

3 The Spirit and the Letter: Protestant Thomism and Nigel Biggar's "Karl Barth's Ethics Revisited"

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One of the more interesting developments in recent theological ethics is the emergence of what has been called "Protestant Thomism."¹ By this term, following John Bowlin, I mean the renewed influence of Aquinas's account of natural law and the virtues among Protestant moralists. This seemingly oxymoronic turn draws more explicitly from work on Aquinas as theologian than Barth as ethicist, though it benefits from recent efforts to read them together and without caricature.² It promotes a dynamic version of Thomism that is at once more Aristotelian and more Augustinian than scholastic Counter-Reformation moral theology that is sometimes held responsible for the independent rationalism of early modern moral philosophy. It is also quite different from common approaches to Aquinas in analytic philosophy of reli-

1. John Bowlin, "Contemporary Protestant Thomism," in *Aquinas as Authority*, ed. Paul van Geest, Harm Goris, and Carlo Leget (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), pp. 235-51. My focus will be versions of Protestant Thomism shaped by Barthian sensibilities rather than apologists for natural law who, according to Bowlin, speak "not for the Church and the grace it confesses, but for a certain cultural and political order" (p. 251).

2. See, for example, Eugene Rogers, *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: Sacred Doctrine and the Natural Knowledge of God* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), and Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002). An important common resource for these authors is Victor Preller, *Divine Science and the Science of God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967). For a recent statement by a leading Roman Catholic ethicist with long-standing interest in Barth, see William Werpehowski, "Practical Wisdom and the Integrity of Christian Life," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 27, no. 2 (2007): 55-72. Werpehowski's "Catholic Barthianism" mirrors Bowlin's "Protestant Thomism."

gion or moral philosophy. My response to Nigel Biggar's welcome revisiting of Karl Barth's ethics considers his remarks primarily in this contemporary context.

It is of particular interest because Biggar's earlier work on divine command and Barth's "special" ethics offered a nuanced response to the many critics of Barth's voluntarism and its supposed heteronomy.³ By arguing that Barth's theology has resources to accommodate traditional Christian teaching on natural law in both the Catholic and Reformed traditions, Biggar in his own way was preparing the ground for "Protestant Thomism." If Biggar and others are correct, their revisionist assessment updates traditional challenges to Barth's ethics even as it promises a nuanced alternative that transcends conventional Protestant/Catholic options in moral theology. At the very least, it seems to be an option for a less anxious but still distinctively Christian ethic that may have been unavailable to Barth in his own day and has been neglected by most contemporary Barthians. I will leave it to scholars of Barth to reflect on its significance for Barth studies.

Let me begin by highlighting what I take to be the central elements of Biggar's assessment. I am helped by the clarity of his essay, especially in noting points where he thinks "Barth should have gone" rather than "where he actually went."⁴ Interpretation and reconstruction are scholarly virtues that helpfully locate agreement and disagreement. Before identifying salient differences, Biggar puts forth commitments that he shares with — and learned from — Barth. They are many. They reflect the massive influence of Barth's uncompromising Christian approach to ethics. These include the priority of prayer for Christian living, the Trinitarian structure of theological ethics, the centrality of Jesus Christ and eschatology, and the evangelical significance of the human good for understanding God's gracious purposes in Christ. As such, Biggar shares with Barth a fundamental concern to take "the liv-

3. Nigel Biggar, *The Hastening That Waits: Karl Barth's Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993, 1995). Here Biggar made a key claim that Barth did not hold "that there is no human *esse* apart from Christ, but that apart from Christ there is no human *bene esse*" (p. 162). Biggar's reading has influenced some Thomist moral theologians. See, for example, Jean Porter, *Nature as Reason: A Thomistic Theory of Natural Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), and *Natural and Divine Law: Reclaiming the Tradition for Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

4. Nigel Biggar, "Karl Barth's Ethics Revisited," p. ♦♦ above. Page numbers for Biggar's essay are incorporated into the text.

ing reality of God seriously” and to assume “unequivocally that God wears the face of Jesus” (p. ♦♦). He too is unwilling to separate Scripture and doctrine from ethics, proclamation from action, or theory from practice. Each of these commitments, however, undergoes redescription in light of Biggar’s critical remarks on the limits of Barth’s ethics and its account of *eudaimonia* and holiness. In this sense, we could claim that Biggar’s project adheres to the spirit but not the letter of Barth’s writings. The debate focuses on specification, not a wholesale choice between philosophy and theology, Christian orthodoxy and moral analysis, or some additive picture of their relation.

