

THE ELEPHANT AND THE WHALE

In mid October a group of technicians and representatives of B.B.C. television crossed the English Channel and proceeded to tiny Switzerland. Their mission: to televise and record interviews with the two men who have influenced the thinking of the Protestant world in the last half century more than any others. The two big "B's" from Switzerland, Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, have been challenged in recent years by Paul Tillich and Rudolph Bultmann, but the influence of the former is concentrated in the United States, that of the latter in Germany. On an international scale- at least in the realm of dogmatics- the two "B's", Barth and Brunner, remain kings. Walk into the classroom of a Protestant theological seminary in almost any land in the world today- Tokyo, Japan, Monrovia, Liberia, Buenos Aires, Argentina or Bangalore, India- and almost any student will know something about the two great Swiss theologians. The same is true of many non-Christian intellectuals and hosts of laymen in even remote parts of the world.

Hence for good reason the B.B.C. went to the trouble and expense of televising the two theologians. Noteworthy, however is this. They first went to Zürich, where Emil Brunner has spent most of his life and then to Basel, the city which Karl Barth has made especially famous. They were not televised together, partially perhaps because it was considered desirable to film each of these "greats" in his native habitat. But a more important reason may have been the fact that although Basel and Zürich are only 50 miles distant from each other, theologically they represent different worlds.

For half a century these two names have been paired together as naturally as bread and butter. Thus many people, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon world, came to assume that these two were old friends and collaborators. Granted, they have much in common. Both are Swiss and both are approximately the same age (Barth will be 75 next June, Brunner 71 this December). Both spearheaded the new theological movement originally known as dialectical theology or neo-orthodoxy. (They prefer to call it a theology of the Word of God.) Their common foes were mysticism, rationalism, and above all liberalism. Nor

during one brief period in the early twenties, they, together with Eulmann, Gogarten, Thurneysen and Herz were instrumental in founding a theological journal called "Zwischen den Zeiten." But the honeymoon lasted less than a decade. Even during this period Barth and Brunner would hardly describe themselves as close friends. In 1933 the split became open and final concerning the "Anknüpfungspunkt" (point of contact) between God and man and the next year in the famous controversy about nature and grace. In the years that followed the two "B's" rarely saw each other. When they did, they usually did not discuss theology- it was safer and friendlier that way! Meanwhile they were both taking potshots at each other in their respective dogmatics. Occasionally they indicated respect and appreciation for their opponent's viewpoint and contributions, but more often the footnotes were negative and only added fuel to the fire.

Consequently the Barth-Brunner alliance was in reality a myth. Despite all they had in common, the wall that separated them seemed high and insurmountable. That two "neighbors" should find it necessary to feud more than fructify was regarded by some as tragic but by others as inevitable.

Barth himself recently provided a vivid portrayal of the situation in response to a question by the A.B.C. commentator. The question was about his relationship to Brunner. Barth replied (this was recorded): "The good Lord saw fit to place in his Creation two creatures so different as a whale and an elephant. Each has its place and its function, but they are so different from each other that they cannot really talk with each other, fight with each other or make peace with each other. Only at the end of time will we understand what purpose God, ~~the~~ in His great wisdom, had for these two strange creatures."

After the recording was finished the commentator could not refrain from asking further, "And which of the two are you?" The answer: "I should prefer to be a whale, for whereas the elephant is limited to a certain area, the whale is free to travel throughout the whole creation."

Unlike many true stories, this one has a happy ending. The two theologians,

like good tobacco, mellowed as they aged. Since the war the counterattacks have been less frequent and less vociferous. In recent years the thing that has separated them most sharply was not their theologies but their political positions- although the latter are not unrelated to the former! Nevertheless, when the Brunners flew to Japan in September, 1953 to take a position at the International Christian University in Tokyo, amongst the many friends who came to Zürich airport to see them off was none other than Karl Barth from "distant" Basel. In the intervening years their paths have not crossed, although a brief bit of correspondence passed between them (concerning a prospective bride for Barth's son since she was a student of Brunner's!) But on November 19 the two B's met in what was their first real encounter in several decades and perhaps their last this side of heaven. It took place in Basel in Barth's home, with the Brunners taking the initiative this time. One could hardly call it a reconciliation, but it was as Barth himself exclaimed, "a great historical event!"

No publicity heralded the meeting; only a few people were even aware of what was taking place between 11:30 and 12:15 A.M. that dour, drizzling Saturday morning. The meeting was brief but dramatic as Brunner presented Barth with a copy of his (i.e. Brunner's) recently completed Dogmatics, Vol. III. (Barth is now working on the thirteenth volume of his gigantic Church Dogmatics!) More important was the fact that the 2 "B's" were actually confronting each other for more than a moment for the first time in several decades. Not only that, their wives were seeing each other again for the first time in 40 years! If the two theological antagonists were a bit nervous at the outset, it was not at all surprising in view of their past history. But this was soon dispelled and when they said farewell an outsider would have concluded that these were two close friends of long standing.

As the Brunners boarded a train for Zürich that evening, having visited friends in the meantime, they were obviously weary but happy. (Brunner himself is still recovering from his fourth stroke and a blood clot which followed less

than a year ago.) Written on their faces was the message: "Mission accomplished."

When Barth learned of this later, he smiled benignly and sighed, "Good, I am at peace."

An elephant and a whale are indeed two very diverse creatures. The theologies of Barth and Brunner, from a professional standpoint, are almost as diverse both in purpose as well as in content. But the theological world will rejoice to know that even if the two did not conclude a peace they did manage to rub noses in the same place and in a peaceful way. "Who knows? It may well be that the Barthian angels are playing Mozart (Barth's favorite) and the Brunnerian angels playing Bach (Brunner's favorite) as never before because of this reunion." Yes, who knows: They may even be keeping in tune with each other!

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7. December 1960