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PROVIDENCE

AN ACCOUNT OF KARL BARTH'S DOCTRINE¹

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HERE is the eleventh *Kapitel* of Barth's *Dogmatik*, and he entitles it *The Creator and His creation*. Its three great themes are: God's Fatherly Providence, the "Negation" (Chaos or Void) of which He rules and against whose opposition He safeguards His creatures, and the ministry of angels. Before he passes on from the first to the second article of the creed, Barth promises a further *Kapitel* dealing with the ethical doctrine which rests on our understanding of God as Creator. The doctrine which he has to expound and establish in this sector of the theological field is at once the most familiar and the least secure element in the Christian outlook of modern men. We all know the kind of thing we are expected to say about God's Fatherly care. Professor Farmer's book, *The World and God*, gave substantial help towards saying it in the modern climate of thought. But there are plenty of signs that Christians tremble in face of the obligation to relate the vast and complex range of experience to the action of God. It becomes increasingly difficult to speak as though the wealth and variety of cosmic reality can be intelligibly related to the God who reveals Himself in Jesus Christ and to the action which He takes at that focal point. And what one expected from Barth was a rethinking of the doctrine of Providence on a Christological basis. What he has to say is not excitingly novel. He is happy to work with the analysis of the subject found in older works of theology, notably in the *Summa Theologica* of Aquinas and in the Reformed (rather than the Lutheran) divines. Those who now have Heppes's *Reformed Dogmatics* on their shelves may even be able to reconstruct for themselves the process by which, in study and lecture-room, this book took shape. And such as find Barth's "sources" a matter of interest will be duly intrigued by

¹ Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Band III/3: *Die Lehre von der Schöpfung*, 3. Teil (Evangelischer Verlag A.G. Zollikon-Zürich, 637 pp., 1950; 30 Swiss fr.; with paper covers, 27 fr.).

the ascendancy of Cocceius over Quenstedt. In my judgment he has re-told the story of God's government of the world so that it becomes a convincing and well-established story, and the secret of his success is precisely his fidelity to Christocentric theological thinking. It is not a new story, but an old one, drawn out in its full depth, so that the main theses, about whose status we have become steadily less sure, are reaffirmed, and notorious difficulties (such as that of reconciling any significant divine government with a real spontaneity of events) are properly faced. A busy reader will be moved by this volume more than by its predecessors to join in the fashionable chorus of protest against Barth's literary technique. If he had time to write books elegantly and economically instead of printing material hot from the lecture-room, how grateful we should be! But though one may thus occasionally cry for the moon, one may be profoundly grateful for what one gets instead. And indeed, the aid to easier comprehension which one longs for may be the false aid which is afforded when the treatment of a wide range of subjects is co-ordinated by a distorting "system". By the present technique, the truth of every thesis is brought to light in a manner appropriate to that thesis, and one is rebuked time after time for one's churlish complaint against repetitive and seemingly rhetorical thinking.

And now, as far as may be, granted the present reviewer's limits, we will let the content of the volume speak for itself. A translation of the fundamental theses may serve to introduce it:

48. *The Doctrine of Providence, its basis and structure*

The doctrine of Providence is concerned with the history of created being as such, more especially in that it pursues its course in every detailed respect and in its totality under the Fatherly Lordship of God the Creator, whose will takes effect and is recognisable in His Election of Grace, and therefore in the history of the covenant between Himself and man, and therefore in Jesus Christ.

49. *God the Father as Lord of His creation*

God exercises His Fatherly Lordship over His creation in that He preserves the course of its particular existence, accompanies it, and governs it. He does this in that His mercy in Jesus Christ has appeared and is powerful in the created world, so that the glory of this His Son may be made manifest in it.

50. *God and the Negation*¹

By the counsel of God, a threat to, and actual corruption of the world have also appeared, by reason of the Negation which is hostile to the Creator's will and therefore hostile also to the good nature of His creatures. In having passed judgment upon it through His mercy which appeared and is powerful in Jesus Christ, God decides where and how, to what extent and in what ministerial relationship to His Word and Work, it may still retain a place until its refutation and destruction (which are already accomplished) are generally revealed.

