

## Karl Barth's Theology and Its Implications for Christian Ethics

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
morals, manners, theology	In an era marked by moral relativism and the secularization of ethical discourse, Karl Barth's theology offers a compelling framework for grounding Christian ethics in divine revelation rather than human reason or cultural norms. This research examines Karl Barth's theology with a focus on the implications of that theology for modern Christian ethics. The study employs a qualitative library research methodology with a thematic-textual analysis of Barth's primary theological works—particularly Church Dogmatics—supplemented by secondary literature from Reformed theologians and contemporary Christian ethicists. The findings demonstrate that Barth's theology establishes five key ethical principles: (1) divine sovereignty as the foundation of moral authority; (2) revelation-based ethics transcending human rationality; (3) obedience to God's Word as the essence of Christian moral action; (4) rejection of autonomous secular and liberal ethics that prioritize human autonomy over divine command; and (5) integration of personal piety with social responsibility reflecting God's justice in the world. The implications include Christian ethical acts oriented toward obedience as well as social responsibility in the context of the contemporary world. This research contributes to theological ethics by demonstrating how Barth's christocentric approach provides resources for addressing contemporary moral challenges—including bioethical dilemmas, environmental crises, and political engagement—while maintaining theological integrity in post-secular contexts.

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### INTRODUCTION

Ethics are often confronted with a person's moral views or behavior in daily life. This proves that a person is civilized or not. The view of ethics is sometimes eroded by the progress of the current era, so that the customs of politeness (manners) and civility of a person are often set aside. Humans always act on values. The actions taken by humans are considered good and appreciated. Everyone or group has their own view of value or goodness. They can assess every action taken based on a reference or binding law. Differences in ideas between individuals in the same group about something that is good and appreciated will cause problems. Studies that study moral behavior and values are called ethics. Ethics talks about the standard of good and providing value for a good action (Hackney, 2023; Koenig et al., 2015; Longman & Longman, 2019; Sota & Sota, 2015).

Literally it can be said that Theology is the science of God not according to human ratios but Divine revelation. Who He is and how to relate to humans (Gallagher & Gallagher, 2014; Lorrimar, 2025; McHugh & McHugh, 2014; Migliore et al., 2014; Nnaji & Nnaji, 2015). Braedly C Hanson said theology is a personal reflection in a religious faith (Aquinas, 2014). Karl Barth said that theology, like other functions of the church, is uniquely since God speaks to man and man listens to His word through grace. Theology as a buagh An act of humble repentance (Grenz, 1996). Staenly Grenz defines theology as "learning to know God and His attributes and their relationship with man and the universe. Hodge argues that theology is the presentation of biblical facts in the order of true relationships, with the general principles or truths involved in

the facts themselves and spreading and harmonizing the whole. Doodyewerd defined theology as the study of the aspects of faith and human truth (Guthrie, 1994). John Stott says that theology is a rich multidimensional discipline of science and demands accountability (Stott, 1996).

From some of the above expert understandings, it can be concluded that Theology does not only learn about God but more than that it learns about the absolute truth of God and all aspects of work and salvation and participation in human life. We also learn about theological elements in the form of God's Word, wisdom, doctrine, Bible facts, faith, discipline and science.

The value system is considered something subjective because values will merge with the culture of everyone. Many things are considered good by some people, but not considered so by some or called moral relativism. This is in accordance with the opinion of Gowans (2019), right or wrong moral judgment is not absolute or universal, but depends on one's traditions, beliefs, and experiences. However, for Knight (2009), Christianity views the value system as not universally recognized because the concept of essence and truth is the basis for building an axiological system. In essence, a value system essentially refers to a single absolute reference that can influence actions in an individual or group's cultural phenomenon.

