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THE ELEPHANT AND THE WHALE

by JOHN HESSELINK

Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, November 19, 1960

IN THE FALL OF 1960 A CORPS OF TV TECHNICIANS and an announcer representing BBC of London crossed the English Channel and made their way to Switzerland. The reason: neither an international political conclave in Geneva nor a major sports event. They went rather to film and interview the two most influential and renowned theologians of our time — Emil Brunner and Karl Barth.¹ They spent over an hour with each man in his own home. The two interviews were presented together on one show which was given in January, 1961.

The interviewer had obviously received some theological briefing, for in his interview with Barth (Brunner had been interviewed first) he concluded by posing a question which has perplexed many a theologian. He asked Barth if he could describe or explain his relationship to his near-neighbor in Zürich, Emil Brunner. The question was most appropriate, for both men have much in common: nationality, age (Barth is three years older), specific area of work (dogmatics), and geographical proximity (Zürich and Basel being only about sixty miles apart). More important, both were leaders in the theological movement known as dialectical theology or neo-orthodoxy. Yet their relationship has been marked by a strange reserve and occasionally a definite hostility. Hence the significance of Barth's half-jocular but perceptive reply.

"In his good creation," said Barth, "God saw fit to create such diverse creatures as an elephant and a whale. Each has his own function and purpose. But they are so different that they cannot

communicate with each other or even fight with each other. As a result, they also cannot conclude a peace pact with each other. Why God chose to place such diverse creatures in the same universe no one knows. For the answer to this question we must wait until the eschaton. Only then will it become clear as to why God created the elephant and the whale."

"That," Barth added, "may help to explain my relationship to Emil Brunner." With this the televised interview ended. The interviewer, however, could not refrain from asking afterwards, "Which, Professor Barth, would you prefer to be?" Barth paused for a moment and then replied, "I believe I would rather be a whale. An elephant is limited to the land, whereas a whale can traverse the whole creation."

THIS RELATIONSHIP MAY COME AS SOMEWHAT OF A surprise to those Anglo-Saxon readers whose acquaintance with the positions of Barth and Brunner is largely second-hand. Their names have been linked together so frequently that many have assumed that they were very closely associated. Moreover — and here the fundamentalists and liberals have been equally careless — the words neo-orthodoxy, dialectical theology ("The New Modernism"!), etc. have been glibly used to designate men of such disparate positions as Barth, Brunner, Nygren, Bultmann, Tillich, and Reinhold Niebuhr!

Actually, only during one relatively brief period could it be said that Barth and Brunner collaborated on anything. In the 1920s, along with Gogarten, Thurneysen, and Merz, they produced and were the principal contributors to a theological journal called *Zwischen den Zeiten*. This was very influential in Switzerland and Germany and served as the principal means for expounding the new ideas of the

1. At present, at least on the continent, and increasingly in countries like the United States and Japan, the influence of Rudolph Bultmann may be as great if not greater. The fact remains, however, that from a world-wide perspective the two names best known over the past forty years have been those of Barth and Brunner.

"dialectical" theologians. Even at this time, however, there was little personal contact between the two men. Barth was already teaching in Germany and Brunner was at the University of Zürich.

The honeymoon — if it can be described as that — did not last long. In one of the first issues of the journal Brunner wrote an article on "The Question About the Point of Contact." In the same year (1922) Barth wrote in the same journal, "The Word of God as the Task of Theology." Brunner answered in 1929 with an article, "The Other Task of Theology." These titles give some indication of the tension which existed from the outset. The decisive break, however, took place already in 1924 when Brunner wrote his famous monograph *Nature and Grace*, to which Barth responded with his blistering *No!*² The fight was on. Not only were Barth and Brunner involved, but others as well. *Zwischen den Zeiten* folded in 1934 when Barth quit it as a result of a quarrel with Gogarten.

From then on the two Swiss theologians went their separate ways, both literally and theologically. Barth continued to teach in Germany until forced out by Hitler in 1935. He was also one of the leaders in the formation of the "Confessing Church" in Germany. Although he has taught in Basel since 1935, he has continued to play an important role in German ecclesiastical as well as theological circles.