51. *The Kingdom of Heaven, God's Ambassadors, and their opponents*

God's action in Jesus Christ, and therefore His dominion over His creation, are therefore called "The Kingdom of Heaven", because its claim is primarily and peculiarly upon the upper world. From this upper world, God elects and sends His ambassadors, the angels, who come as forerunners (in the sense of objective and authentic witnesses) of the revelation and actualisation of His will on earth, who accompany it as true and powerful servants of God and of men, and who stand as an excelling guard against the opposing forms and powers of Chaos.

Section 51 is the one best calculated to hit the headlines, were there any to hit, but section 49, though more pedestrian, is more important.

I

In section 48 Barth examines our belief in Providence; he takes critical account of how it has been handled in older systematic theology; and he proves that we are committed to a distinctively *Christian* belief which is not to be regarded as a modification of insights within the reach of all good men—insights derived from a "general revelation".

First he maintains, with an eye on Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologica* I, qq. 22-23 and, after a long interlude, 103 ff.), that the theology of this matter is in no respect part of the doctrine of God. In so far as it must, of course, rest on the doctrine of God, it does so, not because *providentia Deo conveniat* as do *scientia, vita, voluntas, amor, justitia, misericordia*, but because *praedestinatio* (understood as God's Election of Grace) pertains to the Being of God, and that Election carries with it both Creation and

¹ The term *Das Nichtige* is not readily translated into English. I imagine that "the Void" would convey its sense to those familiar with existentialist thinking. My wife, who neither knows German nor is a theologian, suddenly came to my rescue with "chaotic insubstantiality", which deserves, I think, to be placed on record. After all, she knows more about it than I do (cf. Gen. 3.1).

Providence. Further, the Calvinist assimilation of Providence to the doctrine of Creation, and the interpretation of it in terms of *continuous* world-creation, is wrong (cf. Hepppe, p. 251: "There is a single divine act by which God creates the world and determines its government"). The dangers thus entailed are that one either abandons the precise significance of *creatio ex nihilo*, or that one interprets Providence in a falsely deterministic fashion. The action referred to here as the Fatherly Lordship of God the Creator has its ground not only within the Godhead but also outside Himself in the already established being of creatures. It is, if you like, a *continuing* of creation, but it is an act with a different "time" from that which the act of creation has. Its content is to guarantee, rather than to found.

But that is not to say that there is anything arbitrary in this further action of the Creator. We are in a position to resist any suspicion of Epicureanism that the world is at the mercy of Chance; and we must leave no room for an Aristotelian suggestion that creation is moved by a God who is in any sense indifferent to its being. But a doctrine of Providence which is not Christocentric (governed, that is, by texts such as John 5.17; Col. 1.16 f.; and Heb. 1.3), must inevitably seem speculative and insecurely grounded, and in no better case than similar doctrines which arise in pantheist and polytheist religions, as also in Judaism and Mohammedanism where the lack of a completed *Heilsgeschichte* means an attenuated belief in Providence. Therefore we must examine with care this act of faith, and no better indication of it can be found than in Questions 26-28 of the Heidelberg Catechism. Paul Gerhardt's hymns are a classical expression of the way in which the doctrine came to its own in the climate of thought created by the Reformation.

The question at issue is about the Lordship under which history develops. There is no answer to the question from world-history itself. It cannot yield the revelation which Natural Theology is concerned to find here. If, by faith, we are able to affirm that it does carry within itself the glory of God, this faith is not a response to the creatures, their life, their goodness, their beauty, etc. (and queer things begin to happen when you try to identify the glory of God with the bright side of creaturely reality). It is faith in *God*, the history of whose glory (i.e. His Lordship) is concealed in, with, and under the history of the

creatures which are His veils (*larvae Dei*). This glory is not felt nor seen, nor affirmed in dialectical judgments, but strictly *believed*. But this act of believing is sustained by perceptions which Ritschl in particular banished from Protestant thinking under the opprobrious label of *Metaphysik*, leaving nothing stronger than value-judgments. These perceptions (the subject matter of Section 49) do not afford a secure conception of how God's Providence works, and the doctrine of Providence is not an essay in the Philosophy of History. But in so far as our belief in God is *Christian* belief, in so far, that is, as we have found in "God with us" and "God for us" the eternal God who is therefore "God above us", we can pass beyond any abstract speculative theory to a securely based belief. Calvin pointed the way in isolated passages, but abandoned it in the *Institutes*, where he perpetuated the abstract handling of this matter which received its death-blow from the Lisbon earthquake.