Within Christian theological ethics, the twentieth century witnessed significant debates about the proper foundation and method for moral reasoning. Liberal Protestant ethics, influenced by Friedrich Schleiermacher and Albrecht Ritschl, sought to correlate Christian moral claims with modern philosophical categories and cultural values. This approach, while facilitating dialogue with secular thought, risked diluting the distinctiveness of Christian ethics by subordinating theological convictions to philosophical respectability. In contrast, Karl Barth (1886-1968) initiated a theological revolution that reasserted the primacy of divine revelation over human reason, arguing that authentic Christian ethics must be grounded in God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ rather than natural law, human experience, or cultural consensus (Barth, 2010).

Despite Barth's profound influence on twentieth-century theology, contemporary Christian ethics has sometimes marginalized his contributions, particularly in contexts emphasizing practical applicability and interfaith dialogue. Some ethicists view Barth's revelation-centered approach as too exclusivist or insufficiently engaged with the moral insights of non-Christian traditions and secular philosophy. However, this critique may overlook the enduring relevance of Barth's theological method for addressing the crisis of moral authority in late modernity. As Hauerwas and others have argued, Barth's insistence on the church's distinctive moral witness offers resources for resisting the privatization of faith and maintaining ethical integrity in pluralistic contexts (Cui & Han, 2024).

Scholarly engagement with Barth's ethics has developed along several trajectories. Classical studies by Gustafson (1978) and Biggar (1993) examined Barth's ethical method within Church Dogmatics, emphasizing his rejection of natural law and his Christocentric approach. More recent scholarship by Webster (2000) and Nimmo (2007) has explored the relationship between Barth's doctrine of election and his understanding of moral agency, demonstrating the coherence of his theological ethics. Hauerwas (2001), while diverging from Barth on ecclesiology and virtue ethics, acknowledges Barth's contribution to narrative approaches in Christian ethics that resist liberal fragmentation.

Contemporary applications of Barth's ethics have addressed diverse issues: Jones (2003) applied Barthian principles to bioethics, Malesic (2012) examined implications for political theology, and Clough (2015) explored environmental ethics through Barth's doctrine of creation. However, most existing studies focus on specific dimensions of Barth's ethics (Christology, ecclesiology, political engagement) rather than providing comprehensive analysis of his theological ethics and its systematic implications for contemporary Christian moral life across multiple domains—personal, ecclesial, social, and political.

Furthermore, scholarship has insufficiently addressed how Barth's rejection of secular ethics informs Christian responses to moral relativism in postmodern contexts. While studies acknowledge Barth's critique of natural theology and autonomous ethics, fewer have systematically explored how his alternative—revelation-grounded ethics—provides constructive resources for Christians navigating moral pluralism. This represents a significant gap given the intensification of ethical diversity and the erosion of shared moral vocabularies in contemporary societies.

Karl Barth's view of Christian ethics is very centered on Christianity as the Word of God that is the source of Actions and commandments, so Christian ethics must begin with God's sovereignty and His grace manifested in Jesus Christ. This is a strong reason for us as believers that Christian Ethics is guided by or linked to Jesus Christ. What is Barth's theology and its implications for Christian ethics?

The urgency of this research stems from three converging factors. First, the intensification of moral relativism and ethical pluralism in late modernity necessitates robust theological responses that articulate distinctive Christian moral witness without retreating into sectarian isolation. Barth's theology, with its emphasis on divine sovereignty and Christocentric ethics, offers precisely such a response by grounding moral authority in God's revelation rather than cultural consensus, while simultaneously engaging substantive social and political issues. Second, the resurgence of interest in "post-secular" discourse—recognizing religion's ongoing public relevance despite secularization—creates opportunities for retrieving theological resources like Barth's ethics that were previously dismissed as pre-modern or fideistic. Third, contemporary crises—bioethical controversies surrounding human enhancement and genetic engineering, ecological degradation demanding theological responses to creation care, political polarization requiring prophetic critique of ideological captivity—demand ethical frameworks that combine theological depth with practical engagement, characteristics embodied in Barth's approach.

