


# Worship as *primary ethical act*: Barth on Romans 12

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Following the centenary year of the publication of the first edition of Karl Barth's *Der Römerbrief*, this article attempts to look at what a contemporary South African audience could potentially learn from Barth's reading of Romans 12. This article begins with a few preliminary remarks on the reading of Barth in both apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, and asks whether his theology still has any role to play in current theological and ethical discourses (amidst calls that theology should be decolonised). After arguing that Barth might still have 'a' contribution to make (as we further develop our own theologies), this article provides an in-depth exposition and analysis of Barth's reading of Romans 12. Here it is shown how, in his commentary on this chapter (under the heading 'The Problem of Ethics'), Barth maintains that worship, that is, the offering of our bodies as 'living sacrifices' to God, should be seen as the *primary ethical act*, which precedes and renders possible all other secondary ethical conduct. This is then followed by the last section of this article, which explores the possible meaning and relevance of Barth's insights for life in present-day South Africa.

**Keywords:** Karl Barth; *Der Römerbrief*; worship; ethics; South Africa.

## Introduction

Last year marked the centenary of the publication of the first edition of Karl Barth's *Der Römerbrief*,<sup>1</sup> and when surveying current Barth-scholarship, it is interesting to note that this anniversary seems to be accompanied by a renewed interest in Barth's early theology. Much of this interest has, of course, been focused on the second edition of *Der Römerbrief*, in which Barth drastically reworked and refocused the content of the first edition. Together with new publications that have been engaging with *Romans II* (as the second edition is often abbreviated in English), many of the contributions at recent Barth conferences have focused on this work.<sup>2</sup> For the past 2 years, the Centre for Barth Studies at Princeton Theological Seminary has also been hosting student-led colloquiums on Barth's commentary, which have given doctoral students and early career researchers the opportunity to discuss and debate its relevance for the present moment.<sup>3</sup>

As part of this larger reconsideration of Karl Barth's early theology, in general, and *Der Römerbrief*, in particular, this article will attempt to look at what a South African audience could potentially learn from Barth's reading of Romans today, 25 years after the dawn of democracy. It is well known that the writings of Barth played an important role in the church struggle against apartheid, but what could his theology, also in its so-called 'early form', have to say to those living and doing theology in *post-apartheid* South Africa – especially when it comes to questions of ethics and what Christians should *do* in the current South African context? In what follows, I will begin by making a few preliminary comments on the reading of Barth in present-day South Africa, before preceding to address the above-mentioned questions by specifically turning to Barth's analysis of Romans 12. It will be shown how, in his commentary on this chapter, Barth maintains that worship, that is, the offering of our bodies as 'living sacrifices' to God, should be seen as the *primary ethical act*, which precedes and opens up the possibility of all other ethical conduct while countering the human tendency towards titanism and self-justification – especially when thinking, and acting as if, we are in the right. It will then be argued that this link between worship and ethics might have an important contribution to make in the discussion on what Christians are called and required to do in South Africa today.

1. Even though the first edition of the *Der Römerbrief* was already available by December 1918 (after Barth completed it in August of that year), the book's official publication date reads 1919.

2. See, for example, the list of papers at Princeton Theological Seminary's Annual Karl Barth Conference in both 2018 and 2019, the University of Geneva's *Colloque Karl Barth 2019* (with the theme 'Karl Barth's *Römerbrief* 100 Years Later – Retrospect and Prospect'), the sessions of the Karl Barth Society of North America at the American Academy of Religion meetings in both 2018 and 2019, and the *Karl Barth-Tagung*, hosted by the Protestant Theological University (PTHU) in the Netherlands in both 2019 and 2020.

3. This article was first delivered as a paper at one of these colloquiums hosted by the Centre for Barth Studies from 14 to 16 August 2019.

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## Reading Barth in post-apartheid South Africa

At the beginning of this article, it is important to acknowledge that any theological endeavour is always grounded in and expressive of the context in which it originated. Theologians do not find themselves on the 'frosted heights of Thomas Mann's Magic Mountain' (Ward 2016:130), but live and compose their theologies *within* the world. Theologians learn to 'speak of Christ in specific ways at specific times and within specific locations' (Ward 2005:199), and their theologies remain marked by these specificities, as time goes on.

