

Karl Barth and the "German Christians"

Replies from the Nazis

The German Christian Party, which gained a decisive majority in the Church elections of last Sunday week, has not been satisfied to leave the criticisms of Karl Barth without answer. *Das Evangelische Deutschland*, a Protestant weekly which is now wholly on the Government side, publishes in the current issue two replies, expressed in moderate language, to the pamphlet by Professor Barth, "Theologische Existenz Heute." The first is by Professor Erich Seeberg, of Berlin; the second by Professor Georg Wobbermin, of Göttingen.

I.

Dr. Seeberg notes with due respect the earnest advice given by Karl Barth to theologians, that they should keep strictly within the limits of their own vocation. "From his own point of view, he argues with as much courage as logical clearness, that nothing matters for us except God and His Word. There is danger in all ecclesiastical politics, because they obscure that unambiguous principle. And so he sets aside the 'German Christians' as a rather coarse type of heretic, and the 'Young Reformers' as a refined type. So he seeks his way, moving steadily along his own path, beyond the groups and parties who have formed themselves to-day amid the strife of Churches. I ask myself, Why can I not travel with him? My instinctive affection goes out to minorities rather than majorities; to danger rather than peace; to the persecuted rather than the persecutor."

Professor Seeberg refuses, however, to accept the Barthian view that the theological profession can or should be isolated. Man's redemption was wrought out in history, and God revealed Himself through His Son. "Therefore there is no 'pure'

theology, but all theology is linked up with that Word of God which was declared in history, and works out its effects in the historical process. . . . I believe in the revelation of God in the Man Christ. Therefore I say not only 'the Word,' but I say 'the Word and History.' God speaks to us in the Word and in history, but His Word is history—i.e., it became time and man. What God says to us is fulfilled in time and hidden in the fate which we experience. Our task is to interpret the full meaning of God's word from nature and history; and, more than that, to make it fruitful for ourselves in our own position in life and in the forms of our time. The Divine Incarnation compels Christian theology to take that direction."

The Berlin professor argues passionately for a clearer understanding of St. Paul's words, "We are labourers together with God." "The sinner is destined to be *Co-operator Dei*: the instrument, the organ, of God, in which, according to Luther, God Himself prays and preaches, and does good." The debt of the Churches to the "theology of crisis" is freely acknowledged, but the question is repeated at the close of the article: Does Evangelical theology need a firm basis in history, or is it fundamentally a theology of the Word, and of the Word alone?

II.

Professor Wobbermin quotes Karl Barth's references to the Episcopal office within the German Church. There is in Barth, he suggests, a tendency to forsake the main highway of the Reformation, and return to the old scholasticism. "With us," says Wobbermin, "the Episcopal office will never be a tenet of the Evangelical faith. But it does and will have this great significance—a matter of almost priceless importance at the present time—that it represents the uniform spiritual leadership of that German Evangelical Church which comprises the German nation. And in that we should suppose every German patriot, whether he was born within or without the borders of the Reich, must feel pure and undivided joy."

Professor Wobbermin refutes the suggestion of Barth, that German Protestants are seeking to establish an Episcopate on Anglican or Swedish lines. No "apostolical succession" will be claimed for the prelate whose appointment still hangs in the balance; on the contrary, that "pseudo-historical" doctrine will be expressly rejected.