

by John R. Fry

Presbyterian Life

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Four Important New Books

**The champion theologians,
in common with most men,
are concerned with the question:
Where to begin?**

JUST WHAT IS THEOLOGY, anyhow? Karl Barth and Paul Tillich have surprisingly different answers to that simple question. They use outrageously difficult language in order to be very precise about their own answers and how their answers differ from other answers being made, especially by distinguished opponents. The average intelligent theologian is apt to become as confused along the way as the average intelligent layman—though less ready to admit it—and there really may be no point in going into the matter; but on a hunch that Christian people will be more or less naturally interested in what the real heavyweights are up to, a brief report on the most recent offerings of Barth and Tillich seems now in order.

The latest volume in which Karl Barth appears is a paperback book, **Karl Barth's Table Talk** (John Knox Press; \$1.75), reporting informal, off-the-cuff conversations he had with English-speaking—and largely American—students studying with him at Basel, Switzerland, in 1955-57. The fellow who manned the tape recorder and contributed an introductory essay is Dr. John D. Godsey, now professor of systematic theology at Drew University.

Barth is very clear about what theology is. Theology

is the orderly explication—display, almost—of the Christian proclamation. The Christian proclamation, in turn, is the witness to the revelation of God in Christ to the Church. Barth says that you cannot write theology very well, or write very good theology, by looking on the inside of a Christian to see what has happened to him (or why). You have to start with what happened. Begin at the beginning place of the Christian faith itself, at the act of God in revealing himself in Jesus Christ. Since it is Holy Scripture that makes the prime witness to God's revelation, and since Holy Scripture identifies God's actions as speech, the beginning place for theology is: the Word of God. And the Word of God is the Word of the *triune* God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. So, from having adopted the only beginning place there is, the rest of the explication of the Christian faith follows along nicely.

This is the way it looks in outline: Part I: The Doctrine of the Word of God—which deals with revelation as such; Part II: The Doctrine of God—which deals with the knowledge and the reality of the God who is One and who reveals himself in Threeness; Part III: The Doctrine of Creation—the activity of God the Father; Part IV: The Doctrine of Reconciliation—the activity of God the Son; Part V: The Doctrine of Redemption—the activity of God the Holy Spirit.

In the actual work of writing down theology, it is necessary to go through twenty centuries of advice on theology that has been left by Christians. This advice is called dogma. You listen humbly, says Barth, as you would listen to a wise father, and use as much of the advice as you can. The accumulation of dogma in a great pile should not obstruct the vision of the theologian, however. No matter how big the pile, how vast the understanding of the advice, the theologian pri-

Surplus foods were granted on a basis of payment for work performed on an approved project. By using surplus foods as payment for such projects as the dam at Pi Bong, the United States is providing the means by which projects in underdeveloped countries can be undertaken by the people themselves.

The program enables villagers to participate in projects which benefit their communities and raise their standard of living. Most important of all, it removes them from the rolls of the dependent.

Approval for the Pi Bong project was given by KCWS, which released 170 one-hundred-pound bags of flour and cornmeal, enough to feed forty-five families or three hundred people daily for three months.

KCWS's approval also opened the door for the village to appeal to the local government for assistance in the form of additional food, a cash loan at low interest rates, and an engineer to supervise the construction of the dam.

The government approved the application, and the project was under way. The villagers themselves were to supply the labor and some money.

Construction began in April. Working under the supervision of the government engineer and a church elder who coordinated the project, the villagers hauled cement, sand, and gravel on their backs up the mountain from the village.

Throughout the construction of the dam, the only tools the villagers used were picks, shovels, and bare hands. Dump trucks were wooden A-frames carried on the backs of men and oxen with woven baskets on



Mr. Wilson (second from left) confers with engineer from Korean government and village elders on progress of dam.



Women who tamped earth for dam listen to Mr. Wilson's sermon. They are dressed in customary Korean blouse, skirt.

