heard and considered. This is God's grace in judgment." ¹⁷

And for this we have the actual demonstration in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the proof that we sinners are declared righteous before God. Man's confrontation with God has now been brought to this climax, that the very God who condemned man on account of his sin now pronounces him righteous and free from the bondage of death.

This does not mean that man, thinking that his release has been easily procured, now can go serenely on his own independent way. On the contrary, his release has not been easily procured. God's pardon is not just "cheap grace." God is a just and inexorable judge who granted our release only in the form of a legal action. (Here Barth seems to echo Anselm.) And by that token God's condemnation remains upon the man who does not want to live by God's grace and who wants to excuse and justify himself.

Free, forgiven, justified, man will thus attain the sanctification which is God's purpose in His judgment. God is equipping and preparing man for that eternal life which has been achieved for him and promised to him. Our sanctification is an accomplished fact, for it is Jesus Christ.

Allen writes, in interpreting this aspect of Barth's thought: "God has a claim upon us from which we can never escape, solely because all that we have and are is from Him. His nature is love, love even to the undeserving and rebellious, and He has bound Himself to us in a covenant-relationship; He has actually become man in

Jesus Christ. What claim upon us is for a moment comparable with that of God's self-sacrificing love? Ought we not to respond to it in eager love and heartfelt gratitude? What more should we ask from any situation in life than that it should provide us an opportunity to give to Him who gave Himself to us?"¹⁸

Barth's treatment of the relationship between Law and Gospel is ingenious and provocative. But it is not Scriptural. As Werner Elert points out: "The genuinely dialectical opposition between Law and Gospel is here reduced to a verbal dialectic of form and content. The opposition has been completely smoothed over. The explanation of this lies in Barth's sentence: 'The fact that God speaks to us is under all circumstances due to grace.'" The correlative statement is that "judgment *is* grace."

The first objection that may be raised to Barth's thesis is that the promise of the Law is totally different from the promise of the Gospel. The Law declares: "This do, and thou shalt live." It holds forth the promise of life to him who keeps it perfectly.

The Gospel, on the other hand, is meant for sinners, for those who contritely say, "Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to Thy Cross I cling." It is the very fact that man is unable to meet the inexorable standards of the divine Law that the promise of the Gospel is so precious to him. That promise goes out to him who "worketh not," i. e., who does not seek to merit his own salvation but who trusts in Him who died for the ungodly. That promise is sheer grace.

The Law and the Gospel, moreover, inspire different motives in the hearts of men. Through the Law men are incited by the hope of reward or the fear of punishment. The Gospel, on the other hand, knows no other motive than the constraining love of Christ. "We love Him because He first loved us."

The idea that God speaks only in grace deprives the Law of its power. The function of the Law is to threaten the transgressor. "The soul that sinneth, it shall die." "The wages of sin is death."

To be sure, such threatening can make the sinner realize his own desperate state and thus lead him to repentance. And then indeed God will pardon. But where such a response is lacking, the threat will be carried out; it will find its consummation in

judgment. It would hardly be correct, therefore, to describe this judgment as *grace*. Indeed, the eternal consequence of that judgment is that the doomed in hell are forever deprived of divine grace. God's judgment is the antithesis of His grace.

The elimination of the difference between Law and Gospel, or the reduction of that difference to a mere distinction between form and content, also deprives the Gospel of its power. Far from being equated with the Law, the Gospel is distinct from, and opposed to, the Law. Moses is not the *alter ego* of Christ. They impart a different kind of knowledge. Moses is the mediator of the Law, that Law by which "is the knowledge of *sin*." Christ is the Mediator of the better covenant of grace. By that grace we can affirm, "This is life eternal, that we may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent."

It will be instructive to throw the light of the Lutheran Confessions on this vital theological issue. The Formula of Concord declares: "The distinction between the Law and the Gospel is a very brilliant light, which is of service in rightly dividing God's Word." To be sure, the New Testament sometimes uses the terms "Gospel" and "repentance" in a broader as well as in a narrow or specific sense. This is the case when it speaks of salvation in its entirety.

Nothing indeed could be clearer than the definition which the Formula of Concord gives concerning both the Law and the Gospel, and the distinction which it makes between the two. Thus, the "Thorough Declaration" states (Article V):

For, since the mere preaching of the Law, without Christ, either makes presumptuous men, who imagine that they can fulfil the Law by outward works, or forces them utterly to despair, Christ takes the Law into His hands and explains it spiritually . . . and thus reveals His wrath from heaven upon all sinners, and shows how great it is; whereby they are directed to the Law, and from it first learn to know their sins aright — a knowledge which Moses could never extort from them.

Anything that preaches concerning our sins and God's wrath . . . that is all a preaching of the Law. Again, the Gospel is such a preaching as shows and gives nothing else than grace and forgiveness in Christ, although it is true and right that the apostles and preachers of the Gospel (as Christ Himself also did) confirm

the preaching of the Law, and begin it with those who do not yet acknowledge their sins nor are terrified by God's wrath.

The Law by itself produces either pride or despair. To the insecure or desperate soul the comfort of the Gospel needs to be brought. The Smalcald Articles and the Apology also amply establish the necessity for both. And Luther made the distinction clear when he showed that whatever terrifies the conscience is Law and whatever comforts the penitent sinner is Gospel.

This distinction must ever be kept clearly in view. The Formula of Concord plainly states:

The Law is properly a divine doctrine wherein the true, immutable will of God is revealed as to how man ought to be, in his nature, thoughts, words and works, in order to be pleasing and acceptable to God; and it threatens the transgressors with God's wrath and temporal and eternal punishment. . . . But the Gospel is properly a doctrine which teaches what man should *believe*, that with God he may obtain forgiveness of sins.

This distinction, which is clearly set forth in both the Old and New Testaments, must be kept in the foreground of all Christian preaching. The Formula of Concord insists that if they are confused, the proper relationship between justification and sanctification will be blurred, the atoning work of Christ will be obscured, and the gracious Gospel will be reduced to a *nova lex*. Into this error Roman Catholicism has fallen. And it is for this fundamental theological error that Karl Barth, too, must be indicted.

For ultimately, in restating the salvatory indicative in terms of an imperative, Barth has actually reduced the imperative to an indicative. The force of the divine imperative is lost because the commandment of God merely indicates that we are going forward to the fulfillment of the Gospel promises.

The inevitable conclusion, according to the Barthian inversion, is that the will of God is really a pure form and nothing more. Its content depends upon what men put into it. And what is to prevent every man from putting his own meaning into it?

And thus, unwittingly but inexorably, Barth's development of the Gospel and Law relationship leads to the very subjectivity and individualism which he abhors.

Portland, Oreg.

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6. *Ibid.*, p. 607.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 619.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 672.
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10. Barth, p. 781.
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12. *Ibid.*, p. 784.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 788.
14. Allen, *A Guide to the Thought of Karl Barth*, p. 43.
15. Van Til, *The New Modernism*, p. 314.
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18. Allen, p. 42.

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