



# THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### The orders of creation in the theological ethics of Karl Barth

**Citation for published version:**

Nimmo, PT 2007, 'The orders of creation in the theological ethics of Karl Barth' *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 60, no. 1, pp. 24-35. DOI: 10.1017/S0036930606002626

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1017/S0036930606002626](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930606002626)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**Published In:**

*Scottish Journal of Theology*

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

©Nimmo, P. T. (2007). The orders of creation in the theological ethics of Karl Barth. *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 60(1), 24-35doi: 10.1017/S0036930606002626

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



# Scottish Journal of Theology

<http://journals.cambridge.org/SJT>

Additional services for ***Scottish Journal of Theology***:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



---

## The orders of creation in the theological ethics of Karl Barth

Paul T. Nimmo

Scottish Journal of Theology / Volume 60 / Issue 01 / February 2007, pp 24 - 35  
DOI: 10.1017/S0036930606002626, Published online: 25 January 2007

**Link to this article:** [http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S0036930606002626](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0036930606002626)

### How to cite this article:

Paul T. Nimmo (2007). The orders of creation in the theological ethics of Karl Barth. *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 60, pp 24-35 doi:10.1017/S0036930606002626

**Request Permissions :** [Click here](#)

# The orders of creation in the theological ethics of Karl Barth

Paul T. Nimmo

Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge, West Road, Cambridge CB3 9BS, UK

ptn1000@cam.ac.uk

## Abstract

It is widely known that early on in his teaching career Karl Barth advanced a concept of the 'orders of creation', but that he retracted that concept in his later work in reaction to the tragic use that had been made of it by the National Socialist movement in Germany. However, two aspects of this movement remain relatively unexplored: first, the underlying material continuity between Barth's early ethics and his later ethics that this movement occludes; and second, the significant methodological shift in Barth's theology which this movement attests. This article explores both these aspects of Barth's theological development through his treatment of the 'orders of creation'.

In 1928–9 (in Münster) and in 1930–1 (in Bonn), Karl Barth delivered a series of lectures on ethics. On both occasions, Barth espouses a theology which contains a concept of 'orders of creation'. He asserts that there exist:

*orders of creation*, i.e., orders that come directly into question (and more than that) with the fact of our life itself as representatives of the order, as a creaturely standard and basis of knowledge of the will of the Creator, as words which we cannot possibly overlook in obedience to the Word because they are set on our lips and in our hearts with our life as direct testimonies to the Word.<sup>1</sup>

In 1951, however, when Barth wrote volume III/4 of the *Church Dogmatics*, on the ethics of creation, he describes as unsatisfactory a theology which posits the existence of an 'order or many orders of creation, which create a sort of basis, sphere or framework for the real divine commanding to be extracted

<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *Ethics*, ed. Dietrich Braun, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), p. 215, hereafter simply *Ethics*. The English text is based on lectures given in Bonn, and is translated from the relevant volumes of the *Karl Barth – Gesamtausgabe: Ethik I. 1928*, ed. Dietrich Braun (Zürich: TVZ, 1973) and *Ethik II. 1928/1929*, ed. Dietrich Braun (Zürich: TVZ, 1978).

from God's particular revelation'.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, so far did Barth move from the idea of 'orders of creation' that he refused to allow the *Ethics* to be published in his lifetime.<sup>3</sup>

The question therefore arises as to what changed at this point in the theology of Barth between the *Ethics* of 1928 and the *Church Dogmatics* of 1951. This question is relevant not only in terms of tracing the historical development of Barth's ethics during a critical period in European history, but also for the light it sheds on the wider matter of how to construe the relationship between Christian ethics and the sphere of creation. To investigate this issue, this article proceeds in two stages. First, it examines the criticisms of the 'orders of creation' that Barth makes in the *Church Dogmatics*, and explores their relevance to the concept of the 'orders of creation' that he himself advanced in the *Ethics*. Second, this article considers what developments, beyond mere terminology, have taken place in Barth's ethics at this point between the *Ethics* and the *Church Dogmatics*.

