

Article Review for *Scottish Journal of Theology*

*This is the original version of this article review prior to its submission to SJT*

*The published version is in:* Scottish Journal of Theology 68.1 (2015): 83–97

Reflections on *The Analogy of Grace* by Gerald McKenny<sup>1</sup>

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## introduction

One of the most significant studies of Barth's theological ethics to have appeared in recent years is *The Analogy of Grace* by Professor Gerald McKenny of the University of Notre Dame.<sup>2</sup> In this article review, I seek to accomplish three things. First, I will offer a concise introduction to the form, content, and purpose of this book. Second, I will attend to some of the volume's core claims in greater detail, exploring areas of potential

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the insights of this article review were offered in telegrammatic form in my book review of Gerald McKenny's *The Analogy of Grace: Karl Barth's Moral Theology* in *Journal of Theological Studies* 63.2 (2012): 787–789. An early version of this article review was delivered at the 2012 Annual Meeting of the Karl Barth Society of North America in Chicago: I am grateful to Professor George Hunsinger, President of the Society, for the invitation to speak at that event.

<sup>2</sup> Gerald McKenny, *The Analogy of Grace: Karl Barth's Moral Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2010); hereafter indicated inline by page number in parentheses.

exegetical and theological divergence. And finally, by way of conclusion, I will comment on the work against the backdrop of contemporary studies of Barth's theological ethics.

## **part one – introducing the work**

Gerald McKenny's *The Analogy of Grace* is a text significant not only in terms of the study of Barth's ethics – which will, of course, be the primary context within which I examine it here – but in the context of the author's own biography and theology. In the preface, McKenny relates how the earliest roots of the book relate to a job-talk delivered at Notre Dame many years ago, and how his own work on Barth began long before that and has continued ever since. Indeed, to examine the list of luminaries with whom McKenny has studied and discussed Barth is to detail a veritable 'Who's Who?' of key figures in the tradition of the study of Barth's theology. *The Analogy of Grace* is correspondingly a book with a real breadth to its scholarship and a real depth to its reflections: over ten years in the writing, the book demands similar care in the activities of reading and engagement.

The afore-mentioned Preface aids the reader in setting out the motivation, the purpose, and the method governing the material that lies ahead, and thus merits some initial attention by way of sketching the horizons of the work. In terms of its motivation, the book arises from McKenny's view that – in spite of the work of a recent generation of Barth scholars – in the field of Christian ethics, Barth's work is 'neither well understood nor widely appreciated' [vii]. In terms of its purpose, correspondingly, McKenny desires

to ‘bring the reader to an understanding of Barth’s moral theology in all its strangeness and to an appreciation of its significance for Christian ethical thought and practice today’ [viii]. And its method is to explore Barth’s moral theology from a conceptual perspective, ‘critically examining its central claims, themes, and arguments while also tracing the lines of their development’ [viii]. At one level, then, the book seeks to be comprehensive –

covering the major stages of the development of Barth’s moral theology, treating its major concepts and themes, exploring the relevant primary and secondary texts, and elaborating the traditions of Christian ethics and the schools of modern moral thought that form the background of his moral theology. [x]

However McKenny is also deeply aware of the limitations of his work in terms of its lack of coverage of the detail of the Christian life, of the political dimension of moral theology, of the full breadth of primary and secondary literature, of the wider ethical and philosophical themes, and – his greatest regret – of the ecclesial locus of Christian ethical thought and practice [x]. There is a refreshing honesty here about what has been attempted and what has been – at least for here and for now – passed over.

By way of Introduction proper, *The Analogy of Grace* offers what it calls ‘An Overview of Barth’s ethics’ [1]. In these pages, there is a foretaste of the more detailed exposition of Barth’s ethical thinking that is to feature in the chapters ahead. Drawing on material from across the *Church Dogmatics*,<sup>3</sup> McKenny offers a reconstruction of the underlying theme, structure, movement, and vision of Barth’s ethics, and provides as concise and precise an

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 volumes in 13 parts, edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-1975), the English translation of *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, 4 volumes in 13 parts (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1932 and Zürich: EVZ, 1938-1965); hereafter indicated inline in parentheses by *KD* / *CD*, followed by volume number, part-volume number, and respective page numbers.

