

June 12, 1930.

SCOTS OBSERVER

EUROPE'S MOST DISCUSSED THEOLOGIAN

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Professor Karl Barth, whom Glasgow University honours next week by conferring on him the degree of D.D., is widely known on the Continent and in America. In our own country groups of ministers meet to discuss his teaching and many say that he has given them a new sense of respect and authority as preachers.

This dynamic personality, who compels men to take sides with him or against him, was born at Bale in 1886, and educated at Bern, Berlin, Tübingen, and Marburg, taking his deepest impressions from Professor Herrmann, of Marburg, "his unforgettable teacher." He began as a country minister at Safenvil, in Aargau, Switzerland, and there in the agony of his efforts to find a message for his people his own theology had its beginning. He recognised that before he could speak he must first listen.

During the next years he absorbed the message of many teachers, including Nietzsche, Dostojewski, and Kierkegaard, but his greatest teacher was the war, which he observed as a neutral. His whole former conception of God and the world was rudely shaken. Everything that counted for anything, culture, civilisation, science, even morality, he saw under the judgment of God. To this vision of a world under judgment (crisis) we are to trace the germ of the now famous "Theology of Crisis" of Karl Barth.

When the war was approaching its close the first edition of his Commentary on "Romans" appeared, to be followed a year later by a second edition in which not one stone was left standing upon another. A Roman Catholic theologian described it as a "bomb" falling upon the playground of the theologians. It brought him at once into fame, and he was called as Professor, first to Göttingen, in Germany, then to Münster, and quite recently to Bonn.

Those who know Karl Barth personally say that his outstanding characteristics are undoubted genius, sincerity, humility, and almost boisterous humour. He complains ruefully that for the success of his books he is punished by the existence of regular "Barthians." Speaking of the noise caused by his "Romans," he compared himself to a man climbing a dark tower at night, who put out his hand to feel for the banister, and took hold by mistake of the bell rope! He means to be careful not to do the same again.

Barth does not profess to offer a "new" theology, and he will not accept the name of prophet. He is only a "witness" to the Word of God. Yet many believe that he and his friends, Brunner, Gogarten, etc., are initiating

a movement away from subjectivity, and back to an objective authority in religion which may be as epoch-making as was that led by Schleiermacher a hundred years ago. Barth is a master in the art of lecturing, and by means of his trenchant addresses he has spread his views far and wide in Switzerland, Holland, and Germany. The only volume so far translated into English, "The Word of God and the Word of Man," while it contains the essential Barth, hardly represents his views as they have developed during the last seven years.

His challenge to religion, to the Church, and to society remains. He continues to be the foe of all compromise, especially the treacherous compromise of the last century between Christianity and civilisation. But he is advancing to a more positive position, as he rediscovers for himself, and for us, the treasures of Reformed theology. So keen is he on advancing that he has often exposed himself to the reproach of being inconsistent. But it does not trouble him. He gaily compares himself to a cruiser going full steam into action, with the enemy shells dropping harmlessly astern.

The general outline of this theology of crisis, which many find difficult to grasp, may be briefly sketched.

Barth starts from the fact of sin which is to him a tremendous reality. Man, enslaved and blind, cannot save himself, and all attempts at finding a way from man to God, including the highest flights of religion, are so many towers of Babel. God is the Altogether Other, the Transcendent God. All doctrines of Monism and Immanence he rejects as being unchristian. Between God and man there is an infinite difference, an infinite distance, caused by sin. Sin has meant the closing of many avenues of approach to God.

Because man is a sinner, truth can reach him only brokenly, in the form of a dialogue of yea and nay, of paradox and contradiction, in which God is the One who puts the questions and man is compelled to answer. Hence Barth's theology is called "dialectic." This dialogue between God and man we encounter in the Bible. The Bible is not the objective Word of God, but it becomes the Word of God to the individual as its truth is brought home to him by the Holy Spirit, and he is forced to a decision. It is only in the moment of decision, the name

for which is "faith," that God reveals Himself to us. So long as we remain spectators, we are outsiders. The truths of science can be reached by cold and neutral thinking, but spiritual truth comes to us only when it becomes a matter of life and death in which our very existence is involved. Then we cease to be spectators, and become actors. This is what Barth calls "existential thinking," on which he lays great stress. "Existential thinking" on the subjective side, and the Word of God on the objective side, are the two poles round which Barth's whole theology revolves. Because there was no way from here to there, God has flung out to us from the other side a lofty bridge whose name is Jesus Christ. For Barth Jesus Christ is supremely the Word of God, reaching us as a person speaking in space and time, to persons.

We can understand Jesus Christ also only by existential thinking. The so-called historical Jesus is not as such the Son of God. The historian can neither prove nor disprove the truth of Christianity. Religious authority rests not on history, but on revelation, which is the breaking through of the divine Word into the sphere of the local and temporal. This Word of God, which comes to us only in the existential moment, has completed itself in the Death and Resurrection of Jesus, in which the nay of condemnation pronounced on sin on the Cross is met by the yea of Divine forgiveness in the Resurrection. But God's "Yes" can only be heard and understood by the soul that accepts His "No." In accepting the divine judgment we are saved.

The sinner is justified and sanctified at once in the moment of decision, according to Barth, but this decision has to be made again and again as he fares forth on his strange pilgrimage, never at rest, a sinner still, depending on the divine forgiveness. A man never is a Christian. He is not yet redeemed. The kingdom of God is not yet come. We live, according to Barth, "Between the Times," to use the title of the Magazine of the movement, between the old age and the new, the old which is under condemnation, and the new which is ever breaking in. Faith is thus a state of tension.

In this existential moment of decision, when he encounters Jesus Christ, the Word of God, the believer discovers also his neighbour, and the claim which he is commissioned of God to make on him, and he must be ready to answer that claim in sacrificial service.

Karl Barth offers no complete system but a theology for the wayfarer, and it is commanding and stimulating, and worthy of our attention.