

A THEOLOGICAL CHALLENGE

The Knowledge of God and The Service of God According to the Teaching of the Reformation. The Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Aberdeen in 1937 and 1938. By Karl Barth. (Hodder and Stoughton. 12s. 6d.)

LORD GIFFORD left in his will the clearest instructions that those who should be appointed to the Lectureship which he founded were to take as their subject "Natural Theology," and in the development of their theme should not refer to or rely upon "any supposed special exceptional or so-called miraculous revelation." Further, the Gifford Lectures were to serve the "promoting, advancing, teaching and diffusing" of the study of natural theology. It is not surprising that Dr. Barth felt considerably embarrassed when in 1935 he was invited to deliver the Gifford Lectures at Aberdeen. He reminded the Senatus that "I am an avowed opponent of all natural theology"; its very existence he attributes to "a radical error." However, the Senatus still wanted him; he accepted, and, while he could not directly fulfil Lord Gifford's intentions, set himself to do so indirectly by expounding the theology which stands in sharpest antithesis to natural theology. Fresh interest in natural theology on the part of its friends might well be created. So he took his hearers through the *Confessio Scottica* of 1560, and at the end affirmed his belief that the Confession and his lectures contain no important statement

"which the representative of Natural Theology can avoid considering as the direct opposite of his own tenets and therefore of necessity extraordinarily interesting and profitable for his own particular undertaking. I feel therefore that I have fulfilled my obligations toward the Gifford lectures."

It is an entertaining story. Dr. Barth was scrupulously careful not to attack natural theology; at the same time, some of his readers, if not of his hearers, might well wish to know why that theology and the theology even of the Reformation should be set in such sheer contrast with one another. If natural theology be taken as the sum total of true theology the contrast is, of course, inevitable. But there are many Christian theologians who would maintain not only that natural theology has a right to exist, but, further, that it may rightly lead on to a richer theology which takes the thought of God's self-revelation in Christ with a seriousness which natural theology by itself cannot do. Barth would not allow that to be the case, but a reader without previous acquaintance with Barth may be puzzled at the sharpness of the antithesis here presented.

Briefly and decisively Barth expounds the Reformed theology, taking the Scottish Confession article by article, as it covers all the ground from "The One God" to "The State's Service of God." The controversial note is rarely quite silent, whether in the Confession or in the commentator; yet he has much to say which is simply the common faith of all Christians who hold fast to that Gospel concerning Jesus Christ the Son of God in which we can hear the original apostolic witness. I wish that Barth had made more of Catholic and Protestant unity at this point. Here and there he could not but call attention to differences, which he does always courteously though firmly. Speaking of "The form of the Church," he denounces as "downright treason" in the modern oecumenical movement the designation of "the true and the false church (e.g., the Evangelical Church and the Roman Catholic Church) as parts of the one church of Jesus Christ." But I do not at all gather from this protest of his that he thinks of the Roman Catholic Church as, *simpliciter*, "the false church." Yet, it would have meant something for the cause of Christian unity had so great a Christian and so eminent a theologian as Karl Barth made it clear that in respect of those supreme affirmations of faith which concern God and Christ and the Holy Spirit, and have taken dogmatic form in the doctrines of the Trinity, and the Incarnation, and the Atonement, he and Catholic theologians occupy the same ground and are at one both in what they say and in what they deny. It is in respect of the doctrines of man and of the Church that their differences are most acute.

The most impressive fact about Barth's theology is that it is indeed theology. A man, an unbeliever, might find himself disagreeing with Barth, wholly and in detail; but only a man of trivial mind could fail to appreciate the majesty of this faith in God and the confidence, never arrogant but completely without reserve, that the knowledge of God is in the fullest

sense knowledge of reality. No one could suppose the God of whom Barth writes to be a *Deus minorum gentium*.

Barth's thought is not always quite in line with that of the Scottish Confession. It is so with regard to the Incarnation, "it was God who became man in Jesus Christ," and the Atonement, "He has taken man's sin, guilt and punishment away from man and upon himself," and the Resurrection, "if Christ had not risen from the dead, then I should have no desire to stand before you as a theologian." But on the doctrine of Predestination he quite definitely breaks with the idea of the double predestination, of some to eternal life and of some to eternal reprobation. Moreover, and not for the first time, I find it hard to discover whether Barth tends to hold that man whom God has created and redeemed will by the grace of God be restored to a fellowship with God that will mean universal reconciliation and salvation. I have no right to say with confidence that this is what Barth believes; and yet there are not wanting signs that this may be his faith.

It is Christians who will feel most intensely the challenge of this book. And those who, here and there, will be in sharpest opposition, will hold, and not unreasonably, that Barth reads into their positions implications which they would refuse. But it is Christians, all Christians, who will feel at times that Barth speaks for them as an interpreter of their profoundest convictions. So it is when in one passage he speaks about the Church. Jesus Christ, he says,

"wishes the church to be as He is and to continue as He continues. He wishes to be loved and praised in the Christian life of her members because in His Person and in His work He is the meaning and the goal of all human history. It is in the church that this meaning and goal become visible."

Words could hardly express more splendidly the significance and the glory of the Church; and there are few Christians who would not desire to make them their own.

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WASTED LIVES

Poverty and Population. By R. M. Titmuss. (Macmillan. 10s. 6d.)

GRADUALLY, under the impact of books, newspaper articles and broadcasts, the public is waking up to the facts of its demographic future. For five hundred years the population of Great Britain has been increasing; slowly until the last two centuries, then with dramatic speed, then with gradually dying momentum. Now that momentum is practically exhausted. The decline is due to begin within the next decade; is due to accelerate swiftly as the present generation of adults reach the age of high natural mortality; is due, on the most probable assumptions, to leave this country a century hence with a population numbering about half that of present-day Greater London. Of that population, over half will be over sixty . . . What a world! What an atmosphere! And what a prospect for the nerve centre and heart of a great Empire—which will, incidentally, so far as its white inhabitants are concerned, be in exactly the same plight!

Mr. Titmuss does not labour these figures, nor dwell for long on the melancholy picture which they suggest. They form merely the starting point, not the substance, of his argument. That argument, supported by copious statistics, well constructed diagrams, and quotations from reputable authorities, can be roughly summed up as follows. The fathers and mothers of the next generation are already born; there are not enough of them, but it is too late to do anything about that. Their numbers are given. The coming decline cannot be averted. (It is not, of course, physically impossible for it to be arrested and reversed; people might suddenly decide that a dozen children, instead of two or three, made the right total for a family; but it is highly improbable to say the least.) What we can and should do, for demographic reasons even if for no others whatsoever, is to ensure that none of these existing lives shall be unnecessarily wasted. The margin of waste is enormously higher than is generally realised; and the wastage is highest precisely among those classes, and in those regions, whose greater fertility supplies even our present inadequate replacement rate. Its cause can be summed up in a single word—poverty. The attack on poverty is the first, and the most constructive and practicable, attack on the demographic problem.