### An underlying continuity in Barth's ethics of creation

In order to assess the continuity of Barth in his ethics of creation, it is instructive first to examine the criticisms of the 'orders of creation' that Barth makes in the *Church Dogmatics*, and to explore their relevance to his own concept of the 'orders of creation' advanced in the *Ethics*. In the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth offers three closely related grounds for rejecting the concept of 'orders of creation'. The first ground is that the concept of 'orders of creation' is ethically unsatisfactory: it implies that ethical certainty can be attained through these 'orders' even in abstraction from the revealed Word of God.<sup>4</sup> The second ground is that the concept of 'orders of creation' is theologically unsatisfactory: it suggests that the 'orders of creation' are separate from the command of God the Redeemer, and thereby splits not only the one command of God but ultimately the concept of God itself.<sup>5</sup> The third ground is that the concept of 'orders of creation' is epistemologically unsatisfactory: it infers that the 'orders of creation' are divorced from the true Creator-creature relationship, from faith and from revelation.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936–77), III/4, p. 36. Further references to volumes of the *Church Dogmatics* will be indicated by CD.

<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Braun, 'Editor's Preface', in Karl Barth, *Ethics*, p. vii. A duplicated version of the Münster lectures was initially distributed as *Ethik I* and *Ethik II* (Geneva: SCM, 1929).

<sup>4</sup> CD III/4, p. 37, referring back to CD III/4, pp. 20–1. This criticism of the 'orders of creation' appears earlier, at CD I/2, pp. 404–5.

<sup>5</sup> CD III/4, p. 37. This criticism also appears earlier, at CD III/3, pp. 39–40.

<sup>6</sup> CD III/4, p. 38.

The question arises as to what extent these three related criticisms meet Barth's own construal of the 'orders of creation' in the *Ethics*.

In respect of the first criticism – the lack of ethical certainty – already in the *Ethics*, Barth acknowledges in respect of the 'orders' under which he stands that '[W]hether they are order or merely apparent order may be asked of all orders that are not directly the order, that are not finally God himself or direct witness to him'.<sup>7</sup> And therefore even if the ethical agent had perfect knowledge of all the orders, 'we still could not speak any final word about what is good or bad, since the order is not coincident with the totality of the orders'.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, pre-empting the risk of an abstraction from the Word of God, Barth stresses that the orders of creation are 'primal words which at all events proclaim God's own Word'.<sup>9</sup>

In respect of the second criticism – the division in the command of God – Barth notes already in the *Ethics* that it is 'inadvisable . . . to construct an antithesis between the command of the Creator and the command of Christ'.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, Barth declares, '[I]n Christ we have to do with the Creator and in the Creator we have to do with Christ'.<sup>11</sup> This reflects the fact that 'God . . . is one, the one, and among all the possible determinations of our will it can be said only of that which comes from him that it is uniform and unequivocal'.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, in respect of the third criticism – the abstraction from the revelation of and the relationship with God – Barth stresses the importance of the

<sup>7</sup> *Ethics*, p. 213.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214. Barth correspondingly writes that the givenness of the orders of creation can only be meant in the sense that 'they can no more be reiterated or indicated by us than can the command of God itself', *Ethics*, p. 215. In a lecture given in 1929, contemporaneous with the *Ethics*, Barth notes correspondingly that 'there are definite "orders," arrangements that are in force and regulate my life at this moment. These "orders" were laid down by God at the creation, and even now they are directions intended for my living. But what, for example, work, marriage, family, and so forth, signify just now, in my particular case, as God's "orders" I do not know', *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life*, tr. R. Birch Hoyle (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), p. 7. Barth thus posits that theological ethics 'should not make appeal to the truths supposed to lie in nature as creation of God', *ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> *Ethics*, p. 215.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 118–19. And therefore, Barth explains, '[W]hat the Creator really commands is not a "natural" but a Christian command, and what is really a Christian command is an order of creation', *ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212. Barth nonetheless distinguishes the different spheres in which the command of God is encountered, noting e.g. that '[T]he divine order does not first encounter us in the divine institutions of the kingdom of grace, but truly meets us already in the kingdom of nature', *ibid.*, pp. 215–16.

present actuality of 'the created order of the relation of God and man',<sup>13</sup> and affirms that obeying the command always means obeying God.<sup>14</sup> He posits that, within the order of creation, '[W]hat is commanded us is and will be established by him who commands here, and no general moral truth, no matter where it comes from, must intervene between him and us'.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, Barth notes that the claim of the command of God is one of right because 'we belong to him who commands from the very first'.<sup>16</sup>

