

Th. Chr. 253

Change 1928 - 1938

The editor of "The Christian Century" has expressed with the greatest emphasis the desire that the contributions to this theme might be made as much as possible personal and "autobiographical". And why should I not comply with this wish ? Have I not often enough exerted myself to write scientifically, systematically precise and convincing - and as well edifyingly, arousingly, polemically ? Why not then also for once "autobiographically"? Especially now while I have the Christmas vacation and so a bit of time for such a "Parergon"? But I cannot, to be sure, promise anyone who has not understood me in those other languages that he will now ~~understand~~ understand me in this one!

Shall I say something about the change "in my thinking about religion" in the last ten years ? Then let me say first of all that my thinking at all ~~xxxx~~ events remains in one point the same as ever. It is unchanged in this, that its object, its source and its criterion are not the so-called "religion", but rather, so far as it can be my intention, the Word of God. The Word of God which has established, preserved and borne forward the Christian Church, her theology, her preaching and her mission. The Word of God which in the Holy Scriptures speaks to man - to the men of all times, countries, circumstances and stages of life. The Word of God which is the mystery of God in His relation to man and not, as the term "religion" seems to imply, the mystery of man in his relation to God. In this matter my American readers and friends as well, must find me completely unchanged and will continue to find me, I hope, till my life's end inexorably unchanged. But the thing that one wants to hear from me to-day, and that "autobiographically", is not this but rather something about the change that has befallen me.

First of all then, I must relate that ~~wixx~~ which is most self-evident, that which I have in common with all other contributors to this theme and that which, "autobiographically", is decidedly the most important,

namely - since 1928 I have become 10 years older, older by those years which lie between the 42. and 52. years of my life. I do not make any mistake if I take it for granted that these years in the life of most men - and so it has been in my life as well - signify approximately something like this. One had at 42, with regard to the main course of one's thinking and doing, by and large "come out into the clear". One had made oneself known and as much as possible understood to one's contemporaries, insofar as these were interested. One had become in their eyes, for better or for worse, a definite figure. Shall it be said that one had now, with this point, "arrived"? No - remarkable though it may seem, life now really only began. Now for the first time came the inner and outer examination and ~~testing~~ testing of the adopted stand, in that now for the first time the establishment of its presuppositions and the unfolding of its consequence, become possible; in that now for the first time its setting forth over against possibilities and figures became sharp and radical and the assumption of a medley of practical responsibilities became a weight. For in the meantime, the ranks of older contemporaries which one had had up to this time before one, as to speak, protectingly, became thinner. The last of my theological teachers have died in these last 10 years, and last autumn my mother as well. And already one hears behind him the steps and little steps of many younger ones. Already I see myself as father of two theologians and as well grandfather of two little ladies who have already their word to say. And all this means that one now belongs to the generation which is temporarily held responsible for the character and fate of our time, which at all events - in this and that area, each man in his own sphere - has for the time being to run the business. In so far as this is true did life really now only begin. So then, in spite of their having been very hard years, I cannot remember any decade of my life in which I lived so consciously and withal with such relish. One has his hands full with things to do; without as much as wanting it, one has continually to stand up as example

and pattern, and for this reason one knows only too well why one is here. One knows that now everything is at stake. That age is coming nearer and with it that which inexorably comes at the end of age- if not suddenly before it. And one knows that this can only mean for him who ~~xxx~~ still has his time and task, that all contours of things and men outline themselves more sharply, that the problems and needs of one's own stand and accomplishment as well as those of the world around us are felt more keenly, that one is summoned to a prudent haste, to a certain mild but dogged intensity in both work and talk. Now everything has come to be , and is, of the greatest earnestness. Now it must be decided whether one, in receiving the gift of this short life, received with it as well a charge. And whether one, in and despite one's own stupidity and perverseness, has rightly understood this charge. And further, whether one in and despite one's own great unfaithfulness, has taken this charge thankfully to one's heart as a manifestation of the free grace of God. This is my change from 1928 to 1938 insofar as it is conditioned by the natural change in my age. It has come to pass silently and almost unnoticed. But now that it has come about it strikes me as very radical and seems even more important than everything else put together. I would like now however, at this point, to turn my attention to a few particulars.