Karl Barth was, of course, well aware of this fact. Already in his preface to the English translation of *Romans II*, he cautioned his readers that, as his commentary 'is now set in a new context', it should be remembered that it was written 'fourteen years ago', by a 'young country pastor', amidst the sounds of 'guns booming away in the North' (Barth 1968:v). When he 'looks back at the book', he writes, 'it seems to have been written by another man to meet the situation belonging to a past epoch' (Barth 1968:vi). For Barth, it was important to see and acknowledge that *Der Römerbrief* was deliberately composed *in and for* a specific context. And as his theological career unfolded, he would continue to echo this sentiment, also with regard to his other writings, as seen, for example, in his last public letter, written to theologians and pastors of South East Asia, a letter in which he purposely emphasised the *situatedness* of his own thought (Barth 1984:551–556; cf. Smit 2012:3).

Barth did, however, recognise – also in the letter mentioned above – that, while our theologies, as human utterings about God, are necessarily rooted in and expressive of specific contexts, they can, and occasionally do, transcend their original settings to speak to and bear witness in other times and places. This is, for example, seen in the strategy he himself used in exegeting Paul's Epistle to the Romans. While he acknowledged in the preface to the first edition of *Der Römerbrief* that Paul was a child of his time who addressed a certain group of historically situated people (and that the historical-critical method thus had 'its rightful place') (Barth 1968:1), he believed that the letter's subject matter, its *Sache*, namely, the revelation of God's radical grace in and through Jesus Christ, bound readers together throughout the ages. He, accordingly, set out to listen to and present Paul's words as if they were spoken by a contemporary, by someone also speaking in and to the present moment. In *Der Römerbrief*, Barth was thus interested in what he, following his father, called the 'uninterrupted conversation between the wisdom of yesterday and the wisdom of tomorrow'; in how Paul's 'ancient' exhortation resounded through the ages to address 'modern' listeners, in their own contexts, in the here and the now (1968:1, 7–8).

Without, then, getting into the complexities and, perhaps, problematics of this hermeneutical method, it can be said that just as Barth, in *Der Römerbrief*, had listened to Paul's words

*in view* of his own context, so many theologians throughout the world also came to listen to Barth's words *in view* of their own contexts.

One such context was South Africa, especially during the apartheid years. Although it is true that Dietrich Bonhoeffer became the most prominent German-speaking theological voice in and for the church struggle against apartheid (see De Gruchy 1984; Koopman 2014:985–998; Vosloo 2013:186–199), Karl Barth's contribution should not be underestimated. While the country's neo-Calvinist theological establishment actively opposed Barth's theology, on both theological and also political grounds (De Gruchy 2019:11–28; Smit 2013:275–292), numerous young pastors and theologians came to read and utilise his works in speaking out against the heresy that was apartheid. In the foreword to the important collection of essays, *On Reading Karl Barth in South Africa Today*, Allan Boesak, one of the most prominent anti-apartheid theologians of the time, remarked that he and others heard 'a strangely contemporary ring' in Barth's writings – echoing Barth's comments on Paul – and, therefore, deliberately used Barth's insights in and for their own theologies (Boesak 1988:xi). For Boesak and others, Karl Barth's writings provided an important theological impetus to utter '*Nein!*' against apartheid and Afrikaner Nationalism, and to confess – amongst other places in the Belhar Confession – that 'Jesus Christ is Lord'.<sup>4</sup>

But what about the present moment? Does Karl Barth's theology still have something to say in South Africa in the aftermath of apartheid?

In this regard, it can firstly be remarked that even though it has been 25 years since the dawn of democracy, South Africa is still marred by the evils of the past. It remains the most unequal country in the world,<sup>5</sup> with many of those who benefited under apartheid still holding on to their social and economic power, while many of apartheid's victims continue to suffer poverty, exclusion and indignity. It has also become evident that there are 'pharaohs on both sides of the blood-red waters', to quote the title of a recent publication by Allan Boesak (2017). At the moment the so-called Zondo-commission, a judicial commission headed by Deputy Justice Raymond Zondo,<sup>6</sup> is trying to make sense of the state capture, corruption and political foul play that have haunted South Africa's post-1994 government, with many of the culprits being so-called struggle heroes of the apartheid era, also from within faith communities. The fact of the matter is, thus, that South Africa remains in need of what the Kairos Document (1986) called *prophetic theology*, a

4. For more on the influence of Barth's thought on the theology of the Belhar Confession, see, for example, Tshaka (2015:185–199).

5. According to data sets collected by, amongst others, the World Bank, South Africa indeed has a Gini coefficient of 0.63 (the highest in the world), with 76% of South Africans living under, or facing the imminent threat of falling below, the poverty line. See Smith (2019).

