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PROFESSOR KARL BARTH AND THE THEOLOGY OF CRISIS.

BY THE REV. A. J. MACDONALD, D.D., Rector of St.
Dunstan's-in-the-West

KARL BARTH, the son of a Swiss Professor of Theology at Berne, was born at Basle in 1886. He was educated at Berne, at Berlin (under Harnack), and at Tübingen (under Hermann). He became a journalist in the office of the *Christlichwelt* (1908-09) and developed a vivid dialectical style. He was assistant in a Swiss pastorate at Geneva (1909-11) and for ten years had charge of a Reformed church of his own. In 1921 he was made Professor of Theology at Göttingen. In 1925 he accepted the Chair at Münster, and in 1929 at Bonn. He comes from a distinguished academic family. He has three brothers: Peter, Professor of New Testament Theology at Geneva; Heinrich, Professor of Philosophy at Basle; while the third is a Doctor of Medicine.

The theology of Barth has become the material of what Brunner of Zurich has termed the theology of crisis, but Barth's teaching was not developed in the first instance to meet the situation arising out of the War. In one of his chapters in *The Word of God and the Word of Man* he describes the week-end crisis of the minister faced by the urgency of saying something effective to his people. Barth felt this crisis before the War, and during its early years when he prepared his sermons for his Swiss congregation. He took up the Epistle to the Romans and went through it, week by week, in a series of graphic expositions, which have now become famous in his magnificent commentary on that book.

Like every other prophetic mind Barth was early possessed by a spirit of discontent, which he learned to regard as divine. He perceived the breakdown of the theology of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It had ceased to be the embodiment of faith, it had lost its inspired content, it represented merely the workmanship of the human mind, using as materials, not the Word of God, but the conclusions of human philosophy, science and history.

"Our naturalism, our soulless historicism, our æstheticism are mistaken. Whence arises the opposing fact that we are always in part refusing to ask after God—you take your biology! you take your history!—I have my religion!—you in your small corner and I in mine."—All this "converts the knowledge of God offered in the Bible into what it is not. . . . The failure of the relative type (of Christianity) consisting of experience, metaphysics, and history, is so palpably, so unmistakably before our eyes, and the demand for a something new, the Wholly Other, the reality of God, is so definitely upon our lips."

Note that all this was written in 1916 when the victory of the Germanic powers appeared to continental observers to be assured.

But Barth is not a fundamentalist, nor does he think meanly

of the gifts of intellect in the interpretation of the Bible and religion. We require the aid of criticism, history and science, but religion enters when these have done their work. It is something very far beyond and above the conclusions of the intellectualists in any branch of enquiry. So he condemns the modern tendency to "shake off theology and think what is intelligible" as "hysterical and thoughtless." To be ashamed of theology is "a children's disease." His quarrel with contemporary theology is levelled against its lack of spiritual insight, of spiritual content and power to inspire.

In this Conference we shall perhaps be more especially interested in what Barth calls the preacher's problem. He says :

"Once in the Ministry I found myself growing away from these theological habits of thought and being forced back . . . more and more upon the specific minister's problem, the sermon. I sought to find my way between the problem of human life on the one hand and the content of the Bible on the other. My intention is not to create a new theology, but to get at the trend of the revealed theology of the Bible, and make that a living message for the crisis of the times."

Although he makes use of every modern aid to interpretation, Barth is not a Modernist. He accepts the theology of the Creeds, but seeks to expound their living content, and finds it in the Bible message which they enshrine.

But he is aware also of the problem of the man in the pew.

"On Sunday morning when the bells ring to call the congregation and minister to church, there is in the air an expectancy that something great, crucial and momentous is to happen. Here is a building, old or new, of which the very architecture, even apart from the symbols, paintings, and appointments which adorn it, betrays the fact that it is thought of as a place of extraordinary doings. Here are people, only two or three . . . or perhaps even a few hundred, who, impelled by a strange instinct or will, stream towards this building, where they seek—what? . . . and their being here points to the event that is expected . . . or was once expected here.

