

The Symbolism of Marriage and of the Parent-child Relationship:

A Comparison Between Karl Barth and John Paul II

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Both Karl Barth and John Paul II have written extensively on marriage and procreation. Coming from different traditions, they have of course different things to say. The aim of this paper is to show that the differences between them highlight theologically important questions relating to the symbolism of marriage, the value of procreation and the parental mission. Both theologians share the view that as Christians we must see the world and human relationships in the light of the Gospel News, and so from an eschatological perspective. Both of them, therefore, hold that under the New Covenant in Christ the relationship between mankind and God and also between man and woman in marriage take on a new meaning. But, nevertheless, they differ on the importance of procreation and also on the question of the God-given parental mission. The exploration of these differences will bring to the fore the question of what moral obligations are entailed by the concept of the child as a gift, a concept espoused by both theologians. It will also bring to the fore the question of the basis of the fourth commandment.

The paper starts with a comparison between the two theologians' views on marriage and procreation. Here it is shown why Barth considers procreation relativised under the New Covenant in Christ and so why he attaches less importance to procreation than John Paul II does. In the second part of the paper the two theologians' views on the main role and mission of parents are discussed and it is shown why John Paul II puts the emphasis on the evangelising role of parents as Christian educators, whereas Barth stresses the symbolical role of parents as representatives of God.

The sacramentality of marriage

The principal difference between Barth and John Paul II in regard to the sacramentality of marriage comes to the fore in Barth's criticism of what he sees as the Roman Catholic failure fully to appreciate the novel sacramental dimension of marriage under the New Covenant in Christ, a failure that he relates to what he considers an inflated view of the vocation of celibacy or virginity on the part of the Catholic Church. In Barth's view the Roman

Catholic tradition, is 'menaced by the theory of the higher perfection of the celibate life of monks and priests', compared with the married state.¹

Yet, John Paul II, like Barth emphasizes that man and woman are relational beings who, in their togetherness in marriage, constitute the image of Christ's relationship with the Church and also of the One and Triune God. Both argue that it is not so much as separate individuals, but as individuals in union and communion that man and woman resemble the Triune God and reflect the covenant of grace, that is, Christ's covenant relationship with the universal Church. John Paul II writes:

The fact that man 'created as man and woman' is the image of God means not only that each of them individually is like God, as a rational and free being. It also means that man and woman, created in a 'unity' in their common humanity, are called to live in a communion of love, and in this way mirror in the world the communion of love that is in God, through which the Three Persons love each other in the intimate mystery of one divine life.²

His statement echoes the following words of Barth:

The command of God comes to man and woman in the relationship and order in which God created them together as His image, as the likeness of His covenant of grace, in the male and female existence which they gain in His eyes within their character as likeness and image.³

Moreover, John Paul II, like Barth, argues on the understanding that his theological anthropology has normative implications. Both theologians develop a witness ethics to the effect that the symbolism of marriage under the New Covenant in Christ entails the requirement that marriage must be a monogamous and indissoluble union. Both hold that it is in virtue of its unitive and spiritual aspect that marriage possesses a sacramental value and that the requirement regarding monogamy or the exclusiveness of marriage—which rules out not only polygamy but also unfaithfulness—is a moral consequence precisely of the sacramental end or value of marriage as a union of total and committed love. Barth describes marriage as a 'full life-partnership and claims that 'monogamy is unconditionally required' inasmuch as it is 'primarily and supremely in marriage that God manifests Himself in his unity as Creator-God and God of the Covenant'.⁴ Likewise, John Paul II analysing the Pauline letter to the Ephesians, emphasizes the unique relationship between spouses and the requirement of life-long faithfulness: 'marriage corresponds to the vocation of Christians only when it reflects the love which Christ the Bridegroom gives to the Church His Bride... This is... the love with which man from eternity has been loved by God in Christ' (John Paul II, TB, August 18, 1982, p. 312).⁵

Procreation and marriage

While declaring the vocation of celibacy or virginity for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven a superior and more transparent eschatological sign than marriage, John Paul II's main concern in his major work on marriage and procreation, *The Theology of the Body*, is the sacramental end of marriage in the image of the Trinity and Christ's relationship with the Church in virtue of the unitive end of marriage. And in the first and by far the largest part of that work he gives the impression of holding that under the New Covenant in Christ of the three traditional good or ends of marriage, procreation, union (or *fides*) and sacramentality, the two most important are the sacramental end realised in and through the unitive one.⁶

