

# *Two Portraits of Karl Barth*

## THE GOSPEL WITH *GEMÜTLICHKEIT*\*

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BEGINNING ABOUT the second Tuesday evening in November, the habitués of the Restaurant *Bruderholz* in Basel, Switzerland, find its normally German atmosphere disrupted by the arrival of a sizable group of English-speaking students. In this group may be a sprinkling of Britons, perhaps an occasional Frenchman or Dutchman, but most will be Americans, ranging in age from fresh college graduates to ministers and college instructors in their late thirties or early forties. These persons will disembark every other Tuesday from a convoy of Volkswagens and Renaults, march through the main dining room of the *Bruderholz* to a side room especially reserved for them, sit down, and order a beer or a cup of coffee from the polite but persistent waitress whose job it is to see that everybody orders something. Presently a large, slightly stooped man with jungle-like eyebrows and a belligerently benevolent smile on his face will enter the room. The noise of conversation will give way to the pandemonium of table-beating and floor-drumming with which continental students acknowledge the arrival of a professor, and then there will be a moment of quiet as Karl Barth seats himself and calls to order another session of his annual seminar for English-speaking students.

Perhaps the impressiveness of this phenomenon wears thin for those who sit under Barth for more than one year, or for those who take courses from him regularly at the University of Basel. But it did not do so for me during the two semesters in

\* An untranslatable word meaning roughly "relaxed conviviality of the sort that one finds in a German home or a German inn."

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which I attended his seminar. I could never escape the feeling, as I walked into the *Bruderholz* and fought for a seat and a carbon copy of the paper being presented that night, that something *important* was about to take place. All of us tried to pretend that it was just another gathering, and our conversation before each class was usually college-kid chatter or tourist talk rather than theological discussion. But I do not think that any of us quite forgot that we were sitting for a couple of hours at the feet of the century's most famous Protestant thinker. Here was Karl Barth in the flesh, very man and very theologian. And while we may have been more intrigued by the former aspect of his being, it was the latter aspect which dominated our mood.

Even a theologically unconcerned onlooker would admit that the seminar is remarkable. That a seventy-two year old professor takes the trouble to meet each week with a group of foreign students is in itself a rather startling departure from European professorial isolation. It is understandable that Barth might feel it necessary to schedule a separate class in English for the benefit of Americans, since we are notoriously ill-equipped with other languages. But why should he pick a time outside the normal university hours? Is it because he wants to be sure that Fulbright students from near-by German and French universities may also have a chance to hear him? And is it not extraordinary that Barth has a seminar on alternate Tuesdays for French-speaking students? I know of few other professors on the continent who do not simply assume that European students will be able to understand them in their native tongue. Is Barth so accommodating because he is eager to communicate his thought with *exactitude* to as many persons as possible, French as well as American and British?

I believe so, for I believe that Karl Barth is gripped by a sober passion to convey his understanding of the Christian gospel as clearly, forcefully, and completely as possible to as many Christians as possible. In all likelihood, he is particularly interested in imparting his thought to Americans because of a feeling widely held among theological professionals on the continent that (to quote a joke popular among them) "theology is born in Germany, deteriorates in England, and is ruined in America." As Barth once exclaimed jokingly in response to some question about the Trinity, American students ask so many questions about this particular doctrine that one might well believe they had never heard of it! On the other hand, Barth knows that the American Church represents the most populous and potentially powerful arm of Protestantism in the world, and he wants to see that potential harnessed in the proper way. To put it in Reinhold Niebuhr's

terms, Barth suspects that we are blessed with an especially rich store of "common grace" (*i.e.*, a Church life which elicits warm enthusiasm and lively participation on the part of its members, and which fosters active neighborliness); however, Barth obviously feels that we are somewhat deficient in the element of "special grace" (*i.e.*, that more-than-neighborly interpretation of the gospel that emphasizes its transcendent power and makes the Church something more than a center of "belongingness").

But if, as it would seem, Barth is frankly evangelistic about his theology, he is at the same time an admirably fair-minded evangelist. The strength of his conviction is tempered by an ostensible desire to have all his ideas subjected to frank criticism. Precisely because he makes no artificial effort to appear "sincere" or "humble," he leaves with his students an impression of bonafide sincerity and humility. He does not shy away from making statements that could be taken as a sign of conceit, but the tone in which such statements are delivered is disarmingly matter-of-fact; furthermore, Barth usually qualifies remarks of this nature with an immediate warning about the relativity of any human interpretation of the Word. Time and time again he cautioned, "But don't take my word for it!" After criticizing the views of some theologian of the past he might add: "After all, each man can only witness to the Word as it comes to him in his time, and he may not be right. Only time can tell. Only God can judge. I might turn out to be a terrible heretic!" His emphasis was consistently placed on faithful testimony to one's own understanding of the Scriptures as heard in the Spirit; his guard was continually up against the imputation of finality to any system, including his own. On one occasion, after expressing his extreme distaste for the theological radicalism of Socinians and Unitarians ("I don't *like* these people!" growled Barth), he stressed his belief that even these groups have some segment of Christian truth, and that the Holy Spirit can work even through them. Barth's motto in dealing with such radicals is: "Tell me what you *do* believe, not what you don't accept." Surely the tolerance exhibited in the foregoing sentences is more representative of Barth's true position than another remark of his concerning the burning of Servetus: after commenting that Calvin's antagonist was "really not a very nice fellow," Barth offered the opinion that "it might be better to burn a heretic now and then than to be so tolerant as we are today."