". . . here above all is a man (the preacher) upon whom the expectation of the apparently imminent event seems to rest in a special way. —he will pray—he will read from the Bible—he will enter the pulpit and—here is daring—preach; that is, he will add to what has been read from the Bible something from his own head and heart. . . . He must speak of God—God *is* present. The whole situation witnesses, cries, simply shouts of it, even when in ministers or people there arises questioning, wretchedness or despair." . . .

Karl Barth's theology springs from this overpowering sense of the individual preacher's *need*—"Not until our preaching arises from need will our work become a *mission*. Mission alone can legitimize preaching." "Woe is me if I preach not the Gospel." It is no use for the preacher to contemplate resignation under the sense of unworthiness or unfitness—

"Shall we say farewell to the ministry, give up our positions, and become what all the others are?—But the others are not happy. . . . If we were not ministers others would have to be . . . giving up the ministry would be as sensible as taking one's life; nothing would come of it, absolutely nothing."

How does Barth solve the problem? His reply takes us to the heart of the Barthian system. It must be "remembered as we look forward to our task that only God *Himself* can speak of God. The task of the minister is the Word of God," and he weaves the maxim into his first formal theological work (the first volume of the *Dogmatik*) written when no longer a parish minister, but when occupying the Chair of theology at Münster. He defines "dogmatics" as the "effort towards the recognition of the legitimate content of Christian speech about God and Man." Human preaching can only be a *ministerium verbi*, a service towards this original Word-itself. His idea contains the notion of the Word, the Logos Himself being in the preaching, "its content can be no other than the Word of God itself." The human word of the preacher is merely the instrument of the Word of God, empowered and directed by the same Word of God which declared itself in Holy Scripture. So the sense of burden is removed from us by the recollection that our preaching is not our own—it is a manifestation of the Word of God.

"Obviously the people have no need of *our* observations upon morality and culture, or even of our disquisitions upon religion, worship and the possible existence of other worlds. The theme of preaching is not 'psychology, morals, biblical history, public utility, ecclesiastical tradition, personal experience,' but the . . . 'Cross, the Resurrection and repentance'—and this is what the people expect to hear. If the congregation brings to church the great question of human life and seeks an answer for it, the Bible contrariwise brings an answer."

We have to speak of God, or better, let God speak in us. What, then, is Barth's view of God? His conception of God is primarily transcendental although its transcendentalism is balanced by the immanentalism of his doctrine of the Holy Spirit. "God is in Heaven; we are on earth—to use the language of human symbols." There is a distinction between God and ourselves which cannot be traversed—surely a healthy challenge to the vague subjective teaching which inspires our preaching, our religion, our psychology to-day—all, be it observed, an inheritance from two hundred years of theologising and philosophising and now of psychologising. This is the angle of approach of prophetic men, of Isaiah and Jeremiah, of Paul and Luther and Calvin. It is Barth's challenge to the immanental theology of our day. The necessary prerequisite for every soul which would get right with God is to realise God as completely and distinctly *other* than himself, not to be grasped by any subjective movement of thought, only to be understood by movement from the other side, by revelation from God, indeed as Barth has recently shown, in his little book on the Holy Spirit, by the agency of the Holy Spirit. So completely does Barth draw a distinction between man and God, that he defines God as "non-being" in contrast with the existential life of man, as Plato taught and as, we may add, John the Scot in the ninth century taught, although under the different phrase "no-thing." Hence S. Paul speaks of the unknown God. Yet there is no Gnostic nihilism in this conception. God is

only described as "non-being" in contrast with the material nature of human beings; "spiritual being" would express Barth's meaning just as well. The loftiest human conception or experience of God falls short of apprehending His reality because we, as material beings, cannot approach to a true conception of the spiritual, of God. "The divine is on the further side of the human last." Barth is content to state the *fact* of God, and he calls upon us to be content with that; man cannot define the attributes and qualities of God, especially as God seldom speaks of Himself in revelation.