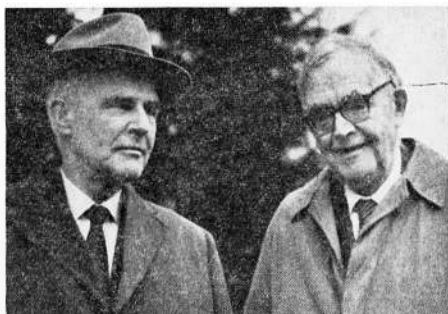
Brunner, on the other hand, has never had the influence in Germany that Barth has had. His life and work have been oriented more toward the Anglo-Saxon world. He taught French in England for a year to learn English, later studied at Union Seminary in New York, and has frequently been a guest professor in the United States, particularly at Princeton Seminary. This, plus the fact that Brunner's works were translated very soon after their publication, meant that until 1950, Brunner's influence was considerably greater in the English-speaking world.

ALTHOUGH THE CONFLICT ABOUT NATURAL THEOLOGY generated the most heat and excitement, the cleavage between the two theologians is by no means limited to that one problem. For example, in 1932, when the first volume of the monumental *Church Dogmatics* appeared, Barth gave notice in the foreword that he was forsaking Kierkegaard and existentialist philosophy and was now taking more seriously the early church fathers, and particularly Anselm of Canterbury. Then in the second chapter of this volume he points out that Brunner and he even have a different understanding of the function and purpose of theology.

2. The question concerned the existence of a "point of contact" between the Word of God and the natural human consciousness and related to the problem of Natural Theology.

Granted, they agree in most fundamentals, but their differences are far from incidental. When they are compared to Bultmann or Tillich, they seem very close. Nevertheless, they have disagreed — and sometimes rather violently — about all of the following issues: anthropology, ethics, the Church, election, the analogia entis, the virgin birth, and law and gospel. And this is only the beginning! The most recent outburst arose as a result of Barth's open letter to an East German pastor which climaxed his seemingly moderate stand in regard to Communism. Brunner was shocked and labeled this "ethical irresponsibility." Barth, in turn, is appalled by Brunner's repeated blasts against all those who would try to work out a *modus vivendi* with the Communists (including the World Council of Churches). Barth feels that Brunner's reactions are more capitalist than Christian.

Their biggest difference theologically now revolves about Barth's doctrine of election, which has consequences in almost every other realm. Although Barth has repeatedly denied the charge of Universalism, at least as taught by Origen and his followers, Brunner maintains that Barth goes even farther and in effect has the most thoroughgoing doctrine of Universalism that has ever been formulated. The result, says Brunner, is that Barth has eliminated judgment, condemnation and hell as a



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You have nothing to fear. I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; he has been raised again, as he said he would be. Come and see the place where he was laid, and then go quickly and tell his disciples: "He has been raised from the dead and is going on before you into Galilee; there you will see him." That is what I had to tell you.

The Gospel According to Matthew, chapter 28, verses 5, 6, and 7, The New English Bible

Preface to this month's special issue

on KARL BARTH

"THIS BOOK," WROTE PASTOR KARL BARTH IN CONCLUDING THE FAMOUS PREFACE TO HIS *Romans*, in August of 1918, "has time to — wait." But the Safenwil Pastor found that his book spoke to a theological generation itself not only waiting, but apparently a-waiting his clear-voiced invitation to a "united renewal of questioning and exploring the Biblical good-news." A third edition in four years, a professorship at Göttingen, and a focal point at the center of theological revival awaited the book and its author.

For forty years thereafter Karl Barth has largely defined the area of theological discussion, as much for those who differ from as for those who agree with him. "The proclamation of the Church, her dogma, the authority of scripture and its proper interpretation, election, the image of God, creation and redemption — all of these subjects have come to stand in the center of intense theological discussion" under the "domination" of Barth, writes Professor G. C. Berkouwer. And he adds, "Barth's views have had powerful repercussions in non-theological spheres."