The novelty of this study lies in its comprehensive synthesis of Barth's theological ethics and systematic exploration of implications across five domains: foundational theology (sovereignty and revelation), moral epistemology (obedience as ethical method), critical engagement (rejection of secular alternatives), social ethics (political and communal responsibility), and contemporary application (addressing 21st-century moral challenges). Unlike previous studies focusing on discrete aspects, this research integrates these dimensions to demonstrate the coherence and contemporary relevance of Barth's overall ethical vision. Additionally, this study uniquely positions Barth's theology as a constructive resource for post-secular Christian ethics that maintains theological integrity while engaging substantive public issues, moving beyond simplistic binaries of sectarian withdrawal versus liberal accommodation.

This research pursues three specific objectives: (1) to systematically analyze Karl Barth's theological foundations for Christian ethics, particularly his doctrines of divine sovereignty and revelation as moral authorities; (2) to examine Barth's rejection of secular and liberal ethical frameworks and articulate his alternative vision of revelation-grounded, Christocentric ethics; and (3) to explore implications of Barth's theology for contemporary Christian moral life across personal, ecclesial, social, and political dimensions, demonstrating relevance for 21st-century ethical challenges.

The academic contribution of this research encompasses both historical-theological scholarship and constructive ethical reflection. Historically, it contributes to Barthian studies by providing comprehensive analysis of his ethical theology and its systematic integration with his dogmatics. Constructively, it contributes to Christian ethics by retrieving Barth's insights as resources for addressing contemporary moral challenges—bioethical dilemmas, environmental crises, political engagement, and cultural pluralism—demonstrating that revelation-centered

ethics need not be sectarian or socially irrelevant but can engage substantive public issues while maintaining theological distinctiveness.

Practically, this research offers several benefits for Christian communities. For pastors and church leaders, it provides theological frameworks for moral formation and ethical discernment in contexts of cultural pluralism, equipping congregations to resist relativism while engaging neighbors charitably. For Christian educators, it offers pedagogical resources for teaching ethics that ground moral reasoning in Scripture and doctrine rather than therapeutic pragmatism or cultural accommodation. For Christian professionals and public intellectuals, it articulates ways of maintaining Christian moral identity while participating constructively in pluralistic public spheres, avoiding both sectarian withdrawal and uncritical assimilation. For Christians facing personal ethical dilemmas, it emphasizes obedience to God's revelation as the primary ethical orientation, offering clarity amid moral confusion. Ultimately, this research aims to strengthen Christian moral reflection in plural societies by demonstrating that theologically robust ethics—exemplified in Barth's work—provides coherent alternatives to relativism and secularism while remaining socially engaged and culturally relevant.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This paper resulted from library research and observations of existing journals that provided data to the researcher. Information related to Karl Barth's theology and his emphasis on Christian ethics was collected. The study used a qualitative descriptive method. Specifically, a qualitative library research methodology with a thematic-textual analysis design guided the research. This approach enabled systematic examination of Barth's primary theological works—particularly Church Dogmatics—supplemented by relevant secondary literature.

The research design involved thematic-textual analysis, examining Karl Barth's theological writings and significant secondary sources to identify and synthesize key themes relevant to Christian ethics. This analytical process included close reading of primary texts to discern Barth's theological positions, comparative analysis with other theological traditions to provide context, and constructive interpretation to draw implications for contemporary ethical challenges. Thematic organization facilitated coherent presentation of Barth's theology, and the textual focus ensured fidelity to his actual writings.

Primary sources consisted of Barth's theological writings—particularly Church Dogmatics (Volumes 1-4), his occasional writings, lectures, and essays. These provided direct insight into Barth's theological voice. Secondary sources included monographs and commentaries on Barth's theology by scholars such as Stanley Grenz, Eberhard Busch, John Webster, and Paul Nimmo; works by classical Reformed theologians such as John Calvin and Wayne Grudem; comparative literature from figures like Martin Luther, Stanley Hauerwas, and Reinhold Niebuhr; contemporary works on bioethics, environmental ethics, and political theology; and peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2024.

Data collection proceeded via systematic literature review. Relevant primary sources from Barth's corpus were identified—prioritizing sections addressing ethics, obedience, revelation, and social responsibility. Secondary sources were selected through academic database searches using keywords such as “Karl Barth,” “Christian ethics,” and “theological ethics.” Sources were screened for quality and relevance, and selected texts were read and annotated, with key themes documented and organized according to the research structure.

