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"THE VISIBLE CHURCH" ACCORDING TO THE DIALECTIC THEOLOGY

THE literature, lectures, conversation and general atmosphere in Germany all breathe the spirit of "crisis," "need," and "problems." It is the "Zeitgeist" of these post-war days in a land which finds itself undergoing radical changes in every sphere of life. Hence it is that for thirteen Thursday evenings a series of "crisis" lectures are being given here in the largest auditorium in the Marburg University, each time to a group which fills the room to capacity, on such topics as "the crisis of faith," "the crisis of spirit," "the crisis of religions," "the crisis of world-views," "the crisis of the Christian church," "the world political crisis," "the crisis of world economics," "the crisis of German foreign politics," "the crisis of German constitutional life," "the crisis of law in Germany," "the crisis of German education," "the crisis of German political concepts." Lately we were addressed on "Missions as a theological problem." The theological faculty is offering a prize this year for the best essay on the *problem* of "the difference between the visible and the invisible church." No doubt that subject was not *selected* by the faculty, rather it was *thrust* upon it, due to the very circumstances in which the Protestant church in Germany finds itself today. And it is this very problem that engaged the powers of perhaps the most prominent theological spirit in Germany today, when he addressed the dignitaries of the Protestant church in Germany early this year on "Die Not der evangelischen Kirche" (The need of the Evangelical church). In what follows we shall seek to give a careful and rather full synopsis of the contents of this address, given by Professor Karl Barth in Berlin on January 31st, 1931, and in Bremen on February 13th, and in Hamburg on February 14th, and as printed in the *Zwischen den Zeiten*, heft 2, 1931, pp. 89-117.

Barth announces that the need of the "Evangelical church" with which he will here deal is a double one. The first need is one which roots itself simply in the very "essence" of what is called "Evangelical church"—a need, in fact, which, because it is included in the very definition of "Evangelical church," cannot be denied or avoided by anyone without at the same

time severing himself from that church, and working to undermine it (p. 89). This first need which inheres in the very being of the “Evangelical church” as such, “is great and burdensome to bear, but at the same time salutary and full of promise, just because it is necessary” (p. 90). The second need is a quite other one. “This is the need of its present existence (Existenz)” (p. 90)—a need which does not inhere in the very nature of the “Evangelical church,” but an exigency in which it finds itself, which we cannot continue to tolerate, but against which we must protest, and which we need to resist. This is a need which has come into existence to-day (as it always does whenever it does appear), when this *essential* need is “denied and consequently ignored, evaded and shoved to one side” (p. 90).

He thereupon addresses himself, in the first section, to the consideration of *the essence of the “Evangelical church,”* and as preliminary definition he says: “This is indelibly expressive of the essence of the Evangelical church: that it is the church under the cross. . . . Where it is not the church under the cross, it is not the Evangelical church. Where it would be such only in part and in addition also something else, there it is not the Evangelical church. It is what it is either completely or not at all. Its very existence is either an acknowledgment or a denial of its essence so understood. *Tertium non datur*” (p. 91).

“The Evangelical church did not come into existence as the result of the insight, or experience, or decision of any one. But the Evangelical church once appeared upon the scene—thrust out and condemned by the one church which then existed” (p. 91). And “the rejected sanctuary, which now established itself outside of the (then) church, was indeed the *cross*” (pp. 91-92). This is the cornerstone of the Evangelical church: namely, that God’s mercy has reached down to us in our deepest need and calamity, and on the cross has spoken redemption to a humanity dying the death of a rebel (pp. 92-93). “Pointed to such a Christ (the reformers) one day found themselves outside of the church, and the church which drove them out acknowledged, and still acknowledges in every way, that it knows a wholly other Christ than such an one: namely, a Christ who has cast aside His crucifixion-death and allowed it to lie there like an old garment, a Christ who is king in a wholly other fashion than that in which He was king in the presence of

Pilate—a Christ (who is conceived of) . . . as a powerful organised principle of a constantly visible, institutionally operative exaltation of man into the sphere of the divine—a Christ no longer of humility and of a hidden divinity, but a glory directly tangible, historically verifiable, psycho-physically experienced and amenable to a direct, so to speak legal and political documentation" (p. 93). Because the Reformers saw the Christ of the cross, they automatically broke with the Catholic church.