If I take my notes of the last 10 years and look at them, then on the surface the first thing that strikes me is the fact that only in these years have I actually for the first time seen something of the world, or at least of Europe, on a somewhat larger scale. Up to 1928 my personal acquaintance was limited to Switzerland, some greater parts of Germany and the Netherlands. I saw Italy for the first time in 1929 and then in the following years, some only once, some more often: England and Scotland, Denmark, France, Austria (at that time still free !), Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Transylvania. To-day I do not ~~if~~ know how it ever came about that I formerly considered that I had so much to learn and to do in my study and its immediate vicinity, to feel any impulsion towards wider frontiers. I suppose it had to be like that. In any case, to-day I also do not know how it ever came

about that I could exist without having been talked to, more or less distinctly, by all those distant places, by their history and their contemporary and their people: above without all having France and England now somehow inside myself, just as Switzerland and Germany- without also having to think continually, while doing my theological work, of the many other churches in the one Church, of those many other churches in which I was privileged to find so much echo and co-operation and in which, consequently, I had as well to assume certain co-responsibilities. In this way I have in these last 10 years, on my own account, achieved my "Oecumenical movement" and I am glad to have done it. I see now for the first time in others, that it makes a difference in the stand taken, in the awareness, in the "venture of abandonment" one is prepared to make, whether one does this, or - hide-bound by some nationalism or provincialism - does not do it. The fact that I did it, in any case did not mean that I had found it necessary to cancel or even extenuate anything at all of that which I had come to know formerly in my study as the one All-essential. What it did mean for me rather, was the experiencing of the earnestness and joy of being under the obligation to understand this as the one All-essential for all the churches in the One Church and to learn to stand up for it, as far as this can be my task. I am of course not blind to the fact that the radius of my personal acquaintance with the remainder of the globe is still a very modest one from a modern point of view, and especially so according to American ideas. Why have I not yet come to America in spite of kind invitations? For the present I have serious reasons which keep me back, but the space within the 4000 words allotted to me here, does not suffice for their explication. It is true that I have also not yet journeyed to Japan and New Zealand, notwithstanding the fact that I have friends there and in other places who read my books and who, by the medium of their letters and communications and sometimes by their visits as well, keep me aware of things going on there. Who knows what may be awaiting me in the future? However up till now I have followed the rule only to go travelling when a certain necessity,

clearly recognizable and obvious to me, turns up, and I intend to keep on with the same course. Whoever wishes to see and hear me has to be very explicit about his intentions in this regard. For the moment I consider that it has already been excellent and profitable for me to have come out from within the narrow confines of my earlier life, in so far as this has occurred.

A painful change which has come about in the last 10 years has been the losing of a host of theological neighbours, co-workers and friends whom I still possessed in 1928. It was not by death that I lost them but simply in this, that they and I, little by little or all at once, found ourselves unable to work any more together in the harmony of one mind and one spirit. We quite definitely got on different roads. We are still travelling those different roads to-day, and at the best can only greet one another from afar. I cannot complain, for I was privileged to keep enough of the old friends and during the same time to find also new friends, in part very good new friends. But in the course of the decade I was made to see very clearly that my life-work seems to be wanting in a certain accumulating power, even more, that a certain explosive, or in any case centrifugal, effect seems to inhere in it. In the 10 years following the World War my friends and I had found each other in what we thought, what we willed to do and what we were effectively doing, in terms of certain oppositions we held in common and in terms of certain general positions; and we had believed that we might give, each to the other, confidence and support. But as the sun went up - and this is what happened in the decade we are looking back on now - those of these fellowships, which had not really been fellowships at all, were dissolved like the morning mist. It had to be then, that Friedrich Gogarten should develop into a sinister-looking new German state theologian. It had to be that Georg Merz should work out his own salvation in a half-patriarchal half-pastoral combination, with a bit of Luther, a bit of Hitler and a bit of Blumhardt. It had to be that Emil Brunner should turn to a new apologetic of his own inventing, and at the same time throw himself into the arms of the Buchman Group-movement. Also among the