6. The official name of the commission is the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into allegations of State Capture, Corruption and Fraud in the Public Sector Including Organs of State. For more on the commission's work, visit the website <https://www.sastatecapture.org.za>.

theology which speaks truth to power, challenges the order of the day and inspires a different way of seeing and, importantly, acting in the world.<sup>7</sup>

It should also be remarked that, in and amidst this situation, there is a clear realisation that the theological response to the present moment should come from within the South Africa context; that – as part of a larger process of decolonisation – South Africa should nurture, listen to and learn from theological voices from its own soil. Some would argue that this means that Barth's theology should be discarded, or at least be *put on hold*,<sup>8</sup> a position which, of course, has merit and should continue to be discussed. I would, however, like to suggest that, as we decolonise the academy, an academy indeed infected with the 'diseased social imagination' underlying Western thought as Willie Jennings (2010:6) has argued, and deliberately listen ever deeper to South Africa's own sons and daughters, it perhaps still remains possible to engage with and even learn from someone like Karl Barth, not as a normative theological voice from the West with more authority than any local counterpart, but merely as a (potential) contributor to the larger conversation, as someone who *might/might not* provide 'a' viewpoint with some value, that could stand in service of, and act as a footnote to, the theologies we ourselves develop. This is, arguably, the way Barth himself intended his theology to be used. It is often told how, upon passing a bookstore in Basel which displayed some of his books, Barth remarked to his graduate assistant: 'At most [*these works*] ought to provide ... a few footnotes as a basis for someone else to address their particular needs' (see Villa-Vicencio 1988:12n).<sup>9</sup> It is then in this spirit that I turn to Barth's reading of Romans 12 in *Der Römerbrief*.

## Barth's reading of Romans 12

As is well known, Barth's *Römerbrief*, especially in its second rendition, marks a decisive break with 19th-century liberal theology.<sup>10</sup> On account of Paul's Epistle to the Romans, it advances a theology of radical negation and *krisis*, which upholds an 'infinite qualitative distinction' between Creator and creation; emphasises and explores the dialectical relations between, for example, time and eternity, the visible and the invisible, Adam and Christ, and the historical and the

7. For recent calls to revive the prophetic theology of the Kairos Document, see, for example, Boesak (2015) and Le Bruyns (2015:460–477).

8. At the Annual Barth Conference at Princeton Theological Seminary in 2018 (on the theme 'Karl Barth and the Future of Liberation Theology'), Graham Ward, for example, argued in his paper titled 'Liberation Theology: Does Karl Barth Have Anything to Offer Here?' (which dealt extensively with, and asked critical questions about, the reading of Barth in South Africa), that there is a 'need to decolonise Christian theology' and that Barth, whose theology is 'white and Western' (like Ward's), should be moved to the background, so that South Africa can nurture its own theologians 'rooted in their land, their histories, their cultures ...'. For a recording of the presentation, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DGQ35ZxvZIs>.

9. Villa-Vicencio mentions that the graduate student referred to was Frederick Herzog, who later would become a professor of systematic theology at Duke University.

10. As is often pointed out, Barth's break with the liberal theological tradition already began in 1914 when most of his teachers (including Harnack, Schlatter and Herrmann) supported Kaiser Wilhelm II's disastrous war policies. In the years that followed, Barth would increasingly turn his back on this tradition that was shaped by the theologies of, for example, Schleiermacher, Ritschl and Troeltsch, and, ultimately, set out on a completely new path with his Roman's commentary – a work which he began working on in the summer of 1916. See, in this regard, McCormack (1996:31–290).

non-historical; and makes as its centre point the 'event' of revelation, where God's judgement and grace break into creaturely reality (above all, in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ). At the very heart of Barth's *Römerbrief* is the often-repeated confessions that 'God is God' and that 'creation is creation', and that it is only in and through God's faithfulness (and not ours!) that salvation takes place, and death is, ultimately, turned into life.

When reading *Der Römerbrief*, it is seen how Barth introduces and develops these themes by meticulously following, explicating and expounding on Paul's text.<sup>11</sup> Beginning with Paul's initial greeting, wherein he is seen to be an 'emissary', 'servant' and 'minister of the King' (Barth 1968:27), Barth moves, often at a snail's pace, through the letter's content, showing how God, who is utterly distinct and free from the realm of creation, utters both 'No!' and 'Yes!' to sinful humanity, decisively, as said above, in and through Jesus Christ, in whom the *Deus absconditus* becomes the *Deus revelatus*, and vice versa (Barth 1968:422). Barth's commentary on Paul's words in many ways reaches a preliminary climax in his discussion of the last few verses of Romans 11, a section titled *The Church's Hope*, where he recapitulates Paul's, as well as his own, message up until this point, and firmly asserts that it is only by the radical grace of the unsearchable God that the rejected, who includes, above all, 'the church', now becomes the elected – a glad tidings which calls forth *doxology*, as seen in Paul's letter.

