

With Barth in Geneva

The International Theological Seminar

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THE Scots Presbyterian is sure to feel at home in Geneva. He will be hailed as a Calvinist by Continental Protestants with an emphasis that may cause him some surprise; he will be shown the dingy Rue Jean Calvin and the site of the house where Calvin died, and probably he will meet some one from Scotland in the International Students' Federation next door; he will be taken to a Presbyterian service in the Chapel of the Maccabees, where Calvin originated our educational system by his announcement of the foundation of his Academy in 1559; he will cross the street to Calvin's Auditory, and read on a mural tablet outside that John Knox ministered here to the English congregation; and finally he will stand for a long time in front of the Monument of the Reformation in the University grounds. This is a noble memorial in a lovely setting of gardens, broad flights of steps, and running water. The background is a sheer wall of smooth white stone, bearing the motto of Geneva, "Post Tenebras Lux", in giant letters. In the centre four huge figures, hewn in massive stone, stand side by side upon a projecting block, in close-fitting caps and voluminous gowns, Calvin, Farel, Beza, and Knox. One would hardly recognise Knox in the strange cap, but his name is there with the others. Six smaller figures are set at intervals along the wall, three on either side, including Roger Williams and Oliver Cromwell, with extracts from great Reformation statements and bas-reliefs of notable incidents. Here is the Lord's Prayer in English, and the words of Randolph to Cecil in 1561: "The voice of one single man is able in one hour to put more life in us than the noise of five hundred trumpets blowing ceaselessly in our ears." Here is also a relief of John Knox preaching the Reformation before Queen Mary in St. Giles', Edinburgh. The Scots visitor will study critically the St. Giles' pillar beside the low pulpit, and the windows in the background.

Thus it was not surprising to find a representation of Scots Presbyterians at the Second International Theological Seminar held in Geneva this summer. Their numbers should have been larger;



KARL BARTH

Photo by A. R. C. Duncan

more ministers should have been there to state our unique position and to learn the positions of others; but even as it was, we outnumbered England and Ireland put together, and we also outnumbered America in regular students.

The Seminar

The movement towards closer unity between the Churches, which has found such striking expression in Scotland to-day, found international expression in the Faith and Order Movement that issued in the great Conferences of Stockholm and Lausanne. The Oecumenical Movement, which aims at a closer understanding between Christians, has become a notable phenomenon of our times; and in order to study its phases and to advance its purposes the Universal Christian Council for Life and Work, in collaboration with the Theological Faculty of Geneva University, and inspired by the leadership of Professor Adolf Keller, held the First International Theological Seminar in Geneva last year. The subject of the next great Conference, to be held in Britain in 1937, is "Church, Community, and State", and this was chosen as the subject of the Second International Seminar.

Fourteen lecturers took part, representing most of the great Christian communions; there were about eighty regular participants, students and ministers, and an equal number of auditors, from seventeen different countries and all denominations except the Roman, including the Old Catholic and the Russian Orthodox. The Seminar lasted for about three weeks, from 22nd July to 9th August, lectures being given in the large science classroom of the University every morning in the week, and most afternoons, with discussions and receptions on certain evenings, and a number of excursions. There was a predominance of youth; but everyone seemed to be youthful, of whatever age.

Barth and Calvin

Probably the most interesting event of the Seminar was the presence of Karl Barth during the first week, and large crowds followed his lectures on "The Church and the Churches" and took part in his Seminar on "Calvin's Catechism." It was speedily clear that wide differences prevailed about his theology, and the Seminar had soon split into two camps in regard to the rival merits of what was approximately termed "Continental" and "Anglo-American" theology. The great personality and the personal charm of Barth himself, however, conquered all our hearts. As we listened to him and watched him go about amongst us, we felt that here indeed was a great man, a prince among professors. He usually wore what seemed to us picturesque but sensible summer clothes—a light cream-coloured jacket, grey flannels, and a pale blue tie of the colour of his eyes, which smiled and flashed behind thick spectacles. His voice was rather high, without much modulation, tense with sincerity. He was totally devoid of self-consciousness, and never strove for effect; what he said was part of himself, wrought out of years of devotion. Often a boyish smile would wrinkle his face, and his eyes would dance with glee at certain pungent sayings. Then he would launch into stern denunciation, with an accusing finger that seemed to tremble invisibly with emotion. He had little good to say of any human methods of Church union, and commended us to Christ the Incarnate Word, and to God's will in Church affairs. As he sat up on the front desk amongst us with Calvin's Catechism, in fervent exposition, we remembered that this Catechism was once approved by the First Book of Discipline in 1560. Would Scotland still listen to it?

One Swiss student was vowing to use it in a future parish. Is Calvin understood in Scotland to-day, where there is so much condemnation of Calvinism?

