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

COMMENTS

Karl Barth's paper on
"The Church -- The Living Community of the Living Lord Jesus Christ"
By Hans Magle, Tønder, Denmark.

It is always an inspiration to read what Professor Karl Barth has written. This is the case with the present paper on the Church. The author divides his theme into three parts, viz. The Essence of the Church; The Threat to the Church; and the Renewal of the Church. The main point to my mind is Barth's definition of the ecclesia not as an organisation or a static body, but as an "event of a gathering-together". This definition must not be lost among the many other words that are likely to be spoken about the Church. In Sweden and Denmark we have been used to speaking about the Church as an "organic unity between Christ and those who belong to Him"; but Barth's definition has the advantage in that it stresses the divine activity - His gathering-together - without which there would be no Church at all. The use of the word event is to my mind also a happy choice. An event is something that happens now, at this very moment. It has no past tense and no future. An event in perfectum has become history, in futurum it is another event or the same event repeated by other people. So it is with the Church, with una sancta ecclesia, though being composed partly - but also only partly! - of earthly persons, it is living its real life in another sphere of existence, in an eternal NOW beyond the line of time. Nevertheless we cannot dispense with that other definition of the Church as an organic unity - for reasons that I do not need to state here. But might we not improve upon Professor Barth's definition by adding an other one to it, e.g. "The Church is an event of a gathering-together into an organic unity etc.?"

After these introductory remarks, I want to pass on and comment on certain details.

In I, 8 Professor Barth gives as his opinion, that it is the Holy Scripture that convinces us, adding this is effected by the power of the Spirit, but nevertheless claiming that the Holy Scripture founds the Church. It is impossible to follow Karl Barth here. It is not only an overstatement with regard to the importance and the place of the Bible, but it must be called a misstatement or even a wrong statement, Grundtvig - the Danish Bishop - repeated over and over again,

that "Holy Scripture presupposes the Church" with its Baptism and the Lord's Table (supper) and its Faith, that the Scriptures are written for the Church and its members, and that consequently the members of this Church or community "could not and should not learn from the Bible what to believe and hope for" (vide N.F.S. Grundtvig "Kirkelige Oplysninger", Copenhagen 1870 2nd ed., p.30). Since Grundtvig lived we have in this country discusses these problems over and over again. Though we disagree among ourselves to a certain degree, I think that I am safe in saying, that at least most of us do find that Grundtvig was right on this very point. The Bible must be put behind the Holy Spirit, not vice versa. It is and must be the Holy Spirit that founds the Church, never the Bible. The Scripture is in this connection only the means that are used. And there are other means besides the Bible. It can be replaced by something else. But nobody can replace the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that convinces men by e.g. the Scripture, not - as Karl Barth says - the Scripture that convinces by the Spirit.

In II, 18 it is stated that the Church ceases to be the Church when that event comes to a halt. That is true. But - are we ever in a position to judge whether or not that event really has come to a halt? If we cannot found the Church, if we cannot bring it into life, if that is only done by the power of God himself - ubi et quando Deus vult - can we then think that there is any possibility of us passing judgment upon the Church as a dying or a dead Church? If not, this terrible question of a dead Church can only be for us a possibility, a warning to the Church, to the members of the community. This warning sign must always be visible, it must never be taken down. It makes me as an individual constantly ask myself: "Do I belong to the living Church?" Then the answer must be: "God only knows - because He alone founds the Church, and He alone passes judgment upon the Church as a dead Church."

In III, 24 ff., Barth rightly refutes the idea of an ecclesia invisibilis, and very strongly defends the visible community. But in doing this it seems to me that, for fear of any kind of equation of una sancta ecclesia with its visible manifestations here on this earth, he goes so far as almost to do away completely with every kind of Church organisation. This tendency is landing him in something that resembles the Congregational Church idea; but whether or not that is any better than the State Church - or as we have it here in Denmark, the Folke-Kirke - I very much doubt.

I should like to call attention to the Lutheran phrase concerning the individual Christian: simul justus et peccator. If that is true about an individual member of the Church, it must be true about the whole Church. If one member of the community, or rather if each member of that community individually is simul justus et peccator, this must also be true of the entire community. And in that case one cannot see why we should take these various human Church organisations so very seriously. They are just so many human attempts at visualising the Una Sancta, or rather, at visualising its manifestations in this age. And when it comes to our human efforts, even if they are inspired by the Holy Spirit, they are nevertheless always temporal, which means that they change with the changing times and the changing cultures. We are not going to copy the New Testament Church organisation here in this country.