exposition of the primary contours of Barth's moral thinking as one could desire. Thus there is presented here, in bold yet accurate contours, the divine election in eternity as the determination of Christian action, the divine sanctification in time as the actualisation of that determination, and the human participation in God as the goal of that determination. Throughout this material, McKenny correctly emphasises the profoundly Christological form and content of Barth's theological ethics, identifying this as 'the most distinguishing and controversial aspect of his moral theology' [7]. And in the process of his exploration he touches on many of the wider and central themes of Barth's ethics that will be explored further in the chapters to follow: the inseparability of dogmatics and ethics, the encounter of God and humanity, the relationship of Gospel and Law, and the form and content of the divine command.

In the first chapter of his work, McKenny turns to 'The Problem of Ethics', the persistent question that provoked Barth's moral theology throughout his career: 'What does the righteousness that comes to us through God's grace have to do with our conduct in the world?' [27]. He proceeds to investigate Barth's handling of this 'problem' in the period between Barth's dialectical break with liberal theology and his general ethics in *Church Dogmatics* II/2. McKenny's contention is that there is a striking *continuity* evident in Barth's approach to moral theology both from the beginning and throughout this period, in which divine righteousness calls into question human righteousness, and the hope of the latter rests only in the former [36]. In this way, he contends, there is a consistent attempt on the part of Barth to move beyond the perceived infelicities of the ethical work

of Luther and Calvin. At the same time, McKenny carefully traces the *development* in Barth's ethical work over these years, and the way in which certain shifts of emphasis and perspective allow Barth to stay true to this basic insight yet to evolve ever more detailed and reflected descriptions of moral theology. In particular, McKenny rightly observes that there is a fundamental conceptual shift from the divine righteousness as the *interruption* of human moral achievement to the divine righteousness – in Jesus Christ – as the *fulfilment* of human moral achievement [72].

The focus shifts in the second chapter to the relationship between 'Barth's Moral Theology and Modern Ethics', and thence to the broader question of Barth's relationship to modernity. McKenny begins with an exploration of Barth's narrative of the modern period itself, according to which narrative 'The Reformation theology of grace stands against medieval-cum-modern self-assertion' [81], and confesses to find this narrative only partially plausible. Though Barth evidently finds much to criticise in modern ethics, McKenny nevertheless astutely points out that Barth also appropriates much from modern ethics, and raises the consequent (and complex) question of the extent to which Barth's own ethical theology remains within the horizon of modernity. On the one hand, McKenny rightly observes Barth's principled rejection of the autonomy and interiority of modern ethics, and his insistence in their place upon the gracious God of the covenant who stands over and outside us, as well – of course – as with and for us. This view requires a rejection of the binary opposition of autonomy and heteronomy, and rests upon a 'Christological standard of good and evil' [109]. On the other hand, McKenny

carefully suggests that the necessity of this Christological standard to preserve the alterity of the ethical command – as well as its plausibility – is itself dependent both upon Barth’s narrative of modernity and upon Barth’s penchant for bypassing viable alternatives at key points. McKenny concludes in balanced fashion that ‘Barth accepts modernity’s deepest desire ... yet ... rejects its own understanding of that desire’ [121].

The third chapter visits in detail the relationship between ‘Dogmatics and Ethics’. McKenny briefly traces the development of Barth’s conception of ethics as an integral part of dogmatics, and notes that it questions ‘the almost universal practice, taken nearly for granted in modern and contemporary moral theology, of treating ethics in at least relative independence of dogmatics’ [122]. He also rightly posits that the crux of Barth’s argument rests on Barth’s view of ‘the inability of ethics outside of dogmatics to sustain the proper relationship of ethics to divine grace’ [140]. At the same time, McKenny perceptively draws attention to the fact that, for Barth, dogmatics is also ethics: the Word of God is both a Word of grace and a Word of command, and dogmatics and ethics are both constituted by and witness to precisely this Word. There is thus a clear and insurmountable *difference* between theological ethics and ethics in general ... yet also a clear *coincidence* of the question of Barth’s ethics and that of general ethics. This leads McKenny to consider the relationship between moral theology and moral philosophy, and the development of Barth’s thinking on the matter. He concludes aptly that, for Barth, ‘moral philosophy ... can be recognized as a valid form of ethical inquiry only to the extent that it can be comprehended under the ethics of the command of God’ [158].