disciples I saw, here one quietly remain behind, there one rushing noisily away to I know not where. And withal it also had to come about that I on my side got to hear more or less lively grievances. As though I had not remained faithful to the beginning originally in common to all of us and thus had not kept what I had once promised - whereas I am conscious of only having walked further on the way then and there begun, and that's the sense of a way and by doing so to have brought the grounds, the import and the consequences of that common beginning, into a clearer light. Who is right now ? There would be not point in wanting to quarrel over this. But the actuality of the separations cannot be denied. It might have been that in 1928 some could still be of the opinion that the so-called "dialectical theology" ("Barthianism") meant a "school", a school towards which one could take up a stand summarily as opponent or disciple. To-day, no one who wishes to talk responsibly in these matters can be spared from examining the possibilities in all this variety which have arisen on this field and consequently from letting himself be questioned by my former colleague and by myself, man by man, for his own decision. Certainly we are all sorry that we could not make it easier for our contemporaries, and especially for our American contemporaries who are always anxious to get the most simple and rapid courses of instruction !

If I now attempt to gauge in how far I have actually changed in these last 10 years with regard to my work, then it seems to me to be possible to put the thing in a formula : I have been occupied approximately equally - and at the same time, of course - with the deepening and the application of that knowledge which, in its main channels, I had before gained.

The deepening consisted in this. In these years I had to rid myself of the last remnants of a philosophical, i.e. anthropological (one says in America "humanistic" or "naturalistic") foundation and exposition of Christian doctrine. The real document of this farewell is, in truth, not the much-read brochure "Mein!", directed against Brunner in 1934, but rather the book about the Evidence for God of Anselm of Canterbury which appeared in 1931.

In all the number of my books I regard this as the one written with the greatest fondness. And yet, in America it is doubtless not read at all and certainly in Europe is the least read of any of my works. The positive in it new was this : in these years I had to learn that Christian ~~theology is the~~ ~~world's supreme doctrine~~ doctrine, if it is to merit its name and if it is to build up the Christian Church in the world as she must needs be built up, has to be exclusively and conclusively doctrine of Jesus Christ - of Jesus Christ, as the living Word of God spoken to us men. If I look back from this point on my earlier studies, I may well ask myself how it ever came about that I did not learn this so much sooner and correspondingly speak it out. How slow is man, above all when the most important things are at stake ! In order to see and understand the meaning and bearing of the change which therewith entered my work , the first two volumes of my "Church Dogmatics", which appeared in 1932 and 1938, will have to be studied to some extent. ( You don't want to read so much ? To be sure, I exact it of no one. But at the same time I cannot say that I consider it "cricket" when people talk about something without having properly studied it.) My new task was to take all that has been said before and to think it through once more and quite otherwise and to articulate it anew as a theology of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. I cannot pass over in silence the fact that in working at this task- I would like to call it a christological concentration- I have been led to a critical ( in a better sense of the word) discussion of Church tradition, and as well of the Reformers, and as well of Calvin. And I have thereby made the discovery that I can say everything in this concentration, far more clearly, unambiguously, simply and more in the way of confession and at the same time also much more freely, openly and comprehensively, than I could ever say it before - before, namely, when I had been at least partly hampered, not so much by the Church tradition, as by the egg-shells of a philosophical systematic. I am well aware that this change did not by any means please a good many. I have been reproached with having completely withdrawn behind a "Chinese wall" and consequently become "extremely uninteresting". This latter judgement came out of Ameri-

ca ! To such a statement there is scarcely anything left for me to say. But I cannot help saying this, that from my side of things the affair of the Chinese Wall is "extremely enigmatical". For, strangely enough, it has been precisely in this decade, and thus in the course of this change, that I have found time and disposition for things, which quite patently have nothing to do with withdrawing behind Chinese Wall. I have found time and disposition, e.g. to occupy myself much more than formerly with universal "Geistesgeschichte"; on two journeys to Italy, to let the classical antiquity speak to me as it had never done before; to gain a new relationship to Goethe, among others; to read countless novels- a good many of them from those first -rate producers of the English detective-novel literature ; to become a very bad but very passionate horseman, etc.! I do not think that I ever lived more gaily, just in the real every-day world, than precisely in this time, which brought with it for my theology what appeared to many to be a monkish concentration. I have no idea which diagnosis the psychologists would apply to me on the basis of these facts. And I must almost fear that serious Christians will doubt whether the change during this time really has consisted in a "deepening" with me. But be that as it may and let ~~me~~ one construe it as he will. The fact is that the danger of falling into an abstract negation of the world - into which some have apparently already seen me fall - has never been less my anxiety than it is to-day. Rather I must set it down as fact that, in these last 10 years, I have become, at the same time, very much more churchly and very much more worldly. The application I had to make stand in the closest possible connection with the already mentioned name Hitler. Just about this same time in 1928, I ~~was~~ sat at this same desk in a small house of my own in Münster in Westphalia - a Prussian professor and, after seven years spend at that time in Germany, nearly on the point of becoming something like a "good German". But again seven years later, 1935, during which time I had moved over from Münster to Bonn, I had been discharged from my excellent teaching-work there and to-day find myself, like a mariner temporary rescued out of the gale,



