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Karl Barth, Teacher—A Close-up

By John Wesley McKelvey

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SOLI Deo Gloria (To the Glory of God Alone!) This is the ideogram for Karl Barth. Heard once, it has been heard to fall from his lips a hundred times in a semester. Entranced by such self-modesty in this day of individual glorying, I looked forward to my first impression of this modern reformer in his lecture room in Bonn University, Germany.

I

IT WAS one November morning, 8 o'clock, in a large lecture hall at the extreme end of the university building, within a stone's throw of the Rhine. The morning was sharp with frost. An atmosphere of enthusiasm was abroad. The first day of university lectures had struck a perfect blend of weather and spirit. Students hurried right and left. Some were going my way. As paths and streets converged, I noticed others, many of them, men and women, coming quickly and endlessly, it seemed, along with me. Where are all these going, I wondered. And then it dawned on me as we all turned the last corner and headed in one direction—to Karl Barth! And it was so. These were his students, some four hundred strong, so many of them that the largest lecture hall in the university was necessary. With almost breathless expectancy, I took my seat in the well-filled room. The hour was at hand.

The bell rang. A door at the right front opened. In stepped a man somewhat under six feet tall; well-proportioned, though thin of face, wearing a black slouch hat and dark mussed topcoat. At his appearance the students thundered applause with stamping feet (German student style). The man hurriedly extricated himself from his topcoat, thrust it on a hook, and jammed his slouch hat unmercifully on top of it. He turned and stepped to the lecture stand. I saw a rugged head of thick, brown dishevelled hair, a soft linen collar meandering over the edges of the coat collar, and a necktie half awry, dangling innocently below the collar button. I gasped. This Karl Barth? Then I smiled. *Soli Deo Gloria!* Indeed, well said. But immediately he began to speak, and I forgot all else except that there before me was pulsating the heart and soul of a man on fire with the truth of the Word of God.

Absorbed in his semester theme, Ethics in General, The Child of God, God's Commandment, Faith, Revelation, Education, Authority, My Neighbor, Obedience, God's Law, Sin, Sacrifice, Atonement, Grace, The Church, and others in particular, he lost all sense of self, and, awhile reading his carefully prepared manuscript; awhile extemporizing; all the time aflame with

fervor, earnestness, humor, purpose, and mastery, he welded together his message with a sense of the dramatic that came short of being studied art. Now he was deep in controversy, courageously quoting from Jesus, or Paul, or Luther, or Calvin, or others, in the original tongues (!) for support or refutation; now quiet in review; now technical in theory; now beaming with a pinch of humor that caused a burst of genial laughter or thunderous applause over the entire room. Like priest, like people.

Such a love of truth, of power of intellect, a fervor of spirit, a dauntlessness of purpose, have not failed to find response among the students. They follow him meticulously, and in moments of pause the only sound that breaks the silence is the murmur of their several hundred pens busily recording the hurried words of this great teacher.

The bell rings. The hour has passed. The lecture is abruptly closed. Feet stamp with applause. All turn to go. Before we have hardly time to reach the street, a door farther down the building has opened and from it emerges a man with slouch hat pulled low over his forehead, wearing a mussed topcoat, puffing calmly at a pipe. He hastily moves around the corner and is gone.



Professor Karl Barth

Professor in the University of Bonn, Germany, whose teachings and writings are profoundly influencing theological thought

II

LISTENING to such a man lecture four times a week throughout a winter did not lessen my interest in either his message or himself. The fascination grew. The man was kaleidoscopic. Every week brought new legends of his genius. He was always a "headliner" in student conversations. I was eager to meet him personally. My opportunity came one morning after church. An English friend introduced me. Barth was all friendliness, a friendliness that forgot German formality. I was an American? How he beamed on me! I felt a conferment of special privilege. He invited me to his home. There was nothing deceptive in his warm cordiality.