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each side. Steam shovels and bulldozers were picks and shovels. Tamping tools were short tree trunks with long handles that were lifted and dropped by girls and women to a chant that echoed up and down the valley. Working hours were from daylight to dusk, seven days a week, rain or shine.

Life in the village of Pi Bong has not changed much in the past two thousand years. In fact, the elders say there have been only three changes in that time: the introduction of Christianity sixty years ago, the establishment of the day school fifty years ago, and the construction of the dam last year.

The spirit of the dam and what it means to the villagers of Pi Bong is best exemplified by the women who tamped the earth being hauled up the dam on the backs of the men.

Moving a half-step ahead each time in an endless movement back and forth across the dam, the women tamped in unison as their leader sang from a book of ancient verses. After each verse the women lifted their crude tamping tools above their heads and let them fall together as they sang the response, "We do this for our children."



Karl Barth

marily must keep his eyes glued to *the* book. He must cherish, listen to, be edified and chastened by the Bible; or else he is not doing theology, he is doing history of Christian thought. Even though what he is writing is dogma (Barth, after all, calls his systematic theology "Church Dogmatics"), he is writing it fresh. It comes out of his obedience to the Word of God. And let it be clear that Barth believes the theologian is commanded by God first to be obedient and *then* brilliant.

Another word about the starting point: the starting point is so important that it creeps into the whole system. It will not be left behind as though forgotten. Thus God's act in revealing himself in Jesus Christ to the

Church goes with Barth back to the creation, stays with him throughout the Old Testament, and is the primary subject matter of the remaining parts of the system. A lazy student once told me that he never read any of the background assignments in preparation for these English-speaking colloquiums. "It wasn't necessary," he said. "Whatever the question was, there was only one answer: Jesus Christ. Barth considered me brilliant, you know."

Because the starting point shows up everywhere, one of Barth's critics has unkindly suggested that Barth has constructed a giant *Christomonism*; and that is a very dirty word, even though it may sound harmless enough.

Karl Barth has a perfect horror of using anything except genuine Biblical-theological contents in a *Christian* systematic theology. That means particularly philosophy, or art, or culture in any form. He is not anti-philosophy. He just does not think that philosophy has the right commitment, the faith, the appropriate starting point to be able to say anything to a theologian about his business. Therefore, when the critic called Barth a "Christomonist," he was saying that Barth has constructed a *philosophical* system which sees reality all of one piece, without any dualisms between good and evil, God and the Devil, spirit and matter, and the center of such a philosophical description of reality is called "Christ."

Barth, naturally enough, ignores criticism of that nature because he stands on his record. He has tried as hard as a man can to stick to the Biblical-theological contents in order to explicate the Christian faith for the Church. Above all, the "Church" in "Church Dogmatics" is the telling word. Barth believes firmly

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Paul Tillich

FOUR IMPORTANT NEW BOOKS

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that theology is written for Christians. Curiously, if theology is strictly fashioned that way, it is going to be interesting to the world. "The Church must sound strange to the world if it is not to be dull," he said to one student. "The Church's language has its own presuppositions. The Gospel is good news, news that is not known. Even we Christians will find ourselves in conflict with the Gospel, for it is always news and new for us too. The secularized Church is peaceful, but not a light in the world. The Church must be salt and light, but in order to be these, it must clarify its presuppositions. Thus the necessity of dogmatics! Even philosophers will not listen to a theologian who makes concessions, who is half-philosopher himself. But when you ring the bell of the Gospel, philosophers will listen!"

Devoted followers of Karl Barth have been pointing out for a decade that the older Barth gets, the more "yes" he says and the less "no." *Time* magazine took that line in reporting on Barth's visit to the United States in 1962. He has begun to open up the God-for-man-by-becoming-the-man-for-us theme. The chasm between God and man is still fixed and, in Barth's mind, is as deeply impassable as ever, but the crossing God has made into our humanity, indeed, the theme of the *humanity of God* (since Jesus Christ ascended as well as rose from the dead), is what now characterizes Barth's thought. Well, some of that theme appears in Godsey's book. Informally, he is 60 percent "yes" and 40 percent "no" by my count. In fact, his "no" is reserved now not for man, seeking to bridge the chasm to God, but for fellow theologians Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich. Probably that is a function of being one of the three greatest living theologians. None of the three would dispute the *three* part, but as to the number one, well, now. . . .

