Karl Barth on Jesus Christ the Ethical Center by David W. Gill (1986)

Public lecture in honor of the l00th anniversary of the birth of Karl Barth (16 November 1986)

I. Introduction

Karl Barth is best known as a systematic theologian---many of us would say the greatest systematic theologian since Luther and Calvin. But his work also stands as one of the most creative and powerful contributions to Christian ethics. Few theologians have ever been able to describe the grandeur and multifaceted richness of God with the eloquence and insight of Karl Barth the theologian. But equally few Christian ethicists have illuminated the contours of daily discipleship-in-a-difficult-world as brilliantly as did Karl Barth.

Many Christian ethicists have drawn on the work of Karl Barth, the most important of whom is the French writer, Jacques Ellul, who sees his own work as a kind of extension of Barth's ethics. Even those who reject Barth's ethics, for example the American James Gustafson, are forced to grapple with his approach.

It is important to note that concrete ethical problems played a major role in Barth's whole theological development. As a young pastor in Safenwil, Barth found the ethics as well as theology of his seminary teachers impossibly naive and irrelevant to the problems of his parishioners. What sounded so good over beer and cigars in academic theology seminars in Berlin, Marburg or Tubingen didn't wash in the daily lives of the faithful.

But even more stunning was the incapacity of this ethic to guide even its own great teachers! On August l, l9l4, World War I broke out. On that very day

> *93 German intellectuals issued a terrible manifesto, identifying themselves before all the world with the war policy of Kaiser Wilhelm II. . . . And to my dismay, among the signatories I discovered the names of almost all my German teachers. . . It was like the twilight of the gods when I saw the reaction of Harnack, Herrmann . . . and company to the new situation, and discovered how religion and scholarship could be changed completely into intellectual 42 cm cannons.*

As a result, Barth did not know what to make of the teaching of his German mentors,

> *To me they seemed to have been hopelessly compromised by what I regarded as their failure in the face of the ideology of war. Their ethical failure indicated that their exegetical and dogmatic presuppositions could not be in order. A whole world of exegesis, ethics, dogmatics and preaching, which I had hitherto held to be essentially trustworthy, was shaken to the foundations and, with it, all the other writings of the German theologians.*

A similar crisis emerged with the rise of Hitler and the Nazis. In l934, exactly twenty years after the failure to see clearly the problem of the Kaiser, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others rallied together the "Confessing Church" behind the famous "Barmen Declaration" in opposition both to the naivete of those church leaders who supported Hitler and those who stood by passively while clinging to their doctrinal orthodoxy!

Although we are a long way from Germany and the specific challenges Barth lived with, I submit that the basic themes in his ethical teaching are as relevant to the American Church in the '80's as they were in his own time and place. I want to review four distinctive contributions of Barth's ethics this evening. Each of these four contributions points us to one fundamental notion---that Jesus Christ should be Lord and Center of our Ethics.

First, Karl Barth proposed an "ethic from above" that is, an ethic of the Word of God.

The most common way of doing ethics is "from below"---that is, beginning with nature, reason, the individual, the cultural context or setting. In this approach it is *my* list of problems that become central---and it *my* reason or intuition that will decide the solution.

To understand Barth's approach I want us to consider the prologue to the Ten Commandments: "And *God spoke all these words* ." We can recall also the opening line of John's Gospel: *"In the beginning was the Word."* Everything, including ethical discussion as in the Ten Commands, begins with God's Word.

An "ethic from above" implies two things: first, the *authority* in our ethics is located in God and his Word; second, the *agenda* for our ethics---what is and is not important--is determined by the Word of God. Many contemporary theologians and ethicists wish that the Ten Commands began with the phrase "And the culture spoke these words" or at least "And the culture asked these ethical questions." They wish that the Gospel of John began "In the beginning was man in his cultural context." To be sure, that Word became flesh and dwelt among us--in a cultural, historical context. But "in the beginning was the Word and the Word
was with God and the Word was God."

The danger in beginning from below is that of conformity and accomodation to a fallen world. Thus, beginning with human culture and possibilities, the German church was seduced into support for Hitler. And in our own day of narcissistic celebration of the self and of the possibility of wealth and prosperity exceeding that of previous generations, we risk our ethical souls if we begin from below.

Most contemporary ethicists like to claim that God has created in us an ethical reason and sensitivity that are still substantially reliable even after the fall into sin. They argue that "orders of creation" continue to frame our ethics. But they forget that the way back to Eden was barred by flaming swords.

Thus, Karl Barth does not encourage us to address ethical issues as they are posed by the world, the philosophers or even the theologians. Instead, the ethical question is posed by God. It is the question of our love, freedom and obedience raised by God's gracious Word. When God speaks his word the first ethical question is not genetic engineering, tax laws, abortion, or nuclear proliferation. Rather, it is the question of idolatry. "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself any idol."