In the fourth chapter, McKenny turns to 'The Divine Claim' upon humanity and embarks upon a sustained analysis of Barth's controversial construal of the relationship between Gospel and Law – that the Law is the form of the Gospel and the Gospel is the content of the Law. Central here is Barth's view that '[Jesus Christ] accomplishes the good on our behalf so that the good confronts us not as something still to be accomplished by us but as a demand to be what we are, and are now free to be' [166–167]. The burden of this chapter is to trace the development of Barth's distinctive position, and to assess its coherence and plausibility in comparison with alternative views. McKenny concludes that while Barth's view of the Gospel-Law relation succeeds in offering a realistic hope to our moral lives, it risks denying that our moral striving has any ultimate consequence [200].

This fear concerning the place of ethical agency is the dominant concern of the fifth (and shortest) chapter on 'Human Moral Action'. McKenny agrees that recent literature has succeeded in proving that there is a real and significant space for human ethical action in Barth's thought; here, then, his task is to explore further the meaning and status of this action [202]. McKenny highlights the centrality of the concept of *correspondence* in relating human action to divine action, and notes accurately that this concept combines our affirmation of grace, our imitation of grace, and our witness to grace. This correspondence, he notes, takes the paradigmatic form of gratitude, and – as such – 'is the participation of human action in the divine movement of grace' [210]. At this point, McKenny transitions to an exposition of Barth's view of the role of the Holy Spirit in the

Christian life. For Barth, he observes, it is the case that ‘by the power of the Holy Spirit, human action is taken up into God’s own action, yet without ceasing to be human’ [217]. Though recognising that this clears a space for human ethical action, McKenny confesses a lingering sense of unease with Barth’s resultant denial of sacramental mystery and Barth’s corresponding hesitation in affirming the visibility of human goodness.

In the sixth (and longest) chapter, McKenny turns to the complex issue of ‘Ethical Reflection and Instruction’ in Barth’s moral theology. At the heart of this exploration lies the question of how human ethical thinking can participate in the divine judgement, choice, and decision without asserting itself over and against God; at the heart of Barth’s answer lies the encounter of the ethical agent with God. McKenny begins with ethical reflection itself, which he defines as ‘the attitude proper to a conscious awareness ... of the human condition of accountability’ [230]. McKenny avers that there is something of a (problematic) paradox in Barth’s moral theology here: on the one hand, Barth affirms that ethical reflection is necessary; on the other hand, ethical reflection is not sufficient. He nonetheless endorses the way in which Barth depicts ethical reflection as a spiritual discipline akin to prayer. McKenny next turns to ethical instruction, and treats first the contested place of casuistry in Barth’s moral theology. McKenny posits that Barth’s ethics – like casuistry – presupposes a general norm and a communication spoken from one person to another (the latter point is revisited below), but that Barth rejects casuistry as it ‘removes us from the fundamental position of ethical reflection [accountability] described in the previous section’ [241]. In Barth’s view, far from leaving a general norm for the



human agent to specify apply, as casuistry does, the encounter with the command of God offers a full specification of the command of God in which it is already interpreted and applied. McKenny treats second the place of ethical instruction in Barth's moral theology at large. Rejecting criticisms of Barth's concept of the command of God as simply occasionalist or voluntarist, McKenny indicates the central importance of the covenant for understanding Barth's view of ethical instruction – the ethical encounter 'is never an isolated event but is always related to the history of the covenant of grace' [247].

In a pursuant exploration of the moral knowledge this foundation yields, McKenny identifies the procedures employed and the limits delineated in the unfolding of Barth's ethics of creation, at the same time subjecting Barth's attempt to derive ethical guidelines and frameworks and his employment of the concept of the 'boundary case' to careful scrutiny and critique. He rightly concludes this exploration with the summary view that ethical reflection 'gives us a significant approximation to the command of God' [264]. The chapter closes with a sustained critical analysis of Barth's view of ethical reflection and instruction. McKenny concludes – in brief – that there remains 'an irreducibly arbitrary aspect to hearing the command of God' [269], a certain inconsistency in the handling of boundary cases [273], an inadequacy to Barth's treatment of virtues [276], and – within Barth's treatment of the ethical encounter with God as 'not characterized by any immediacy or transparency' [281] – an unnecessary dichotomising between Barth's 'prophetic ethos' and casuistic ethics [286].

