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Karl Barth's Witness—Reformed And Roman Differences

The monthly meeting of the Presbyterian Elders' Association was held at Surrey Hills on Tuesday, 23rd May, under the chairmanship of the president, Mr. Claude Robertson.

An address was delivered by the Rev. W. H. Leembruggen on "The Reformed and Roman Catholic Churches—Their Differences, as witnessed to in the Books of Karl Barth."

The lecturer said that the differences were clear enough in the days of the Reformers, who not only endeavoured to restore the Church to apostolic purity by pointing out the errors of the Papacy, but contended also against the false witness of the Anabaptists, Libertines and the Enlightenment.

Referring to Calvin's Tracts, Mr. Leembruggen showed how the reformer, with piercing insight and literary skill, exposed, seriatim, the false accretions, un-Scriptural dogmas and exploitations of the Roman Church. We had reached a stage when the antithesis was blurred because the Protestant Church had got away from Scriptural and evangelical bearings. The weapons used generally to-day, were different in quality from those wielded by the Reformers.

He welcomed the witness of Professor Karl Barth because it was true to the Scriptural principle of the Reformed Church. Happy was the Church to-day which heeded Barth's witness. The Swiss theologian had won the respectful attention of the Roman Catholic Church, because they recognised in his witness a genuine rebirth of Protestantism. Milder and more compromising theologians were unheeded. Barth had much of Calvin's sting. He had daringly improved on the Reformers; which was only to be expected in present-day circumstances. He was not playing Calvin. He stood where Calvin stood, on the irrefragable foundation of the revealed Word of God. Here the lecturer adverted to the late Professor H. R. Mackintosh's eulogy of Barth in "Types of Modern Theology."

Barth gave no quarter to the false dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church. He unhesitatingly regarded that Church as false, and he affirmed that there could be no concord where the dogma of Papal infallibility interfered with and jeopardised the Sovereignty of God.

Catholicism was the Church of Man as contrasted with the Reformed witness to the Church of God. "I regard," Barth was quoted as having said, in his "Doctrine of the Word of God," "the analogia entis as the invention of Antichrist, and think that because of it one cannot become Catholic." As the Church of Man, Roman Catholicism was regarded to the natural man in the ingenious manner.

Its fusion of nature and grace, its doctrine of human merit, its teaching on the sacraments and the distortion of the Lord's Supper in the Mass, its Tridentine anathemas against justification by faith, and sovereign grace, its claims for tradition as a source alongside Scripture; all these, and many others, marked the Roman Catholic Church as false. Yet Barth did not scruple to acknowledge that God might have "His own in places where we cannot imagine them." He allowed for "the Church even within the false Church" ("Credo").

Barth sorrowfully admitted that the Protestant Church of the present day was not equipped for contest with the Roman. "Let the Evangelical Church take pains to be evangelical, in order so to become anew really Protestant." ("Credo.")

It could not fail to be noted that alongside Barth's strictures against the Roman Catholic Church, he was equally severe in his exposure of what he called "Pretistic, Rationalistic, Modernism," which had grievously complicated the issue. This false development in Protestantism had its beginnings two hundred years ago, and had taken the Church out of the category of Revelation in which Reformed thinking was mainly done.

Several illuminating extracts from Barth's many books were read in the course of the address.

There ensued a series of questions and comments which showed that the address had been closely followed. A few of the questions might be recorded as indicative of the interest.

Q.—In what respect has Barth corrected and improved on Calvin?

A.—Barth's improvement on Calvin is analogous to that of a son's development on the method of his father, and is out of loyalty to the basic Scripture principle. Barth corrects (a) Calvin's Double Predestination. (b) Calvin's surrender, at times, to Natural Theology—as in the early sections of "The Institutes." (c) He corrects Calvin's allegiance to certain aspects of Augustinianism.

Q.—What practical value has the subject for elders and the youth of the Church?

A.—Knowledge of God is necessary for elders in their service of God within the Church. The youth of the Church are in a

(Continued)

KARL BARTH'S WITNESS

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in the midst of numerous idealisms. Their perplexities can only be resolved by the Word of God. We all need more Reformed doctrine.

Q.—Ought we not to be tolerant and to practise tolerance?

A.—The Church cannot be the Church of Jesus Christ if she is tolerant of error. God is not only a Holy Lover. He is at the same time a Holy Terror. If we tolerate falsehood, then falsehood will swallow truth. Tolerance is a worldly, diplomatic concept. Proposals of tolerance towards the Roman Catholic Church tend unwittingly to send our people into that fold. The Reformers knew that.

Q.—How should we counter the methods of the Roman Church in respect to Anzac Day and Scripture instruction in State schools, etc.?

A.—The only way in which we can effectively counter them is by loyalty to, and confession of, the Word of God—Jesus Christ. The Roman Catholic Church is a past-master at political intrigue. Neither with politics nor by rationalism or philosophy can we contend victoriously; but only by the Word of God. The world cannot lead the blind. The blind cannot lead the blind. Only in God's light shall we see light. That is the Reformed principle. God alone is our Helper in this contention.

Q.—What is the position in Germany to-day, where both the Evangelical and Roman Churches are under persecution?

A.—(Mr. Leembruggen narrated the story of Nazi persecution.) The factor common to both Churches, and also to Communism, is persecution. But that does not mean that the dogmatic differences are allayed. "Misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows." One-third of Germany was Catholic, the rest nominally Protestant. The Confessional Church, which is perhaps the purest witnessing Church on earth to-day, numbers about two millions. They will die rather than yield to false gods.

Q.—Has not the Roman Catholic Church some good in it? Has it not sound doctrine? What about the Creeds?

A.—It would be wrong for us not to acknowledge that there is much good, and many good people in the Roman Catholic Church. God knows His own in the midst of the false. The Reformers endeavoured to clear out the bad and retain the good. The Roman Catholic Church is rich in doctrinal treasure, but the casket is encrusted with much that is false to Holy Scripture and apostolic witness. There is much dross, many pagan accretions and impurities, false dogmas of traditions of men. The worship of the Virgin Mary and the invocation of saints, blots out the sole mediatorship of Jesus Christ. Relic worship, the images, enforced celibacy and auricular confession. Did the apostles practise and enjoin them? Their seven sacraments, the Mass, the doctrine of transubstantiation, the claim of the priest to create the Creator. Are these true to the Word of God? The doctrine of human merit, the claim to temporal power—are these true to Holy Scripture? It was the work of the Reformation to save the treasure in the Roman Catholic casket, and to discard the dross; to cleanse the Church of her errors. We are the children of the Reformation. Let us continue to bear the same witness which our fathers bore; and if the Roman Church still retains the errors and heathenish, false practices enumerated, then there is still work for us to do to save her children from bondage. But be sure we shall do that work only as we are true to the Biblical witness. Otherwise we shall be im-

potent, and, as Barth has said, remain a corpse, or, at best, a ghost of the Reformation.

Refreshments were provided by the ladies of the congregation, and the minister, the Rev. J. K. Robertson, expressed appreciation of Mr. Leembruggen's address.