

The Barthian Idea of Revelation.

WHILE reading *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, by Karl Barth, one seems to hear echoes of Prof. Teufelsdröckh in *Sartor Resartus*. There we are in the atmosphere of eternities and immensities, the everlasting No, the everlasting Yes; and man in the midst of it all, with his folly and littleness confronted by Choice, Decision, Duty. In Barth man is represented as setting himself up as judge and accepting only what approves itself to his own judgment. He makes himself the measure of all things, even of God, whereas the only true attitude to God is the acceptance of the Revelation He is pleased to give; and man's true business is to fit himself to hear the "Word of God." This "Word" comes to those who have faith, who believe. To ask for proof is to paralyse faith; is, in fact, the ultimate human revolt against God.

The Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament are the only, the exclusive sources of the knowledge of God. No certain revelation of divine things can be found in other "sacred books," or in extra-canonical literature. Now, this is nothing less than a revolt from much current thinking—a direct challenge to the modernist outlook. But it is stated and enforced with strong conviction, and with an enthusiastic ardour that compels attention. The picture of "The Strange New World within the Bible" has about it a glow and a rousing stimulus that must appeal forcibly to the Christian preacher, because of its insistence on the great central message he has to proclaim, the objective reality for our beliefs.

The familiar "God has never left Himself without a witness" is generally supposed to allow for a preparatory revelation in the Ethnic religions and in philosophies, but Barth maintains that in these we find only man's groping search for the Infinite, whereas in the Bible it is always God's search for man. God takes the initiative, and there is no movement possible in the contrary direction from man to God.

All through the Bible there are divine calls, promises, assurances, through witnesses—leaders, prophets, and psalmists, and through Jesus, and echoes of Jesus in Paul, John, etc. "Who," asks Barth, "set these echoes ringing? What is the truth underlying it all?" The Bible gives to every enquirer such

answers as he deserves. Everything depends upon what he looks for, and on what sort of man he is who looks. We receive varying answers according to our earnestness and experience. But these answers may only meet the demands of our temperament, of our religious and philosophic theory. The Bible says, "You want to see yourselves mirrored in me, and you have found your own reflection there." But we must dare to reach far beyond ourselves. The Bible says, "Seek *Me*; seek what is here," and the highest answer is a New World, a World of *God*. We may stop and play among the secondary things, but there is a Spirit that presses us on, a river that (if we entrust our destinies to it), carries us away from ourselves to the sea; and the daring to follow this drift is faith, while the invitation to dare is the expression of the Grace of God. To our uncertainties, relativity, and subjectivism Barth opposes the absolute authority of Scripture as a revelation of God.

It might be surmised that this is based on a position of Fundamentalism, but that is very far from being the case. The validity of literary and historical criticism is frankly acknowledged. Verbal inspiration and inerrancy are repudiated. The Bible contains errors and inaccuracies, myth and legend, obsolete cosmology, faulty history. Brunner says, "the witnesses were men, doubtless entangled in human error." In science, evolution is well grounded! There are important differences between the synoptists and Johannine and Pauline tradition, and even the synoptic tradition itself is sometimes unreliable. But nothing of real importance is destroyed because of these defects; only the divine authority of what was merely human is lost. It is, indeed, no catastrophe, but a most necessary deliverance from a misconception that for centuries has damaged and crippled faith. Brunner employs illustrations to make clear his position.

(a) The pearls of revelation have been imbedded in a covering of sand, and criticism wipes away the sand to show the pearl in its pure whiteness. But nobody would throw away a pearl because of the sand in which it lay.

(b) The Bible is the crib in which Christ lay, but no accident to the crib affects the reality of the Christ who found His resting-place in it.

Clearly, then, the Barthian position is not founded on any theory of Literalism. An important distinction is drawn between the contents of the Bible, and the content of the contents. The contents of the Bible are considered under three headings, (1) history, (2) morality, (3) religion.

