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## Karl Barth: Appreciation and Tribute in Honour of his Seventieth Birthday

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It is one of the characteristics of Beethoven's music that again and again there breaks into it a startlingly novel element which jolts you upright with a shock. You feel, 'He cannot do that. This is something illogical, a new theme that interrupts the symphony, that contradicts what we have just been hearing.' And then before you have recovered from your surprise you discover that with great profundity Beethoven has worked it into the texture of the whole symphony, and that far from being alien to the main theme it was perfectly integrated with it. Only a great genius can do that.

That is the genius of Karl Barth in the profundity and rich complexity of his *Church Dogmatics*. Even Emil Brunner was jolted into writing an article a few years ago on what he called 'The New Barth,' for in the third volume Barth appeared to convey quite new elements which Brunner welcomed warmly but which he could only interpret as a *volte face* or at least as out of harmony with what had preceded. But it was not so. The 'Christian humanism' of the new man expounded by Barth in the various parts of his third volume belonged to the very essence of his main theme.

The main theme of all Barth's theological writing has recently been described by Professor G. C. Berkouwer of Amsterdam as *The Triumph of Grace*. There can be no question that Berkouwer is right, but this is the second book he has written about Barth. After nearly twenty years he has come to revise very radically his first estimate and to publish a new work (*De Triomf der Genade in de Theologie van Karl Barth*) in which great appreciation and admiration for Barth's theology is accompanied by a tempered criticism in which Berkouwer's main concern is revealed to be essentially the same as Barth's, in the riches of God's amazing grace. I feel sure that the road from misunderstanding to deep, if also critical, appreciation taken by Berkouwer, or by James Brown in his invaluable discussion, *Subject and Object in Modern Theology*, must be the road that the theologian will take who honestly listens to Barth and is not afraid of fashionable opinion in high places!

In what follows I should like to indicate briefly some aspects of Barth's teaching which any

estimate of his theological thought must take fully into account.

1. *The New Creation*. This is where the emphasis in Barth's theology has always been laid, even when in his early years at Göttingen and Münster he directed that unending stream of searching questions that probed the whole structure of Protestant philosophy and theology to its foundations until it appeared to so many that he was the advocate of a negative theology, although the truth lay in the opposite direction. That should have been obvious at least from his publication of *The Resurrection from the Dead*. It was this preoccupation with the triumphant grace of God manifested in the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and in the new man risen from the dead, that gave Barth's naturally questioning mind the positive base from which to call in question the superficial fabric of the romantic-idealistic theology and to hasten its dissolution. It is the new wine that bursts the old bottles; it is because in Jesus Christ all things are made new that old things pass away; it is because the grace of God has overtaken us in Christ that all our efforts at philosophical and theological self-justification are revealed to be but shabby clothing beside the new humanity in the Risen Jesus. The criticism that emanated from this 'resurrection of the Resurrection' was utterly radical without being pessimist.

It might help here to draw a brief (and no doubt an exaggerated) comparison between Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr. As I see it, Niebuhr's return to the doctrine of man's depravity, so skilfully worked out later in his Gifford Lectures on *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, was reached partly through disillusionment in and after the First World War and partly through the manifestation of the seamy side of human nature by modern psychological analysis. He began to understand again the wrath of God and the wicked pride of man, and he has come to paint for us a very black, and I feel a rather pessimistic, picture of human nature; and yet he did not go as far as to enunciate a doctrine of 'total depravity.' 'Total depravity' taught in those terms could only have been a sadistic slur upon the Creator—and Niebuhr is certainly not guilty of that. To Barth, however, this whole approach to human

