

No Boring Theology!

A Letter from Karl Barth

SEAJT 11 (1969)

Dear Christians in South East Asia,

It was a happy surprise for me to hear that an entire number of the South East Asia Journal of Theology will deal with the nice theme—"Karth Barth". * Having been invited to greet you on this occasion myself, I must confess that for the most part you are unknown to me. To be sure, I have had the pleasure now and then to meet a South East Asian Christian (and sometimes also a Buddhist) or to get to know him a little in my study among my many books. I also read the newspaper carefully every day and there I learn again and again something of the dynamic situation in your corner of the world. But still, my way has never led me to any actual journey into your presence—not even to India, like Pope Paul VI who is so mobile in this connection. In the boundaries in which I have lived and worked, and in the smaller space in which I can move as a man who has become old, very old, I am somehow far away from you.

I am all the more surprised that I am apparently not an entirely unknown figure to you and that among you there seems to exist a certain interest in taking notice of "me". And I am still more surprised that (at least in the opinion of the editor of your periodical) the little piece of theology that I have presented here in my place for future pastors, may now also be of significance for the theology with which you in your place are entrusted and engaged. Can the theology, presented by me, be understandable and interesting to you—and how? And can you continue in the direction in which I believed I had to go, and at the place where I had to set a period—and to what extent? Well, it is your responsibility to take a position on this. But I would like now just to put into your hands two small criteria by which I would judge whether you have understood what my concern in theology has always been, and is to this day:

1. A Christian does theology well, when he sticks to his real business. A good theologian is namely one who wants to accept and to confess, both courageously and humbly, with hard

Translated by William Rader

* Our intention was to devote a quarterly issue to "Karl Barth", but as this Journal is now published bi-annually this material forms half an issue.

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work and simple prayer: "I am the Lord, your God. You shall have no other gods besides me" (Ex. 20: 3). Christian theology is therefore good to the extent that in its speaking, thinking and acting—free from all "Babylonian captivities"—it is not an end in itself, but completely service—service in which one learns more and more: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3: 30)—He, the living, free, but in this way gracious God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—the Father of Jesus Christ!" If the theologian serves Him, then he will not be "fugitive and wandering" like Cain, always merely experimenting, letting himself be driven by this or that wind of modes or notions. Rather, proceeding from a clear basis and progressing towards a clear goal he will venture firm steps. If the theologian serves Him, then he knows too that he dare not remain at some stand-point or other, at some custom or tradition, not to mention looking back like Lot's wife. Rather, he will have every reason to go further onward.

2. A Christian does theology well, when he sticks joyfully, yes with humor to his real business. No boring theology! No morose theologians! Of course, I know: there are today many, many serious questions—and we ourselves really have our very strong doubts. But since a good theologian does not serve himself, but God,—does not preach himself, but once again, God, his questions and doubts must have no final power over him; nor does he need to prop up his Father in heaven with some sort of well-intended apologetic. Rather, he may believe confidently and serenely that God really has not died and will at the right time care for the recognition of His name, His will and His kingdom. And I really know too; we are surrounded on every side by very much sadness—and we ourselves are again and again very unpleasant fellows. But since a good theologian, again, does not serve himself, but Him, the Father of Jesus Christ, he may look at his fellow men who are loved by God in every case, and even at himself contentedly and hopefully; he may (the more he takes his business seriously!) despite everything, laugh from his heart and even laugh at himself.

But enough of these pointers for the understanding of "my" theology! Now I want instead to think a moment about you and about the task which is placed upon you as Christians in your world. In my long life I have spoken many words. But now they are spoken. Now it is your turn. Now it is your task to be Christian theologians in your new, different and special situation with heart and head, with mouth and hands. How is this done? Well, for this

5 I can less than ever make prescriptions. That is more than ever your responsibility to answer adequately. Yet, I would like in this respect also to give you two small friendly suggestions:

1. I can only encourage you: Yes, do that: say that which you have to say as Christians for God's sake, responsibly and concretely with your own words and thoughts, concepts and ways! The more responsibly and concretely, the better, the more Christian! You truly do not need to become "European", "Western" men, not to mention "Barthians", in order to be good Christians and theologians. You may feel free to be South East Asian Christians. Be it! Be it, neither arrogantly nor faint-heartedly with regard to the religions around you and the dominant ideologies and "realities" in your lands! Be it all openness for the problems with are so burning in your region, and for your own, special and unique fellowmen; but be it above all in the freedom which is given and allowed to us and which is—according to II Cor. 3: 17—where "the spirit of the Lord is".

