An Interview With Karl Barth

Donald Grey Barnhouse

"ONE is hardly considered well-informed in Europe unless he can discuss Karl Barth" (pronounced Bart), says an editorial in the Bulletin of the *Federal Council of Churches*. Wilhelm Pauck, in a criticism of the new German theologian writes, "Karl Barth is unquestionably the most discussed personality in the theological world today".

Karl Barth is a German Swiss who, during the war, was pastor of a little village church in Safenwil, in the Canton of Aargau. In 1919 he published a work on the Epistle to the Romans, and from that moment his name was known through Switzerland. He was soon called to a chair of theology in the great German University of Bonn, and from then on his name has swept throughout the world. The Roman Catholics have recognized the reality of the movement, and one of their professors, Dr. Karl Adam, has said, "There is no doubt that in the Protestant theology of Germany, which a few years ago appeared to the outside observer as a dry waste over which the hot wind of a limitless criticism played, wells have suddenly broken forth; a new sense for the supernatural realities, for God and His revelation, for faith and miracle, rises up and fights with uncommon force".

Barth was a pupil of Germany's greatest modernist and destructive critic, Harnack. At the moment when it appeared that liberalism had gained the battle, when criticism had destroyed the Bible, Barth came forth with his work, so scholarly that it demanded the attention of scholars, so warm that it demanded the attention of believers, so different from anything hitherto seen in Germany that it caused the theological world to pause.

First of all it was a revolution against modernism and criticism and a call for a return to the supernatural. The critics were left gasping for breath. But the conservative theologians had learned to look askance at Germany for so long that they were wary of this new thing and pounced upon every shortcoming to attack it. Dr. A. S. Zerbe wrote, however, "People in the United States who have kept in touch with religious thought know that the celebrated Swiss theologian has hurled an enormous bomb into the theological camp and has caused a scatterment right and left. Theologians are not quite certain what has hit them, but they agree that it was something beyond the ordinary."

All this was in my mind when we drove over the brow of the hill and saw the city of Zurich lying at the head of the lake which bears its name. I knew that this was Barth's city as it was the city of Zwingli. In a very few moments I was talking to him on the telephone. A very pleasing voice gave me my appointment and described the road out to the village where we could talk together. It was six miles down the edge of the lake, and then a sharp climb up the long hill that rims the lake. Trying to find an isolated farmhouse demands a special technique especially when the chauffeur is a Frenchman. At each cross roads we stopped and I interviewed a peasant, and from the horrible Schweitzer German dialect got the directions.

After a while, coming round a turn, we saw a farmhouse through the trees, beyond a garage which stood by the road. A man walked across the field to greet me; it was Karl Barth.

A very pleasing personality: about five feet ten, keen eyes, handsome face, little black mustache, a sense of alertness that makes one suspect a good sense of humor; altogether a pleasing man.

Two deck chairs had been placed near a tree in the meadow, and we sat with the great panorama at our feet, twenty miles of the clear, pale green lake in view, with villages, orchards and vineyards scattered over the highly cultivated country. The warm September sun poured down upon us as we settled ourselves for a conversation that lasted almost two hours.

I told Dr. Barth why I had come. He was being talked of as no man in the theological world. He was being criticized, of course, by the liberals, and yet he was being criticized by some conservatives. Perhaps a few questions would shed light on the situation. I pulled out my note book and prepared to write as fast as I could. He began by saying that the titles of liberalism and conservatism were out of date, and that he did not wish to be classed with either. The American reader may wonder at this, and while it is not true for America, it certainly is true for Germany. This came out later when Barth complained bitterly that the conservatives had followed Hitler as sheepishly as the modernists, and that the number of men who were willing to die if need be for the supernaturalism of the Bible seemed hopelessly small.

"I do not wish to be classed", he said, "otherwise than as being a Bible Christian".

Perhaps it will be best for me to translate a portion of the conversation, as I have it recorded in my note book. The questions are mine, the answers are Dr. Barth's.

"You believe, then, in the Deity of Christ?"

"Jesus Christ is eternally God, the Logos."

"But do you believe that the Jesus Who was on earth was God?"

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Messages go over a wire by telegraph or telephone, and the wire is not in contact with the earth. It must be insulated, separate, if it is to be of value. Direct contact with the earth causes a short circuit and the wire is out of commission. ¶ So Christians must be separated from the world and separated to God. They must be insulated by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the life. They are in the world but not of it. Only then can they be channels for God's message.