This is not our usual starting point for ethics. And yet is is precisely the worship of technology, the state, money, power and the self that is challenged by this first ethical Word from above.

Barth's ethics, then, did not sort our lists of ethical issues into sections on politics, economics, family, and church. Instead, he approached ethics from the perspective of the Word of God as Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer---and the free obedience of the creature, partner and child of this God. He looked at God's freedom for human life, and our call to freedom for God in response. He studied God's relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in love---and our call to freedom in relationships with others. He looked at God's freedom for life---and our call to respect, protect and nurture life. And he studied God's free self-limitation and our call to freedom and honor in our own time and vocation.

Thus, a topic such a work and business ethics arises for Barth in several ways. It is first raised by the question of the Holy Day, the Sabbath, in our freedom before God. It is implicit in our relation to other people. Work is a substantial issue in our freedom for life. And finally it is carried out as part of our larger vocation in the limitations of our space and time before God.

All of this leads inexorably to Jesus Christ. We have no independent access to the "above." But God above has come near in Jesus Christ. The Word has been made flesh and we beheld his glory. In Jesus Christ we see the perfect God for mankind, the Creator for the creature; and we also see the perfect man for God, creature before the Creator.

Second, Karl Barth proposed an ethic of the covenant between God and his people.

Consider again the prologue to the Ten Commands: "God spoke all these Words. I am the Lord your God." The point here is that ethics flows out of an indissoluble relationship established between God and his people. Ethics does not stand on its own as a set of abstract rules to be understood and applied. Christian ethics is more like obeying a Commander than it is like obeying particular commands. The latter exist of course, but their force is as the gracious guidance offered by the one who has acted to love us and bring us into relationship with him.

The perennial temptation of ethics is to want to tell the world the rules by which we will then judge it. Ethicists want to find some independent, universal basis for ethics. But God first establishes his covenant, then guides his people within it. The God who commands us is the God who has died and risen for us and who calls us to daily life in his presence.

All of this implies that prayer, meditation and a walk with God are crucial in ethics. It is no accident that the first table of the Ten Commands addresses our relationship with God. The covenental character of ethics also implies relationships with other members of the covenant people, the body of Christ. For assistance both in ethical discernment and in carrying out the will of God we need other brothers and sisters.

Most ethicists deal with the moral life as though it were an affair for individual moral athletes striving to achieve independent, abstract goals. Barth's second great contribution was to stress the

covenantal context of all true Christian ethics. And this is most clearly seen in Jesus Christ, in whose death and resurrection the covenant was established.

Third, Karl Barth proposed a gospel ethic.

Remember the prologue to the Ten Commands: "God spoke all these Words. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall, shall not." Ethics is our free obedience to the Word of a liberating God. Ethics gives shape to our freedom. It is not a new bondage.

In one of Barth's most powerful phrases, "The Law is the form of the Gospel; the Gospel is the content of the Law." Barth often pointed out that the Gospel, God's redemption from Egypt, preceded the giving of the Law. And that the two tablets of the ten commands were carried inside the Ark of the Covenant. The Law did not get carried in a box ahead of the Ark but was within it. Christians have often made a radical distinction between Law and Gospel. Barth's insight was to see the close interconnection between the two. Thus, each of God's commands is always also a promise. "You shall not" means both that you "must not" and also the promise "you will not."

It is in Jesus Christ that we see the fulfillment of the Law as well as the Gospel. In his exposition of the 6th command in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus showed that the law not only prohibited killing but promised the possibility of reconciliation as a better way.

Fourth, Karl Barth proposed an ethic of freedom, love and joy.

The content of Christian ethics is freedom and love; the style of Christian ethics is joy. This is no less important today than ever. Think of the vitriolic criticism, scorning of others who disagree, joylessness, legalism, lovelessness, and division of much ethical discourse.

Although Barth himself was capable of powerful rhetoric and did not hesitate to raise his voice against injustice or unethical behavior, his first and last word was always grace. He combined confidence in God with humility toward others, including his opponents. Here too we are driven to the example of Jesus Christ---his joy, freedom and love toward all, including the outsider.

We must approach the task of ethics with great seriousness and determination. But if we do not arrive at a position where we experience freedom, love and joy we will have missed the mark.

Obviously, Barth's ethics are much richer, deeper and complex than the four summary points I have made. But if we approach the topic of ethics with the Word of God as our point of departure, with the covenant community as our context, with the Law and the Gospel in a rich synthesis, and with freedom, love and joy as the outcome---we will not only honor the labors of Karl Barth but much more profoundly honor Jesus Christ who alone is worthy to be Lord and Center of our moral life.