

KARL BARTH AND HIS MESSAGE

By Canon Peter Green.

Just ten years ago two articles in the "Expositor" by Dr. Adolph Keller on "A Theology of Crisis" made the name of Karl Barth known to British theologians, and since then his teaching, with that of Friedrich Gogarten and E. Thurneysen, has attracted more and more attention. With him may be named Emil Brunner, who, while he is not exactly a follower of Barth, keeps a line parallel to his. To-day, thanks to the lively interest in all things German, people not usually interested in theology are wanting to know something of the man and his message. For his outspoken pamphlet "Theological Existence To-day," in which he declares that the very existence of religion in Germany is threatened by the Nazi attempts to control the Church in Germany, has been translated into English and widely read here. Can any brief account of him and his teaching be given?

The difficulty is that Barth's ideas can only be understood if put against a background of the entire theological position in modern Germany, and that involves something like a review of religious opinion in that country for the last century and a-half. It is common to regard the natural antitheses in theology to be Catholic and Protestant. But at and since the Reformation Catholic and Protestant have had to deal with the same problems, and, even if they have arrived at different solutions, they have regarded those problems from similar angles and approached them with similar pre-suppositions. But for a century and a half now the true antithesis has been between the theological mind and what, for lack of a better term, we must call the modern mind. More than twenty years ago Professor E. Caldwell Moore, of Harvard, said truly that men of the post-Kantian world are separated from their forbears who lived before Kant by a greater gulf than separated those forbears from Plato. Three things are responsible for that gulf. They are the new theory of knowledge which we owe to Kant; the new conception of the criticism of the Bible which we owe to Baur and his school; and the new attitude to man and the universe associated with the name of Darwin.

The reactions of the modern mind to theology have been many and various. First we have the effort to save religion by making it no more than a philosophy. "It is the metaphysical element alone, and not the historical, that saves us," said Fichte. In violent reaction against this the school of Albert Ritschl allowed no place to metaphysics or mystical experience and, stressing the moral and practical, made the person of the historical Jesus the centre of theology. But the critical school, in its "Quest of the historical Jesus" (to adopt the title used for the English translation of Schweitzer's great book), seemed to dissolve away the historical figure till P. W. Schmiedel could say that it would make no difference to his religious life if he were forced to admit that no such person as Jesus had ever lived. And the school of Harnack seemed to leave little in Jesus but the social reformer and moralist. And then again, in vehement recoil from the school of "Liberal" theology, we have the "Eschatological" school, which seemed to many people to make of Jesus nothing but a deluded Jewish fanatic. What wonder that to many people there seemed to be an emptiness in German theology, as if the life of religion had been eaten out of it?

We have had examples of these various schools here in England, but many things have combined to prevent matters from going as far here as they have done in Germany. One is the blessed illogicality of our national character. Attribute it to what you will, to a deep-seated distrust of mere intellectualism, to a sense of humour, or to anything else you please, it is still true that we never carry things to such lengths as they do in Germany.

The key to Karl Barth lies in recognition of the fact that he is in opposition to all these various schools in about equal measure. And the reason is that he is not a professor turned preacher but a pastor and preacher who has been called to a university chair of theology. His anxiety has always been to find something that can be preached to the plain man needing guidance. He not so much opposes the tendencies of the various schools, we have described as brushes them aside. He sprang into fame in Germany

through his great commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (published in 1919 but only translated into English last year by Sir Edwyn Hoskyns), and he is the spiritual child of St. Paul. As such he could hardly fail to be influenced by Luther, but it may be questioned whether he has not really been more deeply affected by the prophet Jeremiah and by Calvin than by St. Paul and Luther. He denies that he has founded or desired to found a school, and says that to try to give an account of his teaching is impossible, since it is "a moment in a movement." By this he seems to mean that to describe his system is like trying to give an idea of flight by photographing a bird in the air. The picture gives everything except the motion.

But if he himself refuses to define his system we need not refrain from trying to do so for him. He would not hesitate, we may believe, to subscribe to the following positions, though they are derived rather from Emil Brunner than from him himself.

1. It is not true that there is a spark of the divine in every man and that Jesus Christ is the man in whom that spark shines most clearly. Jesus is not the nearest that man has ever got to God. He is the nearest that God comes to man. For He is God in man. This, curiously enough, seems prompted less by a desire to defend the divinity of Christ (though Barth is perfectly orthodox on this point) than by a desire to deny the divinity of man. The "community of nature between God and man" (the phrase is the late Dr. Rashdall's), which plays so large a part in much modern philosophy and theology, is anathema to Barth and his school.

2. Christianity is not one among many religions of which it is the purest and best. All other religions are man's cry for God. Christianity is God's word to man. This position is prompted by a desire to deny the idea, fundamental to all mysticism, that to find God it is only necessary to sink into the depth of one's own nature. With mysticism of any kind Barth will come to no terms. I believe that the only English writer on mysticism whom Barth notices is Miss Evelyn Underhill. But he will have nothing to do with the spark of the divine in man, the Fünklein, the apex mentis, of Eckhart and his followers. The notion that Christ is divine because He is perfect man, and that if a man were perfect his nature would be identical with that of God, a notion very common in much modern theological teaching, is the very opposite of Barth's position. For him the gulf between God and man is bottomless and to be bridged from God's side only. The initiative must be with Him, not with us.

3. It is not true that sin is a lack, a darkness obscuring the divine in man. Sin is but the outward sign of the total corruption of man's nature which grace alone can cure. It is not better men and women that we must look for but "a new creature in Christ Jesus." A new creation is needed.

Nothing could be farther from the truth than to suggest that Barth is a mere reactionary. On the subject of Biblical criticism he says, in "The Doctrine of the Word of God": "The Canon of Scripture, in the extent in which it has come down to us, has not dropped from Heaven. . . . Christian Churches and theology must let historical learning say out its say in order that, when it has said what with full right it has to say, the Church and theology may go on to say . . . that it is no longer devout men that are speaking but the voice of God." The title of "A Theology of Crisis" is derived from the text translated in our Bible: "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment," where the word for judgment is *Krisis*. But for Barth the crisis is always here and now. The crisis is man's surrender to God.

To sum up, we may say that Barth's leading ideas are the allness of God, the nothingness of man, and the instant and urgent need of grace. Little wonder that his teaching, given with conviction, has meant something like a national revival in the Lutheran and the Reformed Churches in Germany and has given the Churches whatever spirit they have displayed to resist Nazi domination. Yet, strange as it sounds, Barth's teaching is a reflection, in the world of theology, of that desire for authority which bulks so large in politics in Europe. Over against the authority of the totalitarian State Barth sets the authority of the omnipotent God.