However, there is a tension in John Paul II's thought. While the first and major part of *The Theology of the Body* presents a theological and Scripture-based argument for the sacramentality of the unitive aspect of marriage, the last part of the work is of an apologetic nature. That is to say, in the last part John Paul II defends Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (HV). And while he presents a number of philosophical reflections on the encyclical in the end he defers to the authority of the magisterium.⁷ Thus in the last part of the work, the emphasis is on the importance of the procreative end of marriage. In this part of the work, then, in line with Paul VI, John Paul II describes the moral norm of *Humanae Vitae* never to separate the unitive and procreative aspects of the individual sexual act in marriage as a norm belonging both to natural law and to the moral order revealed by God (TB, p. 387). And so John Paul II denounces contraception as wrong. For him the Genesis 'commandment to grow and multiply, given to man and woman at the beginning', is applicable to the Christian family just as it was to the family living under the Old Covenant. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* of 1981,⁸ he likewise writes that 'the very institution of marriage and conjugal love are ordained to the procreation and education of children, in whom they find their crowning' (FC, para. 15, p. 28). This may sound as if John Paul II does not recognize the unitive or relational aspect of marriage and of the union in one flesh. But he does. However, seeing the child as a divine gift both to parents and to the Creator Himself, he calls for generous acceptance of this gift.

In its most profound reality, love is essentially a gift; and conjugal love, while leading the spouses to reciprocal 'knowledge' which makes them 'one flesh', does not end with the couple, because it makes them capable of the greatest possible gift, the gift by which they become co-operators with God for giving life to a new human person (FC, para. 14, p. 27).

In another document, *Letter to Families* of 1994,⁹ he explains that, not only is the divine likeness transmitted through human generation, but also the child is 'the first gift of the Creator to the creature' and an expression of

God's self-giving (LF, para. 11, p. 30). It would seem to follow that to obstruct conception is to obstruct divine intention. John Paul II writes: 'Man's coming into being does not conform to the laws of biology alone, but also and directly to God's creative will, which is concerned with the genealogy of the sons and daughters of human families' (LF, para. 9, p. 22).

Besides basing his condemnation of contraception on the understanding of procreation as co-creation, John Paul II in these writings on the family, as in the last part of the *Theology of the Body*,¹⁰ also argues that contraception is contrary to total self-giving. This gives a personalistic or relational twist to the argument, which implicitly, at least, suggests a theological argument against contraception. That is to say, John Paul II also seems to be suggesting that in failing to respect the unitive dimension of the 'conjugal act' contraception also fails to reflect God's self-giving love for man through Christ's union with the Church.

When couples, by means of recourse to contraception, separate these two meanings [the unitive and the procreative].., they act as 'arbiters' of the divine plan and they 'manipulate' and degrade human sexuality—and with it themselves and their married partner—by altering its value of 'total' self-giving. Thus the innate language that expresses the total reciprocal self-giving of husband and wife is overlaid, through contraception, by an objectively contradictory language, namely, that of not giving oneself totally to the other. This leads not only to a positive refusal to be open to life but also to a falsification of the inner truth of conjugal love, which is called upon to give itself in personal totality (FC, para. 32, p. 49).

The reference to the inner truth of conjugal life is no doubt a reference to the sacramental dimension of marriage, as the image of Christ love for the Church, in virtue of its unitive dimension.

However, the main point of interest here is that, on John Paul II's account, biological fruitfulness means more children for God, if it is accompanied by Christian education. Observing that Christian parents have traditionally been taught that their biological fruitfulness entails a duty to educate their children in the faith, (11) he says, in *Letter to Families*, that 'the history of salvation, passes by way of the family' (LF, para. 23, p. 100) and that 'Christian marriage and the Christian family build the Church' (FC, para. 15, p. 28). These statements might sound as if John Paul II holds that the family, rather than the Church, is the way of salvation. But this is not the case. Speaking in line with a long tradition, going back to St Thomas,¹² he is saying that biological begetting coupled with spiritual begetting through a Christian education beginning at home prepares the baptised child for mature membership of the Church. It is in this sense that he sees biological begetting as a precondition of more Children in Christ.

In short, for a number of reasons, John Paul II attaches great importance to procreation. And this is despite his understanding of celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven as a special and more transparently eschatological sacrament than marriage under the New Covenant in Christ. Indeed, he refuses to relativise the importance of procreation under the New Covenant in Christ—that is, procreation within marriage.

