

THE THEOLOGY OF KARL BARTH*

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FEW in their way more difficult and even thankless tasks can await a reviewer than that of writing a notice of the first book of Karl Barth's which has been translated into English. Most books by eminent theologians lend themselves to some sort of selective treatment: a few points of special moment can be chosen for critical discussion. Moreover, the reviewer may usually count on his readers possessing adequate knowledge and understanding of the author's position. They will come not wholly unprepared; they will be in a state of intelligent anticipation. None of these advantages can be counted on by the reviewer of Barth. He cannot make selections with any sense of security. Barth's dogmatic does not split itself up nicely for him and allow him to treat of it in any fragmentary fashion. And as to his readers, he cannot reckon on much more than that they know of the appearance of a stormy petrel of theology, Karl Barth, and may have heard that while to some he stands for the illumination of the theological sky, to others he suggests its darkening.

With all this in my mind, I propose to say something about Karl Barth's theology in general, and to illustrate the exposition by reference to passages in this book. I shall end with a brief note on Barth's special significance for us in England.

Karl Barth, who is now Professor of Theology in the University of Münster, has developed his doctrinal position in sharp reaction against certain tendencies which have been powerful, and, at times, have seemed almost in dominant possession of the theological field. Three, in particular, come to mind. The first is the religious-historical method in the study of the Bible, which, building upon the older textual and "higher" criticism, has striven to give an account of the Bible in terms of the various historical and religious conditions under which it was built and of the different strata discernible in the completed edifice. The second tendency, which derives from Schleiermacher, is the exaltation of religious experience and the depreciation of all "external authorities" in comparison therewith. And, thirdly, within the sphere of the doctrine of God the emphasis has fallen upon God's immanence rather than upon His transcendence, upon His likeness, and nearness to man rather than on His otherness and remoteness. Of God many have appeared inclined to say, as Weiner said of "the historic Jesus," to the amazement of Dr. Burkitt, "We know Him right well."

With each one of these tendencies Barth is in the most decided disagreement. Upon contrary, positive, positions of his own, his whole theology is built up. First, then, as to the Bible. It must be clearly understood that Barth is not what is called a Fundamentalist. He has no quarrel with the methods of the Higher Criticism; he does not object to its findings that they are irreconcilable with a doctrine of verbal inerrancy. In his preface to the second edition of his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, his most famous work, he says of his disagreement with recent commentators on that Epistle, "I do not reproach them with their use of historical criticism, the right and necessity of which I often expressly recognise." In *The Word of God* he contends that when historical criticism "began objecting to the antiquity, the genuineness, the historical reliability of biblical literature," there was no valid answer along the lines of such dogmatic assertion as the authors of the Helvetic Consensus Formula of 1675 employed, nor by the development of "a guerilla warfare in apologetics." But his root complaint is that Biblical commentators have so often stopped just when the most important part of their work ought to have begun. They have busied themselves with questions of date, authorship, origins, and

* *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, by KARL BARTH, translated by DOUGLAS HORTON. (The Pilgrim Press 1928, pp. vii and 327, \$2.25; and Hodder & Stoughton, 8s. 6d. net.

the like, all quite proper objects of enquiry, but still belonging to the externals of the Bible. But the real inner thing, the message of the Bible, its word, that they have left on one side. Max Strauch in his very valuable interpretation of Barth (*Die Theologie Karl Barth's*, Chr. Kaiser, München), shows how Barth has felt the inadequacy of modern Biblical study and Biblical theology when a halt has been made at the "historical-psychological method of treatment," whereas the chief interest of theology ought to be the "actual, transcendental interest of the Bible," its proclamation of God as "Creator and Redeemer, Beginning and End, Origin and Goal of all being." Two Chapters in *The Word of God* bear on this. One has the very suggestive title "The Strange New World Within the Bible." The paragraph which I quote gives us Barth's thought expressed more simply and clearly than is always the case:—"It is not the right human thoughts about God which form the content of the Bible, but the right divine thoughts about men. The Bible tells us not how we should talk with God, but what he says to us; not how we find the way to him, but how he has sought and found the way to us; not the right relation in which we must place ourselves to him, but the covenant which he has made with all who are Abraham's spiritual children, and which he has sealed once and for all in Jesus Christ. It is this which is within the Bible. The word of God is within the Bible." So what we have in the Bible is "the standpoint of God," even "the history of God" (not of man). In two most impressive pages at the end of this chapter, he gives us his reading of the biblical answer to the question, "Who is God?" and penetrates deeply into the richness of that revelation which is given theological form in the doctrine of the Trinity.

