

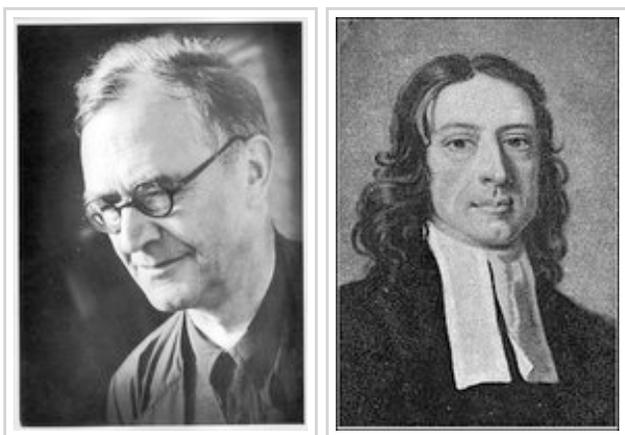
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WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 09, 2006

What Wesleyans Can Learn from Karl Barth (Part Three): Theological Ethics



And now for our third installment of "What Wesleyans Can Learn from Karl Barth."

We have learned that Wesleyans can take a cue from Karl Barth in matters of [theological authority](#) and in [doctrinal procedure](#). But the significance of Karl Barth is not limited to these theoretical matters alone. Barth is also a beneficial guide for the practical world of Christian living.

Wesleyans are known for their concern for ethics. We have a strong heritage of ethical action, both personal and social. Our distinctive doctrine itself has an ethical thrust. To be sanctified is to be empowered for obedience to Christ by his Holy Spirit. Wesleyans don't need any help *caring* about ethics.

And yet Wesleyans face the same challenges as every other Christian in the modern and post-modern world: *How* do we know what is right? *How* do we determine best way forward? *How* shall we then live? Wesleyans certainly know *that* we should pursue righteousness; but *how* do find the path of righteousness?

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A pre-modern Christian might simply say, "I do what the Bible says." Wesleyans have always known that although this approach testifies to the authority of Scripture over our lives, it is still too simple. The Bible does not address every possible situation. Christians must make decisions and develop ends that guide us through the complexities of our concrete lives. In the midst of this hermeneutical struggle, Wesleyans have far too often been enticed by the sense of security provided non-theological foundations for ethical decision-making. Whether it be classical forms of Plato or Aristotle, the modern calculations of Kant or Mill or Marx, or contemporary contextualism or pragmatism, Wesleyans have often been quick to ground their ethical decisions on some external structure. Our motivations have remained distinctively Christian, but our mode of ethical deciding and acting has been guided by seemingly brighter lights.

So who can lead us out of this valley of confusion? How can we learn to decide and act in a distinctively Christian way? Enter Karl Barth. In his unfinished life-work, the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth did the unthinkable: he concluded each volume with a part-volume on ethics. Now this was not simply to make an already impossibly long work even longer. The purpose was to render ethics an explicitly theological task. Just this structural decision alone is commendable: Christian ethics not an independent discipline with its own ground but rather flows directly from the word and work of God reflected upon by theology. This may seem obvious to those of us living in the wake of the 50-year development of theological ethics since Barth. But in Barth's day this was a radical approach. And despite the proliferation of theological ethicists, it remains a radical reminder of the distinctively Christian core of ethics.

The material benefits of this structural move are even more crucial. Barth discusses all the classic and contemporary "issues" from a center in Jesus Christ. The contours of each issue are shaped by the character of God revealed in Jesus Christ. All human action is under the Lordship of God's action in Jesus Christ. Any good that is done (whether explicitly or implicitly related to Jesus) is a witness to Christ's act of reconciling God and humanity. The basis of determining the rightness or goodness of an action is its alignment (or "correspondence") with the action of God. Accordingly, Barth can take unique views on issues ranging from abortion to war to economics that are seldom found held by the same person. How is able to keep this all in tension? By moving out from Jesus Christ to human action as a witness to him, rather than being guided by some non-theological foundation or partisan ideology.

What does Barth's radically theological approach to ethics have to say to Wesleyans? The first lesson is a negative one: we ought to

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repent of our unhealthy reliance on non-theological foundations. Like the Ephesian Church in the Book of Revelation, we have forsaken our first love. Although we should not burry our heads in the sand, we must certainly avoid using these external frameworks as a ground for our ethics. Jesus is Lord. Neither Plato nor Aristotle, Kant nor Mill, Left nor Right have lordship over us. We ought to be in constant conversation with these traditions, but they must never supplant Jesus as the Church's one foundation.

But the lessons from Barth are not wholly negative. We can take a positive cue from his work by developing explicit connections between doctrine and ethics. The doctrine of sanctification has only done half of its job if it merely informs us of the spiritual power that enables us to perform the duties we know by other means. We ought to be asking about the implications of a sanctifying God for concrete ethical issues. Rather than taking for granted what God desires in an individual case, we should think through from the beginning what sanctification looks like for the people involved in the situation at hand. These are the kinds of questions that guide ethics down an genuinely theological path.