Barth, on the other hand, argues that under the New Covenant in Jesus Christ 'the necessity to procreate imposed by the history of salvation prior to the appearance of the Messiah has now fallen away' (Karl Barth, CD, III/4, p. 143). That is to say, 'in the sphere of the New Testament message there is no necessity, no general command, to continue the human race' (*Ibid.*). For the Son of God, as our brother and saviour, has established for us a new kingdom anticipating eternal life. The Old Testament 'lament of childlessness' has no place under the new covenant' (*Ibid.*). On this account, even if parenthood normally is a source of joy and pleasure, childless couples must not despair or regard their lives as unfulfilled, especially as childlessness 'frees them for other tasks' (CD, III/4, p. 267). What matters is to be a child of God, to belong to the family of God. The first end of marriage is not procreation, but spousal union. Thus the Genesis command to 'be fruitful and multiply' (Gn. 1:28) is not applicable under the New Covenant. The fruitfulness of 'marriage does not depend on whether it is fruitful in the physical sense' (CD, III/4, p. 266). To identify marriage as an institution for procreation is crude, according to Barth. Yet, he recognises sexual intercourse as an integral part of marriage and understands it as linked the possibility of parenthood (cf. CD, III/4, p. 270). But for him this possibility is a gift in the sense of a divine offer rather than an obligation; it is an optional gift. However, just because it is a divine gift, he does consider it important that we ask ourselves whether we can refuse it.

Every act of intercourse which is technically obstructed or interrupted, or undertaken with no desire for children, or even refrained from on this ground, is a refusal of this divine offer, a renunciation of the widening and enriching of married fellowship which is divinely made possible by the fact that under the command of God this fellowship includes sexual intercourse (CD, III/4, p. 270).

But equally, while a refusal of the divine offer must be based on serious reasons, the acceptance must be a responsible choice. Those who argue that the matter of procreation should be left to chance or to providence seek to disclaim responsibility, Barth says. In his view, we 'are not allowed to dispense with rational reflection or to renounce an intelligent attitude at this point' (cf. CD, III/4, p. 271). In the matter of procreation, as in others, we must act according to reason. To think, as argued by John Paul II, in line with his predecessors Paul VI, Pius XII and Pius XI, that

openness to life is required on each and every occasion of spousal intercourse, is to accept an Old Testament, or even heathen view, according to Barth (cf. CD, III/4, p. 272).

Barth holds that under the New Covenant, as opposed to the Old, neither marriage nor procreation can be thought of as duties. What has happened, he says, is that marriage has received a new sacramental dimension and that it has become relativised inasmuch as the main end of it is no longer procreation but the spousal union, which reflects the relationship between Christ and His bride the Church. Thus, on his understanding, the importance both of marriage and of procreation are now relativised, though this entails no 'devaluation' either of marriage or of procreation (*ibid.*).¹³

Thus marriage as a possible way of life must have its status... and dignity. Indeed, now that its prototype—Christ and community—has emerged as a historical reality, it can and must receive quite a new consecration, not so much as an institution for procreation, but rather the representation of fellow-humanity, and therefore of man's determination as the covenant-partner of God, in the perfect fellowship of man and woman. Yet it is only one possibility which might be exploited... (CD, III/4, p. 143).

Indeed, showing a certain sympathy for the Catholic understanding of celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of God, Barth says that in the light of the New Covenant, both the married and the unmarried state receive a new significance.

The very thing which confers on marriage a new consecration and meaning also enables us to understand and appreciate abstinence from marriage as a possibility, a way, a matter of special gift and vocation. This is the fact, too lightly ignored by Protestant ethics in its glad affirmation of marriage born of the conflict against the priestly and monastic celibacy of Rome, that Jesus Christ Himself, of whose true humanity there can be no doubt, had no other beloved, bride or wife, no other family or domestic sphere but this community. Certainly, He expressed Himself very definitely about the divine basis, the indissolubility and the sanctity of marriage (Mk 10:12 and Mt 5:27-31). He did not command anyone to abstain from it in practice as He Himself did. His disciples and brothers (1 Cor 9:5) took a different course. But apart from His own example, He has given clear reasons, which might persuade anyone to abstain from marriage. For example, in Mk 12: 25, He did not say (as often stated) that in the resurrection of the dead there will no longer be male and female, he did expressly say that there will be no more marrying and giving in marriage...(CD, III/4, p. 144).

But, while Barth argues that under the New Covenant 'marriage is obviously relativised' (*ibid.*), as is procreation, he denies that the Gospels

contain any suggestion to the effect that the vocation of celibacy or virginity is superior to that of marriage. Nor do the Letters of St Paul contain any such suggestion, according to Barth (CD, III/ 4, p. 147). Instead, he argues that what St Paul says in the First Letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 7) is that, because we are awaiting the second coming of Christ, the symbolism of marriage in the image of Christ's union with the Church takes priority over the Genesis command to procreate (CD, III/4, p. 148). According to Barth, marriage is relativised under the New Covenant, as is, and even more so, procreation, inasmuch as under the New Covenant the sacramentality of the unitive aspect of marriage is highlighted.