In the Conclusion to the book, and in spite of his acknowledged hesitations and reservations concerning some aspects of Barth's theological ethics – particularly in respect of ethical reflection and ethical instruction – McKenny ends with an appreciative review of the daring innovation and lasting significance of Barth's moral theology. Locating Barth's work within the broader arena of traditional and contemporary ethics – both Catholic and Protestant – McKenny suggests that 'Here, at last, is a viable alternative to the Augustinian tradition' [292]. Though he stops short of endorsing Barth's position, then, and though he is not sanguine about Barth's theological ethics impacting significantly upon contemporary ethical thinking, McKenny concludes that in moral theology Barth has 'contributed something of permanent significance to the universal church, however strange the voice in which he has spoken' [294].

## **part two – exploring the work**

*The Analogy of Grace* is a genuine pleasure to read. McKenny writes with the patience of a pedagogue, rendering each chapter lucid in its trajectory and each paragraph crafted in its argument. He adopts a measured tone throughout that is at once both appreciative and critical of Barth, and never remotely risks descending to hagiography or polemic. Above all, perhaps, the reader gains a real sense of the depth of McKenny's *personal* engagement with Barth, of the ways in which this material has alternately inspired and perplexed him.

At the same time, the book is a model of serious and engaged research on the work of

Karl Barth. McKenny shows himself to be at home not only with the precise detail of Barth's moral theology but also with the larger systematic context of Barth's work and the wider historical context of Barth's development. He is aware of the history of interpretation of Barth's ethical work, and displays a praiseworthy desire to navigate his way through the standard diet of criticisms to which it has been subjected, separating those which are plausible and enduring from those which are lamentable and errant. Beyond this, McKenny pervasively relates both Barth's theological ethics and the alternatives to the wider background of the history of Christian ethics and its luminaries. He reserves particular attention for the relationship between Barth's work and the Reformed, Lutheran, and Catholic positions which Barth is continually engaging in both implicit and explicit ways. All this background detail results in the rich and contoured approach to Barth's moral theology which *The Analogy of Grace* sets before the reader.

As with any work of scope and ambition, there are places where readers may be left desirous of more. By McKenny's own admission [x], the extent to which he engages in sustained dialogue with other works on Barth's ethics is limited, albeit the sixth chapter provides something of an exception to this general trend. And again, by McKenny's own admission [x], there is little focus in this book on the church as the locus of ethical thinking, an absence felt all the more in view of his tantalising comments about the possible significance of 'moral pedagogy in the church' for Barth's moral theology [275].<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The role of the church in theological ethics is an issue I explore – albeit briefly – in Paul T. Nimmo, *Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Barth's Ethical Vision* (London and New York: Continuum, 2007), 68-73.

However, there is a sufficient wealth of material on Barth's ethical work in the book already to command the attention of any interested reader. In what follows, I offer an occasionally critical exploration of three particular and significant issues which emerge from reading McKenny's work: first, on the transparency of the command of God; second, on the intersubjectivity of the command of God; and third, on theological ontology.

*on the transparency of the command of God*

The issue of the transparency of the command of God arises in connection with the issue of the purpose and place of ethical reflection. Barth indicates that the relationship between divine command and human response is not a simple one, describing God's command in the thesis statement to §38 of *Church Dogmatics* II/2 as 'the decision from which we come, under which we stand and to which we always move [*KD* II/2, 701; *CD* II/2, 631]. McKenny correspondingly acknowledges that the command of God at once both precedes and follows our response, and consequently observes that it 'occurs in a complex relation to temporality in Barth's portrayal' [281].