here in my native city, Basel. In that former time I would never have dreamed it. Doubtless between that time and to-day a considerable change of my stand and action has taken place: not with regard to the meaning and direction of my accumulated knowledge but rather with regard to its application. And for this change I am indebted to the "Führer"! What happened? First of all this happened - and this one must have clearly in mind while seeing the whole - a gigantic revelation of human lying and brutality on the one hand, and of human stupidity and fear on the other. And then this happened: the German Church, to which I belonged as member and teacher, in the summer of 1933 got into the greatest danger, for her doctrine and order, of falling into a new heresy strangely mingled out of Christianity and German Nationality, and of coming under the lordship of the so-called "German Christians" a danger prompted by the successes of National Socialism and the suggestion power of its ideas. And it happened further, that the representations of the other theological schools and tendencies in Germany, Liberal, Pietist, Confessional, Biblicist, who had before, in opposition to me, put so much weight on ethics, sanctification, Christian life, practical decision etc., now in part openly affirmed that heresy and in part took up a strangely neutral and tolerant attitude to it. And it happened further that I myself, when so many agreed and no one seriously protested, could not very well keep silent but had to undertake to call out to the imperilled church the thing which was necessary. All that was indeed what in America is called an "experience" and is as such so highly regarded there. But just what was the situation with regard to this "experience"? In that first series of pamphlets "Theologische Existenz heute", I had still in June 1933, nothing essentially new to say. I said rather at that time just that which I had always striven to say, namely: that beside God we can have no other gods, that the Holy Spirit of the Scriptures is enough to guide the Church in all truth and that the grace of Jesus Christ is all-sufficient for the forgiveness of our sins and the ordering of our lives. But now suddenly I had to say just this in a situation where it could no more have the slightest vestige of an academic theory. Rather without my

wanting it, or doing anything to facilitate it, just this had of necessity to take on the character of a summons, a challenge, a battle-cry, a confession. Not I have changed, but what has changed, and in tremendous proportions changed, has been the room and the resonance of the room in which I have had to speak. The ensuing repetition of that doctrine and teaching became -of its own accord - and at the same time and paralleling the accomplishment of its deepening in this new room - practice, decision, action. And so one day, above all to my own surprise, I found myself standing in the very midst of church-politics, engaged in co-work in the deliberations and decisions of the "Confessional Church" which had been assembling since 1934. Voluntarily, and not always according to the desires of my German friends, I continued this co-work from Switzerland and intend to keep on with it. What was and what is at stake? Simply this, to hold fast and in a completely new way to understand and practise the truth that God stands above all gods, and that the Church in "Volk" and society has, under all circumstances, and over against the State, her own task, proclamation and order, determined for her in the Holy Scriptures. Despite the fact that many in the Confessional Church still to-day will not see and admit it, it could in reality turn out in no other way than that just this truth of the Church, in the room of ~~the~~ National Socialism, should come to signify not only a "religious" decision, not only a decision of Church policy, but also ipso facto a political decision. A political decision, namely, against a State which as totalitarian State cannot recognize any task, proclamation and order other than its own nor acknowledge any other ~~than~~ God than it itself, and which therefore in proportion to its development had of necessity, in like proportion to go over to the oppression of the Christian Church as such, and the suppression of all human right and freedom. And behind this heresy, which was penetration into the Church, there stood from the very beginning the one who then soon stepped out as the far more dangerous adversary, the one hailed at the beginning, not least