By contrast, while John Paul II in his work, *The Theology of the Body*, also acknowledges that under the New Covenant marriage, in virtue of its unitive aspect, takes on a new more explicit symbolism as the image of Christ's salvific relationship with the Church,¹⁴ as has been shown, he does not accept that there is relativisation of procreation within marriage. This is the crucial difference between the two theologians.

To repeat, for Barth 'marriage is necessarily *coniugum*, but not necessarily *matrimonium*' (CD, III/4, p. 189) under the New Covenant. To his mind, 'the question of posterity has lost its decisive significance in the time of the New Covenant, and husband and wife form a sphere of fellowship independent of the child and family' (*ibid*).

This said, John Paul II too recognizes marriage as a fellowship independent of the child and the family inasmuch as he pays such great attention to the sacramental dimension of its unitive aspect in the first and major part of *The Theology of the Body*. Nor does he gainsay it in the last part of the work. Moreover he accepts the Barthian view that the Old Testament, with its requirement to fill the House of Israel in anticipation of the Messiah, placed a much greater emphasis on procreation than the New Testament does.¹⁵ But his emphatic insistence on the *Humanae Vitae* requirement under no circumstances to impede procreation other than by abstinence and his injunction to be generous and not to refrain from procreating other than for serious reasons and then preferably only temporarily,¹⁶ show that he holds that married couples still should heed the commandment to multiply and fill the earth.

To sum up, John Paul II does accept a relativisation of the importance of marrying under the New Covenant in Christ inasmuch as he declares that, under the New Covenant, the states of virginity and celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven are more transparent signs of God's eschatological plan. In fact, his understanding of celibacy and virginity make it clear that he even recognizes a certain relativisation of the importance of procreation under the New Covenant. What he does not recognize is the relativisation of procreation within marriage under the New Covenant.

However, to reiterate, there is a tension in John Paul II's thought. He is ambiguous in regard to the relative importance of the unitive and procreative ends or goods of marriage. While he emphasizes the obligation to be open to procreation on each and every occasion of spousal intercourse, he links or likens periodic continence to celibacy and argues, in line with *Humane Vitae*, that periodic continence fosters a deeper and more spiritual relationship between the spouses.¹⁷ Indeed, his whole argument suggests that he sees marriage in which periodic abstinence is practiced as a morally superior and more spiritual union—closer to the state of virginity or celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven—than marriage in which periodic abstinence is not practiced. This would suggest that John Paul II holds that the unitive aspect of marriage is more important than the procreative end or good of marriage. Moreover, the claim that abstinence fosters a more spiritual relationship, which suggests that it fosters a relationship that is more transparently sacramental, implies that the sacramental aspect of marriage is to be found (mainly) in the spiritual union seen as something apart from the sexual union. This in turn suggests that the end of good of the sexual or so-called spousal act resides not so much in spousal union as in procreation. If this were the case, it would mean that John Paul II holds that the main end of the marriage relationship is spousal union, while the main end of the sexual aspect of marriage is procreation. But not only does John Paul II say that the so-called spousal act is unitive and that its intention need not always be procreative, but clearly he also says that procreation is a major good of the marriage relationship and not just of the so-called spousal act. In his encyclical letter *Evangelium Vitae* of 1995 he writes:

It is precisely in their role as co-workers with God who transmits His image to the new creature that we see the greatness of couples who are ready to 'cooperate with the love of the creator and the Saviour, who through them will enlarge and enrich His own family day by day'. This is why the Bishop Amphilochius extolled 'holy matrimony, chosen and elevated above all other earthly gifts' as 'the begetter of humanity, the creator of images of God'.

Thus a man and a woman joined in matrimony become partners in a divine undertaking: through the act of procreation, God's gift is accepted and a new life opens to the future.¹⁸

And in *Familiaris Consortio* he writes:

According to the plan of God, marriage is the foundation of the wider community of the family, since the very institution of marriage and conjugal love are ordained to the procreation and education of children, in whom they find their crowning (FC, para. 13, p. 27).

The tension and ambiguity found in the thought of John Paul II, raises the

question whether his insistence on the wrong of separating the unitive and procreative aspects of marriage in the individual act should rather be attributed to his respect for his papal predecessors than to his understanding of the New Testament eschatology.

As to Barth there is no tension in his thought as regards the relative weight of the different ends or goods of marriage. For him the unitive aspect is more important than the procreative good of marriage; and this is because it is in virtue of the former that the spousal relationship symbolises Christ's relationship with the Church.