For McKenny, it is at the middle point of this sequence that there is space for 'ethical reflection', reflection which involves 'the determination of the immanent value and disvalue of possible courses of action' and 'inquiry ... into the mutual relation of these immanent possibilities of action to the will of God' [231-232]. Indeed it is this middle point – 'the situation-specific rational weighing of reasons in the very moment (as it were) of

the encounter' (265n113) – that McKenny claims I overlooked in my own rehearsal of Barth's argument at this point.<sup>5</sup> I am grateful for his correction on this point, and am happy to grant that he is right. Barth quite clearly accords this step within the encounter with the command of God a clear significance, and does so on the basis of a detailed exegesis of the New Testament terms *dokimos*, *dokimē*, and *dokimazein* [*KD* II/2, 707-713; *CD* II/2, 636-641]. On that basis, my own earlier analysis of the command was incomplete.

McKenny proceeds to conclude that from this point of reflection, the ethical agent moves towards the decision of God itself – 'a concrete, fully specified decision' [243]. And this movement from human reflection to divine judgement seems to be central to McKenny's conception of ethical reflection upon the divine command. For example, he writes, 'We approach our own decision with the knowledge that the command of God awaits it and judges it and with a readiness to receive this judgment' [230], or again, 'we rationally test the possibilities before us in readiness for the divine decision ... and wait to hear the divine decision on our decision' [264-265]. This seems in good order, as far as it goes.

At this point, however, one might pause to wonder what McKenny makes of the *first* step of the event of encounter posited by Barth – the command as *preceding* the ethical decision. Of course, McKenny nowhere denies that the command also precedes the ethical decision. However, he does seem to have reservations as to what might be the significance or content of this preceding command. On the one hand, then, he writes that

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<sup>5</sup> See Nimmo, *Being in Action*, 41-61.

‘What God commands at every moment of our temporal lives is the action which ... expresses the purpose of election at that moment’ [227]. On the other hand, he concludes that ‘Barth denies that the specific command of God is accessible to human knowing’ [280] and that ‘The present encounter of our decision with the divine decision is ... not a moment of transparency’ [281]. Indeed, McKenny suggests, ‘if the command of God is fully present to the hearer, then ... [i]ronically, Barth will have reestablished the modern moral subject as judge of good and evil’ [279].<sup>6</sup>

However, there may be a real danger at this point that McKenny overlooks some strong indications from Barth that the command of God is specific, present, and transparent to the ethical agent. Indeed, Barth devotes a whole section in *Church Dogmatics* II/2 to a study of ‘The Definiteness of the Command of God’.<sup>7</sup> Consider the following statements (chosen from among many possibilities) within this section:

The command of God is given [*gegeben*] to us ... in concrete *depth*, in material *definiteness* [in konkreter *Fülle*, in inhaltlicher *Bestimmtheit*]. [*KD* II/2, 738; *CD* II/2, 662]

In the demand and judgement of God’s command, God always confronts [*steht ... gegenüber*] us with a quite definite meaning and intention [*in einer ganz bestimmten Meinung und Absicht*], with a will, which has foreseen each and every thing, which has not left even the smallest detail to chance or our caprice. [*KD* II/2, 739; *CD* II/2, 663]

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<sup>6</sup> This contention, however, does not seem to be logically necessary, as will be suggested below.

<sup>7</sup> §38.2 – *KD* II/2, 737-791; *CD* II/2, 661-708.

[The command of God] encounters [*begegnet*] us in such a way that absolutely nothing – whether externally or internally, whether in the relative secrecy of our intention or in the explicitly identifiable carrying out of our actions – remains left to chance or to ourselves [*dem Zufall oder uns selbst überlassen bleibe*]. [*KD II/2, 739-740; CD II/2, 663-664*]

These statements emphasise that the command is not only given by God in a way which encounters and confronts the individual, but also in a way which is concrete, specific, and detailed. Moreover, Barth is also adamant that the command in all its presence and particularity is also transparent: '[The command of God] needs no interpretation, on account of the fact that it is self-interpreting down to the last and smallest detail' [*KD II/2, 741; CD II/2, 665*]. This transparency of the command is crucial for Barth because it is only on this basis that the ethical agent can be held responsible before God. Barth writes that it is only when the command is conceived to be a demand encountering the ethical agent with a specific content and self-interpreting character that 'we stand responsible [*verantwortlich*], obedient or disobedient, before an Other, a superior Commander and Judge' [*KD II/2, 741; CD II/2, 665*]. Barth concludes this train of thought in rather stern terms: 'The objection that the will of God precisely in its definiteness is unknown or not sufficiently known to us is not only impotent, but deceitful' [*KD II/2, 747; CD II/2, 670*].<sup>8</sup>