If we believe, as Grundtvig says (op. cit. p.5.), that the ~~xxxxxxx~~ Apostolic Church is not only behind us, but follows with us, then the various forms of Church organisations are really irrelevant. The Danish Folk-Church is not "better" nor "worse" than e.g. the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, and nothing would be gained if we did away with our previous Church forms and turned congregational. If this connection one feels tempted to remind Professor Barth that he long ago has written somewhere that it is rather suspicious when a man changes his Church as he changes his coat, meaning thereby not a change of the *Una Sancta* for something else, but only a change of its human and visible form. Those who do such a thing, running in and out of the various churches, put certainly far too much importance upon the "visible" Church. That indeed was what Barth meant then. Now it seems to me that he himself is doing the very same thing. If I feel at home in "my" Church, it ~~ix~~ only means that the "Church" rightly has adapted itself in its forms of organisation to those who live here and now.

But when Karl Barth then speaks about the congregational form of Church organisation as coming nearest to the ideal, one must certainly ask why it should be that neither dogmatic nor historical reasons can prove it. The only thing that can be proven is that Congregationalists naturally prefer this form for Church organisation. And we, who are not Congregationalists ought heartily to agree with them!

Then in III, 27, Professor Barth speaks about a Church (a community) ad hoc/used in connection with the Church must be considered very dangerous. If the idea is that the synodal form of Church organisation is an organisation ad hoc, the expression is superfluous, since all our Church organisations and forms are ad hoc. But if it means an *ecclesia ad hoc*, it is positively wrong, because the Church must be above time, though it is living its life partly here in time and on earth. I wish he would clarify this expression. Ad hoc stands it makes one suspect some sort of equation between the *Una Sancta* and our visible forms of Church organisation.

At last Professor Barth in III, 29, would like to see various independent practical communities organised as "Churches" and even celebrating divine services - not in contradiction to the unity of the Church, but in confirmation of it. Is it not a little too romantic to believe that such communities, if they organised themselves as so many "Churches" and acted as such, could confirm the unity of the One Church? In fact we have here and there seen quite the opposite. There is a tendency - at least in this country - among some of these various Church organisations (the Boys' Brigade, The Scout Movement, Deaconesses Houses etc.) gradually to withdraw from the ordinary Sunday service in the parish church and confine themselves to their own activities. Their leaders are for the greater part aware of this tendency and ~~they~~ try to counteract it. But if we were to establish as an ideal, as Karl Barth seems to do, that all sorts of Church associations, where the members quite naturally do have a strong sense of fellowship, should constitute independent Church communities of their own, the result would most likely be a growing division of the Church, worse than anything we have yet seen. To my mind the Roman Catholics in certain parts of Germany have tried a far better policy. They have Boy Scouts

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and Y.M.C.A.'s and Y.W.C.A.'s and other associations of a Christian character, though naturally with other names, but all of these youth organisations are in close connection with the Church, proved e.g. by the habit they have of going to their own Parish Church on Sundays early in the morning for a special service, before starting for their special activities. These organisations are Christian youth associations, but nobody would dream of using the name ecclesia about them. Professor Barth is, I am sorry to say, doing the Church a poor service, when he suggests that such groups should themselves conduct divine services. I cannot but believe that it is against the fundamental idea of the Sunday Service, which is meant to gather together all the members of the Church community, old and young, rich and poor, in a weekly demonstration of the One Holy Catholic Apostolic Church - of shall I confine myself in saying an attempt to demonstrate it. But what comes of this very necessary attempt, if we split ourselves up into groups, based on age or class or human interests or occupation or something else? I for one cannot appreciate the idea of e.g. a Church of haberdashers, though I certainly would like to see all haberdashers in the Church. Well, perhaps I take some of Professor Barth's remarks a little bit too seriously, or perhaps I ~~may~~ have even misunderstood it, read too much into his words. Then I should like to close with my warmest thanks for his burning love of the Church, that no reader of this paper of his can but fail to notice and be touched.