John Paul II and Karl Barth on the symbolism of the child and of parents

As to the answer to the question about John Paul II, there are actually reasons for thinking that it is not only out of respect for the magisterial tradition that John Paul II differs from Barth as regards his understanding of the relative importance of the unitive and procreative goods of marriage and insists on the inseparability of the two aspects on each and every occasion of spousal intercourse. For, as will be shown, the differences between Barth's and John Paul II's understandings of the sacramentality of marriage and the importance of procreation are matched by differences between their understandings the parent-child relationship under the New Covenant. And these differences actually suggest that John Paul II does not ascribe as much of a break between the sacramental orders under the Old and the New Covenants as Barth does.

Not only is a significant difference to be found in their understandings of the role of parents in relation to their children, but there is also a difference between their views on the symbolical role of the child. Let us start with the latter.

The symbolism of the child and of the family

On John Paul II's understanding, the child completes the union of the spouses. For him, as noted above, it represents 'the crowning of their own love' (LF, para. 9, p. 24; and cf. FC, para. 13, p. 27); and, as 'a living reflection of their love, it is a permanent sign of conjugal unity and a living and inseparable synthesis of their being a father and a mother' (EC, para. 14, pp. 27-28). Hence, the child itself and the family, become, like the spousal union, signs of God's salvific covenant with man and of the Triune mystery. John Paul II lays great stress on the Trinitarian likeness of the family:

Human fatherhood and motherhood, while remaining biologically similar to that of other living beings in nature, contain in an essential and unique way a 'likeness' to God which is the basis of the family as a community of human life, as a community of persons united in love (*communio personarum*).

In the light of the New Testament it is possible to discern how the primordial model of the family is to be sought in God himself, in the Trinitarian mystery of his life (LF, para. 6, p. 13).

John Paul II also sees the birth of a child as a paschal and eschatological sign, a sign of life in the eternal world to come, a sign of the victory over death brought about by Jesus Christ. In *Letter to Families* he writes:

The fact that a child is being born, that 'a child is born into the world' (Jn 16:21) is a paschal sign. As we read in the Gospel of John, Jesus himself speaks of this to the disciples before his passion and death, comparing their sadness at his departure with the pains of a woman in labour: 'When a woman is in travail she has sorrow (that is, she suffers), because her hour has come; but when she is delivered of the child, she no longer remembers her anguish, for joy that a child is born into the world' (Jn 16:21)... Just as the Resurrection of Christ is the manifestation of Life beyond the threshold of death, so too the birth of an infant is a manifestation of life, which is always destined, through Christ, for that 'fullness of life' which is in God Himself... (LF, para. 11, pp. 32-33).

Apart from the deep symbolism he finds in the family and the birth of the child, John Paul II also says that, at the personal or relational level, the child springing from the intimate personal and physical communion of man and woman enriches and deepens their relationship (LF, para.7). He also observes that the child consolidates the parental relationship in a biological sense inasmuch as fatherhood implies motherhood and vice versa (*Ibid*). On his understanding, then, the child consolidates the family both in a theological and in a biological sense as well as normally also in a subjective sense. His symbolical understanding of the child is rooted in his relational or personalistic understanding of the child as a focus of a shared love, who serves—or should serve—to strengthen the bond of love between the spouses. It is as persons in union and communion that spouses as a couple, and man and woman as parents of a child, reflect the Trinitarian union and communion of Father, Son and the Holy Spirit and, also, the Christ relationship with the Church and so the divine relationship with mankind established through the Church.

Barth's account is less Trinitarian. He notes that the birth of a child means the establishment of an exclusive, particular and permanent relationship between the two parents and between each of them and the child. 'They cannot renounce it, nor change the fact that it exists, and that it does so as their child' (CD, III/4, 241). This is why the child is a symbol of the parental relationship, says Barth. He also notes, as we have seen, that the child widens and enriches the spousal fellowship. However, he does not speak at length about or emphasise the trinitarian and eschatological symbolism of the child. Yet, the greatest difference

between Barth's understanding of the parent-child relationship and that of John Paul to lies elsewhere.

The symbolical and educational roles of parents

It is in their accounts of the relationship between the first and the fourth commandment that the differences between the understandings of John Paul II and Barth concerning the parent-child relationship come most to the fore. The important difference is found in their understandings of the role of parents. While Barth emphasizes the parents' role as representatives of God, John Paul II puts the emphasis on their role as Christian educators.¹⁹ That is, John Paul II places the main emphasis on education and the role of the family in bringing up Christians or children of God to bear witness in this world to Kingdom of Heaven by their own behaviour and love of neighbour. Barth, on the other hand, argues that parents bear witness to God, or are His representatives, before their children irrespective of their own behaviour and success or failure in turning the children into good Christians.

