

OBITUARY

Dr KARL BARTH

Swiss Protestant theologian whose influence was world-wide

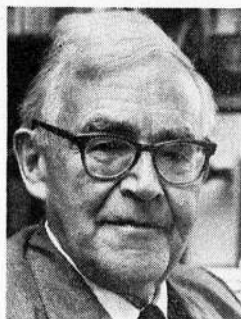
Dr. Karl Barth, who died on Monday in Basle at the age of 82, was Professor of Theology at Basle University from 1935 to 1962.

He was one of the leading religious figures of our times, a Reformed theologian whose stature rivalled that of the giants of the Reformation epoch. It was said of him that he accomplished a Copernican revolution in Protestant thinking, but his influence radiated far beyond the frontiers of Protestantism itself. What gave him peculiar significance, living as he did in an age of international tumult, was his combination of relentless inquiry in the realm of pure theology with his readiness to apply positive theological principles to the social and political life of his times. He was indeed much more than a theologian, for he earned a place in the ranks of Christian prophets.

Born on May 10, 1886, at Basle, he was the son of Fritz Barth, Professor of New Testament and Early Church History there at the time of Karl's birth, but transferred to Berne three years later. After going to school at the Freies Gymnasium at Berne, Karl Barth studied at the Universities of Berne, Berlin, Tübingen, and Marburg. At Berlin he attended Harnack's seminar, and at Marburg he fell under the influence of W. Herrmann and became an enthusiastic student of Schleiermacher, deeply interested in the questions of scientific method. From 1909 to 1911 he served a curacy in Geneva, and in the latter year was appointed a pastor in Safenwil (Aargau). The 10 years he spent there were the formative period in his life. Overwhelmed by the disillusionments of the First World War, not least by the collapse of the ethic of religious idealism, and by his own agonizing consciousness of the responsibilities of a minister of the Gospel to his flock, he was led to a profound questioning of the then fashionable liberalism. The first fruit of this struggle with his own soul was the publication in 1919 of his celebrated Commentary on Romans (*Der Römerbrief*) which at once established his position as a theologian with a new and arresting message.

In 1921 he was appointed professor of dogmatic theology at Göttingen, and in 1925 and 1930 was promoted successively to chairs at Münster i. W. and Bonn. During these years of exhaustive critical study of the content, method and language of theology, in an attempt to lay bare the ultimate sources for a pure theology in its own right, Barth was forced to carry through a searching theological analysis of the social and cultural amalgam of modern bourgeois Christianity and not least of the whole political theory of National Socialism with its roots deep in the romantic and anthropocentric philosophy of the nineteenth century. This brought him into sharp conflict with all who wanted to ground Christianity upon the soil of natural existence and to bring theology into line with the new ideology that was being developed out of it. With the accession of Hitler to power in 1933 he became deeply involved in the church struggle. He was one of the founders of the so-called Confessing Church, reacting vigorously and indignantly against the Nazi ideology of "blood and soil" and race and the attempt to set up a "German Christian" Church.

The famous Barmen Declaration



cerned to establish the truth that God can be known only in accordance with his nature as it is revealed in the overflowing of his life and love to creation. In his early writings he set out to stress the immense gulf between God and man in order to destroy the pantheism embedded in modern culture and let God really be God and man really be human. He attacked relentlessly all forms of religion and culture grounded upon romantic and irrational principles. His primary object was in fact to lead theology away from what he believed to be the fundamentally erroneous outlook of the religious philosophy emanating from the nineteenth century, in the identity between the Spirit of God and the religious self-consciousness or between the laws of God and the natural structures of man's life and history.

He found himself moving towards a vast positive theological construction. Drawing on the Fathers and the Reformers he demanded a return to the prophetic teaching of the Bible (Jeremiah, Paul) of which he believed the Reformers were authentic exponents. He accepted much trenchant criticism of historical Christianity from Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Overbeck and found positive help in Dörner, Vilmar, Kohlbrügge and the Blumhardts. The essence of the Christian message, he affirmed, was the overwhelming love of the absolutely supreme, transcendent God, who comes in infinite con-

descension to give himself to man in unconditional freedom and grace.

Barth expounded his doctrines in a series of sermons, addresses, lectures, and in popular expositions of the faith as well as in his more solid continuous works. His style was vividly lit up by brilliant smiles and turns of speech, and irrepressible humour. In 1922 he published the second, drastically altered, edition of *Der Römerbrief*, inaugurating what came to be called the "theology of crisis" or "dialectical theology". This was followed in 1927 by *Die christliche Dogmatik in Entwurf*.

In 1932 he launched the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, far and away the most original and remarkable contribution to systematic theology that the twentieth century has seen. By 1959 it reached its eleventh substantial volume (Band IV 3). During these fruitful decades his influence was spreading to other countries, and not least to Great Britain.

Barth continued to be an immensely productive writer throughout the whole of his active life.

After the war the University of Münster made amends by restoring his doctorate in 1945. He continued to interest himself keenly in current theological discussion, taking part in controversies regarding Baptism, hermeneutics, "demythologizing", &c.

With his vast authority and prestige as a prophetic teacher, his words made a profound impression at the Conference of the World Council of Churches held in Amsterdam in 1948. In the sphere of the arts he was regarded as one of the foremost exponents of the music of Mozart.

After leaving Germany in 1935 Barth began to read English literature and soon became a devoted admirer of the writings of Winston Churchill and Dorothy Sayers. In the practical sphere he was much concerned with the future of Germany, declaring that, although responsible for the disasters to themselves and to the world, the Germans now needed friends to help them to become what they had never been—a free people, learning not to luxuriate in ideas but to face facts in the spirit of Christian realism. He declined to show towards communism the same kind of direct hostility he had adopted towards Nazism. In 1913 he married Nelly, daughter of Robert Hoffmann, state secretary of the canton of St. Gall. They had one daughter and four sons.

The famous Barmen Declaration drawn up in 1934 was largely based on a draft which he had prepared, and gave uncompromising expression to his conviction that the only way to offer effective resistance to the secularizing and paganizing of the Church was to hold fast to the one ground of Christian security, God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Though a Swiss citizen Barth was not altogether immune from persecution, but his courageous stand and his refusal to take the oath of unconditional allegiance to the Führer cost him his chair in Bonn in 1935. Later still in 1939, he was stripped of his doctorate by the University of Münster; in the meantime, however, he had been forced out of Germany, and had been invited to occupy the chair of theology in his native city. From that date until the end of the war he continued to champion the cause of the Confessing Church, of the Jews, and the oppressed peoples generally.

As a theologian Barth was con-