Prayer is a time exposure of the soul to God

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Except the Lord

(Continued from Page 4)

I beg you, let the Lord build your life. You cannot create an enduring structure alone. Let Him begin by making you, through the new birth, a new creature in Christ Jesus. Start with the right foundation "for other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11). Then, remember that He is the Master Builder: you are only the apprentice. So build as He bids. See that upon this lasting foundation you build worthily, of gold and silver and precious stones, not wood, hay and stubble. For the day shall declare it and if the structure be not abiding it shall be burned, though the apprentice be saved as by fire. Build rather according to the divine plan so that He may keep both you and the building, that you may receive a reward.

But if you are older and have built through the years in your own strength and in vain; if you sit today amid the shattered ruins of tumbled castles or if you have achieved worldly success and found it the hollow deceit which it surely is, I bring you a message of hope. You can begin again! God is ready to wipe out the futile past and start you anew on the one foundation if you will give up your foolish scheming and let the great Builder take absolute charge. He is the guarantee of success and security for what He commences He can continue. "I know Whom I have believed"—there was the start; "I am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day"—there is the sustenance. He can keep what He builds.

To you who believe we state the converse of the Psalmist's Great Except: If the Lord build the house they labour not in vain that build it: if the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh not in vain. What blessed assurance that holds for those who are tempted to worry and doubt! So many believers, though they have peace with God, have not the peace of God because they have not learned to rest upon His promises. Sometimes the apprentice works up a fever building the house and takes matters into his own hands; sometimes he neglects to take a problem to the heavenly Overseer; sometimes he thinks the work goes slowly or is delayed; sometimes he grows nervous when the rains descend and the floods come. These poor, fretful Christians who are up all hours of the night watching the city for fear the eternal Watchman Who neither slumbers nor sleeps might fail to guard the gate!

Indeed, the verse that follows this text assures us: "It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so He giveth His beloved sleep". If you are worrying over your life after you have committed it to God; if you are a spiritual insomniac, sitting up late and rising early in uneasiness over your security, you are doing grievous wrong and cheating yourself out of a blessed rest. You try to rest and cannot exactly because you try. "He giveth His beloved sleep." The more you try to sleep the less you sleep for you cannot rest until you simply let go and rest. He gives you sleep, it is not something you get hold of for it comes only when you turn loose.

If you would know the secret of His Peace, there are only a few simple conditions. First, make sure that you have renounced sin and your own selfish strivings and have definitely and utterly committed all you are and have to Him. If you are not certain that you have done that, do it now and be certain. Then, you know upon the assurance of His Word that what you have committed He accepts and that now you and the building of your life's work are in His hands. It is, henceforth, your business simply to stay in His will and carry out His instructions. Worrying over the materials, wondering what will happen, anxiety about appearances, bothering about the funds, these are all evil for just in proportion as you worry you are not trusting. Remember that if God is building your life you are not laboring in vain. If He is the Overseer and you are the apprentice, it is not your business to bother about how long it will take, where the materials are coming from or how it will look when it is finished. God makes no failures, He never runs out of supplies and what He builds is always lovely.

Furthermore, if He keeps your life you will not watch in vain. Mind you, though He is the heavenly Watchman you must watch also just as you help build, although He is the heavenly Builder. "Watch and pray" (Mt. 26:41); "Watch ye" (1 Cor. 16:13); "Watch unto prayer" (1 Pet. 4:7); "Watch thou in all things" (2 Tim. 4:5); "Watching thereunto with all perseverance" (Eph. 6:18). But it need not be nervous and fearful watching, for He is the real Keeper. Too many believers are like Elisha's servant at Dothan: they see danger round about and cry out in alarm to God "How shall we do?" They need to have their eyes opened to behold God's chariots of fire, for "the angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him, and delivereth them" (Ps. 34:7).

Christians may, therefore, live on the lookout as watchmen under God in serenity and security. How we need to learn, in these tense and nerve-racking times, that if God keep the life there is nothing to fear! To be sure the bank may fail and health may break and best friends be taken, but we need to distinguish between these things and our life. After we are born again our new life is the eternal life of God in us and nothing can despoil us of that any more than it can take God's life from Him. Our lives are hid with Christ in God and no invader can reach that citadel. Therefore, let us be careful for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let our requests be made known unto God, "and the peace of God which passeth all understanding shall keep our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:6, 7).