How does man become conscious of the fact of God—how does man know that God is there? Not through any movement of man towards God, but of God towards man. There is no way from man to God, but from God to man. This is another fundamental Barthian concept. Man is incapable of finding out God by his own efforts. God seeks man and finds him. I think Barth is right. God the Word came seeking man, came down from Heaven, was incarnate. The process of the Incarnation is God seeking man, making a way from God to man, not *vice versa*. Man must place himself in the way of the seeking God. That is our part in the process. "Seek ye the Lord" means "go out and on to the way where the Seeker may find you." So Paul says "work out your own salvation—for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil. ii. 12 f.), a piece of antithetical dialectic which Barth accurately reflects.

The medium of our knowledge, or consciousness, or experience of God is revelation. Human thought and reason cannot find Him. Even the mystic cannot find God, apart from the self-revelation of God to his soul. This revelation is granted by the Divine Word, the Logos, the Son. If the Word of God is laid upon the lips of the preacher "that happens through the monarchical Word of God Himself." That which is Revealed and the Revealer are the same, God the Father, God the Son. God's work is the function of speaking or revealing, so the Son of God is the Word. Revelation is not a gradual response of God to man as man slowly thinks his way towards God through the centuries. Revelation is a breaking-into history at definite points, in the prophets, in Jesus. Revelation envelops history at both ends. It was there waiting, before human history began. It will be there after human history has ended. So it is pre-history, and post-history. So in the person of Jesus, the Word of God was revealed. It crashed into human thought in the midst of its blind stumbling course. The same process takes place in individuals to-day. The revelation of God to us is a coming of the Word to us. We are found by God. God is not immanent in us save in the gift of the Holy Spirit: He is made imminent to us by the revealing Word. The *Kenosis* teaching of S. Paul does not mean that Christ emptied Himself of divinity, it means, that He came down and took to Himself humanity. It was no mere raising of the human up to the divine, but a coming down of the divine to the level of the human. The novelty of revelation and

reconciliation is that God unites human existence to Himself in time at the Incarnation. The humanity of Jesus is a "predicate of God, of the Lord as mediator functioning for us, assumed in incomprehensible condescension." Hence the Incarnation cannot be interpreted as a mere event in history. It is the manifestation on the field of human history, of pre-history. It can only be comprehended theologically. From the point of view of human history it may be a miracle, from the point of view of pre-history and eternity, it is a natural divine event which we shall expect. In theology it is no marvel or miracle. In precisely the same way the book of Genesis speaks to us of God, because it contains the record of the revelation of God to Abraham. It records a breaking-in of God upon the theatre of history in the consciousness of Abraham, and what concerned Abraham concerns us. So the Incarnation and the faith of Abraham are incomprehensible to the observer who does not regard them with something more than the equipment of the historian. They are only comprehensible to an observer endowed with faith. By this method Barth has no difficulty in grasping the scriptural account of the process of the Incarnation—the Virgin-birth. It is a straightforward account of the entry of the revealing Word into history, into time. Thus while it is an historical event, it differs from all other historical events, because it is the point at which pre-history, the divine, is revealed on the plane of the human. The Word of God actually "*becomes*" for us at the Virgin Birth. This is the miracle from the human standpoint. Our theological knowledge prevents it from being a myth. It is not a fact in the ordinary sense, but a fact of which God is the doer. The real miracle is not in the method of the birth of Jesus, but in the fact that the Son of God came to earth.

If the function of the Word of God or Son of God is that of the Revealer, the Word is also revelation itself. The function of the Holy Spirit in Barth's theology is to enable men to grasp the revelation, and to produce its fruits in the human soul. Barth dissociates the human spirit from the Holy Spirit. The human spirit is not a spark of divinity, as some of the old Greek thinkers taught, it is absolutely other than the divine Spirit. The human spirit cannot find God without an indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The indwelling Holy Spirit re-creates the Spirit of man, and reconciles it with God. He does this by the gift of grace. "Spirit is only recognized by Spirit, God by God. The Word of God speaks in us through the Spirit of God, and the same Spirit hears in us." Thus the special function of the Spirit is that of interpretation, interpretation of that which is revealed by the word, although Barth does not actually use this term interpretation.

