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The Christian on the Frontier

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WHEN do the good days of a Church begin if not in moments when, both theoretically and practically, the Gospel is its only source of comfort?"

It is not always easy for British people to enter deeply into the stresses and strains of other European peoples. Have we really known the sort of situation that gives the words of Karl Barth quoted above actuality? They come from a letter written to "My friends in the Reformed Church in Hungary"; and now published in *Against the Stream*, a miscellany of Karl Barth's shorter post-war writings (S.C.M. Press. 16s.).

The paragraph from which they are taken contains also this message:

Everything will now depend on your being inspired with a joyful confidence in the possibility of thinking, judging and deciding spiritually, instead of strategically and tactically, in the problems that confront you. . . . The only possible course that still lies open to you is to live, with your backs to the wall, for the gospel of God's free grace, and to act as conscientiously as you can, with the Gospel as your sole guide.

But what does Karl Barth really mean by the challenge to the Christians in Hungary? He refuses to attempt to suggest any detailed directives; just as in the correspondence between himself and Emil Brunner, on the question of the Church between East and West, he is reproached for not joining, as Reinhold Niebuhr is stated to have done, "the absolute opponents of Communism".

What are the "absolutes" of the Christian faith? In a book written more than

twenty years ago F. R. Barry wrote: "The apparent withdrawal of Christianity from any claims to effective leadership in the vast issues which press upon our society is, both for the Church and the world, the most menacing factor in our predicament."* It was only a few years after those words were written that Karl Barth, both before and after he was driven from his professorial appointment in Germany by the totalitarian State authorities, became the great protagonist of the Christian faith against the evils of Nazism. Many will, therefore, doubtless ask, with Brunner, how it is that his erstwhile close collaborator does not appear to have the same severe condemnation for the Reformed Church in Hungary, which has "come to an agreement with the new régime", as he found for the Protestant Church in Hitler Germany.

Readers who may be disappointed in the answer which Karl Barth gives to Brunner's very forthright challenge may take heart when they read other papers in this collection of Barth's shorter post-war writings; and especially, perhaps, in the messages which Barth gave in person to the members of the Reformed Church when he visited Hungary in 1948, as also in his essay on "The Church between East and West". Strongly as he maintains that the Church in the world cannot stand aloof and indifferent—"We are entitled and compelled to regard the existence of the Christian community as of ultimate and supremely political significance"—yet two further significant facts are equally clear to

* The Relevance of Christianity (1931).

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