We may begin to work out the doctrine by recognising that though the covenant-history witnessed by the Bible is only a tiny strand in the whole of world-history, yet if we have seen it aright it is the strand towards which everything else converges. And again, this strand is all of a piece with general history, so the faith which is evoked by the *Heilsgeschichte* must be faith in the God who is Lord of all events. There seem to be two histories, the history of creatures as such, and the history of God's action with His covenant-partner, and there is a positive, essential, inner connexion between them. How the history of creatures is annexed to the covenant-history is known to God alone; but *that* it is so annexed is revealed in the covenant-history itself—in the very fact, if you like, that man as God's partner is man *in the cosmos*. And the faith to which we are brought by the Gospel is that in the very act of creaturely existence we are in the Kingdom of Christ and in no other. Therefore we cannot regard universal history as something hypothetically governed by God with a hidden left hand, and therefore beyond our power to correlate with the history in which His right hand is laid bare in Jesus Christ. The strand of *Heilsgeschichte* teaches us to regard all history as the field where the Providence so clear in that strand holds universal sway. Pursuing its own course, cosmic history furnishes time, space, and opportunity for the fruition of God's covenant, and

it is preserved by the right hand of God to serve that covenant-purpose. Not by passivity nor by an imposed conformation to the life of Israel and the Church, but precisely by *its own* activity, does it "work together" with the coming of the Kingdom of God. It is the seemingly larger strand of a double history where, instead of the open presence of Jesus Christ, there are only images or reflections (heaven and earth reflecting the relation of God and man; man and woman reflecting the relation of Christ and the Church; light and darkness reflecting the relation of grace and sin, or life and death), and because these are only reflections or echoes, they give no ground for absolute affirmations of any *analogia entis*. By creation it has been *prepared* for this "co-working", though it has no competence in this respect in itself. It was not, however, made for anything else, nor made in vain. It has no status as *creatura corredemptrix*. But in so far as it proceeds under God's Providence, it is given a constitutive significance for the covenant-history. It is too ambiguous in its working to support any *Weltanschauung* which abstracts from the Kingship of Christ, not even so innocuous a version as that it is constructed for the growth of personality! When, therefore, we affirm its regularities, and assess their meaning, what we can say is that God will give to His creation its function, its purpose or goal, and its character, to-morrow as He has done to-day. But the man of faith will not prescribe to God nor to himself *how* this will take place. To affirm *this* constancy is to affirm Providence.

II

The action of God the Father, conserving, accompanying, and governing His creatures as Lord, is the theme of Section 49, for, as might have been mentioned earlier, the Providence of God is an ever-present active Lordship, not a mere envisaging of possibilities. *Non minus ad manus quam ad oculos pertinet*, as Calvin put it.

The term *conservatio* suggests an action of making safe or keeping unharmed, and the prefix has been queried in the past because it might suggest that God's action is an auxiliary aid to the creature's effort to be its own *servator*. Barth, of course, is inclined to retain it with the very different suggestion that the grace by which the creature is maintained in being is some-

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thing which expresses in another way the true grace of its redemption in Jesus Christ. We have to ask whether it is proper to attribute to God an irrevocable decision to maintain, moment after moment in their limited being, creatures such as the world contains; and when we see how they are capable *in their very limitation* of participating in the history which is made by Jesus Christ, we find this to be securely grounded in God's eternal love. They are conserved in the mutual order which the notion of "second causes" expresses. The mode of God's conserving action is incomprehensible to us because in His grace there is none of that "necessity" which we find to be a necessary means for comprehension. They are conserved in face of "evil"—the possibility which God has rejected in His decisive act of creation; for "evil" is a standing threat to the being of creatures. God has power over it, but they have not. Called into play by the rejecting decision of God, it stands like a minus sign outside a bracket, affecting every creaturely plus within the bracket. It is only because God's affirmation of His creatures remains an affirmation, that the creature continues in its creaturely goodness. *Creatio*, in other words, is preceded by a *servatio*, and guaranteed by a *conservatio*. This trustworthy action of God, from which our existence hangs as by a thread from moment to moment, is disclosed (both in regard to its necessity and in regard to its trustworthiness) by the Gospel events, and the "preserving" or "establishing" words used in the New Testament repay careful lexicographical study. They bring to light the ground upon which the New Testament Christians based their expectation of continuity in Christian life, which carries within itself a firmly secured continuity in human creaturely life, and warrants the freedom from care and worry which marks New Testament humanity. Within their appointed limits, therefore, we can take for granted the lasting reality of God's creatures.