On each point of the threefold criticism of the 'orders of creation' in the *Church Dogmatics*, then, the earlier lectures of the *Ethics* appear to emerge unscathed. The 'orders of creation' advanced there do not offer certainty in ethical decision; are not present without the Word of God in Jesus Christ; and are not abstracted from the relationship between God and the ethical agent, the event of the revelation of the former or the faith of the latter. Despite Barth formally dropping the language of the 'orders of creation', an important continuity in terms of Barth's construal of the command of God the Creator remains apparent.

The real opposition of Barth in the *Church Dogmatics* on each point seems rather to be aimed at the concept of the 'orders of creation' posited by Emil Brunner in his book *The Divine Imperative*.<sup>17</sup> There, Brunner confidently describes the 'orders of creation' as 'concrete instructions to work, given by the Creator God to the individual human being'.<sup>18</sup> Then, although Brunner agrees that God the Creator and God the Redeemer are the same, he nevertheless writes that '[A]s Redeemer He can only work where His Word is heard, that is, in faith. As Creator and Preserver He works even where men do not know Him at all'.<sup>19</sup> Finally, Brunner suggests that the orders of creation are 'the subject of a purely rational knowledge',<sup>20</sup> something in which '[E]ven a man who does not know God perceives . . . something of

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210, emphasis added.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119. Barth thus acknowledges that the very givenness of the divine command leads to a strong relativization of theological ethics in general and of the 'orders' in particular, noting that, 'we can point with absolute stringency to no orders to which our acts are always good when bound and always bad when not bound', *ibid.*, p. 214. Barth is therefore aware, even at the time of the *Ethics*, of the limitations of the discipline of theological ethics, particularly in view of the 'orders of creation', and consequently disputes Gogarten's view of the concrete givenness of the 'orders', *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life*, p. 16, n. 24.

<sup>16</sup> *Ethics*, p. 118.

<sup>17</sup> CD III/4, pp. 19–21, 36–7.

<sup>18</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, tr. Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth, 1937), p. 337.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

the Will of God'.<sup>21</sup> At each point, then, it is the 'orders of creation' of *The Divine Imperative*, and not the 'orders of creation' of the *Ethics*, that seem to fall foul of Barth's criticism in the *Church Dogmatics*.<sup>22</sup>

It may well be asked in passing why Barth adopted the concept of the 'orders of creation' in the *Ethics* in the first place, when the meaning he assigned to it clearly differed so radically from that of his contemporaries such as Brunner. After all, Barth had both preached and lectured against the 'orders of creation' many years before the *Ethics*.<sup>23</sup> Although no clear answer to this question has yet been given, John W. Hart is certainly right to observe of the *Ethics* that 'While Barth endorses the concept of the orders of creation in these lectures, his urge to qualify immediately what he affirms indicates his unease with the concept'.<sup>24</sup>

### Significant developments in Barth's ethics of creation

The conclusion that there exists significant material continuity between the *Ethics* and the *Church Dogmatics* on the matter of the 'orders of creation' should not be truly surprising. Recent commentators on Barth's theology and ethics have sought to demonstrate significant theological and ethical continuity between the early writings of Barth and his later work in the

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221. Robin W. Lovin finds this to be the critical issue dividing Barth and Brunner: 'the question of our human capabilities to discern those divine intentions, the question whether, apart from revelation, we can know anything at all about what God wills', *Christian Faith and Public Choices* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 63.

<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that the disagreements between Barth and Brunner were not limited to the status of the 'orders of creation' or the three points noted above. Some of the wider issues are taken up in Brunner's text 'Nature and Grace' and in Barth's response 'No!', published together in *Natural Theology* (London: Centenary Press, 1946), in which the orders of creation are specifically dealt with by Brunner on pp. 29–31 and pp. 52–3, and by Barth on pp. 85–7 (although the translation prefers the term 'ordinances' to 'orders' for the German *Ordnungen*). Salutory, then, is John W. Hart's note that '[O]f the many issues causing stress between Barth and Brunner, ethics was a minor one', in *Karl Barth vs. Emil Brunner* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), p. 116.