2. If I heard rightly, there are however some among you who have already understood this first point well—right away a second point to consider: We all—you there and we here—have to believe, to trust and to obey only one Spirit, one Lord, one God. We all—you there and we here—have therefore to proclaim strictly the same: namely simply the one event, in which both at the same time are true: "Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth" (Luke 2: 14). Surely, you will have to proclaim the same in your region quite differently—even more: you will have to proclaim the same better than has been the case with us European Christians; for we have again and again not given God the honor and have not stood up for peace on earth. But that does not change the fact that what you may and should say and do differently and better must be still the same about which the biblical witnesses of the Old and New Testaments were concerned and about which then we (surely, often not well!) have been concerned and are still concerned. You there and we here are good Christians only so long as we all—in openness for one another (and not to forget: at the same time also for our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters!)—belong to the one people of God, to the one Church of Jesus Christ, to the one communion in the Holy Spirit.

In the fellowship of faith, of love and of hope, I greet you all cordially as your old friend.

Basel, 1968, Nov. 19th.

Karl Barth

W. A. VISSER 'T HOOFT

I may speak here in the name of a great many men and women all over the world who can say, without exaggeration, that Karl Barth was the instrument used by God to give them a theological existence. Already in 1923, the "Letter to the Romans" had the effect on me of an electric shock, and many other people had the same experience during the years that followed. We were so uncertain, we were seeking everywhere, we were really in a dark belfry but we had not found the staircase or the bell-rope. In this plight, what a sense of liberation we felt when we realized that one of our contemporaries (who had been in the same plight) had received an answer to his questions. That answer helped us to read the Bible with new eyes, and showed us how to go forward.

It was in 1927, in his Preface to the first edition of his "Dogmatik", that Karl Barth used the image of the bell. At that time, he did not know that the bell would be heard all over the world.

How can one explain the fact that what was worked out in the little Swiss village, evoked a response in Japan, New Zealand, Ceylon and North America? And not only in the Reformation-Churches, but also in the Catholic and Orthodox Churches? I think that the plight of the Church was universal, and that its sickness had become an epidemic of ecumenical dimensions. Karl Barth did not speak of separate symptoms of that sickness; he described it as the *vitium originis*, i.e. that the Church had become unfaithful to its real primary task. One of his first essays, which were read in every continent, was a simple article published in 1931, in the "Feuille centrale de Zofingue" with the title "Fragen an das Christentum" (Questions to Christianity). It contained some sharp questions. Does Christianity realise that it is confronted by a world in which new totalitarian ideologies and religions are seizing power? Will Christians fall into the error of compromising with these religions and adapting itself to them? Or will Christianity discover afresh that it can only survive in the form of a community in which God speaks and man listens to his voice?

Barth's "Theologische Existenz heute" showed the Confessing Church in Germany what course to take; and many Christians in other Churches learned from his questions to perceive what their task was in the great spiritual struggle of the 1930's. I am convinced that the renewal of the ecumenical movement in the 1930's and 1940's would not have taken place in the same way, were it not for the critical questions raised by Karl Barth. He did not make things easy for us; but no one could doubt that from his statement on the Mission Conference in Jerusalem in 1931 up to his "Ad limina Apostolorum" his sole concern was the great cause of God.

Thus in a very unique way, Karl Barth became a "Pastor Pastorum Ecumenicus." His epistles (Sendschreiben) contained admonitions, consolation, encouragement. They are a fine example of the fact that spiritual authority is really *spiritual* authority, and that it can be exercised from a

study in Basle just as well as from the headquarters of a Church or of a Council of Churches. It is characteristic that the last of these pastoral letters is addressed to the Christians in South-East Asia; it reached me yesterday from Singapore. Its main theme is: You must bear your witness in your own way, and better than we have done, but it must be the same witness as that given by the men in the Old and the New Testament.