Ordinarily, Barth's humor was not so grim. His ability in and his enjoyment of clever repartee is one of the most charming elements of his personality. He chuckles just as heartily over the

witticisms of others as he does over his own, the only difference being that when he personally has come up with a quip he glances slyly about the room to see if it has been properly appreciated! His very pose at the table is delightful: as he listens to the student-read summary of the currently assigned portion of the *Dogmatics* with which each session begins, he hunches over his copy with both elbows on the table, his forehead resting in his interlaced fingers, his face completely hidden from view. Every so often the reader may hear his sentences punctuated by a lusty "Aha!" or a grunt of skepticism. Once in a while the hands will go down, the face will look up, and Barth will nod approvingly to the summarizer, declaring, "Yes! That is very important: I'm glad you see that."

Because the formal presentation of the paper usually took no more than half an hour, there was ample time for participants to question Barth directly; as a matter of fact, he usually dealt with questions addressed to him in such a manner that new questions of his own were raised and student comment on these invited. Quite frequently he asked how his position on the issue at hand would be regarded by some specific school of American theological opinion. More than once he inquired about the fundamentalists of this country, with the clear intention of showing how his point of view differs from theirs. Last fall, during the very first meeting of the year, he barked, "Is there anyone here from Union Theological Seminary in New York City?" When I turned out to be the only one (a fact which seemed to surprise Barth a little), he fastened his gaze on me and asked, "What would Paul Tillich have to say about the point I have just made?" I hastened to inform him that Tillich is now at Harvard and that I had never heard him lecture! But it struck me as curious that Barth, who is well informed about America in many respects, even to the point of using a few slang expressions that are most unusual in the mouth of any European, much less a professor, should prove to be behind the times regarding certain other matters pertinent to his interests. I was quite surprised to learn that he had neither seen nor heard of the reviews of Vol. I, Part 2 of the *Church Dogmatics* which were published in the "Union Seminary Quarterly Review" of January, March and May, 1957.

So far, I have tried to portray a seminar in which unrestricted discussion and candid criticism are not only allowed but encouraged. Such a portrayal reflects the dominant tone of the seminar—let me stress that fact. But let me also qualify that impression by citing certain ways in which this freedom is impaired or frus-

trated. In the first place, there is a tacit presupposition that all participants are solidly within the theological circle. To be sure, that is a perfectly reasonable presupposition, an almost essential rule of procedure from the standpoint of an American student who journeys so far to delve into such a vast amount of material in a limited period of time. But it is a *different* presupposition from that which normally governs university seminars, and it is one which possesses drawbacks as well as advantages.

It so happened that there was present in the group last year a philosophy student who did not fit into Barth's theological circle at all. She had come to Basel for the purpose of studying with Karl Jaspers, and had decided to drop in on Barth mainly because she knew him to be an intellectual opponent of the philosopher. Perhaps her interest in the Barth-Jaspers controversy may have been stimulated in part by an amusing story current among Basel students: It is said that Barth, in a class which he holds at the same hour as one being held by Jaspers in a room directly underneath, often makes pointed observations concerning the fallen state of things "down below"! At any rate, this philosophy student confronted Barth one evening with a sharply pointed question concerning the historicity of certain New Testament passages. She refused to be satisfied with an answer that struck her as equivocal, and she pressed the issue relentlessly until group pressure overruled her and pushed the discussion to another topic. Later, she reopened the discussion with Barth personally. His final comment on the matter is alleged to have been a suggestion that she simply was not reading the Bible under the guidance of the Holy Spirit!

On another occasion, a student approached Barth after adjournment with a question which he had not been able to raise before the session was ended. He began with a reference to Jung's notion that religious symbols "wear out" and have to be replaced by new ones from time to time, and to Fromm's assertion (in *Man For Himself*) that the authoritarian God of the Jewish-Christian tradition simply cannot be worshipped or loved by modern man. Barth cut the questioner short with a question of his own: "Yes, yes, suppose they do say that—but how can they *prove* it?" In the light of the fact that Barth's own system requires a decisive leap of faith, his insistence on proof seemed rather ironic.