Subsequent to this preliminary climax, Barth continues to discuss Romans 12–15 under the heading of 'The Great Disturbance' (*Die große Störung*), referring to the disruption that is brought about by the inbreaking of God's revelation on the earth. Following Paul's text, Barth's focus now shifts to the implications of the 'event' of revelation for humanity and the world; to how the *completely other* God's 'No!' and 'Yes!', uttered in Christ, interrupt and unsettle the lived reality of 'the old' creation.<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that, in the first edition of *Der Römerbrief*, Barth discusses Romans 12 (together with Rm 13), under the title 'The Will of God' (*Der Wille Gottes*), conveying something of his initial

11. In commenting on Paul's text, it is often seen how Barth's own voice becomes intertwined with, and (arguably) even overtakes Paul's. Barth is, indeed, not only speaking *about* Paul, but, almost more importantly, *with* Paul. In the words of Nicholas Adams: 'Barth's voice is not the voice of the detached scholar, weighing evidence ... Barth attempts to re-present Paul's voice ... Barth's voice is Paul's voice ... *The Epistle to the Romans* is not [*merely*] a book *about* the Epistles to the Romans. It aims to *be* the Epistle to the Romans. It is exciting, challenging, bold and extreme (much like the text on which it is a commentary)'. See Adams (2013:581).

12. For Barth, it is important to emphasise that these (ethical) implications are grounded in, flow forth from, and are, in fact, latently part of everything that was said up until this point. For him, there is, in fact, no distinction between dogmatics and ethics. The one is, and opens up to, the other. He writes: 'We are not now starting a new book or even a new chapter of the same book. Paul is not here turning his attention to practical religion, as though it was a second thing side by side with the theory of religion. On the contrary, the theory, with which we have hitherto been concerned, is the theory of the practice of religion. We have spoken of the *mercies* of God, of grace and resurrection, of forgiveness and Spirit, of election and faith, of the varied refractions of the uncreated light. But the ethical problem has nowhere been left out of account'. See Barth (1968:427). On this matter, Barth was strongly influenced by Calvin, whom he was reading quite extensively for his Göttingen lectures on the Reformer in 1922. In Calvin, he writes in these lecture notes, we find 'what it looks like when a theologian really addresses and unites both parts, when the fight for works of the Spirit is also self-evident and a heart's concern... This relating to the horizontal, this unity of faith and life, dogmatics and ethics, this attempt to answer the question of human strivings and willing that Luther's discovery had for a moment pushed into the background, was distinctive, natural, and original to the Reformed'. See Barth (1995:77).

conviction that the 'new person in Christ' is increasingly transformed into a vessel or an instrument of *God's* will (Barth 1985:462–529). By the time he wrote *Romans II*, he was, however, decidedly more convinced of the absolute divergence between God and humanity, also vis-à-vis the *doing of the good*. He, therefore, begins his discussion of Romans 12 under the decidedly more polemical title, 'The Problem of Ethics' (*Das Problem der Ethik*).

In Barth's view, the core of Romans 12, our focus in what follows, is encapsulated and expressed in the first two verses of the chapter, which are introduced by the phrase, 'I beseech you by the mercies of God' (Barth 1968:424; Rm 12:1). For Barth, this 'beseeching' is crucial, as it signifies the way in which the mercy and grace that Paul, and also Barth himself, had spoken of up until this point, disturbs and, in fact, demands the change of, all human thoughts and actions, as they find expression in the 'concrete' world 'of nature and civilization' (Barth 1968:424). Barth reminds his readers at this point that the reality under discussion in Paul's letter is indeed *this* world, the world in which we live and read about in the daily newspaper, in all its unsettling complexity and *krisis*.<sup>13</sup> What is, accordingly, asked of us, according to him, is to be brutally honest about the *way things are*; to 'penetrate life's hidden corners, and steadily refuse to treat anything – however trivial or disgusting it may seem – as irrelevant' (Barth 1968:425); all while recognising that even our thinking about life (and the way we act in the world) remains partial, broken, indirect and, therefore, radically disturbed by the grace of God. For Barth, moral exhortation is thus to let grace 'come into its own', the grace which both interrupts and serves as the pre-supposition of all human doing and thinking (Barth 1968:424). It is 'grace alone', Barth writes, 'that is competent to provide humanity with a truly ethical disturbance' (Barth 1968:430).