The reader of Barth, especially the reader who is versed in the ordinary current methods of Biblical study, must recognise at once that there are questions about the Bible, questions which will seem to him natural and important which he will want to put to Barth, and which Barth simply will not answer—or will answer in a manner that seems to pile up further difficulties. Nothing is more baffling than Barth's attitude to what we regard as inevitable questions concerning the truth of Biblical history. It is not merely that he holds that it does not matter whether "figures like Abraham and Moses are products of latter myth-making"—he adds "believe it who can," but he obviously thinks that this kind of question is the wrong kind of question. It is not relevant for our understanding of the Bible, since the Bible is not a document of human history. It is true indeed that "the Bible is full of history; religious history, literary history, cultural history, world history, and human history of every sort." But that is not the real truth about the Bible. The real truth is expressed by Barth in one of those statements which take their form from that method of dialectic, which is one of Barth's most notable and puzzling characteristics: "Biblical history in the Old and New Testaments is not really history at all, but seen from above is a series of free divine acts and seen from below a series of fruitless attempts to undertake something in itself impossible. From the viewpoint of ordered development in particular, and in general it is quite incomprehensible—as every religious teacher who is worth his salt knows only too well." Any paraphrase of Barth is a perilous undertaking, but perhaps one might say that what he means is that where the action of God is concerned it is no use our supposing that those historical canons are applicable which have become normative for us through our attention to the history of man. God's actions are determined purely by God's will. This seems to be the key to his exceedingly difficult statements on the resurrection of Christ. The chapter on "Biblical questions, insights and vistas," ends with a long exposition of the meaning of the Easter message, which is "the theme of the Bible." Neither here nor later in the book are the usual questions about the historical accuracy of the Gospel narratives answered. What the miracles of the Bible mean is the reality of the "one miraculous new order." So "they illustrate what the resurrection illustrates supremely, that it is beside the point even to ask whether they are historical and possible. They make no claim to being either. They signalise the unhistorical, the impossible, the new time that is coming." More directly with regard to Easter, "the resurrection of Christ, or his second coming, which is the same thing" (the reader may well ponder over that!) "is not a historical event; the historians may reassure themselves—unless, of course, they prefer to let it destroy their assurance—that our

concern *here* is with an event which, though it is the only real happening *in* is not a real happening of history."

At this point something ought to be said about the dialectical method which Barth applies. This is bound up with the sheer contrast between the relativity which is an essential mark of everything human, thought and speech, history and psychology, and the absoluteness which is the essential mark of God, His actions and His ways. Now the fundamental theme for philosophical as for Biblical thought is that of the ultimate transcendental relation of the relative to the absolute, of man to God; but here no one direct way of speech suffices, nor can we find satisfaction in any sharp, clear-cut "Either—or." On the contrary, as Max Strauch put it; we must take refuge in a "dialectical form of speech, which settles itself neither in finally valid positive assertions, nor in finally valid negative assertions, but reaches back beyond both to the original reality, which stands in the middle—no, on the further side of both, and out of which the Yes and the No proceed." As Barth himself expresses it, every Yes and No is no more than a *witness* to God's truth, and misunderstanding can be avoided only when the Yes is adequately limited by the No, and the No by the Yes. And though the dialectical method is truer than any other, the dialectician must remember that he also cannot really speak of God. Only God can do that.

I come next to Barth's reaction against the emphasis laid upon religious experience. The secret of this lies in the fact that Barth will not for a moment allow that man passes out of the sphere of the relative, the conditional, that which is not God, in religion any more than in any other human activity. Religion and religious experience do not make a way from man to God. There is no way from man to God; there is only a way from God to man. The unprepared reader may well feel surprised at Barth's polemics against religion. "Back from theology to experience," or "theology in and through experience," have become—may I say almost the slogans of to-day? But for Barth, religion always lies on this side of the gulf which separates man from God. Max Strauch has much to say which illuminates Barth's thought here. He points out how precisely in religion the dualism which exists between the world and God (though not in the form of any Manichean doctrine), comes to its clearest expression. Religion is the highest point of human possibilities, but that does not mean that by his religious consciousness man passes out of the region of sin and death. Rather is religion, true religion, such as is found in Job, Paul, Luther, and Kierkegaard the point where the gulf between man and God is most clearly revealed, where "the sickness of man becomes recognisable." So, for Barth, religion is not an end in itself, but the special means to the recognition of man's relativity over against God. Wherever the subjective, human aspect comes to the front in religion, and the emphasis falls on "experience" the essential theme or concern of theology is destroyed. For, in the words of Strauch, "religion as a notion of experience fails to grasp precisely that which in the first and last resort is of importance within it, *the objective, original relation of God to man.*"

The difficulty which obviously arises here is that no amount of warning against what is human and subjective brings man within reach of what is divine and objective. If religion is the furthest limit of human activity, how is contact to be established with that which lies beyond the limit? However much we agree with Barth "that the subject in the religious relation is God and not man," how are we to be sure in any religious relationship that we are escaping from illusion? The answer is that from the side of human history and psychology there can be no assurance. Here we meet the supremely Calvinistic character of Barth's thought, though it is not the Calvinism of contrasted individualistic election and reprobation. But if we were to grapple to any purpose with his thought we should find ourselves facing ideas of election, grace, and faith which belong to a very different tradition from that to which we are accustomed in discussions of religious experience. There is no systematic treatment of these themes in *The Word of God*, but in the chapter entitled "The doctrinal task of the Reformed Churches," some of the lines of Barth's thought are discernible. He who wants to dig deeper into Barth's idea of faith must go to the discussion of Romans iv. in the commentary.

