

3451 Shenandoah  
Dallas 5, Texas  
September 9, 1958

Dear Dr. Niebuhr,

As I begin to write the first whole draft of my dissertation, I thought it would be well for me to write to you concerning the general procedure I had in mind to follow, and invite your criticism of it.

I hope to begin the task of writing very soon, as I have spent the summer reading and trying to structure the problem, and I hope, if all goes well, to complete a presentable draft by next April or May.

My plan for the structuring of the project is, as clearly as I am able to frame it now, as follows:

#### I. Historical Fragestellung

As you have suggested, a brief delineation of the Biblical and historical roots of recent theological reflection on obedience is necessary. To begin with I would like to (1) bring together a brief statement concerning the Biblical understanding of *Shama*, *upakouo*, *akouo*, and other terms revolving around the idea of hearing, obeying, listening, serving and responding to the demands of God. (2) Then I think I would like to try to systematize this one small area of Biblical theology into an ordered dialectic of three movements: God's Word, man's response, and the neighbor as the chief value and end of Biblical ethics of obedience. (3) Then, the determination of the Biblical idea of obedience as a relational concept involving---and this is the most important part---never exclusively one or two moments of this dialectic (or, one might say, corners of this triad), but always simultaneously all three. The Bible is concerned with the One to whom one is obedient, and the hearer, or obedient subject, and the community of men in which obedience to God takes place, in equal proportion.

Then I would like to make, again quite briefly, (4) a short exposition of the Kantian view of obedience as a relationship involving the formal principle of law, the autonomous self, and the kingdom of ends. Then I would like to propose that Kant provided for the modern world a philosophical formulation of the moral life which reflects and in significant ways corresponds to the Biblical understanding of the obedience relationship

1111 Chesham Road  
Dallas 7, Texas  
September 9, 1959

Dear Dr. Blauvelt,

I begin to write this to you with the hope that you will find it of some interest. I thought it would be well for me to write to you concerning the general procedure I had in mind to follow, and to have your criticism of it.

I hope to begin the task of writing very soon, as I have spent the summer reading and trying to structure the project, and I hope, if all goes well, to complete a preliminary draft by next April or May.

I plan for the summarizing of the project as clearly as I can this time at least, as follows:

I. Historical Foundations

As you have suggested, a brief delineation of the biblical and historical roots of recent theological reflection on obedience is necessary. To begin with I would like to (1) bring together a brief sketch concerning the biblical understanding of Deuteronomy, Exodus, and other texts revolving around the idea of hearing, obeying, listening, serving and responding to the demands of God. (2) Then I think I would like to try to synthesize this one small area of biblical theology into an ordered dialectic of three movements: God's word, man's response, and the neighbor as the other. (3) Then, the historical roots of the biblical idea of obedience as a relational concept involving--and this is the most important part--never exclusively one or two moments of the dialectic (or, one might say, elements of this triad), but always simultaneously all three. The triad is concerned with the one to whom one is obedient, and the heart, or obedient subject, and the humanity of man in which obedience to God takes place, in special proportion.

Then I would like to state, again quite briefly, (4) a short exposition of the Kantian view of obedience as a relationship involving the formal principle of law, the autonomy of will, and the status of man. Then I would like to press that and provide for the modern world a philosophical foundation of the moral life which reflects and in turn influences man's response to the biblical understanding of the obedience relationship.

just delineated. (5) Finally, I would like to conclude this section by more carefully spelling out the following proposal: that Barth, Bultmann and Brunner, even though they have rejected much of the thought of the Aufklärung, nevertheless all three of them stand unavoidably in that tradition of ethical reflection of which Kant is the architect. None of them are able to be at home in any other approach to man's moral existence than this approach, which orbits around the language of obedience (demand, obey, command, obligation, response), rather than axiological, teleological, eudaemonistic et al types of ethical reflection. All three of these distinguished theologians, when they begin to think along ethical lines, are caught in an unacknowledged captivity to one particular tradition of ethical reflection, which, though it is important, and though it reflect certain important phases of Biblical ethics, is nevertheless not adequate as an exclusive methodology in theological ethics.

## II. Three Views of Christian Obedience

This section would be the main body of the paper. It would consist of exposition, analysis, critique and mutual conversation between Bultmann, Barth and Brunner.

A. Bultmann's doctrine of radical obedience. I plan to take Bultmann first because (a) he frames the subject-object problem in a much more clear-cut way than the others by virtue of his lack of concern for the object of obedience. Bultmann one-sidedly raises the question that Barth one-sidedly answers. (b) I believe I understand his abstruse and headbatteringly the give-and-take relationship which exists between contemporary Protestant ethics and Kant with regard to the question of obedience.

This first exposition would be primarily concerned with an orderly explanation of what Bultmann means by obeying the demands of the moment as the demands of God. Separate sections will probably be required on most of the following aspects of Bultmann's view of Christian obedience: (1) his conception of the will of God, the prophetic view of hearing and obeying, and legalistic or formal obedience; (2) the relation of the eschatological conception of history and the demand for radical obedience; (3) the proclamation of Jesus; (4) Paul's view of law and the new obedience; (5) paranesis in the early church; (6) the paradoxical juxtaposition of the indicative and imperative in N.T. theology; (7) love of the neighbor; (8) freedom and obedience; and (9) modern man and the problem of eschatological ethics.