It was therefore quite natural that Karl Barth was asked to introduce the main theme at the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Amsterdam in 1948. (The proposal to invite him came from a theologian who was working on an entirely different theological line.) What Barth said to the ecumenical movement on that occasion, and again later on when preparations were being made for the Evanston Assembly in 1954, can best be illustrated by a typical incident at the Chateau de Bossey. A discussion was going on there about the Bible and the confessions. One participant had a thick volume in front of him containing the dogmatic symbols of his Church, from which he quoted from time to time. Barth grew impatient; he seized a copy of the New Testament in Greek and placed it on top of the thick volume. Everyone understood what he meant by the gesture.

It was not only through his writings and addresses, however, that he carried ecumenical influence. People from many different countries recall with gratitude unforgettable hours in his little study, when he listened attentively to their questions and difficulties and helped them to a still more serious understanding of those same questions and difficulties. What he said about his intimate friend Pierre Maury, is equally true of Barth himself: that his great gift was the ability to combine a profound interest in theological questions with understanding for everything human and personal.

Is that all finished now? Are we taking leave today not only of Karl Barth but also of his testimony? Certainly not. If God has sent us a man who has interpreted His Word with such authority and clarity, He will also ensure that this testimony is heard again and again. There will be times when few people will listen to Barth. But there will be other times when many people will joyfully rediscover his message.

The news of Karl Barth's death reached me in the headquarters of the Reformed Church of France in Paris, when I was just about to conduct a short service for the staff. The text on which I had been asked to speak was taken from the 5th chapter of the 1st Epistle to the Thessalonians. At that moment, the voice of Paul and the voice of Karl Barth seemed to merge into one single voice, especially when I read the words, "Rejoice always . . . give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Was that not exactly what Karl Barth had always said to us?

And then came the simple, straightforward reason for this thankfulness, which sums up everything that Karl Barth has told us, and which expresses everything, that we have to say to one another in this hour:

"He who calls you is faithful, and He will do it."

Basle, 14th December, 1968.

W. A. VISSER'T HOEFT

The story of the life-work of Karl Barth begins at the end of the first World War when he was a pastor in a small village in German Switzerland. Like so many people at that time and later, he did not really know what to preach. And then he began to look around and decided that he'd study again very thoroughly the Epistle to the Romans of St. Paul. And as in the case of Martin Luther, and in the case of John Wesley, it was there that he found a message that interested him passionately, and that he wanted to pass on to the world. And the message was that it's not by looking into man that you find God, but only when you try to really take seriously that He reveals Himself, that he takes the veil away, and that he speaks to man in his revelation in Jesus Christ.

Karl Barth has written a little later, in 1927, "it seems as if I'm like a man who climbs up the stairs in a dark church-tower, and instead of holding on to the hand-rail, takes hold of a rope, and the rope proves to be the bell-rope, and to one's astonishment, one hears the bell ringing—and not only for oneself." And that's really what happened. Barth wrote that in 1927, but today, we can say that, that bell has rung all over the world, because that message of Karl Barth as been an element of electricity in theology all over the place. People asked at first: but is that not all theological speculation, is it not an escape from the real world? They even said sarcastically: Instead of saying "Stand up, O man of God", Barth seems to say "Sit down, O man of God"! But a little later they had to revise their opinion, because then Hitler came, and a great church conflict started in Germany, and Barth was again the man who pulled the bell-rope. He was the man who gave courage to the confessing church in Germany to stand up against National Socialist doctrine, and during the war it was Karl Barth who sent out his letters from Basel to all countries where they had a great fight with National Socialism to show them what was at stake, so it was surely not an irrelevant message.

And then, I must speak of his ecumenical importance. First the simple fact that his theology affected all churches. All churches were questioned. I remember now suddenly, in the Nineteen Thirties especially, the Roman Catholics became again interested in Protestantism, saying here's something that we must hear, that we must have a dialogue with; and how it brought the whole discussion between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism to a new level. And then he began to participate himself in the ecumenical movement. His participation in Amsterdam at the first assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1948, and then in the preparation of the next assembly, and his help to give a substance to the ecumenical movement, so that the ecumenical movement didn't become a movement of people just talking vaguely in a sort of general indifference about the great Christian truth, but that the movement was really a movement of concentration on the essentials.