(1) The historical narratives are often vivid and full of interest and instruction. But when regarded merely as history they are "flat and incomprehensible." The Bible is silent about

the why and the how things happened, or certain characters appeared upon the scene. No account is given of their natural causes. There *were* reasons, but such reasons as cannot be reached by logical argument or by parallels. The one answer is *God*. The only explanation is that God lives and speaks and acts, and when God enters the field, history for the time being ceases to be, and there is nothing more to ask, for something new and wholly different begins, with its distinct grounds, possibilities, and hypotheses. In mere *events* there is no basis for faith.

(2) Is the uniqueness of the Bible found in its *Ethical* contents? Certainly the moral level is often lofty, especially for the time. But there is no "moral curriculum," no complete code of rules for conduct. There are also examples of virtuous and noble character, good representative men from whom we may learn wisdom and heroism. But on the other hand, many characters and incidents are far from praiseworthy, such stories as those about the patriarchs, about Samson, David, Elijah, etc. Better models of good behaviour more suited to our need are to be found in extra Biblical literature. Even the life and teaching of Jesus do not provide any manual of instruction for practical affairs, very little guidance about industry and business, civil statecraft or war. For all this we fall back on other writings. And even for personal difficulties many earnest souls find more comfort and inspiration in Christian poetry and homilies, and some even in modern psychology. In short, the Bible offers not at all what we first seek in it. Jesus seems indifferent about many of these interests and says, "What have I to do with your 'practical' life? Follow thou *Me*." We stand before the other New World, in which the supreme concern is not the doings of men but the doings of God—not the various ways which we may take if we are men of goodwill, but the power out of which goodwill must first be created. The reality which lies behind all the spokesmen in the Bible is the world of the Heavenly Father, in which morality is dispensed with because it is taken for granted. The life blood of the New Testament is the Father's Will, which is to be done on earth as in heaven. The Bible makes straight for one point—the point at which we are confronted with the necessity of decision, to accept or to reject the Sovereignty of God.

(3) Is the Bible then a revelation of the true religion? How to find God, and how to comport ourselves before Him? Is it a text-book for worship, service, godly living? Yes, but it is something more than all this. All the various "religions" appeal to the Bible. Are all these right? or may they all be wrong? Looked at closely, there are no religions in the Bible, only the other new and greater world. There are many religious problems :

which creed is the more correct? whether understanding, will or feeling should be predominant? But all these questions we must decide for ourselves. The great question is not right human thoughts about God, but the right divine thoughts about men. That is, there is revelation, not religion only, not religious self-expression, but the standpoint of God, "These are they which testify of *Me*." All through, the theme is never the religion of the Jews, or of Christians, or of the heathen, but of God. We are lifted out of the old atmosphere of man, up to the open portals of a new world.

It is this new world of God that brings us to the content of the contents—the divine sovereignty, majesty, and incomprehensible love. What, then, is the revelation? God as the fountain of life, the source of peace. Jesus Christ as Redeemer, Saviour, Comforter, Lord of the heaven which awaits us. Yes, but there is something more and greater. All these blessings represent a God and a Christ by *our* measure and according to our own desires—the saving of our own souls. But the highest point is God as Heavenly Father even upon earth, and upon earth really as the *Heavenly* Father. There is no gap between here and beyond. God has caused eternity to dawn in place of time, or rather *upon* time. He breaks through, and purposes nothing less than the establishment of a new world—a new world in which God, through the Son, is to redeem *all*, and through the Spirit to establish the righteousness of heaven in the midst of the unrighteousness of earth, and will not stay until all that is dead has been brought to life, and a new world has come into being.

So far I have given a rapid summary, partly from Barth's *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, and partly from Brunner's *The Word and the World*, and we cannot fail to be impressed by the passionate conviction and urgency of their message. And there is certainly much that is true and timely in it in these days of timid and perplexed faith, when, in some quarters, a confused humanitarianism is offered as an equivalent for Christianity. The Gospel is sometimes conceived as little more than a duplicate of moral ideals which, in the gradual progress of enlightenment, would have evolved apart from Christ. But the Gospel does not merely hold up ideals and make demands, but brings a gift of that which the world neither possesses nor knows, the secret of God's purpose of love, the message of reconciliation. It has been well said that "What the Church needs is not a clever Apologetic, but a new and fresh insight into its own peculiar message." There has been an undue and sometimes an exclusive emphasis on the divine immanence, and it is refreshing to have the equally real divine transcendence brought into conspicuous prominence. This Barthian movement might

take for its motto the words of Isaiah: Cease ye from man whose breath is in his nostrils: for wherein is he to be accounted of? The Lord alone shall be exalted in that day. Or Francis Thompson's lines in *The Hound of Heaven*:

How hast thou merited—
Of all man's clotted clay the dingiest clot?
Alack, thou knowest not
How little worthy of any love thou art!
Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee,
Save Me, save only Me?