What are we, then, beseeched to do by the 'mercies of God?'; what does God's grace demand of us? The answer Paul gives, Barth points out, is not, in the first place, some or other conventional moral act, as perhaps would be expected, but rather to present our bodies, that is, our 'concrete, observable, historical existence', as a 'living sacrifice, holy acceptable unto God' – what Paul calls 'true worship' (Barth 1968:431; Rm 12:1–2). For Paul, Barth emphasises, worship, understood as *sacrifice*, can thus be seen as the *primary ethical act*, the central and definitive ethical activity demanded from humanity, which both precedes and renders possible all other *secondary ethical activity* (to which Paul, as well as Barth, will turn in what follows). According to Barth, worship, as sacrifice, means 'surrender', 'the renunciation of humanity in favour of God', the 'abandonment by humanity of their power and their right' (Barth 1968:431). It is nothing less than the acknowledgement of the 'confiscation' which occurs when humanity is 'confronted by the unfathomable' otherness of God (Barth 1968:431). It is the laying down and, even, denial of the Self, and the 'giving up' of all 'human duties and

13. Barth's often-repeated conviction that the Christians should read both the Bible and the newspaper simultaneously is expressed here for the first time. He writes: 'A wide reading of contemporary secular literature – especially of newspapers! – is therefore recommended to anyone desirous of understanding the Epistle to the Romans'. See Barth (1968:425).

virtues and good deeds', so that our lives may begin to point towards, or – to use Barth's imagery of a May Day protest (representing the Labour Movement) – 'demonstrate to' God's goodness and honour alone, as opposed to our own (Barth 1968:431).<sup>14</sup> According to Barth, the foundation of Paul's ethics in Romans 12 is thus the offering of who we are and what we do to God; an offering, he adds, which God, in God's freedom, can choose to accept or reject. God is, after all, God. Whether our 'actions do in fact serve His glory must be left entirely to His decision, precisely because their purpose is the service of his Honour' (Barth 1968:432).

Following Paul's text, Barth then goes on to explore the reason why worship must be seen as the *primary ethical act* and why self-sacrifice must be the first word spoken in ethics. And this reason, according to him, is the fact that all human thoughts and words and actions, however 'good' and 'true' and 'pure' they may appear at first, are marked by and expressive of what Paul calls the 'present form of this world' (Barth 1968:433).

For Barth, it is important to recognise, with Paul, that the 'world in which we live', the world of 'time and of humanity and of things', possesses a definite 'form and shape', a general 'law', an 'identifiable pattern', which subsumes and directs everything that is *in* and *from* it (Barth 1968:433). This form, Barth argues, is that of Eros, which should here be understood as self-love, the unquenchable desire for personal honour and significance.<sup>15</sup>

We 'must not delude ourselves', Barth notes, everything we think and do and say in this world is governed by what can be regarded as our 'own beloved ego' (Barth 1968:435). For Barth, there is, indeed, no act of love, or honesty, or courage, which is not, in some sense, also *erotic*. Every human activity and achievement can be seen as a *promethean* attempt to assert the (*no-god* of the) Self. According to Barth, this is, then, why, when it comes to Christian ethics, we are called to give up who we are and what we do to God. Only by presenting our words, thoughts and deeds as 'living sacrifices' to God's glory can our lives, while continuing to be marked by the 'form of this world', begin to resemble something of what Paul calls the 'world's coming transformation', and, possibly, serve as 'parables' or 'tokens' of the goodness which, alone, belongs to God (Barth 1968:436).

For Barth, following Paul, a central aspect of this *primary ethical act* of worship is, then, repentance, or, to use Paul's

14. Barth was, of course, actively involved in socialist politics from his time as a student and especially while he was a minister in Safenwil, where he championed worker's rights. He even became a card-carrying member of the Social Democrats in 1915 (while remaining critical of some of their policies and actions). It is thus not strange that he uses the image of a May Day protest in this manner: 'It is, surely, childish to suppose a May Day Procession to be itself the Labour Movement. It is a Demonstration. Nevertheless, any class-conscious "worker" would feel bound to take part in it. Similarly, all ethical behaviour, even the primary ethic of the broken line, even the worshipper bowed before the merciful God, is no more than a demonstration: the demonstration is, however, necessary and obligatory'. See Barth (1968:431). For more on (the early) Barth's radical politics, see Hunsinger (2017).