Once the British Broadcasting Corporation interviewed Barth, and at the very end of the interview, the interviewer turned to him and said; "Now,

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please will you summarise your message, just in a few words." And Barth had an immediate answer: he just said, "Do not be afraid." That's typically Karl Barth. At the basis of his message, there was a tremendous comfort and a tremendous joy. And even in the last days, I met him again a few weeks ago, and that was the tone of what he had to say. In a world where so many people are afraid he says "Be joyful! Have confidence that God still reigns." And I'm convinced that his life-work, which some say is now antiquated, will go through many revivals, again and again. People will rediscover the witness of Karl Barth.

MISSION AND CHANGE

MISSION AND CHANGE is a theological exposition of the relation of change and mission in the history of salvation.

MISSION AND CHANGE is an E.A.C.C. publication written by Dr. Emerito Nacpil, Professor of Theology at Union Theological Seminary, Philippines.

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D. T. NILES

I had just finished my theological studies at Bangalore in 1933, when I attended the Quadrennial Conference of the Student Christian Movement of India, Burma and Ceylon which was held in December that year at Allahabad. Just before I went to Allahabad, I spent a month with the Burma Gospel Team which was touring India at that time. The Burma Gospel Team was strongly influenced by the Oxford Group Movement.

At Allahabad, W. A. Visser't Hooft, then General Secretary of the World Student Christian Federation, delivered an address influenced by the writings of Karl Barth. I had read a little of Karl Barth at Bangalore, but Visser't Hooft's address marked my real understanding of what Barth was saying. Looking back on my experience at that time, I would say that my association with the Burma Gospel Team prepared me for what happened to me at Allahabad. I had seen that theological faith could not be rested on so-called personal experience. I saw that it rested rather on its own intrinsic authority.

In my autograph album, Visser't Hooft wrote at Allahabad the words of Pascal: "Only God speaks well of God." I glimpsed the meaning of this as a result of Visser't Hooft's address. Everything I learnt at Bangalore sort of fell into place.

In 1935, I went as a delegate from the Student Christian Movement of India, Burma and Ceylon to the General Committee of the World Student Christian Federation held at Sofia, Bulgaria. The Bible Study leader at this Conference was Pierre Maury, another disciple of Karl Barth. He helped me to understand the difference between going to the Bible for answers to questions we ask and approaching the Bible with our answers to the questions it raises. Pierre Maury would say, "Only God has the right to ask questions."

These two experiences at Allahabad and Sofia prepared me for my first interview with Karl Barth. I went to Basle from Sofia to attend the first Missions Conference of the World Student Christian Federation, the first ecumenical conference at which I had to make a major speech. I took the opportunity to go and visit Karl Barth. I must confess that my interest in this first visit was simply to meet the man. I cannot remember that we talked theology very much. It was much more a personal conversation. The impression Karl Barth made on me was that of a very human person of great kindness.

A contrast will make the point. I have had the privilege of many conversations with Emil Brunner also. Brunner left you in no doubt that he was professor and teacher. He was interested in your ideas. Karl Barth was interested in you. It may be that he was not interested in your ideas anyway.

I can recall one item of conversation in this first meeting which may be of some interest. Barth talked to me about our Christian communities in Asia living in the midst of men of other faiths. In the course of the conversa-

D. T. Niles is Chairman of the East Asia Christian Conference.

// tion, he said, "Other religions are just unbelief." I remember replying with the question, "How many Hindus, Dr. Barth, have you met?" He answered, "No one." I said, "How then do you know that Hinduism is unbelief?" He said, "A priori." I simply shook my head and smiled.

My next meeting with Barth was in 1948 at Amsterdam at the Inaugural Assembly of the World Council of Churches. One afternoon, Pierre Maury invited me to have lunch with him and Barth at their hotel. Over lunch, Barth was telling us of his meeting with the women at the Assembly who, under the leadership of Sarah Chakko were discussing the place of women in the life of the Church. As Barth put it, the women wanted to meet some theologian who was prepared to defend St. Paul's conception of women. Barth said, "I volunteered." I asked him how he got on. His answer was, "I was afraid of those women. Miss Chakko has very bright eyes."