Yet, in our sympathy with the aim of these writers, we cannot be blind to serious flaws in their system of thought. Their reaction against the "liberal school" has swung the pendulum too far. And a few points open to criticism may here be briefly stated.

(1) A rigid Dualism—a sharp antithesis between God and Man, an eternal qualitative difference between the divine and the human, and there is no continuity between them. In his revelation God is hidden *sub specie contraria*. To believe that God can be *directly* known by man is heathenism. God is the Altogether Other, the reality that breaks through from the other side. The human mind is passive and only when God speaks in Scripture is there any revelation—any direct contact with human nature. So-called "religious experience" is futile, for there is no road from God to man. Now, this surely is a hard saying. It means that all human devotion, all endeavours to realise a lofty ideal, all the travail of philosophic thinkers (apart from the acceptance of God in Christ), are spurious, because they are the subjective self-assertion of a fallen and impotent humanity. The Reason by which we know and interpret the world we live in has no place in matters of the soul. God is never an *object* of knowledge—but ever the subject, and can only be known through Himself. Is not this an impasse similar to Paul's metaphor of the clay and the potter? The answer is, of course, that we are not clay, and Paul himself does not pursue the analogy, but at once recedes from its implication. Surely our natural value judgments concerning the good, the right and the true are not false or illusory. They are the only ground we have for acknowledging any claim or authority that comes to us from beyond ourselves. And how are we to commend the truth of our religion to non-Christians on the ground that the character of Jesus is surpassingly good and beautiful, and that His life reveals thereby the beauty and goodness of God? Surely God touches us through loving human hearts and draws us by helpful human hands, "with cords of a man, with bands of love." What significance are we to attach to "God created man in His own image"?

or to that jewel of Augustine's, which many feel to be an almost sufficient creed, "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our souls are restless till they find rest in Thee" ?

(2) The rejection of "religious experience" as purely subjective and human. This is, of course, a corollary of the strict dualism. But in experience there are two factors, one objective, the other subjective. Sometimes the one may be stressed, at other times, the other. We may occupy ourselves with our own feelings to such an extent that they become merely sentimental or morbid. But when the object of thought is distinctly and steadily held in view, then we have fellowship, which surely is the indispensable condition of revelation and inspiration. To insist so absolutely on the "Deus absconditus" really excludes the possibility of any communication at all between the infinite and the finite—and the result is to strengthen the position of those who take refuge in either obscurantism or in agnosticism.

(3) No ordered progressive revelation—no gradual education imparting truth as men were able to receive it. That would involve the transcendent God in a time process of natural law, and make revelation a relative and natural thing. There was a sudden break into history. If God does not reveal Himself altogether, He does not reveal Himself at all. But is any revelation possible except in a real fellowship—the activity of God at work upon the experience of His witnesses in their personal life, interpreting for them historical movements, and their own circumstances? The distinction between man's approach to God, and God's approach to man, cannot be sharply drawn. It has been well said that "Revelation and Discovery must be the same process viewed from different standpoints." Revelation is a form of communion in which the act of God and the spontaneity of human personality are inextricably interrelated.

By neglecting development in the divine discipline of Israel we miss the fascinating interest of how God led His people on, not in the line of their natural genius and inclination, but in spite of these—always in advance but not too far ahead to be out of touch—on to ever clearer understanding and acceptance. The Bible is the record of how God by His Spirit, entered intimately into the nation's life, into the experience of its choicest personalities, that the purpose of His Grace might be wrought out on the stage of history for all the world to see.

