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Comments on Barth

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#### COMMENTS

on Professor Barth's paper on  
"THE CHURCH - THE LIVING COMMUNITY OF THE LIVING LORD JESUS CHRIST"  
by the Rev. G.S. Hendry, Bridge of Allan, England.

Parts I and II of this Study and the opening paragraphs of Part III leave little to be said. They state with unexampled force and clarity the fundamental issues concerning the Church as the living community of the living Lord Jesus Christ.

But when Barth proceeds to discuss the question of Church-order in paragraph 23, he seems to me to become (in his own term) "squint-eyed", and to make assumptions which are not demanded by the theological understanding of the Church set forth in Part I, but are derived from elsewhere. Barth is concerned, and rightly so, that the Church should be a living community: it is living, as he says, when it is open, ready and free for the life which flows from its living Lord; but he appears to think that it can only be a living community when its members stand on an equalitarian footing with one another. Of course, he allows room for diversities of gifts and services within the common divine service of the Church and rightly contends that this does not imply higher and lower orders (26). But in his repudiation of a hierarchical conception of Church-order (Obrigkeit) he appears to dispute the right of any authority in the Church whatsoever, and he interprets the dominical precept in Matt. 20, 25 in an anarchic sense. This is certainly not the apostolic interpretation. Paul was no less emphatic about the sovereign lordship of Christ, but he did not deny that this establishes a relative, subordinate authority within the Church: there are those who are "over you in the Lord" (I. Thess. 5, 12). When Barth writes of various hierarchical conceptions of Church order, "This is all to be rejected, because all such intermediate forms of human exaltation and authority can only impede and not further the free course of God's Word and Spirit" (24), he imposes an arbitrary limitation on the living Lordship of Christ - a kind of negative Pelagianism which is no less objectionable than its positive counterpart. It may be readily admitted that an authoritatively organised Church-structure can be, and has often been, a hindrance to the renewal of the Church through its living Lord, but

to suggest, as Barth does, that it constitutes a door which He cannot pass through is to limit the grace of Him who can turn the wrath of man to His praise (even should the "man" be pope or prelate) and who, if they deal proudly, is yet above them (Exod. 18, 11). What ground has Barth for affirming that the living Lord Jesus Christ cannot renew and reform His living community when it is organised on an authoritative or hierarchical basis, just as well as when it is not? When I read that "the episcopalian and presbyterial-synodal conceptions.... not only do not serve to make the community ready, open and free for the Word of God and the reformation of the Church, but are hindrances" (31), I am tempted to quote words which I read recently elsewhere: "Indem man das Verbot übertritt, das Overbeck einmal dahin formuliert hat, dass zu jüngsten Richtern Menschen untereinander nicht berufen seien, stört man das Geheimnis des Leibes Christi" (Barth: Die Protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert, p. 9). But a better answer is to be found in the Study on "The Disorder of Man in the Church of God" (47E/105A) by H.R. Niebuhr, who is - may I say it? - more Barthian than Barth. It is possible that the congregational church polity, on which Barth casts a wistful glance, may avoid the special perils of authoritative polities, but it would be vain to suppose that it is not beset by peculiar perils of its own and does not offer its own kind of hindrance to the renewal and reformation of the Church through its living Lord. If in this matter of Church-order it is a question of finding "the most effective, the wisest, the shrewdest thing possible" (30), this may well

"make us rather bear those ills we have  
Than fly to others that we know not of".

I think that Barth has gone astray on the question of Church-order because he has not seen how it is rooted in the community-character of the Church. In Part I he brings out admirably the essence of the Church as a living community, but I do not think he has given a really convincing exposition of its togetherness as a community (koinonia). He speaks of "the event wherein men are together set before the fact ... and together called ...", but nothing that he says about this event suggests any valid reason why the setting and the calling should be together, why they could not equally well take place in individual solitude. Barth's main concern is "the immediate confrontation and communion of the living Lord Jesus Christ with His community": this is certainly the essential thing, and nothing can atone for the lack of it. But such immediate confrontation does not imply the absence of mediation, human mediation. It is of the paradoxical strategy of grace that the Lord Jesus Christ in His gracious purpose to enter into immediate communion with me chooses to confront me through my fellow-man (Matt. 10, 40; 28, 5; John 13, 20; Matt. 25, 40). The togetherness of the Church rests not merely on the fact that the event happens to us together, but that it happens to us through one another; Christ binds us to our fellowman by this most effective bond that He gives Himself to us by the hand of our fellowman. How did I (or Barth, for that matter) ever come to immediate confrontation and communion with the living Lord Jesus Christ except through the mediation of a presbyterial-

synodal Church? Barth employs the figure of an electric current being switched on between the Lord and His community (30). But before a current can flow, there must be a system of wiring. Barth seems to suggest that each consumer must be connected immediately with the central power-station. But this is Schwärmerei. In this matter, the children of this world (the purveyors of electric light) are in their generation wiser than the children of light.