Data analysis involved descriptive-theological synthesis. Thematic coding identified recurring concepts and patterns in Barth's ethical theology. Comparative analysis situated Barth's views in relation to secular and alternative theological approaches, highlighting the distinctive features of his thought. Interpretive synthesis developed a coherent account of Barth's ethical vision. Critical evaluation assessed the strengths and limitations of Barth's

approach using both sympathetic and critical secondary literature. Constructive application considered implications for contemporary Christian ethical challenges.

As research involving published sources rather than human subjects, this study did not require institutional review board approval. The research adhered to ethical scholarly practice through accurate citation, careful interpretation, fair representation of alternative positions, acknowledgment of interpretive limitations, and a constructive contribution to scholarly discourse. These commitments ensured that the study met standards of academic excellence and contributed responsibly to theological knowledge and Christian ethical reflection.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Sovereignty and Revelation of Allah

The theme of sovereignty of God is always relevant and human life. In principle, the sovereignty of Allah is not speaking abstract and impersonal, but comes from Allah Himself. God's sovereignty is part of His revelation expressed in many Bible verses, confirming that God has full sovereignty over all creation and history (Lele, 2022). For Barth, God is absolute sovereign. God's power is not dependent on the world or the processes of the world. God has complete control over history, and everything moves according to His perfect plan and purpose (Pandiangan, 2024). The Christian faith, which is based on the truth of scripture, teaches that God is sovereign. God is the one who is always sovereign in the believer's journey of faith, both in the relationship of salvation in which there is also the suffering of believers (Wibowo, 2025). R.C. Sproul in works such as *Chosen by God*, Sproul states that "if God is not sovereign, then He is not God." He saw sovereignty as the essence of God's revelation and character (Sproul, 2021). Calvin affirmed that God's sovereignty is the basis of divine predestination and providence. He sees God's revelation as the revelation of His sovereign will over all things (Calvin, 1995). Wayne Grudem calls God's sovereignty an attribute that declares that God has full power and control over all creation, and this is expressed through general and special revelation (Grudem, 1994).

In the Bible, God's sovereignty means that God has absolute power and that His will cannot be thwarted. This is part of divine revelation that reveals God's character as King of all things. Here are some of God's sovereignty that is holy, wise, and powerful, generous, and abundant in grace. In fact, Allah's sovereignty is affirmed in three principles, namely ownership, power, and control (Ferguson et al., 2015).

#### Bible Verses about God's Sovereignty

- Psalm 115:3 – *"Our God in heaven; He does what He wills!"*
- Isaiah 46:10 – *"I have told from the beginning of the last things, and from ancient times what has not yet been accomplished, I say, My judgments will come, and all My will I will do."*
- Daniel 2:21 – *"He changes time and season, he deposes kings and appoints kings..."*
- Ephesians 1:4-5 – *"For in Him God chose us before the foundation of the world..."* (Indonesian Bible Institute, 1974)

It can be concluded that the sovereignty of Allah is the free will of Allah that cannot be restrained by time and space, He is in control of everything He creates, and He is the One who chooses us to be His property. Allah's sovereignty also means that nothing can happen beyond his control or control. It provides comfort to believers that their lives are in the hands of a wise and loving God. It can therefore be concluded that God's sovereignty is a revelation revealed through Scripture, life experience, and salvation history.



## **Ethics as Christian Obedience**

Compared to his brother, Richard Niebuhr was more focused on the theological dilemmas prompted by the Social Gospel movement. Hauerwas points out, influenced by Richard Niebuhr, Christian ethicists sought philosophical bases for theological claims, highlighting the compatibility of theology and ethics. However, this approach inadvertently turned Christian ethics into a nonhistorical meta-ethics, an outcome Richard Niebuhr did not intend, as he valued theological foundations in ethics. Richard's Niebuhr's project sought to explain humanity's relative existence theologically, with an understanding of finitude in relation to God. Yet, Hauerwas notes that Richard Niebuhr's theology, constrained by liberalism, limited its view of God, hindering its ability to address human existence's relativity (Hauerwas and MacIntyre 1983, p. 26; Berkman and Cartwright 2001, pp. 62–63). Richard's students, to some extent, inherited his task of theologizing Christian ethics, one of the most successful being Ramsey (Cui & Han, 2024).