The major perplexity of the seminar, though, arises from Barth's incorrigible inconsistency. This is a problem which I can allude to in such blunt terms because I know that admirers of Barth consider the dialectical aspect of his theology a glory and

not an obfuscation. But to a person whose thinking is marked by sufficient clarity or insufficient sophistication, whichever the case may be, it is confusing when a speaker gives back with one sentence what he had taken away with the previous one, and then resists the intimation that he has contradicted himself by reiterating the first position and assuring the questioner that no contradiction exists. Barth says that each part of the Bible is equally the witness to the Word of God, and that one cannot pick and choose as liberals are wont to do, or isolate a "kernel" of Biblical truth *à la* Bultmann. Yet he reveals a sound relativistic approach in the way that he eliminates from consideration passages which do not fit his arguments. For example, he as much as tells you to use your common sense if you take the equality theory seriously and try to deal with Paul's pronouncements concerning marriage on a par with his pronouncements concerning baptism. In response to a question about Romans 2:14-15, Barth outlined what sounded to several of us like a beautiful description of Natural Law. When challenged, however, he staunchly denied the charge that there was any similarity between what he had said and Roman Catholic or Enlightenment theory. And as his encounter with the philosophy student indicates, Barth's notion that anyone who does not read the Bible "in faith" cannot understand its witness may be used effectively to insulate any given point from assault.

I make this ungracious mention of the inconsistency and insulation that frequently crop up in Barth's approach in order to highlight what I feel is the most interesting single aspect of the "phenomenon" of his English-speaking seminar—namely, the fact that so few of the participants seem to be disturbed by these characteristics. That they are very intelligent students is shown by the high quality of the papers presented; that they do not think uncritically is proved by the incisiveness of the questions raised after the reading of the paper each evening. But it seemed to me that on the whole the group was far too willing to accept anything Barth said in response to a question as *the answer*, whether or not the professor's reply really cleared up the problem, or even dealt with it squarely. This submission was no doubt caused in some measure by a desire to be courteous. Sometimes it may have been caused by a general feeling that a question had been wrung dry and that any further probing would be futile. Nevertheless, it bothered me that the atmosphere at the close of each session was not only complaisant but also complacent, as though the master had spoken (his own reservations about his thought forgotten),

all doubts had been cleared up, and everyone could go his separate way with theological peace of mind.

As I have attempted to make clear, I do not think Barth himself wants it to be this way. Possibly he fears as much as anyone a betrayal of his system by overly zealous disciples. He does not demand the "faith-seeking-understanding" approach to Barthian theology that so many theological students on the continent seem to assume. Professor Martin Werner of the University of Bern maintains that the trouble with the Barthians is that they have become so enraptured with the *spirit* of the early Barth's violent protest against the flabbiness of "civilized-Protestantism," that they have not bothered to understand the implications of the *letter* of Barth's later writings, in which he radically changes his earlier stand.

The one-sidedness of the Barth seminar worries me. It is all well and good that American theology should be eager to profit by the extremely significant pronouncements of continental theology which have taken us by storm in recent decades. But do we not have to be careful lest we be swept up into a kind of theological romanticism which looks upon Europe as the sole source of wisdom and which regards America as merely a passive recipient? What a pity that European theological students and American theological Europophiles do not take our tradition of "common grace" as seriously as American students are expected to take the rediscovered emphasis on "special grace"! What a shame that Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich are just names to most continental students (and Daniel Williams or Richard Niebuhr or John Bennett scarcely that), whereas Karl Barth and Oscar Cullmann are "real" theologians in the estimation of our seminarians! Is the ecumenical movement going to consist of our making all the concessions, as though it were true that we have "ruined" good old continental theology and have nothing creative of our own to give to the hoped-for rejuvenation of the Christian Church?

Let us fervently hope not. For whatever its merits in terms of faithfulness to Biblical or ecclesiastical tradition, Barthianism comes uncomfortably close to deserving the epithet Niebuhr often applies to it—"a religion for the catacombs." And whatever the shortcomings of American Christianity, it has a precious tradition of practical ethical vigor which in many respects is unique and which must be a vital part of the World Church if she is to be a significant force for good in the present era.

What long-range effects will the phenomenon of the Barth seminar for English-speaking students have on the development

of American theology? Many of the participants are distressed that there are so few Americans taking advantage of the golden opportunity to hear Barth personally in his last few years of teaching. Others come away more or less in agreement with the remark made by a professor of philosophy at the theological seminary of the University of Salonika: "Karl Barth? Yes, I studied him rather extensively when I was a student in Germany during the thirties. How can they still take him so seriously today?"