<sup>23</sup> Barth writes in a *Rundbrief* on 9 May 1922 that '[O]n Sunday I preached once again on Isaiah 60.19–20 (a good text!), and this time I preached fairly aggressively against Christendom, Church, and orders of creation (*Schöpfungsordnungen*)', in *Karl Barth—Eduard Thurneysen Briefwechsel*, vol. 2, 1921–1930 (Zürich: TVZ, 1974), p. 72. And in a letter to Thurneysen on 28 Sept. 1922, Barth further writes that his recently delivered lecture on ethics (later published in English as 'The Problem of Ethics', in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, tr. Douglas Horton (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1928), pp. 136–82) contained among other things 'an urgent warning about [Gogarten's] orders of creation (*Schöpfungsordnungen*)', in *Barth—Thurneysen*, vol. 2, p. 100 (cf. 'Problem of Ethics', p. 171).

<sup>24</sup> Hart, *Barth vs. Brunner*, p. 117.

*Church Dogmatics*.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, as the explicit dropping of the term ‘orders of creation’ indicates, important developments have taken place in Barth’s theological ethics between the *Ethics* and the *Church Dogmatics*. This section will look at three developments in particular: first, the shift in the way in which the word ‘order’ is used; second, the change in the material content of the ‘order of creation’; and finally, the alteration in the methodology by which the content of the ‘order of creation’ is derived.

*A change in the emphasis on ‘order’*

In the *Ethics*, the word ‘order’ is used as the title for the section in which Barth deals with the content of the Word of God as the Creator,<sup>26</sup> and there is frequent reference to the ‘orders of creation’,<sup>27</sup> and to the ‘order of creation’.<sup>28</sup> In the *Church Dogmatics*, however, the word ‘order’ no longer forms part of any heading in the ethics of creation. And, as noted above, Barth rejects entirely the concept of ‘orders of creation’ in the *Church Dogmatics*, and the terms an ‘order of creation’ in the singular and the ‘orders of creation’ in the plural are therefore generally eschewed.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Werner M. Ruschke comments that in Barth’s theology from 1922 on, ‘[I]t is not in the history of human beings, nor in given anthropological facts, nor in orders of creation (*schöpfungsmäßigen Ordnungen*) that the grounds for ethics lies, but alone in the history of God with the human being, in the history of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ’, *Entstehung und Ausführung der Diastasen-theologie in Karl Barths zweitem ‘Römerbrief’* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchen, 1987), p. 72. This argument substantiates the view of Lovin that ‘[T]he lectures of 1928–29 set the ethical themes that run throughout the massive *Church Dogmatics*’, *Christian Faith and Public Choices*, p. 32.

<sup>26</sup> *Ethics*, §9, pp. 208–46.

<sup>27</sup> Barth deals with the ‘orders of creation’ in summary, *ibid.*, pp. 215–16, and proceeds to describe them in some detail, *ibid.*, pp. 216–46. The concept of ‘orders of creation’ is also mentioned e.g. *ibid.*, pp. 192, 194, 442, 445 and 485.

<sup>28</sup> Barth refers e.g. to the ‘order of creation’ and its cognates, *ibid.*, pp. 59, 145, 210, 214, 219, 244, 364, 400, 401 and 402.

<sup>29</sup> In negative terms, Barth denies that either marriage or the state or racial segregation is an ‘order of creation’ at CD III/4, pp. 141, 148, 200 and 201; CD III/4, pp. 303, 304, 305, 311, 312 and 317; and CD IV/3, p. 899 respectively. However, Barth does retain occasional vestigial flashes of the vocabulary of ‘orders of creation’: first, he refers to the relationship of man and woman as an ‘order of creation’ in CD III/1, p. 205, and CD III/4, pp. 301 and 305; and second, he refers to the relationship of parents and children as an ‘order of creation’ in CD III/4, pp. 301 and 305. On both occasions, Barth carries over the designation of marriage and the family as ‘orders of creation’ from *Ethics*, p. 216. Nigel Biggar views these examples as a ‘rare exception’, in ‘Barth’s trinitarian ethic’, in John Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), p. 226, n. 6, referring to CD III/4, p. 301. His view here is no doubt correct: e.g. throughout CD III/2, in which Barth focuses on the relationship between man and woman, the term ‘order of creation’ seems