This kind of material is rather absent from McKenny's account, which instead contends

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<sup>8</sup> The simple justification that Barth gives for insisting upon the concreteness of the divine command is that this is the witness of Scripture in respect of the command of God [*KD II/2, 748; CD II/2, 671*]. It is on this basis, then, that Barth adamantly opposes 'to the heathen statement of the emptiness and indefiniteness [*Leerheit und Unbestimmtheit*] of the divine command that of its fullness and definiteness [*Fülle und Bestimmtheit*]' [*KD II/2, 749; CD II/2, 671*]. The insistence on the concreteness of the divine command is reprised in Barth's rejection of casuistry in *KD III/4, 5-15; CD III/4, 6-15*.

for a reading of Barth which suggests ‘a lack of knowledge of the specific command of God in the present’ [280] and – perhaps mistakenly – draws on Barth’s dialectical language of concealment and revelation at this point. While McKenny is certainly right to draw attention to the eschatological dimension of the command of God – and particularly so in the context of judgement which is exercised in respect of human obedience or disobedience to the divine command – this seems by no means to exclude for Barth a concrete and specific knowledge of the command of God in the present. Nor does it seem to indicate for Barth that knowledge of this command means that the ethical agent suddenly has disposal over the divine command or that she is reinstated as the judge of good and evil – both outcomes which McKenny rightly seeks to avoid. By contrast, even in its specificity, the command of God – as with the Word of God in general – is never a human capability or possession and can never be domesticated: it is always only available to the human being in a *dandum*, a being given, rather than as a *datum*, a given.

This understanding of the concreteness and specificity of the divine command necessarily has implications for the conception of ethical reflection. On this subject, Barth writes:

ethical reflection consists in the fact that we give an account to ourselves of the fact that we were, are, and will be responsible [*verantwortlich*] to the command of God given [*gegebenen*] to us in this way, the command really *given* to us, and indeed completely, that is, concretely *filled*, and materially *determined*. [*KD* II/2, 740; *CD* II/2, 664]

At this point, however, one is left with a slight sense of unease. It is difficult to see how Barth’s view of ethical reflection as presented here meshes smoothly with that delineated by McKenny – itself also drawn from *Church Dogmatics*. It may be that further



investigation of this aspect of Barth's moral theology is desirable.

*on the intersubjectivity of the command of God*

McKenny throughout *The Analogy of Grace* claims that the specification of the command of God in Barth's ethics 'is spoken from one person to another' [239] and is 'always given from one person to another' [274]. Correspondingly, McKenny writes, for Barth it is the case that 'Ethics ... is an intersubjective practice' [239]. This contention of McKenny rests on an important text from *CD III/4*, where Barth is approvingly describing the 'casuistry of the prophetic *ethos*' [*KD III/4*, 8; *CD III/4*, 9]. The English translation reads: 'it may well be the case – and will always be so – that ... here and now the command of God must be proclaimed by one man to another who must hear it through him' [*CD III/4*, 9]. This translation – if correct – would support McKenny's case. But the German reads rather differently: the phrase translated 'and will always be so' is in the German '*und es wird immer wieder so sein*' [*KD III/4*, 8], giving the rather different 'and will again and again be [the case]'. In other words, while the command *may* indeed be communicated intersubjectively, and may be so again and again, this mode of communication has neither necessity nor monopoly in respect of the giving of the command of God.<sup>9</sup>

This revised interpretation arguably does better justice to both the immediate and the

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<sup>9</sup> A mistranslation also plagues the following paragraph: 'the unavoidable venture ... of understanding God's concrete specific command here and now in this particular way' [*CD III/4*, 9] should really read 'the *venture*, which is not to be avoided [*nicht zu vermeidenden Wagnis* – cf. *KD III/4*, 8]', thereby also explaining why Barth writes that the final judgement on this venture rests with God [*KD III/4*, 8; *CD III/4*, 9].