15. It is interesting to note that Barth makes this reference to Eros (in contrast with *Agape*), long before Anders Nygren's influential study on this topic. Nygren's two-volume work, *Den kristna Kärlekstanken genom tiderna. Eros och Agape*, was first published in 1930 and 1936, respectively, and one can thus assume that Barth's ideas in *Der Römerbrief* influenced Nygren's thoughts. For the English translation of Nygren's work, see Nygren (1953).

words, the 'renewing of your mind, so that ye may prove what is the will of God, even what is good and acceptable and perfect' (Barth 1968:436; Rm 12:2). Repentance, Barth comments, is the act of 're-thinking', the 'transformation of thought', the constant realisation and acknowledgement that what we, as human beings, do and say and think – including our acts of repentance themselves – are marked by Eros and the ambiguity of our temporal existence, and are, therefore, dissolved by eternity and God's grace (1968:436–437). As a deliberate giving away or even subversion of the Self, repentance, according to Barth, is, paradoxically, an act filled with promise and hope. For in and amidst death and decay, it is – or at least begins to resemble – a thinking not of the Self, but of 'grace, of resurrection, of forgiveness', a thinking which could, possibly, lead to 'behaviour which is well-pleasing to God and in which God's glory and the downfall of humanity shines forth' (Barth 1968:437). 'Like the turning of a key', Barth writes, repentance may be the 'prelude to a new action', to 'conduct which is marked by the divine protest against the great illusion, and through which the light of the coming Day shines clear and transparent' (1968:437).

After having introduced worship, that is, the offering of ourselves as living sacrifices to God, as the *primary ethical act* demanded by God, Barth's focus turns to what can be regarded as *secondary ethical activity*, ethical acts flowing forth from the act of worship, as discussed by Paul. As a preface to this discussion, he begins by re-stating what he regards as the pre-supposition of Paul's Epistle, as a whole, as well as of everything said about ethics up until now, namely, that 'God is God' and that 'creation is creation'.<sup>16</sup> It is important to acknowledge, Barth writes, that even in our acts of worship and repentance, as described above, the perpetual temptation exists to seek out 'high places' and 'spheres of eminence'; to cling to what can be described as 'human righteousness'; to fall trap to an idolatrous titanism, where the Self, instead of God, is exalted (Barth 1968:439–440). It is for this reason, he writes, that Paul urges us, once more, at the start of this discussion on *secondary ethical activity*, 'not to think of ourselves more highly as we ought' (Barth 1968:440; Rm 12:3). In as far as our thoughts and deeds, including our acts of worship and repentance, remain marked by the *form of this world*, by what could be seen as 'Cain's struggle for existence', it is indeed crucial to remember, Barth writes, that it is only in being overtaken by God's inbreaking grace, that the individual – in fellowship with other 'members of the body' (a fellowship established in and by Christ's relation to each distinct person)<sup>17</sup> – can begin to witness, in word and deed, to the goodness of God (1968:440).

16. He writes in this regard: The 'whole conversation between [Paul and his audience] forms one long reminder of the vast disturbance which has taken place. For this reason, the Epistle to the Romans is nothing but *exhortation*. God is God: this is the pre-supposition of ethics. Ethical propositions are therefore ethical only as expositions of this pre-supposition ...'. See Barth (1968:438).

17. Barth's gives his (rather complex) explanation of Romans 12:4–5 (on the *one* and the *many* in the 'body of Christ') in Barth (1968:441–444). In short, he argues against individual persons being part of a larger whole (as is the case in, e.g. Roman Catholicism). For him, every person is a whole in him- or herself, who is established, as such, by Christ's relationship to the individual. The body of Christ, according to Barth, is thus a 'community' or 'fellowship' of individuals *in Christ*, who see and discover in the *other*, that which they, themselves, are not, namely God, the great Other. The *oneness* of the body therefore comes about *through*, and in recognition

For Barth, it is then in the context of everything said above that '*secondary ethical actions* begin to assume full and weighty significance' (Barth 1968:446). Following Paul's text, he begins by discussing different 'gifts' ranging from prophecy to ministry to teaching, which could, as Paul writes, 'perhaps' come to expression in the community of faith, when a human being is 'offered up as a sacrifice' unto God (Barth 1968:444ff.; Rm 12:6–8). While these gifts seemingly differ from one another, Barth notes, they are, in fact, one and the same, because they stand under the same cross of Christ, and all bear witness to, and can be seen as parables of, the grace of the one God at work in the world. The discussion, here, is thus not about our own abilities and what we, ourselves, could say and do. According to Barth, there is 'not a word about human requirements!' (Barth 1968:446). True ethics is alone about what God does, with our words and actions merely demonstrating to a goodness and glory that is not ours, as we offer our lives to God. Barth also then examines various 'positive and negative possibilities', which are opened up by, and flows forth from, the *primary ethical act* of worship, as discussed by Paul (Barth 1968:450ff.). Here, he likewise emphasises that none of these positive or negative ethical possibilities have anything to do with our own abilities, or potential for goodness, but is solely the consequence of God's grace at work in, through, and despite us.

