

In memory of Prof. Dr. Karl Barth

On 9th December 1968 one of the most remarkable theologians of all times, Prof. Karl Barth was called to higher service, at the age of 82. He had been in ill-health some two years ago but had made a remarkable recovery, and when I saw him in June 1968 at his home in Basle, he told me with great joy that he was once more able to conduct a seminar with theological students from all over the world.

I have known Prof. Barth since my student days, when I sat in the packed lecture-room at Basle University, during the German Nazi period, together with students from all over the world, many of them Nazi victims. For two years I had the privilege of attending all his lectures, seminars, colloquia, and discussion evenings, and I have kept in touch with him ever since then. He was greatly interested in all that happened in Southern Africa and showed increasing concern about developments in this part of the continent. For this reason it is certainly appropriate to devote a few lines to him in this review.

Karl Barth's social concern

When he was a young minister in one of the rural parishes in Switzerland where industries had been introduced, he took a tremendous interest in the social conditions of workers which at that time and particularly in that place were far from ideal. He became unpopular, "a red agitator" in the eyes of the wealthy owners of the factories, but - influenced by men such as the late Prof. L. Ragaz and inspired by Blumhardt father and son, - he could not preach the gospel of reconciliation without taking social action for the underprivileged. This concern for the poor and oppressed remained a feature of his personality throughout his life, and students of his voluminous and precious *Church Dogmatics* can find this concern expressed in many of these pages as well as in his many other books and articles.

Karl Barth and Biblical renewal

When Karl Barth was still a student and a young minister, theological "liberalism" held sway: in the centre of this theological liberalism there was no longer God and his reconciling act in Christ, but men's ideas about God. Men sought a way to God, but forgot that in Christ God had come to man, because in their search for God sinful men could only go astray. Karl Barth wit-

nessed the moral and theological decay after World War I, and together with his friends E. Thurneysen, E. Wolf, E. Brunner and F. Gogarten he tried a new way; he returned to the writings of the reformers, Luther and Calvin, and from them to the living Word of God as expressed in the Old and New Testaments.

God became again the centre of theology. This new approach expressed in Barth's commentary to the Romans which he wrote when still a pastor at Safenwil, proved to be a turning point in the theology. Barth was called to a professorship at Göttingen, then at Münster and afterwards at Bonn, in Germany. While in his earlier writings, we find a very strong theocentric and christocentric emphasis which was greatly needed, Karl Barth did not forget human concerns. He was far too great a "humanist" in the best sense of the word. The concept of God's covenant stands in the centre of his theological thinking and this means God is not only the "wholly Other", but he is God in his relationship to and concern for man. This aspect has unfortunately often been overlooked by theologians, especially by those influenced by the British and American tradition. In his *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth touches nearly on all the problems with which we are concerned today: work and working conditions, racism, birth-control, violence or non-violence, to mention only a few. His books deserve far more serious study, and I am sure that after the high waves of modern "secular theology", with its legitimate concerns, have ebbed out, there will be a Barth renaissance.

Karl Barth and ecumenism

Long before ecumenism was "in vogue", Karl Barth was a true ecumenist. It is in his lectures and seminars that we had to give serious consideration to Roman Catholic theology, and we learnt to appreciate the quests, the truth and also the weakness of the great theologians of the past, Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran and Reformed. As far back as 1935, we were introduced to the various Christian traditions and had to make a study of them. - Barth's return to the Word of God, which was followed by a similar movement within the Roman Catholic Church in the last decade, was a tremendous help towards ecumenical thinking. In 1948, Barth addressed the first Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam, and remained in touch with the ecumenical movement ever since then. He was greatly impressed by the Roman renewal

since Vatican II, and in 1967 he visited Pope Paul who called him a second Thomas of Aquinas. When I saw Prof. Barth in June 1967 and again in June 1968, he stated that the events in Roman Catholic theology at the present time needed our full attention and – so he said – were far more important and relevant than certain theological discussions going on in protestant theology.

Karl Barth and his struggle against Nazism

In 1935, Karl Barth was expelled from Germany by the Hitler regime. As soon as Hitler came to power in 1933, Karl Barth was one of its strongest opponents because of Nazism's "natural theology of 'Blut und Boden'" (blood and soil), i.e. its tendency to justify racism and the German way of life. He became the spiritual father of the confessional church in Germany which made such a strong stand against the pseudo-gospel of the Nazis. Karl Barth, being a Swiss citizen, was deported to his homeland and became Professor at Basle, while others such as Pastor Niemöller were imprisoned and then spent eight years in a concentration camp, or people like Pastor D. Bonhoeffer had to pay with their lives. Karl Barth was the spiritual father of the Confession of Barmen, 1934, which faced the new challenge that was put to the Christian Church through the emergence of Nazism and the "German Christians" as well as the fully syncretistic German "Glaubens-Bewegung" (faith movement). Barmen makes it unmistakably clear that there is but one revelation, that of God in Jesus Christ, and that Nazism

could in no way be a second revelation" through historical events expressed in the vigorous movement that started with Adolf Hitler and his idea of a "tausendjähriges Reich" (millennium) which lasted for 12 years only and ended with the disastrous results of the second world war.

Karl Barth and us

Could there be any theologian who is of greater significance for Africa than Karl Barth? His concern for the poor, for a theocentric and christocentric theology in which man is seen in his relationship to a truly human God (one of Barth's writings is entitled *The humanity of God*), with his ecumenism based on a serious study of all church traditions, and his struggle against racism and a pseudo-gospel, is not all this of greatest importance for us? One could only wish that his books, even and especially his voluminous *Church Dogmatics* were carefully studied though this takes time and energy. But this time will be well spent and give us the necessary equipment for our struggle today.

By some, Barth is labelled a "liberal" and by many others an "orthodox". It all depends, of course, what one understands by these labels. In some sense, all labels are mistaken. Barth's main concern was to listen carefully to what God has to say to us in Christ, and then to draw the necessary consequences for our personal and communal living, for social, political and economic problems. Could there be anything more rewarding and more urgent for us to do?

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Book review

F. F. BRUCE: *Romans*, An Introduction and Commentary. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. 288 p., boards, R1.35.

In addition to what is customary in this series, the commentary on Romans includes a very useful summary of the argument of the epistle and a select bibliography of works available in English. The introduction is also rather more substantial, including a discussion of some of the key words of the epistle. The author is Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis, University of Manchester.

C.C. of S.A. News Sheet