Moreover, where Barth does introduce the concept of ‘order’ in the *Church Dogmatics*, in the context of the one ‘order of creation’, he is explicitly more cautious than in the *Ethics*. Barth writes that the spheres of creation, reconciliation and redemption, within which the ethical encounter takes place, might very well be called orders (*Ordnungen*), however there would then exist the permanent possibility of ‘misunderstanding them as laws, prescriptions and imperatives’.<sup>30</sup> Hence he states in respect of the phrase ‘the order of creation’ that:

The distinction between this order and what is customarily called ‘order of creation’ elsewhere is clear and irreconcilable. To be aware of this order we do not leave the closed circle of theological knowledge. We do not in some way read off this order where we just think we find it. We do not understand it at all as an order which can be discovered by us.<sup>31</sup>

to be completely absent. However, despite these formal regressions in vocabulary, the context of these ‘exceptions’ seems to offer evidence that, even here, Barth’s underlying thinking remains broadly consistent. In the first case, in CD III/1, Barth highlights that ‘all that he [Paul] had to say about man and woman was seen . . . in the light of the relationship between Jesus Christ and His community, and therefore of His divine likeness, and . . . it is only in this way that it is presented as an “order of creation”’, CD III/1, p. 205. In the second case, in CD III/4, Barth notes that in the case of these ‘orders’, ‘we are concerned with an irremovable confrontation clearly confirmed by the command of God as such’, CD III/4, pp. 301–2. Thus the context of these ‘exceptions’ still indicates precisely the revelational, Christocentric and relational view of the command of God which Barth extols elsewhere in the *Church Dogmatics*. Herein, then, lies the part-truth in Nigel Biggar’s statement that ‘if the concept of an order of creation is to have “serious theological content”, it must denote the proper relationship between Creator and human creature’, *The Hastening that Waits* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 57, quoting CD III/4, p. 38, although Biggar fails to convey and perhaps even misrepresents the subjunctive and thus hypothetical mood of the original German text. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that Barth’s use of these terms remains unwise, unhelpful and inconsistent.

It should be noted in passing that Barth had earlier argued on the basis of his exegesis of Paul that Paul did not regard this gender hierarchy ‘as an “order of creation”, but only – which is rather different – as a divine ordinance valid in the sphere of the Fall’, CD I/2, p. 194, as a result of which ‘both step out of a relationship in which there is no word at all of super- or sub-ordination’, CD I/2, p. 194. This passage, however, is explicitly contradicted by Barth later in the *Church Dogmatics*, when he writes that ‘[T]he determination and limitation of the relationship of man and woman as established in Christ emerge already in the work of creation’, CD III/2, p. 311. The reason for this shift is perhaps to be found in the revision of the doctrine of election which Barth undertook after CD I/2 – about which more below.

<sup>30</sup> CD III/4, p. 29. Despite the original text reading simply *Ordnungen*, the translation here unnecessarily and confusingly uses the phrase ‘orders or ordinances’, CD III/4, p. 29.

<sup>31</sup> CD III/4, p. 45.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that Barth not only allows that the phrase the 'order of creation' might be legitimately used to describe the first of these three spheres of ethical enquiry, but indeed he also uses the phrase and its equivalents in precisely this way in the *Church Dogmatics*.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, in parallel fashion, Barth also uses the phrase 'order of reconciliation' and its equivalents to describe the second of these spheres of ethical enquiry in the *Church Dogmatics*.<sup>33</sup> While there do not appear to be any explicit references in the extant *Church Dogmatics* to the 'order of redemption', clearly such a reference would be both possible for Barth and thoroughly consistent.<sup>34</sup>

With this analysis in view, it can be seen that Nigel Biggar is right to observe that 'the change that took place in Barth's thinking between 1928 and 1951 was not the jettisoning of the concept of created order as such',<sup>35</sup> but wrong at least in part to suggest that the change was 'a change in the form of that concept, combined with a refusal to call it by its usual name'.<sup>36</sup> Barth's depiction of the one 'order of creation' – as one of the three spheres of encounter between God and the human – did not change either in form or in name, being used in both the *Ethics* and the *Church Dogmatics* to describe the relationship between the Creator and the creature. Nevertheless, on balance it seems fair to conclude with Timothy J. Gorringer that the later Barth 'became much more reticent about the concept of "order"'.<sup>37</sup>

