

# Barth Among the Prisoners

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## Dr. Cyril Powell Reviews

**Deliverance to the Captives:** Karl Barth, tr. by Marguerite Wieser (S.C.M., 12s. 6d.).

**I**T was a splendid idea to issue this volume of sermons. Practically all of them were delivered in the prison chapel at Basel, where for years Karl Barth has been exercising a hidden ministry. The prison chaplain, in a foreword, testifies to the interest and affection with which the prisoners have received both the sermons and the preacher.

"Grant that Thy word be rightly preached and rightly heard here," we find him praying at the Easter service in 1959. We feel sure that this prayer was answered. The prisoners must have been gripped by this straightforward, strong yet tender message concerning the eternal life that, through Christ's victory, now replaces our heritage of sin and death. "Do you realise," he asks his prison congregation on another occasion, "that the Bible is a book of *freedom*, and that divine worship is a *celebration of freedom*?"



**K**ARL BARTH has had the greatest influence on the theological thinking of this generation. One can now discover how the Barthian emphasis can be translated into preaching—and this from the most authoritative source possible. For many people Barthianism is a synonym for doctrines concerning God's transcendence, emphasising his 'otherness,' stressing the gulf that separates Him from sinful men. In these sermons and in the prayers accompanying them, God is anything but remote. The prayers breathe the intimacy and warmth of communion and the sermons are full of the grace of God to men, made known to us in Jesus.

The tone of the preaching is conversational, quite astonishingly so. "But wait a minute," interjects the

preacher. "We are on the wrong tack. . . ." Or, after making a statement he watches the faces of his congregation, "'I haven't noticed it,' you say."

There are very few anecdotal illustrations, though it is worth noting that Barth is not afraid of them nor, on occasion, of humour. In a sermon, pointing to God as the sole ground of our hope, he asks his congregation, "Do you know the story of the Negro who had the habit of speaking aloud to himself? When he was asked to explain his odd behaviour, he answered, 'For one thing, I like to talk to an intellectual person, for another, I like to be addressed by an intellectual one.'"



**T**HE consistent subject of the preaching is the evangel of God. Many of the sermons were preached either at Christmas or Easter; and many of the texts, be it noted, are from the Psalms. The compiler, so it seems to me, has kept some of the best wine until the end, for I found myself more and more impressed and thrilled the further I went into the book. Perhaps it was that I was becoming more used to the style.

One small blemish might be rectified in a second edition. 'Selfishness,' at the top of page 140, obviously should be 'selflessness.' The word is applied to our Lord's dealing with us.

Dr. John Marsh, who contributes another foreword, writes. "We can but thank publisher and translator for enabling us to share in the preaching of the gospel in the chapel of a Swiss prison. The gospel has shown that the real prison is in the heart of each one of us, and has offered deliverance to all of us captives. Were it not for that, I should have been envious of those Swiss prisoners!"

KARL 1959