Finally, Barth's bold structural move to include ethics within dogmatics raises a question about Wesleyan theological education. In my ministerial training, the two courses that seemed to have the least to do with each other where "Ethics" and "Theology of Holiness." It is telling of their separation that the former bore the registration category PHL, while the latter was designated REL. And the foundational status of Ethics was revealed by it being placed *before* Theology of Holiness in the recommended sequence of courses. Finally, the difference in content was striking, as anyone who had read Wesley and Kant on the same day can testify. The two courses were simply not aimed at the same student. One taught us how to reason through moral problems; the other formed us in a tradition that testified to the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. If Wesleyan ministers are going to not only profess holiness but live it out, there must be a more conscious connection between these two courses. What would this look like? It may be addressed simply by the Ethics and Holiness professors having a conversation about how these course form students. It may require more complex curricular solutions regarding designation, loading, and sequence. But whatever it looks like, the divorce between theology and ethics in Wesleyan institutions should be addressed.

So that's the third reason why this Wesleyan has taken an interest in Karl Barth.

Any thoughts?

- What examples can you think of where Wesleyans having been enticed into drawing ethical reasoning from somewhere other than

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our Christian core?

- What specific ethical issues are illumined by a Christocentric starting point?

- How can we better connect theology and ethics?

Labels: [Barth](#), [Wesleyan](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ [4:23 PM](#)

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15 Comments:

At [8:21 AM, August 11, 2006](#), [coach d](#) said...

I'm enjoying these...even though I've nmot engaged them much in response.

At [10:20 AM, August 11, 2006](#), John Mark said...

You and Ben Myers have awakened some interest in me concerning Barth, who, according to a recent Nazarene book, has affected even the holiness movement. Now maybe I am being uncharitable, but didn't Barth have a questionable relationship with his research assistant? There is a short film floating around the internet right now, which, at roughly 5 minutes tells me just that there were romantic feelings. This does not seem to bother Barth devotees, and I'm sure there is a lot of info I don't have. But, to cut to the chase, how ethical was this most respected theologian?

At [10:35 AM, August 11, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

John Mark,

Thanks for bringing up Barth's relationship with Charlotte von Kirchbaum. I think those Barth fans who blow it off and don't acknowledge the tragedy and failure of the situation are misguided ideologues.

What is clear is that Barth's arranged marriage with his wife was never that happy. His parents made him dump his lower class sweetheart (Rosy) for his handpicked wife. They stuck it out to the end, but were only happy with their children, not each other. Their story is certainly tragic.

The story with Charlotte is more subtle than the American tabloid mind can handle. Charlotte nursed Karl back to health in the 1920s and then later became his research assistant for over 30 years. Although there may have been romantic feelings during the early nursing years, they were confidants and theological soulmates, not lovers, through most of his career. There might be more to know for the "theological tabloid" to muck up, but most of the story is lost in the mystery of history.

Anyways, the bottom line is that both Barth and Wesley did not have particularly exemplary relationships with their wives, but whether this undermines either their Christian example or their theological heritage is another question. I am inclined to acknowledge the failures and tragedies, and move on to learn from them.

Any thoughts on this issue or others brought up by the post?

At [11:38 AM, August 11, 2006](#), Casey Rycenga said...

This post happens to be of particular interest to me because after I took an Ethics class at a state university from an extremely knowledgeable professor, I unwittingly had "forsaken my first love", that being the mystery of Christ, and tried to replace it with Ethics which seemed so much more logical and clean.

One thing that I thought was interesting was that you mentioned Mill which made me think of his reference to Christ in "On Utilitarianism". He says, rather casually, that Christ was the ultimate utilitarian. I think that that sentiment is what has created this widespread notion that your dad discusses in his post about how people like to identify the human side of Jesus more than the Messianic side of Jesus Christ; If Jesus was just the best example of a utilitarian, then that pretty much makes him out to just be a nice guy and not God.

Sorry my comment doesn't pertain to Barth, but it was something that just stood out in my mind.

Casey Rycenga
(I work with your brother, Dave, btw)

At [12:57 PM, August 11, 2006](#), John Mark said...

Some rather random thoughts---

My study of ethics is limited to one college class, where we were to write a paper on a selected topic (abortion, war, eugenics, pornography, etc.) I would agree that theology and ethics were not related in my background, at least not in any obvious ways. To have a Christological approach to ethics would have implications immediately in interpersonal relationships, such as our ability to forgive and accept others, or relating with people with whom we disagree. One of the things I notice in political discussions is that people tend to (rather predictably) talk right past each other on the hot button topics; the war, abortion, issues concerning sex, etc. Even though we have had two World Wars and other conflicts, as well as the cultural revolution and the enculturation of politics, perhaps we (the American Holiness Movement) have been so caught up in our own struggles with purity, legalism, or survival we have not had energy to give to integrating the concepts of holiness and a

Christian perspective on ethics. I'm not saying it was never important, just that other things were demanding attention, or so we thought.