At this point I would like to engage Bultmann in a critique and a conversation with the other two views of Christian obedience. Among the areas to be covered are (1) Bultmann's eclipse of the object of obedience in favor of the obedient subject. (2) the lack of any sense of moral ambiguity in the moment of decision, and the presupposition that the faithful man, given the demands of the situation, possesses some sort of clear certain knowledge of the demands of God in every case. (3) Bultmann's narrowing of the province of ethics, and his rejection of all humanistic, Greek, idealistic (Kantian), perfectionist, and rationalist ethics and all value theories. (4) That Gehorsam is reduced in content to Entscheidung.

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At this point I would like to engage Bulmann in a critique and a conversation with the other two views of Christian obedience. Among the areas to be covered are (1) Bulmann's eclipse of the object of obedience in favor of the obedient subject. (2) the lack of any sense of moral ambiguity in the moment of decision, and the presupposition that the faithful man, given the demands of the situation, possesses some sort of clear certain knowledge of the demands of God in every case. (3) Bulmann's narrowing of the province of ethics, and his rejection of all humanistic, Greek, idealistic (Kantian), perfectionist, and rationalist ethics and all value theories. (4) that Gehren is reduced in content to *entscheidung*.

Approaching the Problem  
 Various Attempts at Formulating and

the obedient (and perhaps lengthy) attempt to make clear include the obedience of the Son of God, whose activity calls forth and determines the activity of the obedient subject. Barth focuses on the formal principle of concrete command, which is Christological. Obedience as a full triadic relational idea, as it appears in the Biblical witness, is not present in Barth. It points in the Church Dogmatics to a conversation with the other relations of Christian obedience. Among the areas of Barth's thought which would appear to engage in the Church Dogmatics to be recovered are: (1) Bultmann's eclipse of the will object of obedience in favor of the obedient subject; (2) the lack of any sense of moral ambiguity in the notion of decision, and the presupposition that the faithful, given the demands of the situation, possesses some sort of clear certain knowledge of the demands of the situation in every case; (3) Bultmann's narrowing of the scope of ethics and his rejection of all humanistic of Greek covenantal, Platonic, Kantian, perfectionist, and rationalist ethics and all value theories. (4) That Gehorsam is reduced in content to Entscheidung.

See previous page

B. Barth's Christological Doctrine of Christian Obedience. I would like for the exposition on Barth to follow Bultmann because it seems that he answers, with his whole theology, and particularly in his ethical writings, many of the questions which arise in the context in which Bultmann writes.

I will not go into detail now concerning how I think I might structure my Barth section, partly because I somewhat unclear myself, but the direction I want to move is this: whereas the hiatus in Bultmann was between decision and obedience, in Barth it is between Christ the obedient one and the obedient subject. Some carefully (and perhaps lengthy) exposition may be required to attempt to make clear exactly how Barth intends to include the obedience of the believer within the obedience of the Son of God, whose activity calls forth and determines the activity of the obedient subject. Barth's ethic focuses on the formal principle of concrete command, which is Christological. Obedience as a full triadic relational idea, as it appears in the Biblical witness, is not present in Barth. It points in the Church Dogmatics obedience becomes a rather abstract inter-trinitarian relationship.

Some of the sub-sections of this Barth chapter will revolve around these topics: (1) The concept of obedience and Barth's view of the covenant relationship; (2) the way



he inter-relates the conceptions of permission and necessity, "may" and "must"; (3) the praise of God, and obedience as thanksgiving; (4) his rejection of all anthropocentric beginning-points in ethics; (5) the obedience of the Son of God; (6) the Neighbor; and (7) Freedom as the content of Christian obedience.

Then would come the critical section, which would center, I think, on the question of whether Barth has or has not neglected the reality of the responsible subject who answers with his obedience the obedience of the Son of God.

C. Brunner's Doctrine of the Divine Imperative. I place Brunner last because it seems to me that his writings on this subject, by and large, do not move so close to some of the pitfalls pointed out in the other two views. But, as a consequence, Brunner's view is caught in a series of polarities which the other two views seem to avoid.

The structure of my Brunner section is taking shape around these topics: (1) his exposition on the meaning of "the obedience of faith"; (2) the situation of action as the determinant of the content of obedience; (3) the divine demand; (4) obedience and encounter; (5) the new will and the power of obedience; (6) the polarities of obedience: creation and redemption; (7) the three-fold use of the law; (8) election and responsibility; (9) imago dei, lex natura, and justitia; and (10) obedience in the orders.

The critical section: the unresolved doubleness of Christian obedience---law/gospel, providential ethic/transformational ethic, order of creation/order of redemption.