176

nature is what he calls 'misanthropic and morbid.' He looks at human nature from the perspective of the death and resurrection of Christ for us. Because He died, because He rose again for us, not for some of us but for all of us, not for part of each of us but for the whole of each of us, we cannot but pass a 'total' judgment upon man. If in Jesus Christ man is a new creature then the whole man comes under the sentence of the new creation: that is the most radical judgment possible, but at the same time it is not in the least pessimist, because the Resurrection is God's gracious affirmation of man. It is the confirmation of the fact that the man whom God created was good and remains good, but it is the revelation of the fact that fallen man has yielded his good nature to the service of sin and is wholly embroiled in it with all his natural goodness and his natural knowledge. Here, then, is the contrast: Niebuhr's rather anthropological and psychological approach to man's evil tends to lead him in the direction of a critical despair; but Barth's insistence on looking at man from the perspective of the death and resurrection of Christ, while it enables him to speak radically of man's sin, leads him to speak joyfully and gratefully of the reaffirmation of man in the triumphant grace of God who receives and treats him as His child and as His friend. It is moreover from this perspective that Barth expounds the Creation and the whole history of God's covenant mercies toward man. The great cry against Barth after the publication of his *Commentary on Romans* was that he was a Marcionite, but in point of fact no one has ever been further removed from Marcion than Barth who insists that the covenant of grace realized in Jesus Christ is the inner ground and meaning of the Creation itself.

2. *Reconciliation and Election.* This is for Barth the very heart of the gospel, that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself. It is the glad tidings proclaimed to man in his sin, in spite of his rebellion and enmity, that God loves him and refuses to be alone without him, and insists on sharing with him His own life and glory. In fulfilment of that loving will God gave Himself to man under judgment and in his lost condition in order to redeem him out of perdition. The inconceivable extent of this love, according to Barth, is apparent from the fact that in so doing God hazarded and staked His own existence as God. It was love to the uttermost in which He took man's place under judgment in order to reclaim man and set him in His own place. It is characteristic of Barth's exposition of the Atonement, especially in the two parts of the fourth volume of the *Church Dogmatics*, that this is thought out in relation to the covenant of grace.

It is in this way that Barth sets out the eternal basis of the Atonement. Certainly God has poured out His love to meet man's deepest need, so that where sin abounded grace did much more abound; but Barth will not have it that atonement or reconciliation is a secondary and subsequent activity of the Divine will. On the other hand, he will have nothing to do with the Scotist speculation that the Incarnation would have happened anyway even if man had not fallen. The Divine election of grace manifested in the Covenant is made true and actual within history, for in atonement and reconciliation God realizes His eternal will with man. He keeps faith with Himself and with all men in Jesus Christ in a fulfilment of the Covenant which has the character of atonement and which eternally secures the restoration of a fellowship that was threatened with disruption and dissolution. Moreover the mutual relation of election and reconciliation in all this not only reveals the eternal basis of atonement but sets forth an account of election as the pure act of Divine love which is the rehabilitation of man as a human subject in perfect freedom and in the fulness of all his powers before God. 'The formula "god is everything and man is nothing" as a description of grace,' says Barth, 'is not merely a "shocking simplification" but complete nonsense.' In the giving of His Son, in reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, God is indeed everything, but only in order that man may *not* be nothing, in order that he may be everything that God has made him to be and means him to be as a human subject in relation to God, as His child and friend.

It is impossible in a few words to indicate anything of the immense power and richness of Barth's exposition of reconciliation. Although only two-thirds of it have yet been published, it is already evident that here we are given the greatest exposition of atonement that we have yet had in the whole history of dogma. That is not an enthusiastic exaggeration—it is difficult to see how any sincere reader of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, 4/1 and 4/2, can lay these volumes down without profound gratitude to God for this incomparable exposition of the overflowing grace of God to man in Jesus Christ.