So we believers condition all success and security upon the Great Except. Whatever is built and kept by Him is safe and enduring. No nation can hope to survive unless the Lord sustain it. No enterprise, however impressive its program or splendid its objects, can reach its goal without Him. Church undertakings are not foreordained to success merely because they fly His banner or claim His sanction: they must be utterly in His will and in His Name. And any life not generated and guided by His Spirit, however garlanded with earthly bouquets, is a dismal failure.

When the Constitutional Convention at the beginning of our republic seemed to be getting nowhere in its deliberations, Benjamin Franklin proposed that prayer be offered. Hamilton objected, saying that he did not think it wise to enlist any foreign or adventitious assistance. We certainly have gone Hamiltonian in that sense nowadays. Much has been written about Humanism, one of the blighting fallacies of the times. But there is a practical humanism, often overlooked, which professes to recognize God and then proceeds to deny Him in daily experience. The pitiful actors in the tragedy of these times claim to believe in a Supreme Being but He is left out in the ante-room. We pay nice compliments to the Almighty in our public assemblies. A minister is always on hand to grace almost any sort of gathering with an invocation. Banquet speeches and commencement addresses end with the usual vague admonition to "have faith in God, yourself and your fellowmen". The man Jesus is dressed up to match any clan, clique or club that would use Him to enhance its prestige. Men call His Name but they do not really call upon His Name.

It is the shallow mockery of those who profess that they know God but in works deny Him, being abominable and disobedient and unto every good work reprobate. There is no consciousness of need, no repentance, no supplication for divine forgiveness and favor. Men still seek somehow or other to muddle through with only pious gestures toward the Almighty.

But the Great Except stands forever in the way. The only way around God's "except" is to accept His Christ. Otherwise, we build only for oblivion and the watchman wakes in vain.

An Interview With Karl Barth

(Continued from Page 5)

"I believe that He *is* God. He lives."

"Then you believe in the bodily resurrection of our Lord; that the third day He

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was raised from the dead, not spiritually merely, but physically?"

"I believe that absolutely."

"Do you believe that man is saved only by the supernatural work of regeneration, the implanting of a new life in answer to our faith in Jesus Christ?"

"Certainly. I found my theology in St. Paul, especially in the book of Romans. This new birth is the work of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is a Person. True Christianity is not to be understood outside of the deity of the Trinity."

Most of the criticisms of Dr. Barth by those who are conservatives have been on the ground of his doctrine concerning the Bible. No matter where our conversation drifted, we kept coming back and back again to that point. In answer to my first question about the Bible, Dr. Barth said that he had started out from the modernistic position, and that while he had been a pupil of Harnack, he had abandoned the position of modernism, though he had the highest respect for the memory of Harnack. "Modernism taught us", he said, "to study the text of the Bible more closely. This close study is indispensable. I always tell my students to look through and beyond that method and listen in the Scriptures for the voice of God Himself."

Again he said, "God revealed Himself through human personalities. There was a James and a Paul. What a difference there is between the epistle of James and that to the Galatians. Yet there is a perfect harmony between the two, although that harmony is not human, but divine." Dr. Barth sees other human contradictions in the Bible, but believes that there is a divine harmony for them all. Then came a phrase that seems to be characteristic of Professor Barth. "I do not like this anxiety of some people, this fear of the old theologians for the safety of the Word of God."

Dr. Barth was silent for a moment, and I waited for him to resume. He was still frowning slightly, as though he were impatient with anyone who thought that God needed defending. Then he said, "The difficulty came from the fact that the criticism which has its place in faculties of theology was brought outside of the faculties and into the churches. Whenever you bring modernism into the churches it kills them."

Then, with animation, he went on to tell why he did battle with the German fundamentalists as well as with the modernists. "Reinhold Sieberg is a great conservative", said Barth. "And his conservatism is as devastating as modernism. I do not find in either of them the reality of the divine Word." I could easily understand his meaning, for I know European Protestantism, and too often the conservatives are dry as dust in their sermons and living, and have, as it has been aptly put, "the Gospel in a coffin". Americans who think that all religious life is like that which they see in America will never understand, fully,

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the reason for Barth's bitterness against the conservatives of Germany.