wider context in view. In respect of the former, it explains why Barth refers here merely to the '*particula veri* in casuistry' [*KD* III/4, 8; *CD* III/4, 9] and makes no systematic attempt to bring it to bear on his whole treatment of the special ethics in the same way that McKenny does. Indeed, reference to this 'prophetic ethos' recurs nowhere in Barth's corpus of writing as a whole, let alone as a prominent feature of Barth's ethics hereafter. In respect of the latter, it does better justice to the fundamental conception that Barth has of the Word of God being inseparably Gospel and Law, something McKenny explicitly recognises: 'Grace, for Barth, never meets us apart from a claim on us' [177]. And it also does better justice to Barth's basic conviction of the Word of God as able to reach us through any created medium, not simply the neighbour, that God lifts up to bear witness to him – dead dogs and all [*KD* I/1, 55; *CD* I/1, 55].<sup>10</sup>

This revised perspective has at least two possible ramifications. First, it need not imply that McKenny's (correct) denial that Barth's position is ultimately individualistic must be discarded as inaccurate or irrelevant. Indeed, Barth's view that the command of God *can* be communicated from person to person precisely indicates the possibility of an exploration and validation of an understanding of ecclesial moral authority based, in McKenny's words, on 'the dynamics of risk, proclamation, and summons in which the roles are reversible' [275]. And second, it may at least call into question the way in which McKenny frames a whole series of binary oppositions: 'Spirit or prophetic voice on the one hand and legal code on the other hand ... divine presence and absence ... command

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<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it is perhaps in this connection that the dialectic of veiling and unveiling – or concealment and revelation – more appropriately belongs; cf. *KD* II/1, §27.1, 200-229; *CD* II/1, §27.1, 179-204.

vs. law; event vs. text; (prophetic) risk vs. (casuistical method or technique)' [280]. This is not to deny that Barth wishes to delineate his own construal of theological ethics sharply from other construals or that he utilises such oppositions; but it is to question the full adequacy of these particular categorisations to capture Barth's view.

*on theological ontology*

Given the inseparable connection in Barth's work between dogmatics and ethics, it is no surprise that McKenny's exploration of Barth's ethics is at least as doctrinal as it is ethical. *The Analogy of Grace* affords careful attention to the doctrine of God, Christology, pneumatology, election, and theological anthropology. Pervasive – if implicit – among these varied doctrinal expositions and explorations is the theological ontology which underlies Barth's moral theology as a whole. There are two aspects of Barth's theological ontology as treated by McKenny which merit specific mention at this point.

The first aspect is that there is a deep awareness in McKenny's work that Barth's understanding of moral theology is directly related to Barth's doctrine of the divine election of grace to be for humanity in Jesus Christ. As McKenny notes, Barth's solution to the problem of ethics is Christological: 'The key to Barth's position [in *Church Dogmatics* II/2] is the role of Christ as the one in whom the twofold determination of election is fulfilled' [69]. With this view, few Barth scholars would take exception, and some of its implications will be explored in the next paragraph. Yet McKenny opens up the possibility

of taking this line of thought further. Confronted with a conceptual difficulty in the course of his analysis of the relationship between Law and Gospel in Barth's work, McKenny posits a solution which makes sense of the Law-Gospel relationship, but which seems, in McKenny's words 'to require us to read the incarnation back into the eternal divine determination' [176]. It is important to note that McKenny does not advance this move: indeed, while he draws attention to 'the momentous issues that are at stake here' [176], his own interpretation of Barth leads to a rather more traditional view of Barth's Trinitarian theology [13]. Sadly, space precludes McKenny from pursuing such questions further in this volume. Nevertheless, this deeper connection between the doctrine of election and theological ethics in Barth's work has been pursued elsewhere,<sup>11</sup> and the depth of this connection and the challenge to conventional Trinitarian thinking to which it gives rise should not be ignored.