In this conversation, I remember asking Barth a question, his reply to which I have never forgotten. I asked him about St. Paul's advice that women should keep quiet in Church. He said, "The correct attitude for men before God is silence. All mankind must behave as St. Paul says the women must behave. And, if women will not teach men how to behave before God, who will teach them?"

After lunch, Pierre Maury excused himself because he had to meet some one else and I got up to go. Barth said to me, "If you have nothing else to do, don't go. Let us talk." I said, "Alright, what do you want to talk about?" He said, "Marriage." I was quite surprised. He asked me, "I hear you people arrange your marriages. Have you yourself arranged any marriages?" I said, "Yes." Then he said, "Please tell me how you do it. I want all the details." So I told him. He listened with great interest and when I finished, he heaved a sigh and said, "And then they love each other!" I couldn't help laughing. It was the humanity of the man that was so infectious and so charming about him.

Mrs. Visser't Hooft once told me how she was walking with him to a meeting. On the way they saw a little cottage on fire. She said that he stopped to look at the whole incident with great concern and greater curiosity. It seems she said to him, "You are going to be late for the meeting." To which he replied, "I can talk anytime. You can't see this kind of thing anytime."

My next association with Barth was as a member of the Theological Commission that prepared the statement on "Hope" for the Evanston Assembly. This Commission worked over a period of three years up to the Evanston Assembly in 1954. There are some things that have stuck in my memory about him as I knew him in this work together.

During the intervals when we had our coffee-period, he would often pick up Jacques, the little son of Madam Sturm who was the hostess at Bossey at that time, put Jacques on his shoulder and run with him round the Bossey grounds. Often John Baillie would chase them to Jacques' delight. During meal times, he would get hold of me and Paul Devanandan and say, "Come and sit next to me and tell me stories." Once or twice, we told him some stories at which he laughed heartily and then remarked, "But these stories are that side of the frontier."

In the Commission itself, he spoke very little. But I remember one incident when, in a draft prepared by Paul Minear, a sentence read, "Life is not an ultimate tragedy." Barth would not accept the word 'ultimate.' He

kept on repeating: "Life is not a tragedy at all. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead." Finally in the discussion, Minear said to Barth, "At home when the milk boils over, we call it a tragedy." Barth's comment was, "That is bad use of English." We compromised by saying that the word "ultimate" would not appear in the German text.

After Evanston, I remember two meetings with Barth. The first was when I went to see him to discuss with him a problem that was very much in my mind at that time. As a result of many circumstances, I was forced to speak a great deal about the problems raised by Astrology. Before I committed myself to any definite speaking or writing upon this subject, I wanted to talk it over with him. I remember what he said in reply to my question. He said to me, "Astrology is the science of our bondage. It deals with us simply as parts of the causal universe. What we need is to enter into the freedom of the Sons of God. Only Jesus can set us free." The more I have thought of this answer, the more I have seen how deep it cuts.

The next time I visited him was with my wife. We went with Philippe Maury and his mother. Barth had said to me before, "I must meet your wife." When we arrived, he took her by the hand to a side and whispered something to her. I asked her afterwards what he said. She said that he asked her, "Is he a good husband?" That visit was after the death of Pierre Maury, and the conversation to a large extent was about him. I asked Barth about Pierre Maury's exposition of the doctrine of pre-destination. Barth spoke of the extent to which he himself had been helped in his own thinking about pre-destination by Pierre Maury. He underlined the point that Pierre Maury makes that pre-destination is a mystery of light and not of darkness, a mystery of grace even when it is about the judgement of God that one is speaking.

One other matter I would recall here, and that because it throws light on the way in which my own theological thinking was developing. I am not absolutely certain of the date, but once when I was staying in the home of the Visser't Hoofts, Mrs. Visser't Hooft showed me an article she had written in which she had put into dialogue-form a portion of Barth's *Dogmatik* which had just appeared in which he had discussed the meaning of the *Imago Dei* in relation to the relationship between man and woman. Barth was drawing a distinction between two ways of existence which he designated by two contrasting words "Mitwelt" and "Umwelt". I was surprised and pleased when I discovered that the basic point which he was making was a point which I myself had made in my paper on Genesis that I had read at a Theological Conference in Ceylon in 1942. When I told Mrs. Visser't Hooft about this, she said how happy Barth would be to know that I had arrived at this theological insight, quite independantly. "It shows", she said, "how close you are to Barth's own way of thinking."