Who is this man who, like Luther, heard in the letter to the Romans the tolling of a mighty bell whose echoes spread round the world?

Karl Barth was born on May 10, 1886, at Basel, the son of Fritz Barth, Professor of New Testament Theology at Berne. (In the same first Preface to his *Romans* Barth remarks that it was father who taught him that history is the dialogue between the wisdom of yesterday and that of today — the two being one.) Student at Berne, at Berlin, at Tübingen, at Marburg; pastor at Geneva (1909-1911) and at Safenwil (1911-21), he has recounted how work without rest seemed less than enough to prepare him for the tasks to which the resounding voice of his *Romans* called him. Professor at Göttingen in 1921, at Munster in 1925, and at Bonn in 1930, he encountered the Nazism in 1933. Having supposed at first that theological lights could glow undimmed by political storms, Professor Barth learned soon enough that this was not the government's view of the matter. In response he helped draft the Barmen Declaration of conscience in 1934, attacked the paganism of the Nazi state, and was packed off to his native Switzerland in 1935. From thence, as Professor of Theology at Basel, he comes to visit briefly in the United States this month, rich in years, in wisdom, and in accomplishments too well known to bear repeating.

Dr. Barth lectures at the University of Chicago on "Introduction to Theology" daily at 11:00 A.M. in the Rockefeller Chapel from April 23 to 27, and participates in question and discussion hours at 8:00 P.M. on Wednesday and Thursday of the same week. From April 29 to May 4, he speaks each evening at 7:45 in the Princeton University Chapel on "Theological Beginnings," the individual titles being "Theology," "The Word," "The Witness," "The Community," and "The Spirit."

"Other than through audacity," Barth quoted from F. Overbeck in 1927, "it is not possible to establish a basis for theology." In response to the visit of this senior theologian who demonstrates once again his audacity by taking Greeley's advice to youth, and "comes West" to widespread acclaim, the *Journal* publishes selected articles on Dr. Barth and his theology.

—L.D.K.

real possibility for men. Faith is "relativized" and decision rendered superfluous.³

Barth's essential misgiving about Brunner's approach is that the latter is still haunted by uncritical presuppositions which are taken over from philosophy. When Brunner claims to have overcome the subject-object dualism by building on the insights of Kierkegaard, Buber, and Ebner, Barth feels that he (Brunner) is trapped in a blind alley. For Barth, existentialist philosophy of any variety, whether that of Kierkegaard or Heidegger, only leads down a dead-end street.

This "*Auseinandersetzung*" which has been going on now for forty years has rarely been carried on in direct confrontation. At times their disputes have become rather acrimonious, but since they are usually waged with the pen rather than orally (and at a distance of at least sixty miles) the debate has never become a personal feud. The relationship, as Barth aptly illustrated in his parable, is more like that of an elephant and a whale who can not really communicate with each other. Despite their proximity, their paths have rarely crossed, and then only in an incidental sort of way. The Amsterdam Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1948 brought them together. They next met in Zürich in 1953, when Barth came to say farewell to the Brunners prior to their departure for Japan.

IN VIEW OF ALL THIS, THEIR UNHERALDED FIRST real "encounter" in decades, which took place on November 19, 1960, assumes special significance. I should explain at this juncture that I came to know Brunner well in Tokyo. Our friendship deepened after I went to Europe, despite the fact that I elected to pursue my graduate studies under Karl Barth in Basel.

The Brunners had promised long before that as soon as Dr. Brunner finished the third and last volume of his *Dogmatics* they would make the "long" journey to Basel and visit us. In October, 1960, Mrs. Brunner called to confirm their visit (*Dogmatik* III had just appeared). She then divulged that Dr. Brunner had suggested that since they were coming to Basel anyway, it might be nice if they paid their respects to the Barths at which time Dr. Brunner could present a copy of Volume III of his *Dogmatics* to Barth. What did I think? and if I thought this was feasible, would I make the necessary arrangements.