PAUL TILlich has now finished his system. The third and final volume has arrived: **Systematic Theology**, Volume III (University of Chicago Press; \$6.95). Anxious students have been afraid—not nearly so afraid as Tillich—

that the last volume would have to be finished by a Committee of Seven Outstanding Tillichians, each armed with his own tape recordings of the lectures. Because Tillich's system is so intricately constructed, is so dependable, and his theological language so carefully hand-made, many students believed that they could write the third volume themselves and not miss a trick, just by following closely the development of the system through Volume II. They could have; but as we have hinted, thank goodness they didn't.

It is surprising how well Volume III stands on its own feet and might be read bareback, that is, without having first read the preceding volumes. There is such a large amount of interpenetration in the parts of the system, and there is such a large amount of bringing up the starting point even at the end, that a reader might, if he were to work hard, get through this third volume in something like a thousand hours.

Where Tillich begins

Paul Tillich answers the question concerning theology in much the way Barth does. Theology is an ordered display of the Christian faith for modern man. The important words here are "for modern man." Right away Tillich has rejected a theological method which assumes that modern man is able to understand the traditional language of the Christian faith or will find it meaningful or even very compelling. For him the substance of traditional language has dried up. *Justification by faith* no longer has power and richness as an expression. Sin is hopelessly mired in misunderstanding. Christ has become the very proper last name for the man whose first name is Jesus. And so on. The Biblical language is already symbolic, and always has been symbolic, Tillich says, but when presented as a nonsymbolic description of reality, it loses its power, especially the Biblical word *God*.

All language about God is symbolic. To make Bible symbols into statements about God that can be proved or disproved empirically is to stun modern man with incredible nonsense or force him into ridicule and further estrangement from the Church. Thus proceeds Tillich's way of thinking about *starting* a theology; vigorous analysis of the symbolic language can produce answers to the questions that are posed by the existence of man in the twentieth century

under conditions of disruption, demonic movements, illness, and pervasive anxiety. Freely interpreted, this means *mess*.

Tillich's theology is a five-part system in which analysis of the situation discloses a question that drives for the answer contained in the corresponding analytic presentation of a classic doctrine of the Christian faith. Thus: Part I: Reason—Revelation; Part II: Being—God; Part III: Existence—The New Being; Part IV: Life—the Spirit; Part V: History—the Kingdom of God.

The method employed by Tillich gives him an opportunity to do full-scale philosophical analysis, art-criticism, political analysis, historical analysis, religious analysis, ecclesiastical analysis: all at great length. In presenting the history of a particular word—*life*, for instance—on the opening page of Volume III (Part IV), he displays unlimited virtuosity and profundity. He conceives of this analytic work in the most serious possible way precisely because through such deep concern for the *situation* can the latent and *real* question be exposed.

After working for about one hundred pages on life and its ambiguities, ambiguities discovered in culture, morality, and religion, genuine ambiguities that man concretely experiences, that drive him in destructive directions and that offer him no healing, no peace, *then* Tillich develops the form of the question to which the next section will be the answer. This direct encounter between the drive for *unambiguous* life and the appearance of *unambiguous* life, momentarily, fragmentarily in the Spiritual Presence, Eternal Life, and the Kingdom of God is followed by straightforward, full theological display of the symbolic content of the classical doctrines of the Holy Spirit.

Inevitably, it seems, the manner of Tillich's presentation proves to be either remarkable or shocking, depending entirely on the point of view of the reader. But the explication of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is remarkable *or* shocking for essentially the same reason: it departs so radically from standard, "square" theological treatments. To a person who thinks of the Holy Spirit, talks and prays about the Holy Spirit, as a separate department of God in charge of enthusiasm, guiding committee meetings, and dispensing comfort (the regular old Holy Spirit), Tillich's presentation (and Barth's, too, for that



Paul Lehmann

matter) is strange, bizarre, and the least bit distasteful. But, then, Tillich is negotiating this theological doctrine at a deeper level than usual.