Some weeks later I went. A long walk along the wintry, yet alluring Rhine—a walk he himself makes every day to classes—and then the informal coziness of real German, or should I say, Swiss, hospitality. The visit took place in his study, a workshop of which he needed not to be ashamed. The secret of his power lay partly in the atmosphere of his workshop, a treasury that looked more like a stack-section of a college library than the private study of one of its professors. In this commodious room he labored, night and day, incessantly, passionately, like a strong man ready to run a race, reading, meditating, dictating

(he always has a stenographer at hand to record the swift thoughts of his dynamic mind, something of a Pauline amanuensis).

We talked of the trend of thought in the world today, especially in America. Happy was he to realize the spread of his writings to this country (the Word of God and the word of man, a translation), but always modest, forgetting self, only hopeful for a requickening of the altar fires of the universal Church. There was contagion in his personality. It was like the unction of Pentecost, I verily believe. His gaunt, rather ungainly, figure lost itself in the mellow warmth of human understanding. Karl Barth was princely in his genuine friendliness.

III

THE world cannot but heed such a man. The world is heeding. It hungers for a prophet's voice. It has found such a voice in Karl Barth. Painstaking in research, sensitive to error or misstatement (he has his private secretary take down in shorthand all his public addresses and lectures, in addition to reading his manuscript, lest he be accused of saying things he did not say), lover of truth, sympathetic of the downtrodden, eager to apply Jesus' gospel to all life (once an ardent

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Socialist, he now avoids active politics, only to throw his energies into the awakening of the Church to its task), interpreter of the Word of God, this is what the world has found in Karl Barth.

He is the most talked-of theologian in Europe, and in Lutheran Germany when he is announced to preach, Reformed Churchman though he is, there is not even standing room left. When he preached in the university chapel in Bonn, students and people stood four abreast in the aisles up to the altar itself. The service lasted an hour and a half. Barth preached over

an hour, and fearful unto trembling, read every word!

He stands with the Reformers themselves in his significance in the world of creed and crisis. Long heralded as a prophetic voice with a modern viewpoint, Barth was called several years ago to Bonn with the hope of modernizing the thinking and character of the theological faculty. But he has done more than was bargained for. Those who hoped for his support in their own oft too extravagant critical studies have found themselves confounded. Barth has outdistanced all of them in his proc-

lamation of the Word of God, the theology of crisis, and the return to the fundamentals of faith. He is a giant whose feet do indeed walk on earth, but whose head towers into the eternities.

Such in a few words is Karl Barth. It is no wonder Germany has been listening to him, then Europe, now America, eager to sit at his feet, often obdurate to his splendid challenges, yet responsive to the clarion call of a soul that has searched deeply and found.

Coxestown, Pa.

Keep Your Soul on Top

By Bruce S. Wright

"I KEEP my body under, and bring it into subjection."

A boy, wishing to quote 1 Corinthians 9. 27, gave it thus, "I keep my soul on top." This is not Moffatt or Goodspeed, but it is a fresh putting of an old truth, "I keep my soul on top," where it belongs.

Life is largely built on the basis of the body. Homes are erected to house the body. Clothes are worn to protect the body. Food is eaten to sustain the body. Gymnasiums, golf links, tennis courts, bowling alleys, are provided to give exercise to the body. If you will study the budget of the average family, or look a bit more carefully into your own budget, you will be startled to find what a large amount is spent for bodily needs, and how small a per cent goes for the things of the spirit; how the dollars go for the pleasurable things of life, and the nickels for the cultural things of life. More than that, you will find that in the budgets of a vast number of people the soul cuts no figure whatever. They fit Lowell's description of Judas—

"There walks Judas, he who sold
Yesterday his Lord for gold,
Sold God's presence in his heart,
For a proud step in the mart;
He hath dealt in flesh and blood—
At the bank his name is good,
At the bank, and only there,
'Tis a marketable ware."

There are people whose name is good only at the bank. That is worth something, of course. But there is more to life than that. To keep your soul on top, you must do more than simply sustain your credit at the bank.