This said, as noted Barth, like John Paul II, in keeping with Christian tradition going back to St Thomas, would agree that Christian parents have a special responsibility to educate their children in Christ.²⁰ That is to say, both would say that, as servants and covenant-partners of God in Christ, Christian parents have a duty to bring up their children on the Gospel news and that this is their special parental mission as Christians. Thus, for both of them, Christian education means spiritual parenting. Furthermore both would argue that parents ought to bear witness to God by their own upright behaviour.

Observing that with the dignity or honour of parenthood, even that of single motherhood, comes obligations, obligations before God, Barth states that Christian parents live up to their parental dignity and responsibility by proclaiming the Gospel News to their children and by bearing witness to the fact that their children are little brothers and sisters of Christ, called to live in His Kingdom. Thus the first and foremost parental duty is not to 'attest the Law to their children, but primarily and decisively the Gospel' (CD, III/4, p. 282). This is the mission, which they must fulfil in the hope that the Holy Spirit will render their stewardly witness efficacious. For Barth authority as domination or an insistence on a hierarchy is no part of parental obligations (cf. CD, III/4, 279). 'Ultimately only God Himself is and has authority' (CD, III/4, 280). Certainly, the parental role is not to be understood as an exercise of power or as a right over children. Children are not chattel (CD, III/4, 243). They do not belong to their parents as properties but are first and foremost children of God. The parental task, then, is limited 'in the sense that it cannot amount to more than offering their children opportunities' (CD, III/4, 284). 'They cannot even make their child healthy in body and soul, let alone happy or successful, or one who

seeks and hears and pleases God, i.e. a Christian' (*Ibid.*).

Arguing that under the New Covenant in Christ, the relationship between the first and the fourth commandments acquires a new significance, Barth says that the fourth commandment must now be seen in the light of the first in a way that could not have been readily perceived in Old Testament times. Explaining this, he shows that, under the New Covenant, the command 'Honour thy father and thy mother...' (Ex. 20:12; Deut. 5:16) is to be seen as a reflection of the first, just as marriage is to be seen as a reflection of Christ's relationship with the Church. What is commanded is to honour parents out of respect for the Lord. On Barth's account, under the New Covenant, parents should be seen as representatives of God before their children and, therefore, the honouring of parents must be seen as symbolic of the honouring of God (CD, III/4, p. 243).

To be more explicit, on Barth's understanding, the respect due to parents is a consequence of, and second to, that due to God; the first commandment takes priority over—but does not suspend—the fourth (CD, III/4, p. 251). To show what he means by saying that the first commandment takes priority, Barth refers to the story of the twelve-year old Jesus in the Temple (Lk. 2:41-51), saying that 'it is possible to honour one's father and mother apart from and even against their will and knowledge' (CD, III/4, p. 249). For, as he explains, by disobeying his parents and remaining in the Temple—for the honour of God—Jesus honoured them in their roles as symbolic representatives of God, even though they did not see this. This, then, shows, how in situations of conflict between the first and the fourth commandment, the first takes priority over the fourth, though the fourth commandment is not therefore suspended (CD, III/4, p. 251). In other words, that some people are called to bear special witness to God and manifest His kingdom in a manner that their parents cannot understand and approve of does not mean that they dishonour their parents, but rather that they recognise more clearly than their parents the call to bear witness to the eschatological Gospel news that the kingdom of God 'has already come in its perfection' and now 'hastens to its future revelation and consummation' (CD, III/4, p. 261).

What Barth is saying is that the fourth commandment is limited by the first inasmuch as human parenthood, while analogous to God's fatherhood, is subordinated to it, since the purely biological and social ties of this world will pass away, whereas the spiritual ones, revealed by Christ will not. As he reminds us, Christ asked: 'Who are my mother and my brothers?'. And He answered: 'Here are my mother and my brothers. Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my brother and sister and mother' (Mk. 3:32-35). According to Barth, this shows that the most important relationships are those established in the name of God, that is through Christ—and that the

respect we owe each other and, in particular our parents, derives from our spiritual heritage and the promise it brings.²¹

On Barth's eschatological understanding, not only have parents been entrusted with a responsibility by God, but they point to God, even if they are imperfect. It is in this sense, then, that parents are owed respect out of respect for the Lord.