from so many Christians, as deliverer and saviour - Hitler, in himself and as such National Socialism. The church-theological conflict bore in itself the political conflict, and it is no fortuitous happening that this former revealed itself more and more as a political conflict. Because I could not hide this fact from myself and others, because I could not very well begin my lectures in Bonn with the salutation to Hitler, and because I could not very well swear an unconditioned oath of allegiance to the "Führer", as I should have to do as holder of a state-office, I lost my position in the service of this State and was forced to quit Germany. Meanwhile the anti-Christian and therefore anti-human essence of National Socialism revealed itself more and more distinctly, and at the same time as well, its influence over the remainder of Europe alarmingly increased its proportions. The lie and brutality, and as well the stupidity and fear grew, and have long since grown far beyond the frontiers of Germany. And Europe does not understand the danger in which it stands. Why not ? Because it does not understand the First Commandment. Because it does not see that National Socialism means the conscious, radical and systematic transgressing of just this First Commandment. And because it does not see that this transgression, because it is sin against God, drags the corruption of the nations in its wake. So it came about of its own accord, that I had to persevere, as well in Switzerland, in my opposition to National Socialism for the sake of the preservation of the true Church and the just State - and on that account I am labelled a sort of "public enemy number 1" in Germany, and must see all my writings put on the index of forbidden books. During the Czechoslovakian crisis I sent a letter to Professor Hromádka in Prague, in which I had written that at the Bohemian frontier was to be defended not only the freedom of Europe, but also that of the Christian Church. This letter has brought down upon me manifestations of wrath, or of anxious "discretion", from many countries, and especially of course from Germany. I hope we do not have to wake up too late and too painfully out of this sleep in which, in

company with many others, the Christian circles as well in the countries of Europe, still think they are allowed to indulge themselves. People have been very astonished about the "change" in my stand, and not least in so far as the "change" belongs in this connection. They were astonished first when I began to become church-political, and then very much more astonished when I began to become directly political. But I would like to be allowed to say that anyone who really knew me before could not now be really so very much astonished. I have, in especial, never called good that ominous Lutheran doctrine according to whose teaching there would belong to the life of the State a "law of self-determination" (*Eigengesetzlichkeit*) independent of the proclamation of the Gospel and not to be touched by it. I think, after as well as before my change, that the majesty of God, the eschatological character of the whole Christian message and the preaching of the Gospel in its purity as being the sole task of the Christian Church, are the thoughts which still form the heart of my theological teaching. And the abstract, transcendent God, ~~and the pure law of the State and society, who does not~~ who does not take care of the real man ("God is all, man is nothing!"), the abstract eschatological awaiting, without significance for the present, and the just as abstract Church, occupied only with this transcendent God, and separated from State and society by an abyss - all that existed, not in my head, but only in the heads of many of my readers and especially in the heads of those who have written reviews and even whole books about me. That I have not always succeeded, in former times and as well to-day, in expressing myself in a manner comprehensible to all, is a part of the guilt which I have certainly above all to impute to ~~my~~ myself, when I see myself surrounded by so much anger and confusion. Does the change actuated in me concern anything other than just this : that the practical relevance, the struggle and the confessional character of my theological teaching - which had always just that at its heart, and still has - has become visible to many, and now for the first time to most, against the background of a time which has taken shape just through

National Socialism? Contrary to the opinion of many, to whom it seemed that I was drawing an empty bow for the sheer sport of it, I have quite apparently had an arrow on the string and have taken a shot. It would be well if some, looking on what has happened, would now at last comprehend how the whole thing was meant long before! Have I now, all on a sudden become an activist, a believing democrat, or some sort of a "Crusade"preacher ? And was I perhaps before a quietist, utterly lacking in decision and deed ? What is that all about ? Matthew 11 ; 16 - 19! Sometime or other in the future (perhaps even soon) Hitler will no longer be with us, and then also my attitude and function will have no more need, or in any case not as to-day, of the certain luridly contradictory and opposing character which it needs must have to-day. And will I then have to prepare some sort of another surprise for my friendly and unfriendly judges ? Or shall it then be possible for me, belatedly to make clearer to them what to them seems so full of contradictions in what I did yesterday and am doing to-day ? I do not know. This way or that I am of the hope that it may ~~perhaps~~ still be given to me to-morrow - under perhaps once more very much changed circumstances - to be immovable but also movable, movable but also immovable. However I am glad not to have been asked here for a picture of the future, 1938-1948 ! The "autobiographical " answer to the question put I consider to have answered, and thus to have effected the desired "Parergon".

Basel, December 1938.

Karl Barth .