Tillich's critics, which are legion, jump all over him because they are convinced that he has given up all rights to call this theology *Christian*. If it is Christian, they feel that it is heretical. Why? He has not anchored his theology in the way Christian faith really is. They point out his repeated translation of Biblical words into what he thinks are philosophical equivalents. Sin becomes estrangement; faith becomes ultimate concern; God becomes the Ground of All Being; Jesus Christ becomes Jesus as the Christ in whom the New Being appears; paradise becomes the state of dreaming innocence; the fall becomes the fall into finitude and freedom. And so on. Perhaps the critics are right.

Tillich acknowledges that he knows that his critics exist. He writes:

"A special characteristic of these three volumes, much noticed and often criticized, is the kind of language used in them and the way in which it is used. It deviates from the ordinary use of biblical language in systematic theology—that is, to support particular assertions with appropriate biblical quotations. Not even the more satisfactory method of building a theological system on the foundation of a historical-critical 'biblical theology' is directly applied, although its influence is present in every part of the system. Instead, philosophi-

cal and psychological concepts are preferred, and reference to sociological and scientific theories often appear. This procedure seems more suitable for a systematic theology which tries to speak understandably to the large group of educated people, including open-minded students of theology, for whom traditional language has become irrelevant. Of course, I am not unaware of the danger that in this way the substance of the Christian message may be lost. Nevertheless, this danger must be risked, and once one has realized this, one must proceed in this direction."

The safest thing that can be said, satisfactory to both Barthian and Tillichian enthusiasts, is that Volume III has been published, period.

NEITHER BARTH NOR TILlich has special or separate sections in his systematic theology for ethics as such or for Christian ethics. Both have the same reason: Ethics must show up in the midst of the theology, and often. Once shunted off into a separate compartment, it loses some of its vitality and becomes disconnected from its living sources.

But neither eminent and reverend theologian disapproves when fellow theologians write separate books or monographs on Christian ethics, and that is well, because in contemporary, strictly American, theology, Christian ethics is about the most written-about subject on the book list—next to sermons, of course. No attempt is going to be made to cover that whole field. Instead, merest note is here taken of two very important books that will prove to be immensely influential in the next years of American theological thought.

Ethics in a Christian Context (Harper and Row; \$5.00) is a book for which students and admirers of Paul Lehmann have been waiting since 1951. Lehmann then wrote a brief paper that opened up the possibility for a distinctively new breakthrough in the field of Christian ethics. One can think of no other single article that has had such wide influence in American Christian thought.

Where Christian ethics begins

The point of that article, and the greatly expanded point that appears in Lehmann's new book, is that the Christian life itself within the Christian Church (the Greek word for which is

koinonia) offers the only real context for doing and thinking about doing Christian ethics. Lehmann writes: "Christian ethics, as a theological discipline, is the reflection upon the question, and its answer: What am I, as a believer in Jesus Christ and as a member of his church, to do? To undertake the reflection upon and analysis of this question and its answer—this is Christian ethics."

What this means, bluntly and briefly, is that Christian ethics cannot be manufactured as an unshatterable set of rules, or as a cohesive system anchored in some analysis of duty, or the good, or the right. Christian ethics everlastingly belongs in the *koinonia* where the Christian ethicist realizes genuine obligation under God and realizes at the same time that the performance of the Christian ministry is never simply a matter of obeying rules. Situations arise. Complex circumstances present themselves. The Christian may do the wrong thing for the right reason or the right thing for the wrong reason. He never knows enough to act and yet is compelled by the grace of God and his fellows to act, and so he acts, living as he does in a community of forgiven sinners and not accomplished saints.

