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The Humanity and Humour of Karl Barth

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KARL BARTH is the greatest theological genius that has appeared on the scene for centuries. He cannot be appreciated except in the context of the greatest theologians such as Athanasius, Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, nor can his thinking be adequately measured except in the context of the whole history of theology and philosophy.

Not only does he recapitulate in himself in the most extraordinary way the development of all modern theology since the Reformation, but he towers above it in such a way that he has created a situation in the Church, comparable only to the Reformation, in which massive clarification through debate with the theology of the Roman Church can go on.

Karl Barth has, in fact, so changed the whole landscape of theology, Evangelical and Roman alike, that the other great theologians of modern times appear in comparison rather like jobbing gardeners.

WHO IS HE?

Karl Barth is a native of Switzerland, born and brought up in the home of a Swiss pastor who, when Karl was but two years old, became a Professor of Church History in the University of Bern. It was in Bern that Karl Barth grew up and went to University to study philosophy and theology, and from there he went on to the Universities of Berlin, Tübingen and Marburg.

After spending some twelve years in the pastorate, mostly in the Alpine village of Safenwil in Aargau, he was called to be Professor of Reformed Theology in Göttingen. Then after more than a decade of teaching and debating in the universities of Münster and Bonn, in which he was the living centre of a volcanic disturbance in the whole field of theological thinking, and the great mind behind the German Church's struggle for survival against National-Socialism, he was ejected from Germany, and found refuge in Basel, the city of his birth, where he was appointed to the chair of Dogmatics, which for centuries had been occupied by some of the greatest thinkers of the Reformed Church.

WHAT IS HE LIKE?

Perhaps more than any other theologian of modern times, Barth resembles Luther in his sheer *Menschlichkeit*. That is to say, he has an overflowing love for all things human, whether they are the simplicities of natural life or the great achievements of the human spirit, in the midst of which he manifests a frankness, and childlikeness, and sincerity toward other human beings which can be both gentle and rough, but always with compassion.

His whole attitude to life, and even to theology, is expressed in his passionate love for the care-free, light-hearted music of Mozart, in which the profoundest questions are put to the eternal and the creaturely alike without the dogmatic presumption to any final answer or last word, and it is to the accompaniment of Mozart's music that his engagement in the hard work of dogmatics becomes sheer enjoyment of the majesty and beauty of God.

In the depth of his humanity Karl Barth has a fundamentally scientific cast of mind—the mind of eternal

inquiry, relentlessly probing into everything he finds, not in order to master it or to show off his own powers over it, but to listen to it, to learn from it, to let it declare itself to him, to teach him how to articulate understanding of it sincerely and faithfully in accordance with its own inner nature and necessity and beauty.

CREATIVE ART

That is the humility of the scientist who will not impose theory arbitrarily upon what he investigates, but is always ready to reconstruct what he already thinks he has learned in order to make it possible to learn really new things. It is the eye of the artist who has the faculty of seeing what is actually there and can pick out its deepest and most characteristic forms with which to depict it and communicate it so that his own creative art is allowed to be the instrument of the reality of his subject.

All Barth's theology is characterized by the relentless, irresistible questioning that uncovers the artificiality that constantly prevents us from attaining objectivity, and therefore has the most disturbing, critical effect in shaking the foundations, but only in order that the fundamental realities may be revealed and that genuine theological thinking may be built up on the concrete actuality of God's revelation in Word and Act.

POSITIVE CONCERN

The basic concern of Barth is, however, not critical but positive. In spite of the fact that he is the great enemy of all attempts at constructing rational systems, that is, at imposing systematically upon the subject-matter of theology a rational schematism of our own devising, he is the most constructive and systematic of minds, but it is a mind that finds the co-ordinating principle of its thinking not in its own dialectic but in the forms of rationality inhering in the object or in the material content of theological knowledge. It is in order to uncover this objective depth of rationality that he employs such ruthless, tireless questioning in which he goes round and round the point he seeks to elucidate, interrogating it at every possible angle and every possible level, refusing to break it up into parts in order to master it, so that at last it can stand out in all its own objective and independent nature and form.

Behind all this lies a passionate will to sympathy for what he investigates, whether it be the text of Holy Scripture, the concrete matter of some doctrine, or the mind of another theologian, and throughout the readiness to let himself be criticised by what he learns: that is to say, an openness or readiness of mind both for God and for man; and a determination to let God be God, man be man and nature be nature.

CRITICAL ROLE

Another aspect of Barth's humanity is his irrepressible humour. What we are concerned with here is the theological significance of this, for Barth's humour plays a fundamentally critical role in his thinking. He is able to laugh at himself, and therefore to criticize himself, and hence also to direct his ruthless critique at others in such a way that he can appreciate their intention and respect their persons and their sincerity.

Here he stands out in marked contrast to the seriousness with which nineteenth-century man took himself, and indeed to those today who make such heavy boring play with what they call 'modern man.' But above all Barth's humour has critical

significance for the nature and form of his own theological construction, for it means that he is ever open to the question as to the adequacy of his own thought-forms to their proper objects and that he will never let himself be a prisoner of his own formulations.

One can perhaps describe the critical significance of humour for Barth's theology by recalling a Rembrandt painting, with its terrific concentration of illuminated significance in the centre, its contrast of darkness and light, and objective depth, but with the humour of a cherub peeping over at it from a corner of the canvas, unable to suppress a smile.

GIGANTIC TASK

In other words, Barth engages in his gigantic task of dogmatics with the consciousness that the angels are looking over his shoulder, reminding him that all theology is human thinking, and that even when we have done our utmost in faithfulness to what is given to us, all we can do is to point beyond and above to the transcendent truth and beauty of God, thereby acknowledging the inadequacy of our thought in response to God's Word, but engaging in it joyfully, in gratitude to God who is pleased to let himself be served in this way by human thinking and to bless it in his grace.

One more aspect of Barth's humanity we must note is its *genius*. That is to say, it is a humanity that is full of surprises. Here, although no doubt he would resent it, we may compare his theological thinking to the music of Beethoven with its breath-taking turns rather than to the predestined texture of Mozart's inimitable compositions. Mozart may well be the greater genius, but when he has announced his theme and swept you into the skies like a lark, he creates in you the power of anticipation and you can hear the music from a long way off, and Barth certainly has that quality, too; but again and again Beethoven's music suddenly breaks in upon your ear with astonishing novelty that startles you, and you protest that he has shattered the logic of his composition, but before you can recover your breath you find that he has worked the whole symphony into such a rich and complex movement that the new element actually contributes to its unity. That also is the genius of Karl Barth.

NEW BARTH?

Again and again his contemporaries have spoken of a 'new Barth,' and have described him as a bird on the wing, darting like a swallow into quite new directions, and yet they have not taken the measure of the depth and complexity of this man's thought, or of the immense fertility of his fundamental simplicities which enable him to hold within a profundity elements which in other lesser minds fall apart into contradictions or hopeless antinomies. The reason for this is the incredible intensity with which Barth holds all his thinking in obedience to its object—the Lord God, the infinite and eternal, who has stooped to reveal himself in Jesus Christ and in him has taken us up to share with him his own divine life.

This article is printed by special arrangement with the SCM Press. It is part of the introduction written by Professor T. F. Torrance for the volume **THEOLOGY AND CHURCH** by Karl Barth, in The Preacher's Library Series, due to be published later this month at 37s. 6d. Next week Professor Torrance will describe 'how it all began' for Barth.