Beginning, then, with what could be called 'positive ethics', Barth mentions that even though only God can do what is truly good, there is 'relative positive human behaviour' which, while being 'marked – as all human possibilities are marked – by the form of the world', possesses, even 'in its present form', a 'parabolic capacity, a tendency towards protest, an enmity against the world's erotic course' (Barth 1968:451). Such behaviour, Barth mentions with reference to Paul's text, includes, for example, to be 'kind to one another', to 'rejoice in hope' to be 'patient in tribulation', to 'continue instantly in prayer' and to 'be given to hospitality' (Rm 12:9–15). What makes these actions different, Barth notes, is that – while still being tainted by Eros (as all human actions are) – they also express, or rather bear witness to, what could be called *agapeic* love, a love not directed at the Self, but to the Other. *Agape*, according to Barth, is the antithesis of Eros and, as such, 'the supreme, positive, ethical possibility' (1968:451, 492ff.). In it, he writes, is 'summed up the whole behaviour of humanity which, though relative, and though remaining within the *form of this world*, runs counter to it' (Barth 1968:451). This is then why, in Barth's view, it is so important to see and understand worship as the *primary ethical act*. For in offering our lives to God, as discussed above, our love is turned away from ourselves towards God, which opens up the possibility for us to also love and serve our fellow human beings in a selfless manner. For Barth, the love demanded in the first 'Table' of the Law thus leads to the love demanded in the second 'Table' of the Law; the *primary act* of worship extends, or rather translates into, 'the secondary action of love towards our brothers and sisters' (Barth 1968:452). And because this is so, Barth argues, of each individual person's relationship to the God who is One. See Oakes (2011:131–134).

all *secondary ethical activity*, marked – however imperfectly – by *agapeic* love, also, in turn, becomes *primary acts* of worship through which God is honoured, turning our whole lives into a sacrifice to God's glory.

After having discussed the positive ethical possibilities in Paul's text, Barth also identifies certain negative ethical possibilities, which, in a similar manner than the positive possibilities mentioned above, flows forth from the *primary ethical act* of worship. Barth (1968) writes that, just as there are:

[T]hings willed and done by humanity which, in spite of their relativity, are pregnant with parabolic significance, powerful in bearing witness, capable of concentrating attention upon the Beyond; so there may be things not willed and not done which are endowed with a like gravity. (p. 461)

*Negative ethics* thus refer to 'non-actions', which emanate from and are conditioned by the act of worship. Examples of these negative possibilities, as found in Paul's text, include to *not* set our minds on 'high things', to *not* 'be wise in our own conceits', to *not* 'render evil for evil', to *not* 'avenge ourselves' and, as the 'great negative possibility' discussed at the end of Romans 12, to *not* 'be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good' (Barth 1968:475; Rm 12:16–21). With reference to this last-mentioned negative ethical possibility, Barth writes: 'What more radical action can humanity perform than the action of turning back to the original root of not-doing – and NOT be angry, NOT engage in an assault, NOT demolish?' (Barth 1968:481). Once again, Barth argues, it is thus by giving our whole selves to God in worship, that certain actions, or non-actions in this instance, become possible, which in a relative sense, protest against the order of this world and, thereby, demonstrate to the glory and honour of God.

## Worship as *primary ethical act* in present-day South Africa

Barth's *Römerbrief* is a book of dialectical extremes; a work marked, as he himself acknowledged, by a 'one-sidedness' (Barth 1957:634–635), where the emphasis is on the diastasis between humanity and God, also when it comes to (possibility of) the doing of the good.<sup>18</sup> This one-sidedness is, obviously, open to criticism, and we should ask if humanity is really only capable of *demonstrating* to 'goodness', instead of performing what could, in fact, be considered good, in and of itself. Is it not, perhaps, possible to have a more *analogical* conception of goodness, where human ethical conduct participates in and becomes an expression of the goodness that belongs to God; where our actions, thus, stand in continuity (amidst discontinuity) with those of the divine?<sup>19</sup> While exploring

18. Barth would later – especially in his book *The Humanity of God* – ascribe this 'one-sidedness', marked by God's absolute distinction from humanity, to the fact that his early theology did not fully account for the reality that God decided 'to live together with humanity in Jesus Christ'. See Barth (1960). Cf. also Johnson (2019:13ff.).