But here he burst out in a way that showed his deep feeling in the matter. "In this frightful catastrophe that has occurred in Germany" (he was speaking of Hitler and the oppression of the Protestants), "the conservatives as well as the liberals have run with the Nazis. It is the result of a theological evolution of two hundred years duration. In this evolution, conservative theology is just as much in a state of compromise as is the modernistic theology. We are face to face with a vigorous paganism, strong and solid, and we are fighting for very life. What we are seeing today in Germany is the end of Christianity."

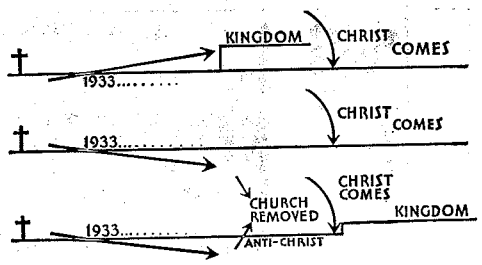
We spoke of Barth's booklet against Hitler, *Theological Existence Today* and he got up from his seat and went up to his study over the garage to get a copy for me. When he came down again in a moment, I told him that there were many people who believed that it would be he, Karl Barth, who would become the rallying point for true, Biblical Christianity in Germany in the fight that would undoubtedly ensue. He put his hand over his eyes, and the pressure of his fingers on his temples left the skin white for a moment, and then said, "I would wish that there might be a stronger rallying point than I". Then, vigorously, "The other countries must learn from the German situation. And this is the question that the churches must put to themselves today. In our preaching and in our faith today, is there a strength to resist such an attack, a spiritual attack, as Germany is seeing today?"

I told him that I thought that we had such a group in America, a group that would die, if need be, in the defense of Christian principle, and that the group was a large one. He said that he did not know America, that he had been invited to come but that there was the barrier of the language, and he was not sure that the visit would be profitable.

Then I went back to something he had said earlier, to follow up one of the implications of the thought. "Dr. Barth, you said a moment ago that we were seeing the end of Christianity in Germany. How does that fit in with your view of Bible prophecy? Do you have a strong eschatological position?"

"Eschatology is everything", he replied. "All Christianity is eschatology. There is no *raison d'être* for Christianity apart from its consummation in the future."

"What is your personal view of prophecy? Are you a pre-millenarian, a post-millenarian or an a-millenarian?" My question was clear enough in my own mind. But in attempting to translate my thought I did not know the complete technical theological terms, and Dr. Barth asked me to make my question clearer. In order to do this, I simply sketched the following outline in my note book.



As I drew the first, I pointed out that the post-millenarians believed that this world would be Christianized little by little until the whole of the world system would be brought under the sway of what they call the Kingdom of Christ, and at the close of this Kingdom, Christ would come back to the earth. The second group, the a-millenarians, believe that the Church is the Kingdom and that, though Christ may come at any moment, there will be no literal reign upon the earth, and that He will come to bring judgment and inaugurate the eternal scheme of events. The third, the pre-millenial position, holds that the age in which we live is not the Kingdom age, that man will be a failure in this age as before, that the next event in prophecy is the sudden taking out of every believing element, followed by the appearance and reign of the antichrist, whom Christ will destroy with the brightness of His return to the earth with the saints, at which time He will rule upon the earth during the period of the millenium, after which there will be the judgment of the lost and the beginning of the eternal scheme of events.

Dr. Barth listened and looked with great intentness. When I had finished he put his finger on the last rough sketch and said in a most definite tone, "It is this which is Biblical". I was very glad to hear him say this, but I wanted to be sure. So I put the question even more definitely. "Do you believe that Christ will come bodily, personally, physically to reign upon the earth in a literal Kingdom?" Dr. Barth answered, "Without being able to understand all that I say, I say, yes, He will come to reign personally on this earth".

"Dr. Barth", I said, "There will be many Christians who will be delighted with this statement, and I am sure that it will increase the prayerful interest of God's people in America for you. There is one matter, however, to which I wish to return, for the heart of the criticism of your theology has been your position as to the Word of God." Our conversation on this point follows. Dr. Barth speaks first.

"I believe in the divinity of the written Word, but the difficulty with some is that they have gotten a divinity that is too human."

"Do you believe that God speaks outside of the Bible?"

"No, there is no revelation apart from the Bible."

"Then you would not agree with those who think that the writers of the Bible were inspired only as Shakespeare was inspired?"