Obedience should always have an object. According to the Gospel of John, both God and Jesus are referred to as objects of obedience. Jesus legitimises his obedience in his references to God as Father. The Johannine use of the noun father (πατήρ) is not distinctive to the teaching of Jesus or is not even innovative of the author in his references to the relation between Jesus and God. According to D'Angelo (1999:59), it seems to be rather 'the theological understanding and product of communal reflection, cultural meaning, and authorial creativity' (Van der Merwe, 2022).

Martin Luther emphasized the importance of obedience to God as a response to God's saving grace. For Luther, Christian morality and ethics were not just a matter of rules but a life based on faith and the realization that salvation is a gift. Obedience is an act of freedom born of faith in Christ, not the mechanical fulfillment of the law (Luther, 1823). John Calvin emphasized that Christian morality stems from obedience to the authority of God's word as the supreme moral law. Obedience is a total attitude that encompasses all aspects of human life under God's sovereignty. Calvin's ethics emphasize obedience not only from the outside outward but from the renewed heart of the Holy Spirit (Calvin, 1995).

From the discussion it can be concluded that the highest strictness that humans do is obedience to the will of God, this is the basis of Christian ethics, as Jesus Christ gave us an example, so we must also be an example to others in our daily lives.

## **Rejection of Secular and Liberal Ethics**

Secular ethics is seen as based only on reason and worldly norms that are independent of the source of religious or divine values, so that it is considered incapable of providing a solid and universal moral foundation. Secular ethics tend to be based on values or rules set by society or that apply in the public. If it is said to be good/true, then the value becomes correct according to the rule. Kant views ethics as a moral system based on universal moral ratios and obligations, which do not depend on consequences or religious authority. Kant's ethics are known as deontological ethics, which emphasize categorical imperatives—moral principles that apply without exception and must be followed by all human beings absolutely. According to Kant, morality comes from obligations determined by reason, where moral actions are actions performed for the sake of the obligation itself, not because of other impulses such as happiness or personal gain. This principle requires every individual to act as if his or her principles of action could be made a universal law that applies to everyone (Kant, 2009).

John Stuart Mill was one of the leading figures in secular ethical thought, particularly through his approach to utilitarianism. Mill developed the concept that morally correct actions are those that maximize the greatest happiness or well-being for the greatest number of people, a principle that bases morality on the real consequences of an action without the need for a religious basis. Mill's ethics were rational and secular, judging morality based on social benefits and general human happiness (Mill, 1879).

John Locke in the context of secular ethics emphasized the view of empiricism and rationality, known as the concept of "tabula rasa" or human beings are born as blank sheets without innate knowledge. Locke emphasized that experience and environment shape human character and morality, not innate factors or divine commands. Thus, ethics for Locke developed from human experience and common sense, not from religious teachings directly. Locke did not base morality on religion but on human natural rights that could be recognized through human reason and experience in general, thus opening up space for the separation of morality and religion in ethics (Locke, 1689). Liberal ethics that emphasize individual freedom and moral relativism are considered to lead to permissive moral behavior without clear limits on absolute good and bad.

Critics from religious and traditional perspectives argue that secular and liberal ethics can lead to the erosion of faith and ignore moral responsibility that comes from divine rules or revelation. The phenomenon of "desecularization" shows resistance to a completely secular world with the emergence of efforts to revive religious values in various areas of public life. This rejection is also linked to concerns about the loss of the spiritual and moral values that are the foundation for an ethical and civilized society.

Thus, it can be concluded that the rejection of secular and liberal ethics often stems from the view that it does not consider the more basic and absolute moral and spiritual dimensions, meaning that human beings are the center/source of the ethics rather than God and overemphasize freedom which can cause moral and social instability.