Now, what does it mean to be "the church under the cross"? It means for one thing that it has no claim in its own right upon "the wonder of Easter" (p. 95), and that whatever it is, it is by the grace of God alone. "It is church if it obeys, and it obeys if it believes, and it believes in case it acknowledges as just and right the unearned, free, divine election: nay, in case it acknowledges that from the very start, also before the fall, God possessed the right justly to reject it" (p. 95). That is to say, the church can only hope that "God may from time to time *make* it a visibly real church" (p. 95). "The Evangelical church can, fundamentally, only serve God. . . . Viewed 'in abstracto' it has no human interests, no human goals. . . . Human concerns in general, from the smallest to the greatest, concern it not in the least. It cannot squint: with one eye at God, and with the other at any human necessities, or lofty purposes whatever they may be. . . . It knows man all along the line as he who has crucified Christ and who lives not of his own wealth, but of God's mercy, not of that which he owns and is his, but of that which comes to him from without and is alien to himself. *He lives not by his own deeds, much rather herefrom, that his deeds have been forgiven.* . . .

"Moreover, the Evangelical church can only desire to serve God. It is not the advancement, the representation, the embodiment, the visible manifestation of the revelation and redemption which has taken place in Christ. It does not need to repeat the sacrifice of Christ. It is not its task in any sense to 'put Christ on the map,' to present Him and make Him operative. It is not for the church either to impart *salvation*, nor to propagate it, nor to spread it. Not as if it denied this whole happening, nay rather it much more *believes* it, but it denies, that this has in any sense whatever been assigned it, or that it is expected to bring this about. *It believes it as God's work.*

And it desires to serve this work of God with all the zeal with which one works who *must* and *would* serve, but (who also serves) with all the cautiousness (*Zurückhaltung*) of one who works who is in no sense a master workman, but in every respect only an apprentice, or handyman (*Handlanger*), who knows that he cannot make the thing in hand, but might only spoil it. It can only advance forward in its doing—(and be it said that it must here and there come forward with works, woe it! when it fails in this respect)—but then immediately it must again step back, in order that the real thing (*das Eigentliche*) which must needs take place, may be done by God" (pp. 95-96).

"The Evangelical church can, in the end, only *seek* its visible unity, but can in no sense claim to have found it. God creates and reveals at all times and in all places its visible unity when and where it pleases Him. What the church itself is able to do can never be more than a way and means to this end, nothing more, and least of all an autonomous creation of, or claim to its visible unity. The erection of signs (*Zeichen*) is its task. However, it will not be able in any way to advance beyond the erection of signs" (pp. 96-97). And Barth characterises as signs of the Evangelical church—preaching, prayer, sacraments, personal testimony, united testimony of domestic and foreign missions, the legal organisation of the church, and its theological confessions. "The Evangelical church knows, indeed, that it is only the earthly body of its heavenly head" (p. 97). "What it (the church) can say to man in the way of a word of comfort, or in the interest of instruction or counsel, that all points without exception as a penultimate word beyond itself, and *is* not true and good, but must *become* true and good, in case God takes His stand behind that which it can say" (p. 98).

So, in closing this first section, Barth declares that "the theology of the Evangelical church is in very deed a through and through comfortless (*trostlose*) theology, comfortless, because as the theology of the church under the cross it can entertain as its comfort *only God* and besides Him absolutely *nothing*" (p. 99). He who is not satisfied with such a comfort, but desires another comfort, had better get out of the Evangelical church, even if it means the shrinkage of the numbers in the church to a tenth or a hundredth of its present strength. As for the Evangelical church, if it is to remain such, its only comfort is the possession of God. And "to have God means for us

humans who live in time and not in eternity : to have *His promise* and *to be addressed* by Him ” (pp. 97-98).

The Evangelical church, therefore, has as its function to exist “ as a human fellowship (*Gesellschaft*) in the midst of, and parallel with all other human fellowships, a fellowship whose particular function consists herein—to be proof of this situation, namely, the confrontation of man with the crucified Christ as the absolutely exclusive law and author of his salvation, and that, over against all other fellowships, *but that, too, without pretending or claiming to be anything else* : rather to be a *sign*, a witness of this situation, performed in unpretending obedience. Where, and whenever, and in so far as the Evangelical church exists in this sense, there it has no need ” (p. 100). “ Every unnecessary and unsalutary need of the Evangelical church comes to the forefront, however, where, and whenever, and in so far as it does not acknowledge the need which roots in its very essence and refuses to assume it, and when it consequently does not wish to exist in conformity with its essence ” (p. 100).

