KARL BARTH ON PRAYER

Karl Barth is commonly regarded as the outstanding contemporary theologian in European Protestantism. "The paramount theological question for the last ten years," according to one authority, "has been: What think ye of Barth?"[1] And more recently, in a short review of *Fifty Years of Protestant Theology*, Barth is expressly treated on 37 out of 108 pages of text, while his break with classic liberalism in 1919 is described as having "struck the continent with the fury of a violent thunderstorm."[2] Consequently, what Barth has to say on the subject of prayer is doubly important: because the subject itself is fundamental and because the author's influence on modern non-Catholic theology is so extensive.

The material for the following analysis is drawn from the published notes of a seminar which Barth gave at Neuchâtel, Switzerland, in January, 1947, 1948, and September, 1949. Although the text is based on stenographic notes taken during the lectures, the editor vouches for having followed them "fidèlement," and thus giving his readers not only the thought but even "les images, la fraîcheur et le naturel du langage" of the master.[3]

IMPORTANCE OF PRAYER

Since the full title of the seminar was: *Prayer, According to the Catechisms of the Reformation*, we should expect Barth to argue to the necessity and importance of prayer from the writings of the original Reformers. His opening sentence is a challenge: "The Reformation presents itself to us as a great ensemble: a labor of study, of thought, of preaching, of discussion, of combat and of organization. But it was more than all of this. From all that we know of its character, it was also an act of continual prayer."[4] To substantiate this unusual statement, he quotes at length from the Large Catechism of Martin Luther: "We must realize that our defense lies exclusively in prayer. Of

[1] Randolph C. Miller, *Christianity and the Contemporary Scene* (New York, 1943), p. 1. This is a collection of essays by various writers on "Christianity in the Light of the Present Situation."

[2] Carl F. H. Henry, *Fifty Years of Protestant Theology* (Boston, 1950), p. 35. The same writer quotes Count Keyserling to the effect that Barth "saved the Reformation in Europe"; and "the Jesuit theologian Erich Przywara, a critic of neo-orthodox theology, asserted that it [Barthianism] had issued in a 'genuine rebirth of Protestantism'" (*ibid.*, p. 41).

[3] Karl Barth, *La prière, d'après les Catéchismes de la Réformation* (Sténogrammes de trois séminaires, adaptés par A. Roulin; Neuchâtel, Switzerland, 1949), Avertissement, p. 5.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 7. The first subtitle of the first seminar reads: "Les Réformateurs de l'Eglise ont prié." And Barth is at pains throughout to point out that Luther and Calvin were "men of prayer."

ourselves we are too weak to resist the devil and his vassals. . . . How shall we carry off the prize of victory over the wiles of our enemies, whom the devil is using to enslave us, except through the prayers of some generous souls, which rise up as a wall of bronze to protect us?"[5]

Among the early Reformers, says Barth, there was never any difference of opinion on the "dominant" necessity of prayer. But they were divided from the very beginning on the nature of this necessity. Strangely enough, Luther is described as "insisting on the fact that prayer is obedience to a commandment of God. It is necessary to pray because God wills it." Barth suggests that we should expect this rigid and almost military idea to come from Calvin: God commands; we must obey—whereas in this matter the French Reformer was less "Calvinistic" than the German. Calvin teaches that the necessity of prayer is "founded on the intercession of Jesus Christ before His heavenly Father." In syllogistic form this would read:

Jesus Christ is our Mediator with the Father, constantly praying for us before the throne of God.

We are the brethren of Christ, related to Him and therefore committed to joining ourselves in doing what He does.

Consequently, we also are to pray, as it were "par sa bouche," through the mouth of Jesus Christ.[6]

PRAYER FOR GRACE

Twenty years ago Barth wrote: "The Bible tells us not how we should talk with God, but what He says to us,"[7] claiming that the Scriptures are only *descriptive* of God's relations with man, and not *instructive* about man's duties towards God. Now he seems to be quite sure that the Bible does teach us at least one duty, the obligation to pray in order to obtain the grace of God:

In the presence of your little faith and obedience, what do these words mean to you: I believe; I obey? The distance between our words and achievements is abysmal, no matter how much we try to believe and obey. Prayer in this situation—and no Christian is exempt—means to approach God and ask Him to grant what we need, namely, the power, force, courage, serenity and prudence (necessary) to obey His law and fulfill His commandments.[8]

However, when he comes to explain more precisely in what this petition for grace consists, we find that Barth has not really changed his former position at all. The latter half of the Neuchâtel seminar is an explanation of the

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

[7] *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie* (Göttingen, 1928); translated into English under the title, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (Grand Rapids, 1935), p. 43.

[8] *La prière*, p. 12.