### III. The Outlines of a Constructive Alternative

I would like to work for some time with all the above exposition and analysis before trying prematurely to state any sort of structure for this section. I have many ideas here, but they have not yet fallen together in an orderly way. I would hope that this section will be brief, and as simple and direct as the problem will allow.

is interpreted the conception of freedom and  
 necessity, "law" and "will"; (2) the will of God  
 and obedience as characteristics; (3) the relation of  
 all things to the divine will; (4) the relation of  
 (5) the obedience of the Son of God; (6) the obedience  
 and (7) freedom as the content of Christian obedience.

Then would come the critical section, which would consist  
 I think, on the question of whether there was or was not  
 neglected the reality of the responsible subject who  
 answers with his conscience the obedience of the Son of God.

I. Krumm's doctrine of the divine imperative. I place  
 it here because it seems to me that his writing  
 on this subject, by and large, has done more to clear up  
 some of the difficult points of view in the other two views.  
 But, as a consequence, Krumm's view is being seen as  
 a series of isolated points rather than as a whole  
 view.

The structure of my present section is taking shape around  
 these topics: (1) the exposition on the meaning of  
 "the obedience of law"; (2) the situation of action  
 as the determinant of the content of obedience; (3) the  
 divine demand; (4) obedience and encounter; (5) the new  
 will and the power of obedience; (6) the voluntariness of  
 obedience; (7) the Christ-faith; (8) the Christ-faith  
 as the law; (9) election and responsibility; (10) the  
 law, the habit, and justice and (11) obedience in the  
 order.

The critical section the unreserved doubtless of Christian  
 obedience--law, voluntariness and responsibility.

II. The Content of a Christian's Alternative

I would like to work for some time with all the above  
 existing and analyzing before trying to put together an article  
 any sort of structure for this section. I have many ideas  
 here, but they have not yet fallen together in an orderly  
 way. I would hope that this section will be better, and  
 as simple and direct as the problem will allow.

I am sorry that this account of the structuring of my project has been so lengthy. There are several other matters I would like to mention.

I have been using Turabian's Manual For Writers of Term Papers, Theses and Dissertations (Univ. of Chicago Press), which, I believe, has been highly recommended. I have for some time been accustomed to writing my footnotenumbers in the text and placing all the footnote references at the end of the paper or at the end of a chapter. Would it be allright if I continued this procedure? I heard last year that this procedure was being allowed by the Yale Graduate School, but I was never able to confirm it. I believe it is much easier to handle footnotes this way rather than to try to squeeze them in at the bottom of the page.

Dr. John Deschner, who has recently returned from studies in Basel with Professor Barth, showed me a copy of a two-volume Ethik of Barth's of 1927, which he refused to allow to be ~~published~~. But, the World Student Christian Federation, of which John was a secretary when he was in Basel, mimeographed some 200 copies of that ~~manuscript~~ ~~in 1927~~ and John acquired a copy. My question is, would you regard this resource as fit for my project? Or would you think that I should stay with published works?

I have checked Bridwell Theological Library at Perkins and was very pleased to find that in my dissertation area it was pretty adequate. I will write Mr. Morris if there is anything I need. Shubert Ogden's personal library will be of some help concerning Bultmann (Ogden wrote his Chicago dissertation on Blt.), and John Deschner's library concerning Barth.

I have had several very helpful conversations with Mr. Shipley. I am confident that he will be immensely helpful in guiding me through some of the tough spots in my project.

Finally, I am very pleased with the responsibilities I have been given with the Perkins faculty. Mr. Outler, Mr. Ogden and Mr. Deschner are jointly offering a year-long course in theology and ethics. In other words, Christian ethics is not being separated from Christian doctrine, as it has been in the Perkins curriculum heretofore, as two separate semester "core" courses, but rather they are being combined. The three professors will share the lectures twice per week, and then there will be preceptorial classes meeting twice per week to direct the readings. That is where I come in. I will be holding two preceptorial sessions twice per week. Readings in ethics classics and contemporary theological ethics will be interspersed throughout the course. I am very interested



in this curriculum idea. We will have to wait and see how well I am able to hold my own as an ethicist, with the other three, all of whom are theologians.

In any event, I am very pleased that I will not be required to do any lecturing. I think it would be difficult to try to write a dissertation and prepare lectures as well. Dean Cuninggim and several other faculty members have, very kindly, indicated to me that they definitely did not want to sponge all my time off on classes, and that they were anxious for me to work hard on my dissertation in hopes that I would do a worthwhile job on it in a year's time, and not let it linger around for years and years. I appreciate this.

I am hoping to begin writing very soon, and when I have something presentable I will send it in. Best regards to you in the coming year.

Respectfully,

Tom C. Oden

in this curriculum ideas. We will have to wait and see how well I am able to hold my own as an educator, with the other three, all of whom are specialists.

In any event, I am very pleased that I will not be required to do any lecturing. I think it would be difficult to try to write a dissertation and prepare lectures as well. I have been thinking and however, other faculty members here, very kindly, indicated to me that they had initially did not want to assign all my time off on classes, and that they were anxious for me to write a dissertation in the future. I would do a worthwhile job in a year's time, and not let it linger around for years and years. I appreciate that.

I am hoping to begin writing very soon, and when I have something worthwhile I will send it to you. Best regards to you in the coming year.

Respectfully,

Tom G. Cook