Going over now to the second division, Barth turns his thought to the consideration of how the present-day church squares with the essence of the church as above defined. Now one of the departures from “ church ” so understood is that which has come to be entertained by many in the wake of the late *idealism* and *mysticism* of earlier centuries in the Christian church. For, under the influence of this tradition, it has been felt that God who is “ great, true, good and beautiful ” (p. 203), and thus grasped only by the individual human spirit in a mystical experience, is only blasphemed by contending that the church must come to *visible* expression in the world, because they have come to the conviction “ that visibility (of the church) means definiteness, and definiteness means humanness, and that humanness all along the line means the pettiness, folly, badness and hatefulness of the church ” (p. 102). And so much truth is there in these contentions, Barth admits, that we will all readily acknowledge, he thinks, the vast difference and the world of distinction which needs to be made between “ the divine revelation and the sermon of Trinity Sunday such and such, communion between God and man and the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper, salvation for time and eternity and the pastor of the neighbouring congregation, God’s hidden wisdom and the lecture notes or manuscript of professor of theology so and so,

the authority of the Holy Spirit and the authority with which the church, e.g., has undertaken to determine the canon of the Holy Scriptures, Jesus in Gethsemane and the diet of Augsburg in 1530 and the ‘Confession’ of the evangelical princes, the approaching kingdom of heaven and the Prussian general synod. Who would not at the same time laugh and weep in face of such juxtapositions as these ? ” (p. 102).

And yet, all these considerations which force upon us the recognition of the utter impossibility of presenting visible before the eyes of the world all of what is given in the hidden things of the spirit, does not authorise us to give up the visible church. For “the church can clearly not exist in the actual world, in the actual state of society as it should, *it cannot be a sign and testimony, without being visible, and it cannot be visible without being definite in numerous ways*” (pp. 101-102). To be sure “its definiteness of form is all along the line a human definiteness. And everything human is always only too human, too much open to question, only too hazardous in every regard” (p. 102). Yet we know “that the erection of a sign and thus the visible existence of the church in the midst of the world has been commanded and is consequently necessary, let come what may. *And that this expectation, this contract (Bindung), this obligation exists, and that concretely, follows from the fact that God Himself has sent His salvation into this world*” (p. 104).

“Yet, be it announced with all emphasis here and now, that the Evangelical church *is not in any sense* this glorious Kingdom of God. The Evangelical church from the very beginning stands in the midst of need, because it is *compelled* to exist visibly, and that means definiteness, and that means in all humanness, and consequently in no sense does it exist as a Kingdom of saints and autonomous creatures (Freien), but rather it is obligated to exist in all weakness—vulnerable and in need of forgiveness. But exist it must ! ” (p. 105).

But *the flight from the visible church was more the danger in the days when idealism reigned*. That is no longer the imminent danger in our own day. Rather, just the opposite danger threatens us to-day, namely, *flight into “the visible”*—not flight into “the visible church”—but *flight into visibility as such* in the most general sense (p. 106).

Our age is possessed with the passion for *organisation, objectivity* (Sachlichkeit) and unassailable authoritative concrete

positions (p. 107). And right in line with this "Zeitgeist" there has appeared in the Evangelical church a new "*will to existence, to visibility, to definiteness of form.*" 'Protestantism must become church or it will become nothing,' we are told. Further, we are informed that 'the century of the church' has dawned" (p. 108): and in all this nothing is meant except the visible church (p. 108).

Now it must be said that "this emphasis upon visibility might be simply nothing less than a return to the cross of Christ and to faith," and the attempt to confront the present age more concretely and definitely with the claims of the gospel as such (p. 108). But Barth says he has reasons to believe that our present stress upon the need that the church be a factor with which the world needs more and more to reckon, is a stress upon the church only *as such*. He seeks to make clear why he so judges by advancing a series of questions to which he says the Evangelical church in its present state gives no satisfactory answer. These questions in substance are:

1. Why is it that churchmen are so constantly and so uncritically applying to the Evangelical church terms and phrases which are in no wise expressive of the uniqueness and distinctness of the Evangelical church, but which are really cogent only as applied to the existence (Existenz) of the church as such? In short, has not the extreme care which the Reformers exercised in defining the essence of the Evangelical church over against their contemporary humanism and mysticism been surrendered by the present-day church, so that it no longer feels that it has a special mission which no other agency may or can supplant? (p. 109).