The Holy Spirit is set up in the human subject as a newly constituted subject with the human "I," and imparts its divine influence to the soul . . . so that we have peace with God and entrance to his grace. Barth appears to identify the presence of the Holy Spirit so closely with the believer's spirit, that the "ego" remains not "I" but becomes "we"—"*we* have peace with God" means

"I and the Spirit within me." This union of the Holy Spirit with the human spirit is effected through faith, which itself is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Grace is not mere sanctification, it is also a gift of God, imparted by the Holy Spirit. "The eternal source of grace is the Holy Spirit. Grace is more than favour, more than sanctification. It is the life itself in the form of the infusion of the Holy Spirit, an inpouring of the Lord of Life Himself." This emphasis upon the indwelling Spirit should remove the charge that the Barthian theology passes over the doctrine of divine immanence.

Baptism is an endowment with grace—not with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit gives grace in baptism, in baptism man is put under the sign of grace. The mere human and material concomitants of baptism do not secure the grace. The dynamic of baptism is the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Communion is a physical appropriation of the bread and wine, and a spiritual appropriation of the true Body and Blood of the Lord. But there is no union between substance and symbol, between the material elements and the spiritual reality. In the Lord's Supper the Holy Spirit adds spiritual substance to the symbol, and revelation to the witness of revelation, poured out according to his own free pleasure.

According to Karl Barth, the Bible is not merely the literature of a religion, or of the Church. It is the source of authority for personal religion. There is no way from God to our souls save through the letter of that writing. This view does not exclude the necessary criticism of the text. It is the function of criticism to arrive at the inner meaning of the letter. If the Bible contains the Word of God spoken to us, it is a collection of human documents, demanding educated human efforts for the elucidation of the text. But scholarly criticism and explanation of the text is one thing; feeding the soul on the Word of God is another. The latter begins when the former ends. In the Bible we find a new world—the world of revelation. "There is a river in the Bible that carries us away, once we have entrusted our destiny to it—away from ourselves to the sea. The Holy Scriptures will interpret themselves, in spite of all our human limitations. We need only dare to follow this drive, this Spirit, this river, to grow out beyond ourselves towards the highest answer. This daring is faith. The Bible unfolds to us as we are made to grow by the grace of God."

If the Bible is not meant to teach us history, neither does it teach us mere morality, for the simple reason that the new world of the Bible is not concerned with the doings of man, but with the doings of God. It is a world in which morality is dispensed with, because it is taken for granted. The real issue is spiritual. Nor is the Bible a text-book of natural science. The biblical idea of creation is intended for "a solemn marking of the distance between the cosmos and the Creator, and precisely not for a metaphysical explanation of the world. God *said* Let there be! That is all. All being awaits upon the Word of God." Sir James Jeans has

recently said a precisely similar thing: "The whole story of creation can be told with perfect accuracy and completeness in the six words: God said, Let there be light.'" ¹

"It is not the right human thoughts about God which form the context of the Bible, but the right divine thoughts about men. God purposes nought but the establishment of a new world. Who is God? The Son who has become the mediator for my soul, but more than that—for the whole world, the redeeming Word—the redeemer of a humanity gone astray. . . . The whole Bible authoritatively announces that God must be all in all, and the events of the Bible are the beginning, the glorious beginning of a new world. Who is God? The Spirit in his believers . . . which will and must break forth from quiet hearts into the world outside. So God is immanent in the believer."

Thus the Word of God is revealed to us in the speaking Word through the written word, *via* the voice of the preacher. Christian preaching is the Word of God by virtue of its grounding in Holy Scripture. Holy Scripture is the Word of God by virtue of its grounding in the revelation of God. Revelation is the speech of God grounded in itself. It is the Person of God Himself. The Word of God is God in His revelation.

Barth will have no concentration upon the mere human character of the life of Jesus. Jesus as God is his message—a healthy reaction against a mere Christocentric theology, against the school represented by Glover's *Jesus of History*—a vindication of Alexandrian against Antiochene Christology.