Again, I admit my perspective is rather limited, but you were kind enough to ask for a further response, and here it is.

At [2:21 PM, August 12, 2006](#), [Sniper](#) said...

I'm wondering how our world, and denomination, and local church, would be different if our actions (ethical or unethical) were gauged by Barth's criticisms.

This is a great post. I'm a big fan of Barth, and have been for the last two years or so. The person and work of Christ is our "ethics meter." And doctrinal statements, like entire sanctification bear weight on both matters. If God is so transforming as to eliminate the power of sin in our individual lives, what significance does such a God place on corporate action? How does an "entirely sanctified" person act? What system of ethics are we to identify with? How about Jesus...

At [9:23 PM, August 13, 2006](#), [Scott David Hendricks](#) said...

I would say that the Wesleyan church's position on the ordination of women is both based on the Spirit and on Christ. To ordain women is to recognize the equality of the sexes, led by the Spirit and by Christ in the gospels. Christ seems (to many) to have given exceptional attention to women for a man in his day, and the Holy Spirit was poured out on ALL flesh at Pentecost, on sons and daughters.

At [9:11 AM, August 14, 2006](#), [Keith.Drury](#) said...

You are absolutely correct that (even in "holiness schools") ethics tends to being a subset of Philosophy while theology runs on its own track and that this is a mistake (especially in "holiness schools"). Entire sanctification is supposed to issue in a practical daily walk of holiness not merely a heavenly status change. Perhaps this divorce was a useful tack to avoid the "ethical legalism" so common years ago?

At [12:58 PM, August 14, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

This was great for me to read, John. I've always been facinated by the study of ethics... even as I had a fairly confusing professor for it the first time through in undergrad... I suppose Walt Kaiser's "Old Testament Ethics" class at GC was where it all started to come alive for me.

I love your connection between Theology of Holiness and Ethics... a great indictment of our sin of omission. Perhaps this statement is a broader indictment and solution, however, as we Wesleyans in general are beginning to go out into the highways and byways to

discover our Ethical Identity.

It may be back at home in our Theology of Holiness textbooks. :-)

Duh!

(By the way, has anyone noticed that the Evangelical preachers like Warren & Hybels have most recently co-opted the Emerging Church Ethic, if not their philosophy and theology, as their own?)

At [2:53 PM, August 14, 2006](#), [Sniper](#) said...

David,

What do you mean by "co-opted"? And what exactly falls under the category "The Emerging Church Ethic?"

At [2:57 PM, August 14, 2006](#), [Kevin K. Wright](#) said...

I've always liked James McClendon's Systematic Theology as it brings ethics to the forefront of the theological conversation. To point out the fact that the theological currents of the radical reformation only found their true form as they were practiced in every day Christian living is a good reminder to us Wesleyans that we may indeed have a few theologies that need flesh in order for them to walk about.

At [7:03 PM, August 14, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

(Sorry to have opened a potential can of worms, here John, but I'll keep it to the general subject of Ethics)

Sniper...

By co-opted I mean "borrowed" or "assumed for their own use"...

And I've believed that the Emerging Church Ethic that I have running through my veins and I've felt in others in the "conversation" included the following: 1) Racial diversity & reconciliation, 2) High value for church planting, 3) Love for the poor and marginalized, 4) Desire to counter the AIDS pandemic, 5) Neutrality in the American political landscape (with an openness to right and left at the same time).

While at Willow Creek's Leadership Summit this year and last year and in reading lately I've been struck with how Bill Hybels & Rick Warren in particular have co-opted each of these specific ethical issues as their own, when they hadn't spoken of them much at all before 2 years ago... It seems to me that while the Evangelical Heavyweights are coming late to those parties they are indeed showing up.

Interesting.

At [11:52 PM, August 14, 2006](#), [Dan Morehead](#) said...

Thanks. My dissertation relates to some of these questions, so it's nice to know others think them worth asking.

At [12:43 PM, August 15, 2006](#), [Sniper](#) said...

David,

I'm on page with you now. Thanks for the clarification. I know Warren has really gone after many of those issues in his column with Relevant Magazine. Not sure about Hybels really. Now I guess the question would be if this is good or bad in your mind...BUT, i think we'll leave that for another discussion.

At [12:11 PM, August 19, 2006](#), [Sharon](#) said...

To add to the separation of Ethics and Theology courses, the former is often taught by an attorney... and sometimes totally devoid of theology even in faith-based institutions. Thanks for raising this dichotomy.

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