Biggar does advance some familiar criticisms of Barth, even as he admits tensions and implicit notions within Barth’s thought that might be resolved in Biggar’s hoped-for direction. He worries that Barth’s formal distinction between theological ethics and Christian ethics, joined with an ambiguous notion of command cast primarily in military terms, becomes a “substitute for ethics” and leads toward a “despotic picture of God” (p. ♦♦). Barth’s misguided aversion to systematic moral reasoning and reticence about the human good, in turn, lead to moral deliberation that Biggar characterizes as “too slapdash, if not whimsical” (p. ♦♦). In this, the great systematic theologian of the concrete is accused of delivering abstract and general moral judgments in *Church Dogmatics* and occasional writings. For example, there are too many missing steps in his provocative but unsatisfying jumps from theological pronouncement and description to specific issues like voluntary euthanasia and human rights. We might add the death penalty, war, coercion, the treatment of nonhuman animals, or the ethics of secret diplomacy to the list of Biggar’s examples where more practical reasoning is demanded. Moreover, Biggar claims, Barth’s suspicion of the good as the end of right action (following Nygren) betrays an unwarranted “assumption that self-interested desire is necessarily selfish” (p. ♦♦). While theological differences are prominent, Biggar also relates these concerns to Barth’s relative neglect of philosophy and nontheological empirical data. Recent Barthian-inspired discussions of the immanent Trinity or the significance of Jesus *in relation to moral and political issues* confirm these judgments.⁵ It is revealing, for example,

5. We might distinguish between Barth’s own sustained reading of various philosophers and his relative lack of attention to concepts in moral philosophy. Contemporary Barthians often draw heavily from philosophy in discussing Barth on christological

that Biggar frames his hiatus from Barth in terms of spending time “at the practical end of ethics” and “expressing a Christian intelligence in a wider public” (p. ♦♦).

Barth scholarship has sought to respond to these kinds of objections, especially in the relatively recent attention to Barth’s ethical writings.⁶ It is difficult to imagine the history of theological ethics in the twentieth century without Karl Barth, his defenders, and his foes. In addition to broader questions of method, discussions of voluntarism, legalism, casuistry, ecclesiology, narrative, and the event of the divine command populate a crowded landscape — especially as mediated by figures as diverse as H. Richard Niebuhr, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Ramsey, James Gustafson, John Howard Yoder, and their contemporary heirs.

Consider, for example, Oliver O’Donovan. Despite his sympathies with Barth’s construal of ethics conforming to the shape of salvation history, he claims that Barth’s attack upon natural law failed to adequately differentiate the epistemological from the ontological issues at hand. Like Biggar, O’Donovan argues that Barth’s dialectics of discernment furnishes an existentialist ethic that is “far too thin to support the extensive responsibility for moral deliberation which he could claim in practice and sometimes even defend in theory.”⁷ O’Donovan praises Barth’s *epistemological* positions given human sinfulness and the radicality of grace, but he thinks they overwhelm a properly realist (and therefore teleological) account of the “whole order of things created, restored, and transformed.”⁸ Despite hints of given spheres of human activity, the organization of Barth’s ethics puts too much pressure on the doctrine of reconciliation alone and fails to provide a suitably complex account of human action and ordered loving. For O’Donovan, the

and Trinitarian issues (for example, the *logos asarkos*). I think Biggar has in mind the relative neglect of ad hoc distinctions that follow the best of recent moral philosophy (i.e., directly and indirectly voluntary acts).

6. See, for example, John Webster, *Barth’s Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth’s Thought* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989); John Webster, *Barth’s Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); David L. Clough, *Ethics in Crisis: Interpreting Barth’s Ethics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); and Paul T. Nimmo, *Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Barth’s Ethical Vision* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2007).

7. Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 87. O’Donovan further claims that Barth ontologically subordinated creation to Christology in ways that led to “a series of frankly Apollinarian Christological conceptions” (p. 87).

8. O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, p. 85.

reality of the resurrection of Christ (which vindicates and restores creation) provides a link between command and obedience that neither denies God's freedom nor denies human agency. This is what is meant by O'Donovan's claim that "the Spirit forms and brings to expression *the appropriate pattern of free response to objective reality*."⁹ Obedience is not an end in itself, but a means to human flourishing in delight with God's will for the good of human beings as revealed and made possible through the saving work of Jesus Christ. In other words, ethics is evangelical ("good news") only if the resurrection "does not appear like an isolated meteor from the sky but as the climax of a history of divine rule."¹⁰

Like O'Donovan (and myself), Biggar wants a more systematic, more eudaimonist, more exegetical, and more realist account of Christian moral reasoning that does not abandon fundamental Barthian convictions. What is interesting in Biggar's treatment, however, is the context of his own selective retrieval of Barth. Biggar's rereading of Barth is shaped by his critical engagement with the influential Finnis-Grisez school of natural law theory that rejects earlier "physicalist" readings of Aquinas.

This school, sometimes called "new natural law," claims that principles of morality cannot be derived from a metaphysical account of human nature or divinity, asserts the priority of the human good to the moral law, and places tremendous weight on concepts of personal vocation (as distinct from the right) and free choice.¹¹ It maintains exceptionless moral norms ("never act against a basic good"), but the goal of the theory is to offer positive guidance for human flourishing across a range of capacities and indefinite possibilities of human fulfillment. As a moral theory, it tries to combine the best of deontological and teleological ethics and avoid their weaknesses. While critical of appeals to virtue that lose purchase on moral realism and difficult cases, its advocates tend to see their primary target as the widespread appeal of consequentialist reasoning in both secular and theological ethics (especially Catholic proportionalism). According to Biggar, these features

9. O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, p. 25, emphasis O'Donovan's.

10. Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 20.

11. For a brief summary of their account, see Germain Grisez, Joseph Boyle, and John Finnis, "Practical Principles, Moral Truth, and Ultimate Ends," *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 32 (1987): 99-151.

make it an attractive candidate for dialogue with a suitably reconstructed version of Barth's ethics. This reconstruction involves being set free from a theological need to ascribe to the sovereignty of God a "freedom to confound every human attempt to understand and interpret the divine will."¹² The bare particularity of Barth's divine command ethic, on this view, falls short of an adequate recognition of both creaturely rationality and the normative structure of created reality, which are not put in competition with God for our attention.

Elsewhere, Biggar suggestively claims that the new natural law theory is "actually formed by specifically Christian presuppositions."¹³ This thought, if amplified, would find favor among critics of the Finnis-Grisez school who highlight the theological commitments of Aquinas's moral vision, especially the way in which natural law is a rational participation in the eternal law of God and human beings are always already under grace.¹⁴ In this essay, however, Biggar seems committed to a substantive account of basic goods (i.e., knowledge of truth, appreciation of beauty, practical reasonableness, skillful performance) as noninferential reasons for action that can swing free of theological reference. Indeed, he indicates that this secular theory of value corrects Barth's (and Augustine's) *excessive* emphasis on the spiritual dimension of all goods.

12. Biggar, "Karl Barth's Ethics Revisited," p. ♦♦♦. O'Donovan also highlights this problematic aspect of a voluntarist legacy in modern theology: "if nothing that our minds can comprehend is in the slightest degree relevant to recognizing the authority of God's will, how is that authority to be recognized? . . . Ultimately man can do nothing but resent God's will, as he resents any other alien imposition, and shake it off if he can" (*Resurrection and Moral Order*, p. 134).

13. Nigel Biggar, "Karl Barth and Germain Grisez on the Human Good: An Ecumenical *Rapprochement*," in *The Revival of Natural Law: Philosophical, Theological, and Ethical Responses to the Finnis-Grisez School*, ed. Nigel Biggar and Rufus Black (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), p. 179. For an impressive account of new natural law with particular attention to Protestant ethics, see Rufus Black, *Christian Moral Realism: Natural Law, Narrative, Virtue, and the Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). The theological commitments of the new natural law theory are most explicit in the work of Germain Grisez; see, especially, his important trilogy, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, 3 vols. (Quincy, Ill.: Franciscan Press, 1983, 1993, and 1997); "Natural Law, God, Religion, and Human Fulfillment," *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 46 (2001): 3-36; and "The True Ultimate End of Human Beings: The Kingdom, Not God Alone," *Theological Studies* 69 (2008): 38-61.