*A change in the content of the 'order of creation'*

There is a clear change in the material content assigned to the 'order of creation' in the *Church Dogmatics* as compared to the *Ethics*. In *Ethics*, the 'order of creation' is filled out by the themes of work, marriage, family and

<sup>32</sup> Barth uses the term 'order of creation' and its cognates at CD III/3, pp. 39, 40, CD III/4, pp. 52, 53 (and in the original text but lost in the translation at CD III/1, p. 127); and similarly writes of Adam's refusal 'to preserve the order of Paradise [creation]', CD I/2, p. 157.

<sup>33</sup> Barth uses the term 'order of reconciliation' at CD I/2, p. 157, and CD III/3, p. 6; and similarly writes of 'the order of restoration' at CD I/2, p. 157, and of 'the order of grace' at CD IV/1, p. 489, and CD IV/3, p. 743. Moreover, Barth refers to the 'order of creation' and the 'order of reconciliation' in their mutual relation at CD IV/1, p. 229, and CD IV/3, p. 43. In *Ethics*, Barth had similarly written of the 'order of grace' and its cognates at *Ethics*, pp. 240 and 244.

<sup>34</sup> In *Ethics*, however, Barth does mention 'a third order' which is ordered to the other two, *Ethics*, p. 470.

<sup>35</sup> *Hastening that Waits*, p. 52.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Timothy J. Gorringer, *Karl Barth Against Hegemony* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), p. 92. Gorringer proceeds to assert, however, that the concept of 'order' in the *Church Dogmatics* 'is tacit rather than explicit', *ibid.*, p. 92, which conclusion is far less tenable in light of the above references.

equality/leadership, which together are explicitly described as the ‘orders of creation’.<sup>38</sup> By contrast, in the *Church Dogmatics*, the ethics of creation is unfolded along four lines which correspond to the four aspects of Barth’s theological anthropology. In this anthropology, the ethical agent is conceived as a being in relation with God; a being in relation with fellow humanity; a being in the unity of soul and body; and a being in (limited) time.<sup>39</sup> Correspondingly, the ethics of the ‘order of creation’, which are described under the rubric of ‘freedom’, appear under the headings of freedom before God; freedom in fellowship; freedom for life; and freedom in limitation.<sup>40</sup>

*A change in methodology for the ‘order of creation’*

Beyond these two shifts in the emphasis on ‘order’ and the content of the ‘order of creation’ there lies a far more fundamental shift which occurs between the *Ethics* and the *Church Dogmatics* at this point. The key change lies in Barth’s methodological move to a theology grounded far more explicitly in Christology, not only in theory but also in practice: not only noetically but also ontically. This methodology emerged in its fullness only after 1936, when Barth recast his doctrine of election Christocentrically.<sup>41</sup> In terms of ethics, it leads to the command of God in each sphere of ethical encounter between God and humanity – including the sphere of creation – being construed in a more definitely Christocentric manner. Reflecting later on his ethics of creation in the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth writes

<sup>38</sup> *Ethics*, p. 216.

<sup>39</sup> CD III/4, pp. 43–4, based on CD III/2, §§44–7.

<sup>40</sup> CD III/4, §§53–6. Biggar suggests at this point that the concept of ‘orders of creation’ has now ‘become basic to the treatise of the command of God the Creator as a whole’, *Hastening that Waits*, p. 57, but his argument at this point, and its supporting evidence, pertains far more to the one ‘order of creation’ than to multiple ‘orders of creation’.