This conserving action of God is the divine factor which faith tries to apprehend in all natural and human history. We go on to understand it as the *concursus divinus*. God's accompanying of His creatures through their history with Fatherly Lordship over them. The Deist story about God in His relation to creatures will not do. God does not leave them to work out the genius of their inherent nature. He accompanies them as

Lord, so that His will is done on earth as it is in heaven; and yet He acts throughout with respect for their relative autonomy and spontaneity. Familiar questions come under discussion in this section—the relation of the First Cause to second causes (the proper analogical use of “cause” in this context being carefully elucidated), and all that falls under the topic *De Potentia Dei*. Barth insists that these questions can be tackled properly only if we work with fully Christian concepts.

By “God” we understand: the one, who as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, is eternal love, has life in Himself—and *as such* is also the *per se* Being, the Almighty in the Height above His creation, and *causa causarum*. By “the will of God” we understand: His fatherly good will, His decision of grace in Jesus Christ, the mercy in which He has set Himself from eternity to rescue His creation and to give it eternal life in community with Himself—His will which, *as such*, is also His kingly lordly will, disposing the existence and operation of His creation unconditionally and irresistibly. And by “the operation of God” we understand His action in the history of the covenant founded on His decision of grace, with its fulfilment in His giving of His Son, and its establishment in the work of the Holy Ghost to awaken faith and obedience—His operation which, *as such*, is also His mighty operation in the whole created realm, over and in, before, with, and after all creaturely operation, in virtue of which the whole of this pertains to *His* operation and is completely subordinated to Him (p. 132 f.).

The *concursus divinus* can be further elucidated by distinguishing three moments within it: *praecurrit*, *concurrit*, *succurrit*. The observable processes whereby creatures are determined in their being are held within a predetermination by God, which is an unconditioned and irresistible expression of His Fatherly Lordship. Readers will remember what Barth has already done (in II/2, cf. Camfield’s summary in *Reformation Old and New*, chap. IV) with the doctrine of predestination. Here he has to take careful account of the status of the semi-hypostasised laws and norms under which the course of nature proceeds, and to indicate a significant act of God preceding their operation in every given case; an act which does not abrogate, but which does relativise them. To make this act of God significant in the mind of modern men is one of the great difficulties in this field, and I do not think that Barth has wholly succeeded. His exposition needs to borrow from that of *succurrit* before it strikes home to my mind at any rate. In regard to *concurrit*, the difficulty is to see in creaturely being an act of God simultaneous with, but not to be confused with, the act of the creature. *Sic*

intelligendum est Deum operari in rebus, quod tamen ipsae res propriam habent operationem (*Summa Theologica* I, 105, 5c). The act of God is intimate and particular to each creaturely event. Formally its relation to the creature's own act is not mere parallelism. In an unconditioned act of Fatherly Lordship, God establishes the act of the creature precisely as the act of the creature. If we try to say something about *how* this happens, and work with the analogy of inter-creaturely acts, we fall away into a "mechanistic" picture, or else we begin to talk of "emanations" or "infusions" of the divine being. This particular Christian doctrine of the divine *concursus*, which matters so much, yet is so hard to state, makes sense only with the belief that in every creaturely event there is an *encounter* of two radically different realities, an encounter such as we know about in our own meeting with God by means of His Word and Spirit. Can we understand the general working of God, with and over His creatures, from that focus? It is the obligation to do so which faith recognises (though theology tries to find other grounds), which has produced the elements of this doctrine—that all creaturely being is good, and to the glory of God, and directly produced by His action out of the richness of His grace, and yet is produced as the proper act of the creature, achieved in genuine freedom and spontaneity. We say something significant about God's action in these terms, without needing to pretend that we have probed the secret of its mode (for the secret of our incorporation into the covenant of Grace by God's Word and Spirit remains a secret until the *Parousia*), and without needing to detract from the sole glory of God the Lord by postulating some kind of synergism in this *concursus*. And what we say does not detract from the worth and the freedom of the creature in its own right. Barth offers three pages of theological argument (cf. 166-170), drawn from the Reformed tradition as opposed to all others, which may be of service to those who have an "anxiety-complex" about human freedom vis-à-vis the sovereignty of God; but he points out that because this is an instance of demon-possession and not a mere intellectual difficulty, his arguments can only avail to speed the departing demon on its way. Its actual casting out comes only by prayer and fasting. So much for *concurrit*. In regard to *succurrit* we are in the realm of the consequences or effects of creaturely action, over which