14. See, for example, Russell Hittinger, "Natural Law and Catholic Moral Theology," in *A Preserving Grace: Protestants, Catholics, and Natural Law*, ed. Michael Cromartie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 1-30.

For Finnis-Grisez, goods found in the first precepts of the natural law generate intermediate principles for concrete action-guidance that flesh out what Aquinas left unspecified in his treatment of natural law. They often appeal to empirical anthropology, psychology, and linguistics. The natural law, perhaps unwittingly, becomes an autonomous source of moral knowledge as right reason responds to the desirability of incommensurable yet variegated basic human goods. While I am sympathetic to most of Biggar's concerns and proposals, it is this commitment that I want to highlight as a potential cause for concern on Barthian grounds. Given the work it does for Biggar's criticism of Barth and his approach to applied ethics, it seems of foremost importance to focus on whether or not a "basic goods" or any "objective list" approach to ethics tends toward an autonomous morality unqualified by evangelical proclamation that Biggar otherwise rejects. Biggar aims to distinguish human goods on their own terms without separating them from a comprehensive theological vision. Can this moral theory consider human goods "without forgetting their status as parts" within the total sweep of divine being and action on human being and action?¹⁵ In short, can it remain *Christian* humanism?

This is not the place to pursue in detail the Finnis-Grisez school, its motivations, and its theological and nontheological critics. However, I can highlight one question. It is an old one. We can put it this way: What are the nature and purpose of the natural law? Or, more pointedly, is natural law intended to be a moral theory at all? Finnis, Grisez, and, it seems, Biggar want elements of a principle-driven theory that establishes a set of rules to guide action. It is this version of Thomism that much of the Barthian-inspired "Protestant Thomism" literature seeks to undermine. John Bowlin, for example, argues that Aquinas's account of natural law does not try to offer a "decision machine for the morally perplexed," and it is a good thing it does not.¹⁶ The moral life is too fragile, and too contingent, for this *excessively* legal approach. This is why Aquinas devotes so much attention to the virtues in the second part of the *Summa*. Natural law does offer a minimal ac-

15. Biggar, "Karl Barth's Ethics Revisited," p. ♦♦.

16. John Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune in Aquinas's Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 114. Bowlin rejects the claim that "reason's first principles can, by themselves, generate concrete moral agreement among human communities sharply divided by time and place, culture and convention" (in "Contemporary Protestant Thomism," p. 251).

count of purposeful rationality, but only insofar as it delineates the shape of human reasoning as created by God and governed by his providence. Aquinas places his discussion of Christian morals in the middle of his dogmatics, between the doctrine of God and Christ. For Bowlin, natural law is not a normative theory of action as such. It is a description of those inclinations that direct us to human ends. It is agnostic as to particular ends and specific means, though Aquinas's virtue-oriented analysis of human acts places them under classifiable moral species (i.e., a violation of justice). In short, it is a description of agency and character that centrally involves the virtuous employment of practical reason through hearing the gracious command of God and the judgments of the wise (we might say, sanctified) in assessing the goodness or badness of acts.

Bowlin's reading of Aquinas, therefore, offers an approach to ethics that is "more compatible with the contingency of the human good, the indeterminacy of happiness, and the difficulty of the life of virtue."¹⁷ It is this complex version of Thomist ethics — which I have not adequately described — that might appeal to Barthians who worry about moral theory building, overconfidence in the powers of human reason, and universal rule prescription. In fact, Bowlin argues that recent Thomistic exegesis suggests that the differences "that divide Aquinas from Barth are more apparent than real."¹⁸ Barth and Aquinas often frustrate theorists in search of pure examples of their favored typologies. But, in short, "divine command" and "natural law," or "rationalism" and "voluntarism," may no longer be helpful categories in assessing the future shape of Christian ethics. They may serve heuristic purposes, but they also distort a more fine-grained account of contemporary debates that "range all the way from God to mundane particulars, from the beatific to the casuistic, from the sublime to the meticulous."¹⁹ Given Biggar's reservations about some of the moral conclusions of the Finnis-Grisez school, and his partial criticism of their method, it strikes me that he should adopt some version of Bowlin's nontraditional account or, at least, identify what is missing from this account. It might allow him to maximize those features of Barth he wants to maintain, minimize those features of Barth he

17. Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune*, p. 95.