<sup>41</sup> Biggar asserts that the *Ethics* was ‘composed before Barth’s study of Anselm had consolidated his Christocentric tendency’, *ibid.*, p. 62, while Paul D. Matheny subscribes to the view that around 1931 Barth turned ‘from dialectical idealism to an analogical realism’, *Dogmatics and Ethics: The Theological Realism and Ethics of Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1990), p. 53, and that in the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth correspondingly abandons not only the radical diastasis between God and humanity, but also ‘the notion of a Schöpfungsordnungsethik’, *Dogmatics and Ethics*, p. 201, n. 68. However, this paradigm of Barth’s theological development, which both Biggar and Matheny follow, has been thoroughly discredited by Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), pp. 14–23. McCormack notes that the shift to Christology as the theoretical ground of Barth’s theology occurred in 1924, well before the *Ethics* was written, *ibid.*, p. 328. However, McCormack also notes that this Christological move was not fully completed until the revision of the doctrine of election in 1936, at which point Barth’s theology finally became ‘a Christologically grounded, christocentric theology’, *ibid.*

we were not being arbitrary when . . . we did all we could to provide a christological and soteriological foundation for all the relevant discussions. What can the Christian say that is true and important about the encounter between God the Creator and man his creature in its ethical character if he does not receive light from the point where this encounter may be seen as an event in the covenant of grace set up between God and man, and therefore in its primal form?<sup>42</sup>

Such practical Christocentrism was not in evidence in the *Ethics*. In the *Church Dogmatics*, however, the four lines along which the ethics of creation are unfolded are based on the four aspects of Barth's theological anthropology. And in the light of the revised doctrine of election and its Christological concentration, as Bruce McCormack notes, there could no longer be an 'independent anthropology (independent, that is, of reflection upon the true, restored humanity disclosed in Christ)'.<sup>43</sup> The unfolding of anthropology therefore takes place in Barth under the theological presupposition that 'we are invited to infer from His human nature the character of our own, to know ourselves in Him, but in Him really to know ourselves'.<sup>44</sup> Thus these four lines are not categories read from reality or the creation *per se*, but are lines of the constitution and relationality of human being as exclusively determined in and by the person of Jesus Christ revealed in scripture.<sup>45</sup>

This development in Barth is clearly highlighted by his treatment of the ethics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer at this point. Bonhoeffer elucidates a number of

<sup>42</sup> Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics, IV/4, Lecture Fragments*, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), p. 12.

<sup>43</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Theology*, p. 454.

<sup>44</sup> CD III/2, p. 54. Barth acknowledges that 'there can be no question of a direct equation of human nature as we know it in ourselves with the human nature of Jesus', CD III/2, p. 47.

<sup>45</sup> It is therefore quite mischievous of Biggar to determine these four dimensions of the relational structure of human being to be 'orders of creation . . . albeit incognito', *Hastening that Waits*, p. 58, a view which Gorringer seems to accept without question, *Karl Barth Against Hegemony*, p. 208, n. 191. To label them thus not only obscures their epistemological origin in particular, but also endangers a true understanding of Barth's methodology in general. Barth is adamant that as theological anthropology investigates human nature, 'its enquiries are not based on any creaturely insight into the creature. It places the contemplative and reflective reason of the creature in the service of the Creator's knowledge of the creature revealed by God's own Word', CD III/2, p. 44. With this in mind, he on occasion casts a self-critical eye back at the *Ethics*, writing e.g. that the inclusion of 'marriage' as an order of creation is 'contrary to the Evangelical principle', CD III/4, p. 141, because 'a human tradition – later grounded in natural law – is set above Holy Scripture', CD III/4, p. 141. However, it must be acknowledged at this point that as these four lines of enquiry are not found explicitly delineated in scripture, there intrinsically remains a human dimension to their precise delimitation.

'mandates' in which the 'relation of the world to Christ becomes concrete'.<sup>46</sup> These 'mandates' are for Bonhoeffer divine 'only because of their original and final relation to Christ'.<sup>47</sup> They have the character of 'the divinely imposed task as opposed to that of a determination of being'.<sup>48</sup> By contrast, in the *Church Dogmatics*, the aspects of the order of creation which Barth sketches out amount explicitly and precisely to a determination of the being of the ethical agent in Jesus Christ. This Christological concentration is clearly in evidence when Barth outlines the legitimate use of the term 'order of creation' to describe