19. According to Hans Urs von Balthasar's account of Barth's theological development – an account Barth himself largely agreed with (but which Bruce McCormack came to challenge in his book, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*) – this is indeed the move that is made in Barth's later theology (especially after his book on Anselm): from a strictly *dialectical* to a more *analogical* approach (even though Barth would like to speak of an *analogy* rooted in 'faith', the *analogia fidei*, whereas Von Balthasar would like to speak of an *analogy* rooted in 'being', the *analogia entis*). For more on Barth's rather complex relationship to analogy, see, e.g. Johnson

these questions, I think it is important to mention, again, that Barth's theology originated in a specific context; a context which seemingly required such stark dialectical thought – also, then, to act as a possible correction to thinking leaning in the opposite direction. And it is in this sense, I would like to suggest that it also might have something to contribute to the discourse on (theological) ethics in South Africa today.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, institutionalised apartheid is no more, but the devastation it caused remains a palpable reality in South Africa. Many black South Africans still suffer severe poverty, exclusion, and indignity on a daily basis, while many white South Africans arguably live a (relatively) privileged and sheltered life (even though some, especially on the political right, argue the opposite). In and amidst this situation, the question remains: 'what can and should be done?'. For the Karl Barth of *Der Römerbrief* (as discussed throughout this article), the answer to this question, especially to white South Africans, would most probably be: the continual giving away of the Self, above all to God, as an act of 'true worship' (as Paul writes in Rm 12). As in the past, Barth would argue, the deep-seated, all-too-human temptation (or, rather, condition) of Eros, that is, of self-love, self-service and self-preservation, continues to ground, form and direct our lives and actions in the (so-called) new South Africa, even if we pretend that this is not the case. While thinking that, and acting as if, we are in the right, that we are serving the 'other', and that we are working towards a better future for 'all', the chances are good that we are really – knowingly or unknowingly, openly or covertly – serving, asserting and sheltering the (*no-god* of the) Self, which is probably part of the reason why transformation and reconciliation remain such distant, and some would argue unattainable, ideals at the present moment. For true change to occur, Barth would insist, we would thus have to begin with, and also end in, worship, as described by Paul in Romans 12. For only in the continual act of repentance and the surrendering of all that we are and do and say to God (as *primary ethical act*), is our love ultimately turned away from ourselves to what is 'other', which opens up the possibility for us to also truly love and serve our fellow human beings (as *secondary ethical acts*) and, in doing so, witness to the goodness and mercy that does not belong to us, but to God. How exactly this 'great ethical possibility' of *agapeic* love would look in post-apartheid South Africa, naturally depends on the various contexts in which people live, work, and serve, and part of the Christian act of worship, as understood by Barth, is precisely to see and to be surprised by what God chooses to do – also in and through our lives – as we begin to offer our bodies as living sacrifices to God. At a fundamental level, it could be argued, it would, however, include the very acts mentioned by Paul as *secondary ethical activity* in Romans 12, acts such as to be kindly 'affectioned one to another', to be 'given to hospitality', to 'bless, and curse not', to 'rejoice with them that rejoice, and weep with them that weep', and to be 'at peace' with one's neighbour (Barth 1968:450; Rm 12:9–20).

(2010), as well as Oakes' discussion of *analogy* in the context of *Der Römerbrief* in Oakes (2011:20ff.).

According to Barth, the same would also, then, apply to those who have fought for justice in the past and are also doing so at the present moment. Barth would remind us that the struggle for justice can easily lead to forms of self-justification; just as the search for what is right can easily lead to forms of self-righteousness.

Those lauded as moral heroes can easily become merciless titans, just as those tasked with enforcing the law can easily become a law unto themselves. This is, arguably, what has happened in recent years, if one looks at the testimonies that are currently being given at the hearings of the Zondo-commission. In this context, it might likewise be good to hear, especially within the church, that the doing of the good, and the struggle for justice, should be *kenotic* acts, acts of self-sacrifice, acts in which the Self is not asserted, but, in fact, given away to God and to others. For, we do not bring about God's kingdom on earth (cf. Egan 2007:448). It is alone by giving our lives away that our misdirected and selfish actions, marked by Eros, are transformed and begin to serve as tokens and parables of the *completely other* God's coming reign.

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