If Barth discounts the effectiveness of human reason as the instrument for discovering, by itself, the revelation, he allows room for the function of reason in apprehending that which God offers. The Word of God is the speech of divine reason to human reason, and imparts knowledge. He appears to mean that God as Word is not integrated for man, until He is received by us, that God needs for His adequate functioning human recognition. This is something more than the illumination of human intellect, it is an actualizing of the Word of God in the reason. But the two must always be kept distinct—revelation and faith on one side—religion and reason on the other.

The function of the Church in the Barthian system is to preserve the preaching ministry and impart the sacraments. This it does by preaching. The material of preaching is dogmatics or Christian doctrine, which is a formal statement of the written Word of God in Scripture, to enable a clear and concise preaching of Scripture. The practical test of doctrine is, "Can it be preached?" The Trinitarian doctrine in the form of doctrine is the work of the Church. Here I disagree with Brunner, and I think that Barth would disagree with him, when he says that the Trinity cannot be preached. It has not been my experience. But both Barth and Brunner emphasise the statement that the Church mediates the Word of God in the form of Church doctrine.

¹ *Mysterious Universe*, p. 78.

So far as the Church fails to fulfil this function she comes under the lash of Barth's invective.

"What is the use of all the preaching, baptising, confirming, bell-ringing and organ playing, of all the religious crowds and modes, the counsels of 'applied religion' . . . the community houses with or without moving-pictures . . . the efforts to enliven church singing, the respectably tame and stupid . . . Church papers?"

They might take note of this in Liverpool. He continues: "The attempt of the Christian middle-ages to *clericalise* society may perhaps be undertaken once more, and once more meet the success it deserves. Already there are signs of a disposition to make the experiment. . . . Surely we shall resist this temptation to betray society; it is no easier to bring it to Christ, than Christ to it. For it is God's help that we still have really in mind; and we shall deceive society about it if we set to work building churches and chapels and do not learn to wait upon Him in a wholly new way." English readers may note that Otto's mysticism is heavily criticised.

The canon of scripture was formed under the agency of the Holy Ghost. Scripture is a whole, and the Old and New Testament are parts of one whole. All scripture is inspired. So while he declines the seventeenth-century theory of verbal inspiration, he inclines to a view of plenary inspiration, although without being bound by the letter of any particular text. The Church has authority in imparting to us the context of Scripture, but it is a mediate authority, the original authority is in Scripture itself. So the Church is a teaching Church, a function not confined to the hierarchy, but shared by the whole Church of God. The Church cannot do or teach what it likes, only what it is ordered to do by God.

The conscience of man is free to accept or refuse what the Church teaches, what the Word of God speaks. The authority of the Word of God is not causal. There is only true freedom where conscience allows itself to submit and trust to authority. Authority as an overpowering causality would be a bare operation upon man. If man actually submits himself to God and actually trusts Him, that will be his own true act, an act of faith and obedience, not because he is compelled to do it, but because he does it himself. If I do not accept Scripture as a revelation of God, it becomes mere literature like that of Homer and Goethe. I have to make a decision on the truth which approaches me. But I have the Spirit's aid for this purpose.

On the doctrine of election Barth pares down the sharpness of Reformation teaching. Election to bliss or condemnation he recognises within the authority of the divine will. But man cannot decide one way or the other, and no man can say either way, what his condition is. There is never a No! not accompanied by "Yes!" in human destiny.

This uncertain note in his teaching is abandoned when he deals with the Resurrection. Although the Resurrection of Christ was an historic event, it is vastly more. It was not the summit of a development of the human spirit. The Resurrection is a divine

event which "down-came" on to the theatre of human life, like an electric current into a dead wire. If you think of the time-series of human history as a continuation of lengths of connected wires, and then conceive of a contact being made with a power-house at one point, in one of the lengths of wire, you have a crude illustration of the Barthian idea of the Resurrection. Reality now enters the wires, and gives power and meaning to the whole length. It is a manifestation of the sovereignty of God. In the Virgin Birth the revelation was concealed; in the Resurrection it is manifested. So the Resurrection of Jesus introduces a new principle into our life—which makes all things new. In the Resurrection of Jesus the reality of existence is revealed. Human existence, including death, is shown to be a mere paper envelope of the inner reality, which bursts through the envelope at the Resurrection of Jesus, and will burst through the human envelope enclosing every one of us.