In 1960, when the World Student Christian Federation held its meeting at Strassburg on the "Calling of the Church to Mission," we were anxious that Barth should come to speak to us at the meeting. When I wrote inviting him, he declined saying that he could not travel to Strassburg. I wrote back volunteering to bring the whole Conference to Basle to his home. He had then retired and was living in a small house away from the university. He replied that the prayer of the importunate widow had to be answered and that, therefore, he would come. He spent three unforgettable hours with us, answering questions that were put to him.

I can recall many of the questions and answers. Out of these I want to select two. One question which was asked of him was, "Do you believe in the existence of the devil?" His answer was, "The devil should not be believed in. The devil should be left behind." I remember the phrase he used. "Whenever you talk about the devil, you must be looking over your shoulder." Another question that was put to him was, "What is the difference between a missionary, a witness and an evangelist." His answer was, "You speak of a missionary in relation to God's mission to and in the world. You speak of a witness in relation to the signs and tokens of the Kingdom. An evangelist is a person whom D. T. Niles invented." I asked him afterwards what he meant by this answer. He laughed and said, "I don't like the word 'evangelist'. The word seems to me to suggest that evangelism is a talking activity."

In 1962, the Princeton Theological Seminary celebrated its sesqui-centennial. For the celebrations, they had invited as speakers Karl Barth, Visser't Hooft, James Stewart and myself. We were together at Princeton. That was a grand time. Barth was there with his two sons, both of whom I had come to know and whose friendship I had come to value. Wherever Barth went, on that visit, which I think was his first visit to America, he was hailed as a great theologian. During the encomiums that were heaped on him, he would sit peering over his glasses and with rather a quizzical smile on his lips. The substance of the lectures he delivered during this visit to America was what was published later as an "Introduction to Evangelical Theology."

His reply to what was said of him is in these lectures. As he puts it:

"What am I describing? The genesis and existence of a prophet? No, but simply the entirely peculiar character of the theologian's origin and life. The genesis and existence of some great theologian? Nonsense—because what can 'great' mean? There may be great lawyers, doctors, natural scientists, historians and philosophers. But there are none other than little theologians, a fact that, incidentally, is fundamental to the 'existentials' of theology.

There is no avoiding the fact that the living object of theology concerns the whole man. It concerns even what is most private in the private life of the theologian. Even in this sphere the theologian cannot and will not flee from this object. If this situation should not suit him, he might, of course, prefer to choose another and less dangerous discipline than theology. But he should be aware that it is characteristic for the object of theology to seek out every man in every place sooner or later (see Psalm 130). It will seek him out wherever he may be and pose to him the same question. Therefore, it would probably be simpler to remain a theologian and learn to live with God's claim upon even the most intimate realms of the theologian's humanity."

Here in a sense is said all that needs to be said about Karl Barth as man, as theologian and as prophet. I count it a priceless privilege that it was given to me to know him. The memory of him will help to fortify whatever of my ministry lies in the future as it has helped to fortify it in the past.

U. KYAW THAN

I will always associate Dr. Karl Barth with my reflections on Christian Hope. His name first registered in my mind at an Asian Christian Conference for student leaders back in 1948 at Kandy, Ceylon. I was not a student of theology and had no idea of the role his thinking and life had played in the churches at large in the world. Two years later, I found myself at Dr. Barth's home in Basel sitting next to the distinguished thinker and theologian, not really understanding what he meant as he squeezed my arm and made a point about new voices coming up from Asia. A group of us taking part as students in the winter sessions of the Graduate School at the Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, during that year had gone over to Dr. Barth's home for a question-and-answer period with him. I was made aware at that time how central the expectation of the returning master was to Karl Barth. One questioner prompted the elaboration of this point as he wondered if the theologian's emphasis on Christian Hope would influence Christians to a certain type of "quietism"—inactive, resigned complacency! The reply was unmistakably clear. How could the servant expecting any moment the return of the Master remain inactive and complacent? Because the Master's return was expected that servant would be all the more active utilizing the available moments to catch up with what he had to do and to be ready for the Master's arrival.