2. "Why is it that we concern ourselves only about the existence (Existenz) of the church as such—about its character, its publicity (Öffentlichkeit), about its deeds, and not at all about the *why* for which it exists? Why is it that so little or almost no theology at all to speak of is to be found behind the weightiest utterances on the subject of the existence of the present-day Evangelical church? . . . Do men really think that they can faithfully and energetically busy themselves with the existence (Existenz) of the church, and leave the question with regard to its essence (Wesen) (perhaps because of lack of time) to be dealt with by the only too gladly ridiculed theorists and pedantics?" (p. 110).

3. Is it not true that the church is complacently and securely satisfied “to be in possession of the gospel” (p. 111) and “makes much ado about the countless numbers of our generation who notoriously refuse to hear from its mouth the gospel?” (pp. 110-111), while in the midst of it all, it wilfully ignores the fact that in order to impart the gospel it must first be in possession of it? But one “*possesses*” the gospel of Jesus Christ “in *faith* and not in sight, in *prayer* and not in ownership, in *spirit* and not in body, no, not in the most spiritual, pious and energetic body” (p. 111). The present-day church, judged by our Evangelical “*Sonntagsblätter*,” the publications of our church presses, and the average sermon, is far from being an embarrassed or perplexed church. It is only too bold. “Where really is the church *which itself stands in the midst of such a repentance as it preaches*, and which makes use for itself of Luther’s ‘Out of the depth of despair I called unto Thee,’—a word which it knows only too well how to recommend to others?” (p. 111).

4. “Does (the present-day church) indeed know that these are two different matters: ‘Thou hast borne all (our) iniquities’ and: the incitement to battle for religious renovation, ethical purity, personal freedom, national or social fellowship?” (p. 112). That is to say, is not the gospel of forgiveness and redemption in Christ too constantly, in the church to-day, being obscured and even nullified by a preaching of the laws of men?

5. Next, Barth brings forth a consideration which has direct reference, of course, to the overtures of the Evangelical churches of Prussia to the government (being presented during this very period) for a concordat, wherein they would be assured of definite rights, comparable with those in possession of the Catholic church in Prussia. He again blames the Evangelical church for craving for such visible, tangible *power*, which it claims it wants to preserve in the interests of society, the school, and morals. He points out that the Evangelical church ought rather to come clearly to see “that the church under the cross, the church of promise and of faith, cannot desire or crave for power as such, . . . for power, no matter for how specific an employment whatsoever” (p. 113). And he asks instead, “would it not be more timely, and finally also more practical and in the best sense of the word more *realistic*, if the church should again begin, first of all, to really strive for the Kingdom of God?” (p. 114).

6. Then in prophetic language which in passionate fervour reminds one of Jeremiah who declared that when he forbear to speak any more in the name of the Lord, " then there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with forbearing, and I cannot contain " (Jer. xx. 9), Barth concludes by " dropping " these weighty words against those whom he views as the false prophets of an erring visible church to-day: " I am aware that what I am about to say is a severe word, but I cannot restrain myself : According to my knowledge and insight, that which in the average sermon of our church is preached as the gospel is, in spite of all appeals to the Bible, and in spite of all Luther-pathos, a mysticism tempered with a little morality, or a morality tempered with a little mysticism, and not the word of the cross as the Reformers have understood it. What the average preacher has to say these days is of account only for those who are good and with God's help are constantly becoming better (note the irony), but has no authority for the lost and those who are to be saved in Christ ; again (what these preachers have to say) is valid only with regard to a salvation which is already present in us and about us and which we create and cultivate within ourselves (again note the irony), but has nothing to do with the salvation which comes to us, and with the Kingdom of God " (pp. 114-115).

In shortest compass, then, we may say that according to Karl Barth, the only and all-embracing need of the Evangelical church is to wait obediently upon God to bring in the Kingdom in the hearts of men, while the church as an organisation carries out its work of testimony, under the conviction that it can itself accomplish nothing toward the salvation of men. The most that it can hope for is that somehow God may own what the church under this sense of obedient duty does, and use it, in His own way, to further ends which He alone knows and will reach. It is to this that Barth would call back the Evangelical church in Germany, and that church the world over wherever it has drifted from this faith.

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