I had intended to discuss the matter first with Barth's secretary, Miss von Kirschbaum. I called, expecting her to reply (she usually answered the phone), but to my dismay Barth himself answered. I had no recourse but to blurt out my message. The

response, however, was instantaneous, expressing both surprise and joy. His exact words were: "Ach was! ein grosses historische Ereignis," which being freely interpreted reads, "Not really! this will be a great historical event."

I continued to play the role of mediator and was somewhat amused to see that as the day for the visit drew near, both parties evidenced growing anticipation and a touch of apprehension. Almost every time Barth saw me during the intervening weeks he would stop and ask if everything was still in order. He also asked if I wouldn't come along, something which the Brunners had taken for granted. The climax came on the Thursday night prior to the appointed Saturday. After one of his informal seminars, he motioned that he wanted to speak to me. His request sounds fantastic until one realizes the long silence which has marked their relationship during the past years. Barth put his hand on my shoulder and said quite earnestly, "Mr. Hesselink, you know Brunner better than I do. Tell me, what shall I say to him when he visits me?" I could not help but laugh at the ludicrousness of the situation, but it became clear that Barth was not joking. I made some tentative suggestions, and Barth concluded by noting that in any case there were two subjects which should *not* be discussed, namely, natural theology and Communism!

On the fateful day, I met the Brunners at the train station (neither Brunner nor Barth has a car) and took them to the Barths. It had been agreed on beforehand that the visit should not last more than an hour. Brunner was obviously nervous and showed more than usual the effects of his last stroke. Barth's very warm, genuine welcome at the door, however, dispelled any doubts the Brunners may have had. It was a particularly moving experience for the two wives who had not seen each other in forty years! The first attempts at conversation were a bit awkward, something like two teenagers on their first date. But soon the wives were engaged in enthusiastic conversation and eventually the men also entered into a free, vigorous discussion of matters which were rather theological. Barth's secretary, Miss von Kirschbaum, was the only other person present and she began to chat with me, so I could not follow the whole conversation.

At noon, as Mrs. Brunner proposed that they should leave, Barth turned to me, winked and said, "We were just discussing Communism!" I smiled, turned to the Brunners and said, "Yes, we had better be going."

Despite a light drizzle, the two B's posed happily for several snapshots. It was the first time they had been photographed together since the Amsterdam Assembly. Even more touching than the greet-

3. This critique appears in Brunner's *Dogmatics*, Vol. I, pp. 313-315 and 346-352.

ings were the farewells. As we drove away, Barth stood on the curb waving fondly until we were out of sight. His countenance was absolutely cherubic.

After dinner, a nap and a visit in our apartment, the Brunners returned to Zürich. While eating and visiting there was little occasion to discuss the "encounter," but en route to the station Mrs. Brunner finally asked her husband just what they had discussed. Brunner thought for a moment, then laughed and said, "You know, I hardly remember anything."

BUT THAT IS NOT QUITE THE END OF THE STORY. SOON afterwards queries came from both quarters about the reactions of the other party. The Brunners were overjoyed that their "daring move" had come off so successfully and were grateful that Barth had felt the same way. When Barth learned of Brunner's reactions, he expressed what obviously was the feeling on both sides. He beamed and said benignly, "Ah, now I am at peace."

Some people who heard about this event asked if a real reconciliation took place. The answer is no, for two reasons. Theologically this was impossible. As Barth said prior to the encounter, "Too much water has flowed under the bridge." Personally, no reconciliation took place because none was necessary. Whatever distaste they might have had for each other's theological positions on certain points, there was no deep personal enmity. Nevertheless, this experience obviously meant a great deal to both of the distinguished theologians. As Brunner had implied to his wife in his reply to her, *what* they said was not important. Far more important was the fact *that* they had stopped writing about each other and had finally gotten together to talk like Christian gentlemen. For even — or perhaps all — theologians are sinful men with strange quirks and funny foibles, men who like everyone else stand in the need of understanding and forgiveness.