

THE CREED AND KARL BARTH

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KARL BARTH: DOGMATICS IN OUTLINE.
Translated by G. T. THOMSON.
S.C.M. Press. 12s. 6d.

THIS VIGOROUS EXPOSITION OF THE Apostles' Creed gives the reader a good idea of the kind of Christianity, at once theological and practical, which issues from the teaching of Karl Barth. The book consists of two dozen lectures, delivered without manuscript to students at Bonn in 1946. The larger part of the audience belonged to other faculties than that of theology. Here, then, is a statement of the essential substance of religion, published practically in the form in which it flowed from the lips of a great teacher, and indicating what he regards as most important both in his own mind and for the lives of intelligent Christians. It is realistic, both in style and in contents. The idiom is racy and vivid; the book reads excellently even in translation. It presents an emphatic challenge both to thought and to life, without ever fading into that dreary moralism which so often nowadays scores the paradoxical but almost ecumenical success of killing Christianity with dullness. It can be confidently recommended whether as a complement to assent or as a stimulus to disagreement.

One cannot easily summarize a summary. But one or two thoughts suggest themselves, on which it may be worth touching. In the first place, then, it needs to be remembered that a number of things are left out, or only lightly sketched, about which the reader wants, sooner or later, to be more fully informed. (In other words, this is not an exhaustive dogmatic treatise, and does not pretend to be so.) When emphasis is laid, rightly enough, on the centrality and transcendence of God, some bargain must finally be made with, or submission rendered to, the deep mysteries of predestination, the problem of which is not raised in the present volume. Again, "the Bible speaks of God simply as of One who needs no proof." With minor qualifications, we may accept this statement as accurate. But in the Barthian context it carries implications about which much argument may be raised, and for which, ultimately, strong justification is demanded. On what ground is the Bible to be taken as containing the inclusive and conclusive revelation? And why this Bible, and not some slightly different Bible, with omissions or additions? Here is one set of difficulties which have to be faced by the converted no less than the unconverted.

Another set of problems arises when Barth denounces natural theology and rational speculation. Human reason follows "a radically wrong road which can never lead to God, but to a reality called so only in a false sense"; philosophy deals with abstractions; at best it can only represent the object for which man longs in order to give meaning to his own existence and a basis for the universe. Barth asserts that God can only be known, in the strict sense, through His own self-disclosure, by faith, which does indeed open a door of real knowledge. With this position we may feel a great deal of sympathy, and yet reflect that, if God is ultimately responsible for making the world, and man, and for causing them to be the kind of objects that they are, an examination of their nature may well be expected to lead us to some sort of knowledge about God's working methods and aims. In this case, reason would certainly seem to throw some light on God, if only indirect. In some sense and degree, Barth himself admits as much in the twelfth lecture: and few, it may be supposed, would claim that science or philosophy in themselves yield direct personal knowledge of the living God.

Questions of this kind, however, are perhaps not appropriate to an elementary course of lectures: we refer to them here chiefly in order to emphasize the point that these lectures are, in a manner of speaking, elementary—they deal with elements in the practical relations between God and men. But to say this does not mean that they favour a shallow and pragmatic approach to religion. On the contrary, they are theological through and through. To mention only one illustration, Barth insists that the true meaning of goodness and holiness cannot be determined by reference to any human standards or inquiries; it can only be expressed by pointing to what God actually is, just as the right conception of power is not "power-in-itself" (Barth writes with Nazi-ism still very much in mind) but power as it is in God, the omnipotence of righteous love.

It is therefore not only his attempt to rely on the evidence of the Bible exclusively, but his proper preoccupation with revealed theology as against the mere analysis of experience, that makes him so uncompromising in his orthodoxy. Indeed, his traditionalism is most striking. He takes a sternly Western view of the *filioque* clause, even going so far as to commiserate with "the poor folk in the Eastern Church" for having never quite fully understood the point of the double procession of the Spirit from the Son as well as from the Father. To attack the Christological phrases of the Nicene Creed is just to emit a "wolf's snarl", and marks a lack of education. The great expenditure of intellectual effort by the early Councils and theologians was designed, not to resolve the mystery of the Incarnation into something humanly comprehensible, but to give Christians the right line of approach towards the "true divinity and true humanity in sheer unity." To sneer at the Fathers is therefore most ungrateful, rather barbaric, a little plebeian!

There is about Barth something that can best be described, perhaps, as robust confidence; he refuses to be cast down. Thus he protests against a doleful Good Friday. It is true, he says, that there can be no glory without the Cross; but it is only too easy for an excess of "tribulation and sullenness" to be wrought into Christian devotion. "It is not a sad and miserable business that took place on Good Friday; for He rose again." "If you have heard the Easter message, you can no longer run around with a tragic face and lead the humourless existence of a man who has no hope." The sort of seriousness, he says, that will insist on looking back from the victory to the burning (like Lot's wife) is not really Christian seriousness. After eating Christ's flesh and drinking His blood at the Lord's Supper, which is not merely an "image" but an "event," the Christian need not fear death; he is in fact already dead. "The terror you face you have already completely behind you. You may live as a guest at this table. You may go in the strength of this food forty days and forty nights."

It is in keeping with this robustness of theological realism that Barth expresses a strong practical realism in his demand for active witness. Faith involves activity in man, corresponding to the activity of God. As God expresses Himself in historical events, so men's faith in God must necessarily project itself in resolute, responsible and public actions. "Living by forgiveness is never by any means passivity, but Christian living in full activity." In the same way Barth rejects the idea of an invisible Church. To him, the Church means primarily the concrete congregation in the particular place in which he may be, to

which is committed the "task of making in this place, in this form, the one holy, universal Church visible." Its nature is manifested in the fulfilment of its service as ambassador of God—that is to say, in proclaiming the Word of God, administering the sacraments, possession of "a more or less developed liturgy", application of Church law, and theology. The notion that the Church can exist without systematic order is dismissed as "fantastic"; from the first, Christians possessed "a Church-law order" in the apostles and congregation.

But all these functions exist not for the purpose of self-edification, which smells of death, but of proclamation; the object of the Church is not religious living (like "a snail that carries its little house on its back, and is so well off in it that only now and then it sticks out its feelers, and then thinks that the 'claim of publicity' has been satisfied") but the *opus Dei*. It may include some very queer saints, yet it is set apart, wholly, as the instrument of God. Barth is rooted in theocentric objectivity. It is true that, without the inner truth, the external expression is dead, even if it can be said to exist at all. Nevertheless, since there is objectivity in God—that is one aspect, at least, of the meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity—the inwardness that has no positive external expression is subjective and illusory. A congregation which is non-confessing is "a community of dumb dogs". The Christian faith itself must be forever expressed, not only in its own Church-language, pronounced in Scripture and theology (vitaly important as that is), but also in the translated terms appropriate to each successive generation—in the language of the newspaper, in the idiom of a political attitude, in the form of actions and conduct corresponding to the living truth.