Because life is so overwhelmingly organized on the basis of the physical does not mean that, to counteract that influence, the body is to be maltreated, abused, or underfed. Surely the Bible does not teach the abuse of the body for the sake of the soul. The Bible teaches the right use of the body through the mastery of the soul. "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the spirit of God dwelleth in you!" The extensive and proper care of the body, as practiced today, is the direct outgrowth of the Christian teaching regarding the sacredness of the body. But there is a point beyond which the care of the body becomes pagan, the direct opposite of Christian. To pamper the body and impoverish the soul, that is pagan. To stuff one's own body while little children in the next block starve, that

is pagan. To bound life, east, west, north, south, entirely by the body—to rule the soul out of the geography of life—that is pagan. The Christian ideal is to view the body through the eye of the soul, always to keep the soul on top. Thus your body will be a temple indeed, a temple of unregretted delight, of untainted pleasure, of unsullied joy, a temple of the living, loving God.

In Youth and Age

YOUNG people, keep your soul on top! Life holds much for you—of joy, friendship, reward, achievement. But life will hold infinitely more of joy, friendship, reward, achievement if you keep your soul on top. Life will be abundantly satisfying; at the end there will be no pang of regret if you keep the mastery of the soul. I know a fine lad who goes to high school; outside of school hours he works. For one thing, he ushers in a big moving picture house which commands his time afternoon and evening, including Sunday. The bed feels pretty good on Sunday morning. I said to him the other day: "You are a splendid, promising lad. Because life holds so much for you, I want that you should live a well-balanced life, and you can't do that if you neglect your soul. I want you to be in church on Sunday morning at any cost." It requires courage, will-power, self-control for a youth, situated as he is, to keep his soul on top. "Be men; play the game of life," said a teacher to a group of students. One broke in, "How can we play the game when we don't know where the goal posts are?" A fair question! Here is one goal toward which youth may ever play. Keep your soul on top.

Men and women in mature life, keep your soul on top. The most trying years of human experience are the middle years of life. The enthusiasms and exhilarations of youth are gone; many of the dreams of earlier years have not come true; there has been a long series of disappointments, a repeated, futile "kicking against the pricks." Age has not yet arrived with its placid mind, its settled faith. So that as a result middle life all too often gives voice to its attitude by the statement, "What's the use?" The answer, of course, in the mind of the one who asks it being, "There is no use." In that great Psalm of assurance and strength—the ninety-first—there is this vivid phrase, "The destruction

that wasteth at noonday." There is a destruction that wastes the noonday of life of him who does not keep his soul on top. Too many people in their maturity forget God, neglect His Church, and when the inevitable noonday destruction comes upon them it meets no resistance; it crushes body and soul. Richard C. Cabot, in *What Men Live By*, names these four things: "Work, Play, Love, Worship." That is, keep your soul on top.

In Sickness or in Health

KEEP your soul on top whatever happens! When sickness comes; when age creeps on; when faculties and senses are not as alert and responsive as once they were; when you face loss and failure, disappointment and sorrow, keep your soul on top. Be like Habakkuk. Do you recall his attitude? "Though the fig tree shall not flourish, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no food; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls; yet I will rejoice in the Lord, and I will joy in the God of my salvation." In the language of the lad, "I will keep my soul on top." Loss of money and business has resulted recently in many tragic reactions in many homes and lives. Why? Because they had not learned to keep the soul on top. Our Methodist poet, Benjamin Copeland, writes:

"Hard times are good, if they lead us to God
From the things that can only deceive and defraud,
And restore to the Spirit its rightful domain—
In the life more abundant forever to gain!"

America, keep your soul on top! Do not let the turmoil of the nations nor the panic of the times lure you from the path you know to be right. Do not act as though national power and material prosperity were all in all. Christ kept His soul on top. In Gethsemane He prayed, "Not my will, but thine." On Calvary He said, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." When you pass through your Gethsemane or climb your Calvary, keep your soul on top. I have read of an artist who begins every picture by painting the sky. Then he fills in the nearer objects with accuracy of tone and size. In your life picture, on the canvas of your daily experience, always paint the sky first. Keep your soul on top!

Buffalo, N. Y.