The necessity and divine compulsion of this demand [the fourth commandment] is rooted in the fact that from the standpoint of children, parents have a Godward aspect, and are for them God's primary natural representatives. The superiority which entitles them to this specific respect from their children really consists in their mission, not in any quality inherent in them, nor in their character as physical parents... nor in any particular moral quality.... (CD, III/4, p. 245).

On Barth's account, then, God is our first and foremost father. All human fatherhood and motherhood derive their dignity from His fatherhood. The fact that human parenthood 'may symbolise the fatherhood of God in a human and creaturely form is what lends it meaning and value and entitles respect' (*Ibid.*). That is, this is why the respect owed to parents is second to the respect owed to God the Father and why each one of us is 'primarily and truly the child of God' (CD, III/4, p. 246).

Though this truth was already inherent in the Old Testament, it was only fully revealed by Christ, argues Barth. On the Old Testament understanding, 'the right bearing of a son to his human father results from the fact that his relationship to him corresponds to that of the biological people of Israel to its God' (CD, III/4, p. 246). The duty to respect parents was a consequence of their duty to honour them as elders of God's chosen people. The child's honouring of God coincided with his honouring of his parents (CD, III/4, p. 248). The first commandment did not limit the fourth. But, with the entry of Christ into human history, the duty to respect parents was set alongside and below the duty to respect God. To be more precise, according to the New scheme, the fatherhood of God and the childhood of man is, Barth says, 'primarily and supremely the relationship between God and the one man Jesus' and 'rooted in this person, it is no less concretely the relationship between God and the members of His body, the community, who are directly awakened, impelled and guided by His Holy Spirit' (*Ibid.*). And so, the respect due to parents is measured against that due to God.

In short, Christ has revealed that the child owes respect to God directly and that the respect he owes his parents derives not from the fact that they belong to a certain biologically identifiable and chosen people, but from the symbolical meaning of parenthood (cf. CD, III/4, p. 252). Thus, to reiterate, human parenthood derives its dignity from the fact that it reflects the divine fatherhood.

Admittedly, John Paul II in his *Letter to Families* also speaks of parents as representatives of God. But his emphasis is different; it is on the missionary role of parents as educators and as witnesses to God by their own behaviour. Unlike Barth, John Paul II does not claim that parents deserve respect as such out of respect for the Lord, because, irrespective of their moral goodness or badness, symbolically they stand in for God himself (CD, III/4, pp. 242, 256).

For John Paul II, parents deserve respect on account of being good examples and spiritually fruitful through the education of their children. He writes: 'As the Second Vatican Council recalled, "since parents have conferred life on their children, they have a most solemn obligation to educate their offspring"' (FC, para. 36, p. 55).²² According to John Paul II, the education of children in the ethos of the heart and as members of the Church and of human society 'is rooted in the primary vocation of married couples to participate in God's creative activity' (FC, para. 36, p. 55). Indeed, John Paul II even describes parental Christian education as a ministry. Referring to St Thomas,²³ John Paul II writes: 'So great and splendid is the educational ministry of Christian parents that St Thomas had no hesitation in comparing it with the ministry of priests' (John Paul II, FC, para. 38, p. 58). For him a Christian education means giving an active example; parents should bear witness in their lives to the values expressive of love of God and of the ethos of the heart, such as kindness and self-sacrifice (*ibid*).

Thus even if John Paul II, like Karl Barth, argues in his *Letter to Families* that the first commandment takes priority over the fourth, he does not link this order to the symbolical role of parents merely in virtue of being parents. He links it to their educational and evangelical role. On John Paul II's account, parents are representatives of God inasmuch as they fulfil their responsibility as Christian educators by teaching their children the Gospel news and love for God and neighbour, by teaching them to enter more fully into the image of God and thus be truly human, human in the way taught us by Christ.

Indeed the affirmation of the person is in great measure to be referred back to the family and consequently to the fourth commandment. In God's plan the family is in many ways the first school of how to be human. Be human! This is the imperative passed on in the family... (LF, para. 15, p. 55).

To the mind of John Paul II, the family is the first school in the civilization of love (LF, para. 15). This explains why he attaches such great importance to biological fecundity. In other words, on John Paul II's understanding, the importance of biological fecundity is linked to the importance he attaches to parents as educators and role models and as such instrumental in the

spiritual education of children of God. He sees biological fecundity as a precondition of spiritual fecundity, inasmuch as he takes it that it is the Christian family that provides the Church with new members. Yet, as he sees it, it is not primarily as biological parents but rather as spiritual teachers, and as such witnesses to the Gospel message, that Christian parents deserve to be respected by their children. For it is in their role as teachers, and as such representatives of God, that they help to build the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. On John Paul II's understanding of St Paul's Letter to the Ephesians 6:1-4, by being respectful of their parents as representatives of God, children—like their parents as spiritual teachers—really are anticipating and beginning to build the Kingdom of Heaven here on Earth, the Kingdom in which the Spirit of Christ and of the Father reigns. That is to say, insofar as it heeds the ten commandments, and especially the first and the fourth commandments, the Christian family of flesh and blood, here and now, really does start building the Kingdom of Heaven on earth in anticipation of the perfect world to come when Christ will reign.