As I participated later in the WCC Second Assembly centred on the theme "Christ the Hope of the World" and as I read the preparatory book on this subject which had been produced by the group of theologians including Dr. Barth, the central point of that afternoon's discussion in the home of the thinker kept turning up in my mind, reminding me not only of the need to be ready to give a reason of the hope but also to be *obedient in action* because of that hope. That comment about the expectant servant trying to catch up with his work because of the imminent return of the Master also added the note of urgency to our obedience in action.

Though his scholarly work on the church dogmatics will always be referred to by those who come after him, he was not an ivory tower intellectual who had no part in social and political actions. On the contrary his opposition to national socialism of Hitler's Germany as well as his active support for a protest against a British Fair in Basel as a way of opposing the British policy in Nigeria, just a few weeks before his death, showed how much this intellectual theologian was putting his faith and hope into concrete forms of Christian behaviour in contemporary society.

Even with modern facilities and organization for translation and communication it will be quite some time before the works of Dr. Barth become accessible to all the Churches in Asia. But there is no doubt that already the influence of the man, his life and thought have *begun* to be felt in the remotest parts of the world—and happily in strategic sectors of Asian church life.

Soon after the death of Karl Barth, Harvey Cox wrote that "cynics might suggest that his (Barth's) theological obituary could have been written ten years ago, when the faint beginnings of the new radical theologies began to appear" (*Commonweal* for Dec. 27, 1968, p. 424). The fact is that even theologians of stature (not necessarily cynics) have called Barth's writings irrelevant theology and have long ago given up reading him. He has sometimes been accused of being a narrow-minded Biblicist, most of whose thoughts go against present theological currents. At the same time, he has also been praised as the most creative Protestant theologian whose theological career is without equal in our century. For the Protestant theologian, H. Berkhof, Barthian theology constitutes the Copernican revolution of Protestant theology (*Evangelische Theologie*, 1948, p. 256.)

We can prescind from how later theologians and historians of religion will ultimately judge his impact and influence on the totality of theological development. What I shall briefly record here is simply my reaction to the thought of Barth. It is almost impossible to single out one topic among his innumerable works as the one most important point around which everything else revolves. But I would suggest that for Christians in the Philippines, Barth's most important contribution to theology was his insistence on the return to the origins of Christianity, especially the return to the Word of God.

We might recall how numerous Protestant theologians of the 19th and early 20th centuries were in varying degrees followers of Schleiermacher. Prominent among these were A. Harnack, A. Ritschl, and W. Hermann whose student Karl Barth was. Theirs was a liberal, optimistic and immanent theology. The young Barth was then a firm believer in the progress of humanity, not only biologically and economically, but also religiously.

But this optimism was brusquely shattered by events of the First World War. It might with some justification be said that Barth revolted against all the prevailing currents of Protestantism then: against the liberal theology of Schleiermacher, against the rationalistic criticism of Sacred Scripture, against Hegelian idealism, and against the so-called "mediation theology" (*Vermittlungstheologie*) which sought a middle way between the ways of faith and reason and which was favored by Harnack, Ritschl, and Hermann. Against all this, Barth insisted not only on a return to the doctrines of Luther and Calvin but also to patristic theology. But above all else he urged a return to Sacred Scripture where the Word of God calls man.

Barth insists that man must return to the Word of God and listen to God speaking. The God who is Wholly Other has nevertheless spoken and revealed Himself to man. The Word of God assumes three forms: Scriptural witness, church proclamation, and revelation. Of the three, the last is the most important. Revelation is God's being present to man in time through Christ. Revelation is Jesus Christ. "Just because we regard the Word of God

16
not merely as proclamation and Scripture but as God's revelation in proclamation and Scripture, we must regard it in its identity with God Himself. God's revelation is Jesus Christ, God's Son... He (Jesus of Nazareth) is the self-revealing God" (*Church Dogmatics*, I, i, 155 and 442). When we return to the Word of God, we return to Jesus Christ. The theology of Karl Barth is basically a Christology.