18. Bowlin, "Contemporary Protestant Thomism," p. 243.

19. Biggar, "Karl Barth's Ethics Revisited," p. ♦♦.

wants to reject, and make explicit those features of Barth that remain implicit.

Let me conclude this brief response. Barth's moral theology continues to exert influence in contemporary Christian ethics, even Protestant casuistry that is open and dialectical.²⁰ It should go without saying, however, that Barth's theological, ethical, and cultural climate was very different from our own. That "Protestant Thomism" is possible is the fruit of patient reading, restatement, and theological development since Vatican II and owes much to Barth's widespread influence in Protestant and Catholic moral theology.²¹ On the whole, however, it strikes me that many Thomists have read Aquinas with Barth in mind; the task remains for Barthians to read Barth with a "revisionist" Aquinas in mind.²² This might take the form of a conversation that relies less on what Barth opposed in his day, or placing Barth as an interlocutor, and more on what a Barthian today might constructively advance in the field of ethics, especially on moral ontology, command, grace, and human agency. The challenge of a "postsecular," "postmodern," or "post-Enlightenment" age does not mean that Barth's rebuke against the false universalism of modernity and his call for Christian particularity should be muted. To the contrary, they remain good counsel against the ideological temptations of Christian ethics and a primary resource for theological-ethical construction shaped by encounter with the Word of God. But it might mean that Barthians will need to not only revisit their imagination for Aquinas, but also attend to more re-

20. For one effort to see how Barth might inform a debate in bioethics, see Eric Gregory, "A Protestant View: The Ethics of Embryo Adoption and the Catholic Tradition," in *The Ethics of Embryo Adoption and the Catholic Tradition: Moral Arguments, Economic Reality, and Social Analysis*, ed. Sarah-Vaughan Brakman and Darlene Fozard Weaver (New York: Springer, 2007), pp. 199-218.

21. As evidence, one need only look at the entries found in Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), and Gilbert Meilaender and William Werpehowski, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

22. Notable exceptions, despite important differences, include George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), and Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001). More recently, see Kevin Hector, "Apophaticism in Thomas Aquinas: A Re-Formulation and Recommendation," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60, no. 4 (2007): 377-93, and Keith Johnson, *Karl Barth and the Analogia Entis* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, forthcoming).

cent work in the history of early modern moral philosophy, contemporary metaethics, and constructive theological ethics.²³

Following Biggar, I have focused primarily on moral concepts in Barth's ethics rather than on his more influential reception in political theology. It is notable that Biggar and Bowlin now occupy two distinguished chairs in Christian ethics. Both took the opportunity of their inaugural lectures to reflect on theology and public life. The shared dispositions of forbearance, gratitude, and moral energy they promoted on those occasions – which challenge some more dominant voices in contemporary Christian social ethics – suggest a promising moment for the development of “Barthian Thomism” in both Anglican and Reformed circles.²⁴ One hope is that this approach, which joins two of the great masters of theological discourse, will help overcome the regrettable division between scholars of theology and scholars of Christian ethics. Whatever its future, that modest development within the bounds of finitude would be a fitting tribute to both Barth and Aquinas.

23. Recent attention to Barth in the broader context of European intellectual history also is suggestive. See Rudy Koshar, “Where Is Karl Barth in Modern European History?” *Modern Intellectual History* 5, no. 2 (2008): 333-62.

24. Nigel Biggar, “Saving the ‘Secular’: The Public Vocation of Moral Theology,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 37, no. 1 (March 2009): 159-78, and John Bowlin, “Some Thoughts on Doing Theology in Public,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 28, no. 3 (2007): 235-43.