the creature has manifestly little if any control. Do we lapse into resignation in respect of all this? Or is there ground for trust, confidence, and hope? It depends ultimately on what you can say about the action of God, and the freedom and Lordship with which He acts, subsequent to the creature's own act. The Christian story, taken seriously, requires you to say of God: *succurrit*.

It is the exposition of the third aspect, *gubernatio*, of God's Fatherly Lordship over His creation, which brings most clearly into view the truth acknowledged in the doctrine of Providence. What we see when we look at the world is not God's government of creaturely life, but rather a nexus of necessities and freedoms or contingencies which defies our imperialist will to comprehend. God rules creaturely life, in and through what we see, and He rules effectively as Lord, with His own self and His own glory as the goal for creatures. We cannot see this, but we may and must believe it because we believe the Biblical witness to the "Kingdom of God". What we say about the government of the cosmic scene is securely based only if we are able to relate it to the action of the King of Israel and to the Kingdom of God taken in its full New Testament sense. The older Protestant theology shows a cleavage at this point between Lutheran tradition, which is so anxious to rule out the Stoical thesis of government by Fate that it lies open to the charge of Occasionalism, and Calvinist tradition, which is more anxious about the Epicurean thesis of Chance and therefore lays itself open to the charge of rigid determinism. Neither charge can be fully sustained. But one must take due account both of the triumphs of *common-sense* (referred to in the German text by the English phrase) in which the bourgeois finds the most congenial manifestations of the Kingdom, and of the eccentricities of waywardness or miracle which make the gypsy as well as the bourgeois a servant of the Kingdom.

The action which faith attributes to God is one of *ruling* something other than Himself, which takes place by an *ordering* of all things through His presence with them both as planner and plan. It is a direct action of God in each separate event, where He gives to the creature a prescribed opportunity of freedom, decrees the effect of its act, and gives it its own validity and worth. But this means in practice its *co-ordination* with its

environment, so that out of individual specialities a significant *unity* is secured. It is the glory, not the shame, of creatures to be utterly dependent upon God the King, though this glory is misconstrued where the notion of absolute dependence is taken abstractly as the key to creaturely existence, and grossly misrepresented where the creature is regarded as utterly dependent on the Whole within which it is ordered.

In fact we cannot pretend to maintain a thesis like this as though it were a self-authenticating idea, or a formal notion to be established prior to any content it may receive from faith in God as the King of Israel. The history of Israel is the place where the government of God is concretely revealed, and it is a history which happens, not for the sake of Israel in itself, but as the "inner ground" of all world-history. It is a history (from Abraham to Christ) which serves as a stock on to which all other nations are grafted, and once we read its true meaning we find that all world-history begins to look like a river, not like "the endless wave-beats of an unbounded, colourless, formless sea, each part of it like the rest, flowing out of itself, and being sucked back into itself". We begin to picture it on the analogy of a life-history of plant, or animal, or man, or as a work of art; not as a meaningless sphere whose points are interchangeable. The covenant-history of Israel, seen from its centre where the King appears in His beauty, is the place where the true "economy" or "disposition" of creatures under the rule of God appears openly, and though the same economy is hidden outside this place, we are constrained to believe that it is real. *This* economy is the case wherever creatures live. The King of Israel, Jesus Christ, is Lord over all. We know *that* this is so. We do not know *how* it is so, and therefore we must acknowledge that His rule continues beyond the focal events, still in the form of a hidden *Heilsgeschichte* which comes into the open only in the once-for-all history of Israel which culminated in the Ascension of the King, and the appointment of the Apostles (from the seed of Israel).