Lord's Prayer. In his exposition of the first three petitions, Barth leaves no doubt that these petitions are only nominal and that the grace which they seem to request is only the grace of Calvin's predestinarianism. Verbally, it is true, we pray: "Hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," implying that in some sense God's name is not yet hallowed, His kingdom not yet come, and His will not yet done as it should be. But this is deceptive: "This prayer (the Our Father) is answered before we express it. . . . We pray for that which has already been accomplished by an eternal act of God, directed to His own proper end."[9]

Not even Calvin could have stated the matter more clearly. Barth follows this general thesis with several pages of exegesis on each petition, but never deviating from his first principle, that the object of our prayer is a *fait accompli* long before we set our minds to pray. Thus, regarding the first petition of the Our Father: "We should transcribe these words: 'Hallowed be Thy name,' in this sense: 'Thy name is *already* hallowed.' This proposition is the foundation of prayer."[10] And the second petition: "The coming of the kingdom is *totally* independent of our power. We are as incapable of doing anything to bring about its advent as we are of creation. . . . Still it is for us an object of prayer . . . that God might fulfill His promises; that we might recognize them as the promises of God; that Thy kingdom come, the kingdom which has already come. Such is our prayer."[11] And the third: "The fulfillment of God's will is an accomplishment beyond our capacity. It is *not we* who do the will of God. To Him belongs the plan and execution, and its time of fulfillment."[12]

PRAYER AND FORGIVENESS OF SIN

The fifth petition of the Our Father involves two suppositions that seem irreconcilable with traditional Calvinism: a request for pardon and a condition for mercy. For when we ask God to forgive our trespasses, we imply that in some sense our sins are not yet remitted and that our prayers will contribute to this remission; and when we add, "as we forgive those who trespass against us," the implication is that our own practice of merciful charity somehow determines the degree of mercy that God will bestow upon us.

But Barth will have none of either. We pray, "forgive us our trespasses," and with good reason, because our whole life as Christians is a continuous sin; but what can our prayer for mercy avail us to obtain pardon? Nothing: "Neither man's offense, nor man himself as a sinner can be exculpated. Man is unpardonable. He has no right whatsoever (aucun droit) to ask for a remission of his debt."[13]

[9] *Ibi d.*, p. 31. [10] *Ibid.* [11] *Ibid.*, p. 34. [12] *Ibid.*, p. 38. [13] *Ibid.*, p. 49.

Perhaps, Barth suggests, there is some kind of condition we place when we pray for mercy, which indicates that God's forgiveness is at least in some way determined by ourselves. "No," he answers, "the phrase: as we forgive those who trespass against us, is (only) a necessary sign to make us understand the pardon of God." When God forgives us, we become conscious of His mercy and confident of salvation. This confidence "necessarily opens wide our hearts, our feelings and judgment with regard to our fellow-men." There are those who mistakenly consider the words, "as we forgive," an appeal for the practice of charity. "However, this is not an exhortation: 'Come, be merciful,' but a simple statement of fact: 'When you receive forgiveness from God, you become capable of forgiveness to others.'" [14] Then Barth returns to his principal theme, that in the economy of salvation all things are accomplished independently of our "good works," including the good work of prayer:

> It is important to understand what God's pardon consists in. It is not an uncertain hope, an ideal that we look for or conceive. It is a fact. Even before I make the request, God has already granted His pardon. Whosoever does not recognize this, prays in vain. We have *already* been forgiven—this is the reality by which we live.
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> Our Father who art in heaven.... Yes, thou hast forgiven our trespasses. Before I have said: 'Forgive me,' thou hast announced and decreed thy right to show mercy, thy right not to charge us with our faults or consider us as sinners.
>
> And thy Son.... Thou hast obeyed and suffered for us; thou hast abolished our sins and the sins of all humanity. Thou hast done this once and for all. Thou hast annulled the sins that accompany us from the cradle to the grave, the sins we commit every day and every instant, in one form or another.
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> Because thou hast done all this through thy Son, and dost continue it through thy Holy Spirit, we are no longer permitted to doubt or hesitate in uncertainty ... in the face of our offenses. Our sins are henceforth no longer our affair, but thine (Nos fautes sont dorénavant ton affaire, non pas la nôtre).[15]

PRAYER ADDRESSED TO GOD ALONE

As a corollary to the preceding, that prayer is essentially an expression of gratitude for graces received from God, Barth argues to a limitation in the object of our prayers, that they can be addressed only to God. He reasons thus: "In His presence we find ourselves tormented by the imperfection of our obedience and the inconstancy of our faith.... He alone can come to our assistance."[16] Is there any place in this scheme for possible help from creatures? At most we may consult them and ask for their advice. "But the gift (of grace) itself can only come from God. Therefore we cannot pray to

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 51. [15] *Ibid.* [16] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

men, neither saints nor anyone else,"[17] in the Barthian sense of grateful acknowledgement for favors received.

