

Study 47E/126
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Comments on
Barth:
Quin

WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES
Study Department
17, route de Malagnou, Geneva, Switzerland

Assembly Commission I on
"The Universal Church in God's Design"

COMMENTS

on Karl Barth's paper on

THE CHURCH - THE LIVING COMMUNITY OF
THE LIVING LORD JESUS CHRIST
(47E/103 A)

I find this paper commands my assent in almost all respects, as in I the definition of the Church in terms obedient answer to God's sovereignty revealed in Christ through the Holy Spirit in Word and Sacrament. And in II in the Threat of sleep, squinting, or blindness. So also of Renewal in III. But then Barth suddenly gives up his usual neglect of Anglo-Saxon theology to make what seems to my prejudiced eyes, a rather rask excursion including an act of indirect approval for Cromwell, the Independent, whom some regard as in some sense a predecessor of Hitler! We must respect his, Barth's, praise for a Church polity not his own. But I think the Congregationalist system can hardly be regarded as a panacea, or even as more open from above than others. I would respectfully suggest that the Anglican-Orthodox system of Auto-kephalous Churches, with their Creeds, Liturgies, and hierarchies (in which the laity play their part) can also be open above, to the Divine Head whom they do not attempt to embody in any visible Authority. They are indeed subject to the temptation to sleep, just as I believe the Presbyterian system with parity of ministers, is disposed, maybe to be squint-eyed, and maybe the Congregationalist to blindness. One system or another may serve better to carry us over seasons of dryness, or to steady us in crisis, or to show us where to look for renewal. But in the end of all, it is not the presence or absence of circumcision which makes a new creature.

I agree that the Church is under the Word, and that the Word creates the Church and reforms it. How far by the way would Barth lean to Bullinger's view c.f. Tabletalk XXXVI to which Luther replied "And that the Word, whether it produce fruit or no, is,

nevertheless, God's strength, which saves all that believe therein." Luther might have a word to say too, to the suggestion that Scripture "Becomes" the Word of God by Faith and the Spirit, as if it were not so already. Yet on top of this, we are told the Word, in this form, creates the Church. One feels inclined to ask the old question, Supposing that a Bible were to fall into the hands of a closed pagan community on an isolated island or oasis, and that they read, understood and accepted it, would the Church then come into being? Or is not Tradition, in some form necessary, to show them how to proportion their obedience to O.T. and N.T., to show them what to do in matters of ministry, worship, morals etc. otherwise footwashing might be their chief sacrament.