But what about the Church, and the Bible? What about the continued history of *the Jews*, which is of the same significance? These are constant elements in the panorama of world-history which serve as reminders of how the whole world is under the Providential government of God the King of Israel.

To draw the proper outlines of God's universal Providential government, we must attend to these signs, and read them aright. For we learn, precisely from the history of Israel, that the wise government of God is no crude affair of open power yielding unmistakable evidence of its reality in the persons of subservient puppets. The "constants" in world-history, each a sign in its own right and with its own purpose, are signs which *can be* but *need not be* read in their true significance. And this very ambiguity is part of what we may read in them. The history of the Bible, its formation, its translation, its exposition, and its effect on history; the history of the Church, with its peculiar claim that our time is now *Endzeit* where everything is ordered to the proclamation and believing of the Gospel, with its peculiar power of resistance drawn from its own experience of Yahweh's faithfulness conquering human rebellion, and its strange capacity for renewal (not *perpetuo mansura* save as *perpetuo reformanda*); the history of the Jews since A.D. 70. which testifies to the action of Israel's King by continuing in so disturbing a fashion to display the negative side of His saving act, the history of those who are "not a people" now that they are no longer Yahweh's people, who are not marked off by any clear racial distinction, nor by language, culture, religion or common history, and who nevertheless are held in being in this form of "not a people" by Yahweh who still holds to His word that "he that toucheth you toucheth the apple of mine eye": these are signs which disclose the true character of God's Providential government. The exposition of them in these pages should have far-reaching effects on other parts of theology.

Barth has added to these three well-known "constants" a fourth which is of much greater significance to the modern mind: the evidence in the structure of human life which is "given" and "taken away" either by Chance or by Fate or by God the Father who is the King of Israel. He notes how every such life is profoundly affected (or "disposed") by the time of its birth and of its death, and how it thus becomes a *unique* participation in common experience. What happens between the two limits is a *history*, which can be brought under judgment *as a whole*; and in its finite particularity, the whole of world-history is somehow focused. These facts can be read without serving in the least to remind us of the Fatherly Lordship under

which we exist, but when the King of Israel confronts us in a life which moves "from His poor manger to His bitter cross", our own condition of life shines with a new light.

Another "constant", of quite a different order, namely the angels, is referred to in this context, and the matter deferred for fuller discussion in Section 51. For Barth knows well enough that this "sign" has been overlooked deliberately in many discussions of Providence within serious Christian theology. "But one wonders whether such discussions are not also remarkable in paying little or no attention to the other constants as well!"

I am aware that I have communicated little or nothing of the real content of this all-important Section 49. But perhaps a better purpose will be served by indicating its structure rather than attempting to characterise its doctrine by neat labels drawn from the history of thought. Readers will note the absence of one familiar bit of apparatus, the distinction between general and special providence. Unless these terms can be used to point more clearly than they have done to the relation of the history of Israel and general history, Barth considers they are better dropped.

The doctrine is further clarified in a long treatment of the Christian life under the universal Lordship of God the Father, a life expressed in faith, obedience, and prayer. These matters have been sufficiently expounded by English writers, influenced by Barth, for me to pass over this section without comment.

III

And so we come to Section 50 on "the Negation", the third element which confuses the relation of God and His creatures, the "foreign body" with its queer negative reality, powerful within yet alien to the sphere of God's Fatherly government. The problem is to affirm God's Lordship over it without impairing His holiness and omnipotence. There is danger in denying its status as a "third element"; the danger to which Calvinism has not been immune, of finding causality of evil in God, and the danger which makes Pelagianism what it is, wherever it appears, of finding this causality in creatures.

There is a profound danger also of failing to recognise the real thing, and of arguing instead in terms of the "shadow side of creation", its precarious status, its tragedy and darkness,

which are not in opposition or contradiction to God, though until they are "turned to His praise" they are eloquent of the deeper hostility to His will by which creation is imperilled. To treat this shadow-side as the Negation is to defend God's cause at the wrong point and thus to leave the real Negation in power so far as we are concerned. (*The Screwtape Letters* went a long way towards making this point clear in Britain.) If you want to know what to do with the darkness which God created by dividing from it the light, you can learn from Mozart who alone in the eighteenth century seemed capable of dealing with the Lisbon earthquake. For he *heard*, though of course he did not see, the whole creation with its joy and tragedy, and heard it bathed in the *lux perpetua* of divine glory. I learn that his grave, like that of Calvin and that of Moses, is unknown; but what does a grave matter in the case of such great witnesses to God!