Here Barth makes a concession to hagiology that would be hard to find in the primitive Reformers. He says:

> In the sixteenth century it was common doctrine (among Protestants) that the saints of the Church and the faithful departed had no power to come to our aid. However, we may now perhaps add a question mark to such a categorical statement. I am not so sure that the saints of the Church are unable to help us: the Reformers, for example, and the saints who now live on earth. We live in communion with the Church of the past, and from it we receive aid.[18]

So much of concession, and now back to Evangelism:

> One fact is certain, however. Neither those who are still living, nor those who have died can be to us what God, and He alone, is in our regard: our help in the great distress we experience in living up to the Gospel and the Law. The same may be said about the angels, that they can come to our assistance but cannot be invoked.[19]

Even a cursory analysis will indicate that this is a break with traditional Protestantism and a "compromise" with Catholic doctrine on the worship of saints. True to Evangelical character, Barth still repeats the words that "saints cannot be invoked," but he has evacuated the formula of its original meaning for the Reformers. According to Calvin, saints may not be invoked because they cannot help us; according to Barth, they are not to be invoked because they cannot help us as God can, by the actual giving of grace. He stops short of drawing the logical distinction between invoking God, directly as the source of grace, and invoking the angels and saints, indirectly, by asking them to intercede for us before God, who alone is the throne of grace.

PRAYER NOT A GOOD WORK

However, there is no compromise in Barth's conception of prayer as a kind of good work, which is intrinsically meritorious before God. He defines prayer as "the act by which we accept and make use of a divine gift," specifically the gift of acknowledging our helplessness before God in token of gratitude for His mercy to us. Then he cautions:

> We must not look upon prayer as a good work to be done, or as a pleasant and genteel exercise of piety. Prayer cannot become for us a means of producing something, of making a gift to God or ourselves. For we are in the position of a man who can only receive, who is obliged to speak to God because there is no one else to

[17] *Ibid.* [18] *Ibid.* [19] *Ibid.*

whom he can turn. In Luther's words: We must realize that we are destitute, that we are simply devoid of everything, and that whatever we receive and understand comes to us from God.[20]

Reasoning from this premise, that the only form of prayer is petition, and its main function is to thank God, Barth denounces every kind of prayer which is not intelligible to the person praying. He adds that this was one of the principal grievances of the Reformation against the Roman Church, namely, praying in a foreign tongue, quoting John Calvin: "Prayer in a language which either the congregation or the one praying does not understand, is base hypocrisy and a mockery to God because the heart cannot take part in such a prayer."[21]

DISCIPLINED AND LITURGICAL PRAYER

Barth poses to himself the question: Should we pray spontaneously or according to a set formulary? He notes that neither Luther nor Calvin paid attention to this question, which is considered so important nowadays. Their concern was that we should pray from the heart. "They emphasized the importance of sincerity in prayer as opposed to a babbling with the lips. They understood that prayer should be free; but they also knew that true prayer cannot be a matter of caprice: it must be disciplined."[22]

Jesus Christ, he continues, not only told us to pray, but He also showed us in the Our Father how we should pray. It would be well for us always to conform to this model. Certainly there is place for the affections in prayer, as Calvin allows, but they must never become the pretext for our spirit to wander and roam. The prayers from the heart with which Calvin used to finish his sermons "are remarkable for their majestic uniformity."[23] He never allowed himself the liberty of a "disorderly effusion" in prayer.

Another problem which Barth feels is needlessly vexing modern Protestants is so-called liturgical prayer. He is impatient with "Protestant liturgists," and warns that by advocating prayer in common they are losing sight of the basic principles of Protestantism. The authors of the various Reformation Catechisms knew their theology well. They never asked themselves if, when Christians pray, it is the whole Church which is praying. For they knew that "Christians are the Church, and the Church is the Christians."[24]

In other words, since the Church is invisible, there can be no question of having to pray in common in order to express or preserve the common visible unity which does not exist among Christians. Barth sadly admits that mod-

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 19. [21] *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20. [22] *Ibid.*, p. 9. [23] *Ibid.* [24] *Ibid.*

ern Evangelicals are encouraging common "liturgical prayer." But he sees in this tendency a creeping disease, "une maladie dans l'Eglise," and a concession to the spirit which Luther and Calvin had repudiated:

> People are beginning to take a peculiar interest in (common) prayer in church and in the liturgical question.... For the Reformers there was no "liturgical question".... They never concerned themselves with the distinction between private and public prayer. What alone concerned them was the necessity of prayer and of praying well.... To emphasize matters of secondary importance (like the liturgy) is a sign of spiritual debility.[25]