(4) The idea of Crisis. When God breaks into the human mind it is for judgment. Man is reduced to a sense of his exceeding sinfulness and utter impotence. "Nothing in my hand I bring. Naked come to Thee for dress." Barth seems to lay exaggerated emphasis on this aspect of God's approach. God

appears first to condemn and then to save. But that is too meagre an account of the "great transaction." It is only one side of the truth, and at least an equal emphasis must be laid on the Love and Grace of God's dealings with the soul.

(5) The "Jesus of History" is of secondary importance. Knowledge of the earthly career of Jesus is no sufficient ground for knowledge of Christ. The historian sees only the human "incognito" of Jesus. The real Christ is not visible in the life and teaching. "Historical understanding is irrelevant for faith." The Cross (God's No on human sin), and the resurrection (God's Yes)—all is summed up in these two acts, and only those who hear the No can hear the Yes. Now this "incognito" suggestion looks dangerously like the ancient Docetic heresy which obscured or denied the truly human nature of Jesus. But the Cross and the Resurrection do not stand apart by themselves. They are the completion, the climax, of a ministry and witness prepared for by His intercourse with men as a brother man:

But warm, sweet, tender, even yet,
A present help is He,
And faith has yet its Olivet,
And love its Galilee.

(6) The dogmatic norm for faith exists exclusively within the Bible, because the Church acknowledges that it contains the Word of God. And the Church can change the canon if it is assured of the leading of the Spirit. It is the law of the Church, not the experience of any particular persons that determines the priority of prophets and Apostles. But this ground for the elevation to absolute and exclusive authority of the traditional list of books is rather precarious in the light of the well-known process by which the canon was fixed. Substantially, general agreement was reached by the end of the second century, but for two centuries afterwards at least five of the New Testament books were doubted in many quarters, and they were finally accepted largely through the influence of Jerome and Augustine. And the Bible of the Apostolic Church, the Greek Septuagint, included writings which are now relegated to the Apocrypha. Indeed, Jerome included the Apocryphal "Judith" in the Old Testament Canon. And at the Reformation the question was re-opened, when Luther raised doubts even about "James," which he characterised as an "Epistle of Straw."

Brunner goes so far as to say that each part of Scripture is the complete Word of God, and can, by the accession of the rest, be made clearer. Surely that is a bold position. The modern Church is as well equipped for selection as the Fathers and Councils were, and, now-a-days, who would not give up (for example) "Esther" for "Ecclesiasticus," or "Chronicles" for

"Maccabees"? The Barthian position is virtually that of the Roman Catholic Church. And although, roughly speaking, the books chosen are, as a whole, on an altogether higher plane than those which were finally rejected, it remains true that the limits of the Canon have fluctuated, and the line between Canonical and uncanonical cannot be drawn with precision or confidence.

We do not accept our present Scriptures *merely* on the decisions of Councils. We verify them for ourselves by the immediate response each part awakens within our own reason and conscience and spiritual intuition, and by the course of our own religious experience. It is the witness in our heart answering to the Witness of the Word.

Finally it ought to be gladly acknowledged that the teaching of Barth is timely and valuable as a corrective (his own word) of certain tendencies in modern religious thought. It originated in his experience as a preacher, as he brooded on the confusion and perplexity occasioned by the tragedy of the Great War, and the break up of assured religious convictions that followed. He says that he was like some one groping his way up a dark and difficult church tower. To help himself forwards he clutched at what he thought was a rope, and he found that it was the bell pull. Its clanging note startled him into a quest for new certainty, and he found that in God alone and not in any human thought at all. But it was a short cut to assurance. He was, as Dr. Quick suggests, more concerned about certainty at all costs than about the whole truth of religion. It was, after all, but "a gesture of intellectual impatience." However, Barth disclaims any attempt at propounding a complete system. He has already considerably modified his position, and we must await with sympathy his further and more ripened thought.

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P.S. The following sentence by one of Augustine's biographers might be not unfairly applied to Barth's teaching. Commenting on Augustine's doctrines of the corruption of human nature through the Fall and the consequent slavery of the human will, and on Election and Reprobation, he writes: "His language is far from uniform, and much of the severity of his doctrines arose from the bitter memory of his early experience, and from the profound impression which the corrupt state of Society, in his time, and the vast desolations of barbarism had made on his earnest and susceptible soul. In his desire to give glory to God, he sometimes forgot to be just to man."