The context for the doing and reflecting upon Christian ethics is so vividly emphasized and appears to be of such extreme importance in Lehmann's thought that he is called, among other things, "contextualist," and his type of ethics is called "contextual ethics." He is against all absolutist ethics, against all rules-ethics or principles-ethics. He does not believe that Christians can possibly be given, ahead of time, a diagram explaining to them what they should do. When they try to connect precept with practice, they inevitably end up hypocrites or live in sweet illusion, Rules deceive; they do not offer guidance.

Most Christians today say that they want some real principles that can be applied to real situations. They say that they want rules that will work right now. But Lehmann almost abruptly refuses to give what is most urgently asked for. He counsels that Christians, instead of searching for a good set of rules, should turn to their own life together as the Christian people, to the *koinonia*, to the Bible. Christians should attend to the preaching of the Word, the administration of the Sacraments, and there they will be bidden to look in faith—not at what they should do—but at what God

CURRENT LITERATURE

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is already doing in the contemporary world. If Christians should be able to see that, and better see themselves as the *koinonia*, then they would already be doing real Christian ethics. "The Christian *koinonia*," he writes, "is the foretaste and the sign in the world that God has always been and is contemporaneously doing what it takes to make and to keep human life human. This is the will of God. . . ." And if anyone answers at this point that Lehmann seems to be saying *let's let God do it*, then that person has no real understanding of the *koinonia*, the obedience that is called for there, or the maturity into which Christians move.

LEHMANN'S DEVELOPMENT of contextual ethics will be going on full tilt for the foreseeable future amidst attack, counterattack, and the pressure of continuous historical and theological developments. He and his critics will all stop briefly in their work to read another truly magnificent book from which they can learn much. This book is **The Responsible Self**, by H. Richard Niebuhr, published posthumously by his son and wife (Harper and Row; \$3.50).

The Responsible Self is subtitled "An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy" and has some of the most elegant, simple, moving prose ever composed in the name of American theology. The following passage is illustrative:

"If now we approach the Scriptures with the idea of responsibility we shall find, I think, that the particular character of this ethics can be more fully if not wholly adequately interpreted. At the critical junctures in the history of Israel and of the early Christian community the decisive question men raised was not 'What is the goal?' nor yet 'What is the law?' but 'What is happening?' and then 'What is the fitting response to what is happening?' When an Isaiah counsels his people, he does not remind them of the law they are required to obey nor yet of the goal toward which they are directed but calls to their attention the intentions of God present [but hidden] in the actions of Israel's enemies. The question he and his peers raise in every critical moment is about the interpretation of what is going on, whether what is happening be, immediately considered, a drought or the invasion of a foreign army, or the fall of a great empire. Israel is the people that is to see and understand the action of God in everything that happens and to make a fitting reply. So it is in the New Testament also. The God to whom



H. Richard Niebuhr

Jesus points is not the commander who gives laws but the doer of small and of mighty deeds, the creator of sparrows and clover of lilies, the ultimate giver of blindness and of sight, the ruler whose rule is hidden in the manifold activities of plural agencies but is yet in a way visible to those who know how to interpret the signs of the times."

The chapters in this brief book were the Robertson Lectures delivered at the University of Glasgow. The movement of thought proceeds in them from a description of the meaning of responsibility as such through a discussion of responsibility in society (the self has none other than a social context for selfhood), the responsible self in time and history, in absolute dependence and in sin and salvation.

The great conflicts in American theological thought about Christian ethics are already potentially resolved and vividly clarified by Niebuhr in these brief, tightly constructed lectures. By introducing the category of responsibility into the most basic descriptions of man, church, and the relation of man to man before God (and man to man before God in the church), he turns discussions of duty, obligation, obedience just slightly, just enough to allow what often is blurred to come into sharp focus. Responsibility is not another topic, alongside others. It is the principal means for perceiving the ethical itself. Focus is the main thing: sharp perception—and if this discussion of theological books has done nothing else, it has disclosed the abiding need to have matters in sharp focus.