### **Social and Political Implications**

Karl Barth's social and political views have important implications, especially within the framework of Reformed theology. Barth emphasized Christ as the transcendent revelation of God and believed that the church had an active role in dealing with social issues. He urged the church not to limit itself to personal safety, but to engage in promoting justice and peace in society. This theological position implies that Christians and the church must engage in the social and political realm by fighting for human dignity and opposing injustice.

Barth's views influenced social and political engagement by emphasizing God's sovereignty over worldly power, calling people to oppress systems and ideologies that were contrary to divine justice. His theology encourages critical reflection on the way politics should be aligned with Christian ethics, thus encouraging the transformation of social structures to reflect justice and peace consistent with Christian teaching.

The church's responsibility to fight for justice and peace in society. Rejection of oppressive political structures that are contrary to God's justice. Encourage the active participation of Christians in social transformation through theological principles. These perspectives are important in contemporary discussions of the relationship between church and society and the role of Christian ethics in political life.

Here are some Bible verses that contain social and political implications for Christian ethics:

1. Matthew 5:13-16 states that Christians are the salt and light of the world, which contains a social responsibility to make a positive impact in society in accordance with the values of the Kingdom of God.
2. Romans 13:1-7 teaches obedience to the government as God's authorized authority, but still prioritizes justice and truth in every political action.
3. Micah 6:8 affirms that Christian ethics demands that the people be just, love faithfulness, and live humbly before God, which has implications for how Christians should behave socially and politically.
4. 1 Peter 2:11-17 commands to live with integrity and respect in a pluralistic society, reflecting the Christian ethical call to interact with the social and political environment.

5. Deuteronomy 24:14-15 emphasizes justice in rewarding and rejecting oppression, which is a socio-economic principle in Christian ethics.
6. Matthew 28:18-20 (The Great Commission of Jesus) forms the basis of transformative Christian leadership and ministry ethics in social and political contexts.

### **Ethics in a Contemporary Context**

Contemporary Christian ethics focuses on the application of Christian moral principles in the face of modern social, cultural, and technological challenges. Some important aspects include:

Freedom of the human will remains the basis for moral decision-making, but it is guided by biblical values on controversial issues such as abortion, euthanasia, and same-sex marriage. Christian ethics exists as a guideline for assessing and responding to these issues with moral integrity and love. A dialogical and inclusive approach characterizes contemporary Christian ethical education, which not only maintains theological authority, but also opens up space for a diversity of perspectives in the context of postmodern and multiculturalism. Attention to environmental issues through the integration of Christian ethics with the sociology of religion, featuring a transformation of ministry that is not only individual but also ecological, leads to real action in the care of creation. Christian ethics also responds to the challenges of the digital world by emphasizing the importance of integrity, self-control, and spiritual awareness in using technology and social media to remain consistent with the values of faith. The teachings of love, justice, and hope remain the main foundations in answering the social problems and suffering facing modern Christianity, providing a theological and practical foundation for facing the pressures of the times.

Overall, contemporary Christian ethics integrates Christian moral traditions with today's social and technological realities in a critical and constructive manner, reinforcing the relevance of faith in an ever-changing world.

### **CONCLUSION**

Karl Barth's theology provides a distinctive foundation for Christian ethics, grounded in the sovereignty of God and His revelation in Jesus Christ, where moral authority rests on divine command rather than human reasoning or cultural consensus. By rejecting the autonomy of liberal and secular ethics, Barth advances an obedience-oriented moral framework that resists relativism and responds to human sin through grace. His theology carries profound social and political implications, calling Christians to act as a moral witness for justice and peace without capitulating to worldly ideologies. Future research should explore comparative analyses between Barth's Christocentric ethics and Virtue Ethics, investigate the application of Barth's framework to emerging ethical issues such as artificial intelligence and genetic engineering, and examine effective pedagogical approaches for integrating Barthian ethics into Christian teaching and practice.



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