But how can we talk about the real thing which God's action is directed against? Barth refers us to the work of Julius Müller: *Die christliche Lehre von der Sünde*, written 1838-44 to expose the limits beyond which the Christian Monism of Schleiermacher and Hegel breaks down. And he offers his own extended examination of Leibnitz, Schleiermacher, Sartre, and Heidegger, as the most important guides for those who want to recognise the Negation for what it is.

They are all fallible guides, because the Negation is known to God alone, and He knows it in the action where the Word was made *flesh*, that is to say, a creature open to attack by the enemy, estranged from Himself and from God by coming into the context where the Negation makes human sin its point of attack against both God and His creatures. He knows it by this victorious action against it. My recognition of it comes by being conformed to this Word of God made flesh. I recognise that I am responsible for the queer reality of the Negation, by being its bearer and its agent; but no self-analysis can disclose in my experience of sin the real Evil which brings real Death in virtue of a real Devil and a real Hell. God alone knows where and what to attack, and I cannot do battle with it save under His election of grace. His command, in Jesus Christ, makes plain to me that disobedience is not mere imperfection judged by a Law, but rather guilt vis-à-vis the grace and kind-

ness of God; and this is knowledge of the Negation, acting through sin, primarily against God. Knowledge of it as active in evil and death is also granted when I see how its powerlessness has been exposed by an event of physical suffering and historical degradation. I recognise that this happened because man is fallen prey to a real Death (not merely subject to an act of dying), and to a real "physical" corruption with its own dynamism. In this "physical" mode of attack, which is just as important as the "moral" mode suggested by sin, the Negation acts primarily against the creature of God, and thus against God in a less direct way.

What account of the reality of the Negation may be offered from this foundation? I will summarise Barth's points as best I can.

(a) We cannot say that it "is", as we use that term of God or creatures; but because we recognise that God is confronted by it and in conflict with it, we cannot treat it as "nothing".

(b) Nor can we identify it with that which God and creatures "are not", for that *privatio* belongs as such to their perfection, establishing in creatures the "shadow-side" which does ultimately redound to the praise of God.

(c) It has no "nature" discernible *by creatures* and no existence which they can discover. They know it only by knowing God in His action against it.

(d) Its ontological context is the *electing action* wherein God is who He is. It is "the impossible possibility" which is given real power to threaten this action precisely by His Lordly and Sovereign rejection of it. But this is not to be understood as though its reality could be caught up by synthesis into what He wills for the ultimate purpose He pursues. Barth's doctrine is not an extreme form of dialectical system. At this point, *all* synthesis is impossible. But we must not follow the obvious alternative of treating it therefore as mere illusion or appearance.

(e) Privation of *grace*, rather than privation of being, indicates its character, its power to threaten, and its status as the object of God's *opus alienum*.

(f) God attacks it, and gives His creatures their part in the attack, by carrying through His *opus proprium*, the gracious covenant-action with man. Man's "good" is thus to cleave to the covenant-action of God; and if, Faust-like, he tries to master

the Negation himself, claiming to "know good and evil", he is himself mastered by it.

(g) God's zeal, wrath, and judgment, give no proper substance or content to this queer reality, but they do give it the perverse "truth" of lies, the "sense" of nonsense, the grotesque "possibility" of the impossible. But it has no stability, and, so far from being a permanently "necessary" element in God's design (which we are always tempted to say by some kind of synthesis), it is in fact finished, a truth still to be revealed, but which our joy and freedom can already proclaim.

Those who see it clearly see it fearlessly, and they alone see its true fearfulness. They see only the echo or shadow of a ruined reality, but they recognise it to be effective even as such. And if you use the concept of "God's permissive will" to theologise about it, the content of this permissive will is simply that we do not yet see the Kingdom of God in open glory, and until we do, this echo of a ruined reality is made to serve His purpose by an act of royal Providence which no synthetic thinking can comprehend.

An account of Section 51 will appear in the next issue. The nature of the subject-matter, as well as consideration of space, make such a division appropriate.