The second aspect is that there is a profound awareness in McKenny's work of the way in which this theological ontology with its Christological focus leads to the revision of a series of central theological concepts, notably those of grace, sanctification, and participation. In respect of the first concept, grace, McKenny posits that 'grace, in the strict sense, as what God does on our behalf and in our place, is also the source and content of the ethical requirement itself' [167]. This is a perceptive and accurate representation of Barth's view of grace, reflecting clearly the closeness and significance of

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<sup>11</sup> Paul T Nimmo, 'Barth and the Christian as Ethical Agent: An Ontological Study of the Shape of Christian Ethics', in *Commanding Grace: Studies in Karl Barth's Ethics*, ed. Daniel L. Migliore (Grand Rapids [MI]: Eerdmans, 2010): 216–238.

the Law-Gospel relationship in Barth's theology. At the same time, it is possible that McKenny has here missed a final nuance of Barth's presentation of grace – the identification of the grace of God as God's grace in Jesus Christ and thus as 'God's sovereign act towards humanity that is always and everywhere new, strange, and free' [KD IV/1, 89; CD IV/1, 84]. That McKenny does not perhaps register the full import of this reconceptualisation is betrayed by his willingness to write of Barth's moral theology as leaving open a place for a 'growth in grace' [15]. This leads directly to the second concept, sanctification. McKenny outlines lucidly how Barth effects in his work an assimilation of justification and sanctification with the result that 'sanctification, like justification, is alien; it is ours only as we are in Christ' [220]. In this way, McKenny indicates clearly the way in which Barth's conception of sanctification in particular – and his moral theology in general – has moved far beyond the conception of his Reformation predecessors. It is here, however, that any discourse of 'a growth in grace' becomes rather problematic for Barth. And it is here that a note of regret might be sounded that McKenny did not offer a similar treatment of the concept of *vocation*, which Barth also assimilates as being true objectively in Jesus Christ and precisely – but only – on that basis something in which the human agent shares. Finally, in respect of the last concept, participation, McKenny correctly observes that 'God grants us a participation in God's own work by establishing us as witnesses to it' [208]. But it is not only the case for Barth that such human witness is identified with participation in the divine *work*; it is also the case, as McKenny notes, that Barth describes 'the service of human witness as participation in God's very life' [209]. This actualistic understanding of participation is at the heart of Barth's understanding of

theological anthropology and Christian life and represents, in McKenny's accurate summary, 'an ontology of the subject in place of a substance ontology' [194].

## **conclusion**

*The Analogy of Grace* is an admirable work in the field of Barth studies. It is beautifully written, carefully argued, and deeply engaged. It builds on existing explorations of Barth's moral theology, breaks new ground in terms of the interpretation and analysis it brings to bear on the material, and raises new questions in respect of the plausibility and significance of Barth's theological ethics. Perhaps McKenny's greatest success lies in capturing so precisely the very essence of Barth's moral ontology: that the grace of God 'addresses us as what we are not (yet) in ourselves but are (already) in Christ, such that what we are in Christ becomes determinative for what we are in ourselves, in our existence as acting subjects' [166]. Though there are evidently points in McKenny's analysis in respect of which questions might be raised, the expertise and erudition of his work mean that this will be a standard text on Barth's ethics for some time to come.

Perhaps, in closing, two final reflections upon McKenny's work in the context of current research into Barth's ethics might briefly be ventured. First, it is both refreshing and encouraging that a senior figure not traditionally associated with the guild of Barth studies has devoted time and energy in such measure to a study of his ethical thinking, and has reached a conclusion which, while falling short of endorsement, is nonetheless

warmly appreciative. While it would be unwise to be overly sanguine about a sudden renaissance of appreciation for Barth's work in the academy of ethics at large, it is nonetheless rewarding for those who find value in Barth's ethical deliberations to find in McKenny a sympathetic colleague, if not an outright ally. Second, it is both refreshing and encouraging that the analysis of Barth's theological ethics undertaken with such care by McKenny in this volume offers a sustained engagement not only with matters of ethics but also with matters of dogmatics. Though much of the academic reception of Barth's ethics has focussed – not inappropriately – on his response to concrete issues within Christian ethics, it is rewarding to find in this work pervasive attention being devoted to meta-ethical issues of theological ontology, and to their implications not only for Christian ethics but also for Christology and anthropology.

The ability to attract attention far beyond the bounds of a narrow audience and the ability to inspire reflection far beyond the bounds of a singular issue are hallmarks of Barth's work in general. As McKenny's work *The Analogy of Grace* elegantly demonstrates, they are also hallmarks of Barth's work on theological ethics in particular.