Thus, on John Paul II's account children are a blessing for the reason that if they are educated in faith, they will add to the House of God on earth, the Church. They will enter more fully into the likeness of God and eventually add to the community of saints in Heaven.

In sum, like Karl Barth, John Paul II links the first and the fourth commandment, because he sees parents 'as in some sense representatives of God' (LF, para. 15). But his sense is different from that of Barth. While Barth sees parents as representatives of God inasmuch as they are symbols of God, John Paul II sees parents as representatives of God inasmuch as they are Christian educators. Hence, he attaches great importance to procreation. For without procreation there can be no education of children. His views on the educational role of parents, then, shows that it is not purely out of respect for the magisterium that he insists so strongly on openness to procreation within marriage.

- 1 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (CD), ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1936-1977) III/4, p. 124.
- 2 John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (*The Dignity of Women*), (Dublin, Veritas, 1988), para. 7, pp. 22-23.
- 3 Karl Barth, *Op. cit.*, p. 153.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.197.
- 5 See John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (TB), (Boston, Pauline Books & Media, 1997), p.312. This work consists of a series of lectures dating between 1979 and 1984.
- 6 Cf. St Augustine, *De Bono Conjugali*, (*on the Good of Marriage*), trans. C. L. Cornish, in ed. Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, first series, vol. 3 (Edinburgh, 1993).

- 7 See TB, p. 389. Here John Paul II writes: ‘Even if the moral law, formulated in *Humanae Vitae*, is not found literally in the Sacred Scripture, nonetheless, from the fact that it is contained in tradition and, as Pope Paul VI writes, has been “very often expounded by the magisterium” (HV, para. 12) to the faithful, it follows that this norm is in accordance with the sum total of revealed doctrine contained in biblical sources (cf. HV para.4).
- 8 John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation (FC), *Familiaris Consortio Regarding the Role of the Family in the Modern World*, (London, St Paul’s, 1981)
- 9 John Paul II, *Letter to Families* (LF), (Vatican City, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994).
- 10 See John Paul II, TB, August 22, 1984.
- 11 In *Gaudium et Spes* it is stated that marriage and conjugal love are ordained to procreation and education of children. Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* (*Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*), trans., Ronan Lennon (with the exception of Part 1, cpt 1, trans Ambrose McNicholl), in *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Flannery VII), para. 50, p. 953.
- 12 See St Thomas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, IV, 58.
- 13 Cf., Gerard Loughlin, ‘The Want of Family in Postmodernity’, in ed. Stephen C Barton, *The Family in Theological Perspective*, (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1996), pp. 307-327. Loughlin compares John Paul II’s and Barth’s understandings of marriage and procreation, emphasising that while for Barth procreation is now (under the New Covenant) relativised, and the main end of marriage is the unitive one, procreation for John Paul II remains *the* important end of marriage.
- 14 See especially, John Paul II, TB, September 15 and September 22, October 13, October 20, 1982, pp. 327-341..
- 15 See John Paul II, TB, August 1980, pp. 135-138. Cf. Karl Barth, CD, III, 4, pp. 142-143.
- 16 See John Paul II, TB, August 1, 1984, pp. 393-394.
- 17 See John Paul II, TB, September 5, 1984, pp. 401-403.
18. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae* (*The Gospel of Life*), (Vatican City, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995), para. 12.
- 19 John Paul II says little about the parent-child relationship in his *Theology of the Body*. The emphasis in the first and main part of that work is on the man-woman relationship and the emphasis in the last part is on contraception.
- 20 Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* (*On the truth of the Catholic Faith*), IV, 58.
- 21 Cf.. Michael Banner, “‘Who are My Mother and My Brothers?’: Marx, Bonhoeffer and Benedict and the Redemption of the Family”, *Studies in Christian Ethics*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 22. Banner is also arguing for the supreme importance of spiritual kinship in Christ and showing in what that kinship consists]. That is to say, the Christian kinship is established through sisterhood and brotherhood in faith.
- 22 The Second Vatican reference is to the Declaration on Christian Education, *Gravissimum Education* —as well as to the passage in *Gaudium et Spes*, para. 50, quoted in footnote 4.