SUMMARY ANALYSIS OF THE BARTHIAN THEORY OF PRAYER

In order to make a proper estimate of Barth's theory of prayer, we should recall that he is a disciple of Calvin, who professedly accepts the latter's doctrine on "God's predestination of some to salvation and of others to destruction." Thus he quotes from the *Institutes*:

> 'Their salvation,' said Calvin of the elect who form the true Church, 'is supported upon a foundation so secure and solid that, even if the whole world-machine collapsed, it could not be shattered nor overturned. For it rests upon the election of God and could no more change nor fail than his eternal widsom. However, therefore, they may tremble, as they are wrenched hither and thither or even dashed to the ground, they cannot perish, because the Lord sustains them in his hand.'[26]

Although Calvin wrote a great deal about prayer, he did not construct what might be called a "theology of prayer" that would stand on his basic principles of absolute predestination. Barth is more ambitious. At the risk of making "mistakes that Calvin was judicious enough to avoid,"[27] his Neuchâtel seminar is an effort to supply this deficiency, in close fidelity to the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563, which was based on Calvin's Catechism of Geneva (1541). The seminar is spotted with loose logic and frequent rhetorical flourishes that defy theological analysis. Still, it seems possible to trace the following main lines of what may be called the Barthian theory of prayer:

1) There is a divine and invisible Church of the elect, composed of those whom God has eternally predestined to be saved.

2) All men, including the elect, are helpless to contribute *anything* of "good works" as meritorious of salvation. Consequently, prayer also is not meritorious.

[25] *Ibid.* [26] *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, p. 265.
[27] George Morrel, *Christianity and the Contemporary Scene*, p. 21.

3) Yet Scripture tells us to pray and ask for the grace of God. This is not an exhortation which a person may freely accept or reject, but a test and manifestation of his election. If he prays, under the impulse of God's irresistible will, this is a "sign of salvation" and a mark of his predestination to glory.[28]

4) How, then, are we to understand the petitions in prayer, and the pleas for help from God when we pray? The Barthian answer lies in several distinctions: (*a*) Our request for grace is not a petition in the sense that somehow this prayer is meritorious before God and "moves" Him to grant us His aid. (*b*) Our prayer is not a condition for obtaining grace, as though we were in *any* way responsible for placing this condition. (*c*) However, our prayer is a condition for obtaining grace in so far as a necessary and divinely predestined cause is a "condition" for attaining an absolutely and eternally predetermined effect. God has selectively decreed that certain men be saved; He has also decreed that certain conditions be fulfilled by those who are destined for salvation, and among these conditions is prayer. But for the elect of God, they can no more avoid invoking the divine aid in prayer than they can escape being saved; both are equally predetermined.

5) There is really only one kind of prayer, that of petition. However, it is not petition in the sense that when we pray we are freely cooperating with divine grace in asking for further grace from God, but rather: (*a*) When we pray we are carrying out an injunction which God has imposed upon the elect "to ask for the help of His grace." (*b*) When we pray we are reminding ourselves of our helplessness and of God's infinite mercy towards us. This humble acknowledgment is the highest glory that we can render to God.

6) Since prayer is an expression of gratitude, it must be a conscious recog-

[28] Perhaps the clearest statement of Barth to the effect that prayer is not a free human act, is the following: "Nous ne sommes pas libres de prier ou non, ou de prier seulement quand nous en avons envie, car la prière n'est pas un acte qui nous est naturel. Elle est une grâce, et nous ne pouvons attendre cette grâce que du Saint-Esprit. Cette grâce est là, avec Dieu et sa parole en Jesus-Christ. . . . L'homme est *poussé* à prier. Il faut qu'il le fasse" (*La prière*, p. 20). It is true that Barth still speaks of a "liberté humaine qui n'est pas écrasée par la liberté de Dieu" (*ibid.*). But this is a mere assertion which he does not undertake to prove; it comes after a lengthy explanation of the irresistibility of the grace of prayer. However, this should not surprise us in Barth, who is known to have gone even beyond Calvin in limiting the natural powers of man. Thus, where Calvin expressly affirms that man has a natural knowledge of God (*Institutes*, I, 3/1), Barth denies altogether the possibility of man's reason coming, without revelation, to a knowledge of God. Consequently, for him to deny as well (in point of actual fact, if not in so many words) the exercise of liberty in prayer, is perfectly consistent with his own, and Calvin's, doctrine on the total depravity of man.

nition of the specific mercies which God has manifested towards me; consequently, "prayer" in a language which a person does not understand is a mockery to God.

7) So-called "liturgical" or "common" prayer, where it is practised by Protestants, shows a decadence of the spirit of the Reformation. Since the Church of the elect is invisible, it can dispense with the various "props of unity" which the visible Roman communion requires.

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