the particular sphere of divine command and human action in which on the one side the God who is gracious to man in Jesus Christ commands also as Creator, and on the other the man to whom God is gracious in Jesus Christ stands before Him also as His creature.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 6, *Ethics*, tr. Richard Krauss, Charles C. West and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), p. 68. This volume is a translation of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, vol. 6, *Ethik*, ed. Ilse Tödt, Heinz Eduard Tödt, Ernst Feil and Clifford Green (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1992). In this work, Bonhoeffer shares with Barth an understanding of the will of God as Christocentric and revealed, *Ethics*, pp. 74 and 390, but maintains that '[T]he scripture names four . . . mandates: work, marriage, government and church', *ibid.*, p. 68, which he enumerates elsewhere as 'the church, marriage and family culture, and government', *ibid.*, p. 388.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, translation altered (cf. 'der Charakter des göttlichen Auftrages gegenüber dem einer Seinsbestimmung', in Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, p. 55). Lovin correspondingly suggests that Bonhoeffer, in contrast to Brunner, 'incorporates into the mandates an element of theology and history that cannot be understood in purely natural terms', *Christian Faith and Public Choices*, p. 152. Nevertheless, while Barth is far more sympathetic to Bonhoeffer's ethics than to Brunner's, he remains unsatisfied. He argues that the word 'mandate' is almost indistinguishable from the word 'command', and questions Bonhoeffer on three particular points: first, how he arrives at no more and no fewer than four 'mandates'; second, whether simply the presence of these 'mandates' in scripture and their relatability to Christ are sufficient to designate them as 'mandates'; and third, whether the notion of superiority and inferiority implicit in these 'mandates' is not both reminiscent of North German patriarchalism and contrary to the concept of freedom, *CD III/4*, p. 22. Barth additionally fears that in all their static givenness, the 'mandates' of Bonhoeffer might become themselves imperatival in force: by contrast, Barth is keen at all points to preserve the dynamic actualism of the ethical event, *CD III/4*, p. 22.

<sup>49</sup> *CD III/4*, p. 45. In this formulation, Barth contends, there is no need to 'leave the closed circle of theological knowledge', for this order has 'sought us out in the grace of God in Jesus Christ revealed in His Word, disclosing itself to us as such where we for our part could neither perceive nor find it', *CD III/4*, p. 45.

Thus while Biggar is right to note that, in Barth, the 'exposition of the command of God the Creator is based upon the created relational structure of the human creature',<sup>50</sup> this is only true in respect of the relational structure of the human creature as *revealed and known in Jesus Christ*. Jesus Christ is not only the noetic, but also the ontic, ground of the order of creation. This, then, is the key development between the *Ethics* and the *Church Dogmatics*: that the ethics of creation is no longer governed by a Christological methodology only in form, but also in content.

## Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that there exists a notable underlying material continuity between the *Ethics* and the *Church Dogmatics* in terms of Barth's view of the 'orders of creation'. It has also recognized the profound shift in his understanding of the 'order of creation' which occurs between the *Ethics* and the *Church Dogmatics*, and has argued that this development can be traced primarily to the Christocentric shift in Barth's understanding of the doctrine of election in the intervening period.

If Barth had banned the *Ethics* from publication during his lifetime on account of this Christological shift alone, then clearly most of Barth's work pre-1936 would have been destined for similar treatment and neglect. The real reason for this strong reaction far more probably lies in the abuse of the concept of 'orders of creation' in inter-war Germany, and its immeasurable consequences.<sup>51</sup> Barth witnessed both at close hand, and it would not do to underestimate the impact these events had on Barth both as a theologian and as a human being.

With the posthumous publication of the *Ethics*, however, it can be seen that there is both important continuity and significant development between the *Ethics* and the *Church Dogmatics*. The continuity in terms of Barth's actualistic and dialectic approach to a Christian ethics centred on the command of God is clear. But it is the shift to a more practically Christocentric moral ontology that allows Barth to move to develop his special ethics with power and theological consistency. It is this shift which the change in Barth's view of the 'orders of creation' clearly attests, and to which this article has attempted to draw attention.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Biggar, *Hastening that Waits*, p. 58.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55. Even within the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth comments that N. H. Sørensen's fear of any 'theology of orders' is 'not without good cause', CD III/4, p. 22.

<sup>52</sup> An earlier version of this article was given at the Annual Conference of the Society for the Study of Theology, Dublin, 31 March 2005. Thanks are offered to Professor David Ford, Professor Dan Hardy and Dr Al McFadyen for their constructive comments and encouragement on that occasion.