Thirdly, Barth is in sharpest opposition to that whole way of thinking about God which

postulates a nearness and affinity of God to man. Part of his aversion from mysticism is due to his disagreement at this point with what some mystics have taught. Barth goes far beyond Otto here. With all Otto's insistence on the *mysterium tremendum*, on God as the wholly Other, man's "numinous" feeling lies within the sphere of the mystical consciousness. There is nothing of this with Barth. *Deus absconditus*—that is the supreme truth about God, apart from the revelation which God has made of Himself in Christ. But if we would not misunderstand this notion of the hidden God and convert it into a problem for thought alone, we must realise the ethical content of the contrast between God and man in Barth's theology. In the chapter on "The problem of ethics to-day," Barth argues that man is bound to recognise his inability to reach that moral objective which, nevertheless, he feels constrained to seek. And there, in his powerlessness, with the doom which his knowledge of it brings, man meets God: "Would God be God if he met us in any other way? Would he be the source of all-being and Creator of all things, unless, in comparison with him, all being had to be disqualified as not being, and all things recognised as estranged and fallen away from the good and perfect life which belongs to him alone? And can man conceivably enter into him except through that door of death and hell which is the perception of his remoteness from him, his condemnation by him, and his powerlessness before him?"

No wonder that Barth makes so much of revelation and grace. The Gospel is even more deeply necessary to him than it was to the Ritschlians of whom he at times reminds us; he speaks of Herrmann as his "unforgotten teacher." But whereas to the Ritschlians the Gospel was the one corrective of ignorance of God, for Barth it is the one remedy for despair before God. The supreme expression of what he calls "the new world," the world of an utterly different order of reality from anything anywhere discoverable except in the Bible, is the forgiveness of sins. Here is a "surpassing paradox," when man, while his righteousness remains infinitely separated from the righteousness of God, while true moral achievement must remain for him "not only incomplete, but perverted," yet participates in a justification which means "the renewal of the unrenovable old man." The discussion of "The problem of ethics to-day," works up towards these conclusions. So we come to this comprehensive statement: "in this world there is no salvation and no certainty apart from the unique forgiveness of God, by which the sin of the pious and the not pious, the sin discoverable in *all* life relations, the sin underlying the *whole* system of human ends, is *covered*." It is in the light of this that justified ethical conduct becomes possible.

What I have written so far is of the nature of *prolegomena* to Barth's dogmatic, guiding-posts (let us hope not too incorrectly orientated) for the reader of *The Word of God and The Word of Man*, who may feel like an explorer of unknown country. Beyond such *prolegomena* I cannot now go. But there are two further matters on which I wish to say a word; and they will not be out of place in such a journal as THE REVIEW OF THE CHURCHES.

The first concerns Barth's Protestantism. It is not difficult to think of Barth as a Protestant of Protestants, one who wears Calvin's own Genevan gown, even though certain alterations have been made in it since Calvin first put it on. Count Keyserling has spoken of Barth as the one great hope of Protestantism, and Barth unquestionably thinks of himself as standing in the true Protestant succession. In the address at a ministers' meeting reprinted under its title "The need and promise of Christian preaching," he says quite simply, "We are not Catholic, nor are our congregations." But there is nothing of the anti-Catholic controversialist about him. Of the "Catholic altar sacrament," he speaks with profound respect, a respect entirely absent when he comments on the proposal, from within Protestantism for "a so-called sacrament of—*silence*." And though we must not see in him a conscious worker in the cause of Christian reunion, it is of no small moment that towards the end of this address he says, "I hold therefore that it must be fundamentally possible in the long last to come to an agreement in thought even with a Catholic theologian, and even over the subject of the altar sacrament—without any accompanying desire to take it from him. The need and promise of Christian preaching, the divine judgment and divine justification, are in the last analysis the life even of the Church of the Council of Trent."

Secondly, the extraordinary unlikeness of Barth's theology to anything with which we usually meet in Anglican or Free Church circles makes it all the more worthy of study. Barth does not fit in either with the orthodoxy or with the liberalism which are familiar to us or with any current attempt to combine the two. He himself is neither mystic nor pietist. Anyone who came straight to Barth from a work steeped in that atmosphere of rational orthodoxy which is the finest type of the Anglican tradition might well feel like a stranger who had wandered into a Christian service at Corinth in the first century and heard believers speaking with tongues. Barth's methods of thought and speech and his characteristic emphases are far removed from ours. But if we neglect him we shall miss a great deal. His dogmatic "scheme" is not likely to gain our assent, but neither the Biblical exegete, not the systematic theologian, can afford to ignore his message. And to some of us there will be a familiar ring in his voice. Again and again in reading Karl Barth we can without difficulty catch the accents of the late Principal Forsyth. Would that so great a master of theology were still with us, that from him we might receive such a study of Barth as he, of all British theologians, would be uniquely competent to give.