One evening we had a lengthy discussion with Barth in the house of a local minister. Questioned as to his differences from Calvin, he gave three main points: (1) Barth disagrees with Calvin's Natural Theology, which he thinks was mainly due to the influence of contemporary thought and the legacy of humanism. (2) Regarding Predestination, Barth does not stress the terms "elected" and "reproved," but he emphasises that God is free to elect or to reprove. (3) He says that Calvin's Church Discipline is not good, and its issues in the Church have been bad. Church Discipline, he declares, can only be practised in the preaching of the Word and not by human legal procedure through Presbyteries and Consistories. Further, Barth believes that Calvin was no Fundamentalist, and therefore he can accept Calvin's critical views on the Bible. Calvin had been his teacher for twenty years, although he never claimed to be a Calvinist. It does not do, he remarked, to cherish Calvinism and also an Evangelical Christianity. I should add that we found his conception of the Word of God very difficult to grasp.

Discussions and Diversions

The largest and most vocal group of students was earnestly devoted to Barthianism, and brought every question to the one issue, so that the Seminar frequently resolved itself into a debating society on what appeared to be the most difficult problem, although it was the most recent. Certain professors represented the Anglo-American point of view in different ways. Dr. Macnicol of Edinburgh vindicated the claim of Christianity over the other religions on the basis of life-values; Professor Vyscheslavzeff of the Russian Church Academy in Paris gave us the view of the hierarchical structure of man's nature; Dr. Bouquet of Cambridge stated the various Anglican positions to-day, and Professor Horton of Oberlin set modern American Realistic thought in its Calvinistic and Rationalistic background. These lectures naturally gave rise to intense discussions, both in public and private. It was clear that much of our mutual misunderstanding was due to ignorance, and that many arguments were necessary before we could begin to understand the very different background out of which our

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO

different conditions had produced different theologies. We felt that it was very difficult to make our own position clear, but we tried to understand the positions of others as far as possible. Perhaps Scots theology is not sufficiently definite and clear to-day; perhaps our compromises have been too complete; anyhow we found it difficult to be precise and even to present a picture on which we ourselves could agree. We encountered much missionary and converting zeal which did not always make itself understood, but which was grounded in sincere faith.

The Seminar was a triumph of the emotions and will over the intellect. We made hosts of friends of every theological persuasion; those of us who lived together

in the Grand'rue were a band of brothers in spite of language difficulties. The excursions were delightful. We sailed up the lovely Lake to the Castle of Chillon; we motored to Chamonix and climbed high above the Mer de Glace; we drank delicious tea at two Receptions; we visited the League of Nations, the International Labour Office, and other places of interest; we brushed up our German and displayed our French.

Much of the success of the Seminar was due to the great ability and untiring kindness of Professor Keller; and we take with us the text of his opening address, to dig deeper into our common foundations: "Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ."

A Hundred Years Ago

"WE have never known any meetings excite so much interest in this city (Glasgow) as the great Protestant meetings held in Hope Street Gaelic Church. So soon as the first was announced, there was such a run for tickets of admission that they were all speedily distributed, and eager inquiries and entreaties were made for more. It was universally the subject of conversation. The hour of meeting was one o'clock. People began to assemble so early as eleven, and by twelve the church was filled. There could not be fewer than 2000 people. There were clergy of all denominations from great distances. . . . Another meeting was held on the succeeding evening. The enthusiasm was, if possible, still more intense; we never witnessed anything to surpass it. God grant that the slumbering indifference to Popery may be awakened."

"In the vast field of the slave-holding States of America, there are but five churches built expressly for the use of negroes. In the present state of feeling in the south, a ministry of their colour could neither be obtained nor tolerated. They have no regular and efficient white ministry. They have no Bibles to read by their firesides. When in affliction, sickness, or death, they have no minister to address to them the consolations of the Gospel, and to bury them with solemn and appropriate services." (Quoted from an American work on Slavery.)

The Church of Scotland Magazine, October 1835.

Fifty Years Ago

"MR. FRANCIS BROWN DOUGLAS (d. 1885) was for years the superintendent of Free St. Luke's Sabbath School—an honourable office, not unworthy to be held, as it was by him, at the same time with the Lord Provostship of Edinburgh. . . . One special enterprise by which Mr. Brown Douglas laid the Free Church under deep obligation to him was the building of the Hall in which our General Assembly meets in Edinburgh. Its erection was a work which called forth the generous aid of many friends, but it is well known that it is in a very special sense a monument of Mr. Brown Douglas's wisdom, energy, and zeal."

(Quoted from a letter by an Episcopalian to the *Guardian*): "There is another reason which prevents our Church from spreading, and which threatens to keep her long a sickly exotic. The relative characters of our service and of the Presbyterian have changed. Our services used to be Common Prayer, in which the people joined, led by the clergyman. Now they are almost a strophe and antistrophe between priest and choir. No one can go into any of our churches without seeing that the choir has almost entirely taken the worship out of the mouths of the congregation; while the Presbyterian service, instead of being as it used to be—a dreary monologue by the minister—now partakes to great extent of the congregational worship, which, a generation ago, was wholly monopolised by our Church."

The Free Church Monthly and Missionary Record, October 1885.