"No. No. No. No. The Bible is the only source of divine revelation."

"Now, Dr. Barth, perhaps we are just at the point that has caused the difficulty. You say that the Bible is the only source of revelation, but do you believe that all of the Bible is God's revelation?"

Dr. Barth had a book in his hand. He divided a page with a gesture of his hand and said, "If this part of the Bible speaks to me, it is God's Word to me". And then, indicating the other part of the page, "If this part does not speak to me, it is not God's Word to me".

That is enough to make some people's hair stand on end, but I was convinced that there was something more than appeared upon the surface of his speech, so I said, "But Doctor, suppose the part that hasn't spoken to you really speaks to me. Is it then God's Word?"

"Certainly", he replied. "It is then God's Word for you."

"And do you believe that the part which is God's Word to me may someday become God's Word to you?"

"Of course. Anything in the Bible may become God's Word to me. This is why the Bible is the book of the Church."

"And is there anything outside of the Bible that can ever be God's Word to any man?"

"No. The Bible is the only source of God's Word."

And so we went on, poking into the question of the revelation from many angles, until I was convinced personally beyond doubt that Barth's position, though expressed in language different from that which I would use, is not far from my own belief, which is of course that the whole Bible, not merely contains God's Word but *is* God's Word, whether or not it speaks to anyone. He has a Bible that is unique, the only source of a revelation from God. It speaks to him, and as much of it as has possessed him, to use another of his phrases, is God's Word. The rest of it may become so at any time, and there is a constant growth in his knowledge of the Book that is bringing more and more of it to him as God's Word. That which does not speak to him may speak to others, and undoubtedly does, for it takes the whole of the Bible to speak to the whole of the Church.

A recent commentator on the theology of Barth says, "We must be on our guard against the attempt to make of the Barthian movement a closed system. Barth describes his theology as essentially a movement, and apart from the movement it cannot be fully understood. The attempt to give adequate statement to his thought he likens to the attempt to draw the picture of a flying bird. The result at best can only show the bird in one position. It cannot give the bird in its flight. The Barthian theology is too young to have run into fixed and clearly defined forms.

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The Barth of today is not identical with the Barth who published the first edition of the commentary on Romans. He has changed his position in many things. He is probably destined to revise his position many times before his final work is done. Part of the interest in the study of Barth comes from the realization that the men who drink from him are drinking from a flowing stream."

The end of our interview turned around the Person of Christ. I received the impression of a man who has been redeemed by faith in the blood of Jesus Christ as his divine substitute, who is going on from strength to strength, deeply devoted to his Lord, seeking to learn from Him and from Him alone, willing to follow wherever He is led by the divine Word, finding all his authority in the Bible, and looking forward to the time when Christ shall return to complete the work that He has begun. I drove back to Zurich with the conviction that I had met not only a great theologian, but a great Christian.

To me, one of the most remarkable phases of my interview with Karl Barth was the lasting effect and memory of the conversation. I have talked with men higher in this world's fame than a theological professor could ever be, but their memory dims and their words go.

But with Karl Barth it is different. I have sought to know wherein this difference lies. I have come to the conclusion that it is because his spiritual growth is so visible. This man, whose thought is a flying bird, is a born again Lazarus whom the Lord has brought forth from the tomb of dead theology. He is alive, and is taking off the grave clothes of modernism. Everyone is interested in seeing such a resurrection.

And as the work of Karl Barth has struck such a blow to German modernism, so that work is reaching out in its influence across the world. Modernism came to America from the German faculties of theology, by way of graduate students who learned it there and returned to teach it here. Let Christians pray for Karl Barth who has toppled modernism from its hold in the citadel faculties of Germany, and whose work, if the Lord tarries, may bring a great upheaval in the liberal seminaries of America.

The Church Catholic

According to the English paper, *The Universe*, there are 321,000 Roman Catholic priests in the world, of which 257,000 are monks and 64,000 regular parish priests. There are 252,000 in Europe, 51,500 in the two Americas, 4,800 in Africa, and 10,500 in Asia and 2,200 in Australia. This is the first official figure given out for thirty years. At the beginning of the century there were 230,000 priests which shows that the first third of this century has seen an increase of about 100,000 priests. These figures, of course, do not include nuns.

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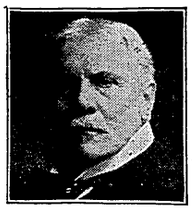

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