3. *Jesus Christ, the Servant of the Lord.* To say election or to say atonement is to say the historical Jesus Christ. That is one of the sustained themes of Barth's Christology. Let it be said right away, to clear up any misunderstanding, that Barth is not afraid to rest his faith upon 'the weakness of God' who in inconceivable humiliation and love has committed Himself to us in the historical Jesus. Everything in the gospel stands or falls with the historicity of the incarnation and life,

the crucifixion and resurrection, of Jesus Christ. 'To try and grasp it as supra-historical or non-historical truth is not to grasp it at all.' Barth will not, therefore, yield in the slightest to the existentialists' reinterpretation, in their fear and their flight from the hazards of history, to any programme that involves the de-humanizing of Jesus or the de-historicizing of the Incarnation. What Barth does do is to give a faithful account of the place of the historical humanity of Jesus in the whole gospel of reconciliation. His guiding conception here (in the tradition of Calvin) is that of the Servant and His obedience to the Father. We cannot do better than cite at this point Barth's own summary of this section of his work. 'That Jesus Christ is very God is shown in His way into the far country in which He the Lord became a servant. For in the majesty of the true God it happened that the eternal Son of the eternal Father became obedient by offering and humbling

Himself to be the brother of man, to take His place with the transgressor, to judge him by judging Himself and dying in his place. But God the Father raised Him from the dead, and in so doing recognized and gave effect to His death and passion as a satisfaction made for us, as our conversion to God, and therefore as our redemption from death to life.'

At last the massive volumes of the *Church Dogmatics* have begun to appear in English, vol. 1. part 2 in May, while vol. iv. part 1, from which I have just cited, will appear in the autumn, published by Messrs. T. and T. Clark. Thereafter at least two volumes will appear each year. It is fitting that this edition of the *Church Dogmatics* in English should be launched in May, 1956, in honour of Karl Barth's seventieth birthday. Nothing could be more enriching for the whole Church than that he should be given the time and health to finish the great work God has given him to do.

## Literature

### SOMA SCRIPTURE

*The Inspiration of Scripture: A Study of the Theology of the Seventeenth Century Lutheran Dogmaticians*, by the Rev. Robert Preus, Ph.D. (Oliver and Boyd; 20s. net), is a work of learning and immense interest for those prepared to brave an intricate argument. For too long an important and necessary period of Protestant development, the seventeenth century in Germany, has been dismissed as a period of barren polemic and arid scholasticism. At the same time, it has been only too plausibly suggested that in this period a Protestant Bibliolatry was rampant, not indeed 'fundamentalist' in the modern sense, but in effect far worse, since its involved arguments as to whether the Hebrew vowel points were inspired represent at best a fossilization of the original prophetic doctrine of the Word of God. Dr. Preus has done much to clear the reputation of these dogmatic Lutherans. He puts them in a proper historical perspective and does not let us forget for a moment that they were engaged on a war upon two fronts which partly conditioned, and certainly evoked, their theological emphases. Thus the abortive conference between Lutherans and Jesuits in 1601 led to a new and not altogether happy insistence on the fact that the Scripture is '*judex controversiarum*.' On the other hand, there was the attack on the Lutheran Syncretists, carried on with that acerbity which Lutherans seem to reserve for domestic quarrels, so that Hunnius could call the writings of Calixt and his friends

'the vehicle of Satan and of atheism'—on which Dr. Preus rather mildly comments 'here we see how very heated this controversy within the Lutheran church was!'

And beyond the Syncretists were the Socinians, who taught that Scripture might include errors, a horrific notion which led the dogmaticians to plug some of the remaining chinks in their circumvallation of Scripture with a really impregnable doctrine of inspiration. Dr. Preus states, and this is the main and deep value of this book, what the Lutheran dogmaticians have to say about the doctrine of inspiration, and let it be said that with all its blemishes, it is a discussion of the problems involved in the unity of Scripture and of a doctrine of inspiration far more profound than can be found in any contemporary discussion in Britain in the twentieth century. He shows that, at every point where we impeach them of crudity, there is in fact an awareness of the deep issues at stake. Their distinction between the twofold form and the twofold matter of Scripture allows for a good deal more flexibility in the doctrine of inspiration than we might expect. Their doctrine of a plenary, verbal inspiration of Scripture is to be balanced by a doctrine of accommodation which makes due allowance for the human character and environment of the Scriptural writers; and even the celebrated dilemma of the 'vowel points' is shown in its context to be a not unreasonable controversy. Of course Dr. Preus does not altogether convince; he leans over backwards in his attempt to show that here is no docetism, no Montanism, that the