What is in time must die in order to enter into life. So death is not to be shunned, we should welcome it. The other miracles of the Bible illustrate this miracle. Some day people will smile at the pictures of Jesus which we have made acceptable to the cultured by purging them of miracle, even more than our eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have smiled at the miracle stories.

Resurrection means a new *corporeality*. If there is one Creator of all things, there will be one redemption of all things, even of our body. As the body participates in the incomprehensibility, the vexatiousness, and distress of our existence, it must also participate in the new possibility beyond the boundary of our existence. This is, I think, a strikingly new idea. The material, the corporal, the temporal, the very terms which describe our bodily existence are finally concerned with the spiritual. Because created by God, the corporal must be resurrected by God, by virtue of an inner unity of God's function as Creator and Redeemer. There is an inner necessity in our creation which can only be fulfilled by Resurrection. We shall rise from the dead because we have been created by God. Creaturehood carries with it Resurrection as part of its nature. Human corporeality must be redeemed and resurrected because it has been created, and cannot escape the natural *dénouement* of its existence. "This corruptible must put on incorruption as surely as it is corruptible, as surely as it must die."

"Eternity is set in the heart of man, set in the new man who is to be put on, made in the image of God . . . it is the God-fearing individual who is the first to be touched. *Thou* art the man—*thou* art marked for it—it is *thy* concern, of *thee* is perseverance demanded—*thou* art the arena where the issues of Resurrection, the issues of God are determined. Observers of God there are none, as surely as there are no officious collaborators with God. There may, however, be children of God who are what they are by His Grace. There are our God-given selves, which *do not* yet appear what they shall be. This is our experience, yours and mine, which may always become the experience of God—this is the meaning of Easter."

In conclusion may I emphasise the fact that the teaching of Barth and Brunner is not the creation of a new theology. It is a revival of the spiritual content of Reformation Theology, with many of its crudities removed. No better service can be rendered in this country during the next year or two, when we shall be celebrating the fourth centenary of the dawn of the Reformation, than a close and sympathetic study of the Barthian movement. This movement is already world-wide. It has been clearly and concisely described by Dr. Keller, of Geneva, in his book, *Der Weg der dialektischen Theologie durch die kirchliche Welt*. But Barthianism does not go back merely to the Reformation. It is a revival like the Reformation, of the spiritual religion of the Bible, and of the best periods of ancient Church history. Therefore it is really a Catholic movement in the true sense. It is more, it is the most striking manifestation to-day of the Spirit's activity within the Churches. It blesses all who receive its precious teaching. It brings life to the individual soul, and supplies the tired preacher with a burning Evangelical message.

THE BEAUTY OF JESUS. By John Merrin, M.A. With Foreword by the Bishop of Manchester. R.T.S. 3s. 6d. net.

Christian work is most effectively done when men and women are brought into direct contact with Jesus Christ. This attractive volume of over 200 well-printed pages sets forth the "Beauty of Jesus" in many aspects, and as a simple contribution to Christian evidences it should be very useful. It is clearly written with no flights of fancy or efforts at originality. A special interest attaches to the book in that the author was called into the presence of his Lord within a few days of its publication. It is therefore the final tribute of love and praise from one whose life work it was to gather souls into the Kingdom and to build up the living Church.

A GUIDE TO THE STUDY OF THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER. By Canon A. R. Fausset, D.D. London: Thynne & Co. Ltd.

The generation that knew the scholarly writings of the late Canon Fausset has almost passed away, but through the enterprise of the publishers we now have a re-issue of this manual on the Prayer Book to which we give a cordial welcome. It contains a great deal of valuable information—the Bible and the Prayer Book are shown to be in complete harmony, and the story of the book and its compilers is told, together with an account of the successive revisions and the story of the XXXIX Articles, while it is furnished with a useful Index. Incidentally there are biographical notices of some of the leading Reformers and it is to be hoped that the book will (at 2s.) have a wide circulation.