More than anything else it is this return to a faithful hearing of the Word of God that makes Barth's theology of particular significance to Christians of the Philippines. It has been repeatedly said that we Filipinos are still looking for our national identity. It is perhaps true to say that very many of us have very ambivalent feelings regarding the rejection or acceptance of values commonly associated with the colonialist regimes that have governed us. Religion in the developing countries—the so-called Third World—will always be judged on whether it has anything to tell the people of this world. And the word that Christianity can speak, can only be the Word of God. I have prescindend from the nuances of theological doctrines on which Catholic theologians especially will take issue with Barth since any detailed discussion of his doctrine is obviously impossible in a short statement like this. The impact of Barth on us will ultimately be judged by how effectively his writings bring us to listen faithfully to what the Word of God has to tell us.

Barth: From Theology to Political Ethics

A Sketch in Thirteen Strokes

VERNE H. FLETCHER

We shall try to summarize here Barth's view of the way of the church in the political sphere after having noted the theological orientation which undergirds his political views. We have called this brief effort a "sketch" for it might be likened to the reaction of an artist who, finding himself in the midst of an overpowering event, quickly sketches in broad strokes his dominant impressions with a view to their possible subsequent use as an aide-memoire for a more careful work. Thus we are simply giving one possible description of the dynamic movement of Barth's thinking as he moves from basic theology to a concrete stance on political questions and especially on the relation of the Christian community and the political community. This is one man's impression of the shape of what is occurring.

Can lines be drawn from Barth's basic stance to the varied scene in South-East Asia today? This, we admit, is the vital question though the answers have been left to the reflection of the readers according to their respective concrete situations. Here we are content simply to report on what Barth himself saw and wrote. We make this report in his own words, without commentary. Consequently, that which follows is primarily a mosaic of quotations and paraphrases. The result is an over-condensed summary which necessarily eliminates the nuances and modulations which give color and humanness to Barth's own writings. Moreover, we will not document our statements with an apparatus of footnotes for to do so would be pretentious in the sort of brief sketch we are offering.

1

God's action is his being. God is what he wills himself to be in his works and words through which he reveals himself to man. Ultimately, the gracious act of God in Jesus Christ is the definitive standpoint from which to view both God-and-man and man-and-man. This means that Christian ethics is Christological ethics in the sense that its form and shape is constituted by, derived from, and orientated toward the Christ event—a specific historical occurrence, effecting *the* decisive existential and ontological change in earthly and heavenly history.

2

The great change in heavenly history is that beginning from this singular and particular event God conjoins his history to ours and from henceforth effectively becomes God-for-man and God-with-man. Consequently, we may speak of the humanity of God which involves the decision of God to make

Verne H. Fletcher is Professor of Biblical Ethics at the "Duta Watjana" Sekolah Tinggi Theologia, Jogjakarta. In September, 1969, he assumes the chair of Ethics at Near East School of Theology, Beirut.

Note: In addition to the *Church Dogmatics*, this sketch is based on the following occasional writings: *Gospel and Law* (1935), *Church and State* (1939), *The Christian Community and the Civil Community* (1946), *The Christian Community in the Midst of Political Change* (1948), *The Church Between East and West* (1949), *The Christian Message and the New Humanism* (1949), *Christ and Adam* (1952), *Humanity of God* (1956).

humanity—though always remaining distinct yet also becoming—a part of himself, thus actualizing, not by necessity but by free and sovereign decision and action, the possibility of his omnipotent love to become a creature, to be in time and space, to be weak and impotent, as an individual man; and yet more than an individual, to be the one man for all men, thus exalting humanity by his self-humiliation. The humanity of God means that henceforth nothing pertaining to the life and history of humanity is of indifference to God.

3

The great change in earthly history is that the rejection and judgement which were man's due were taken by Jesus Christ upon himself while man in God's gracious freedom is elected to life. That is to say, man, estranged from his own reality, his essential being endlessly and incurably endangered—man, who quite simply is wicked and lost, is by this change sustained by God—embraced, surrounded and seized by God—and, though all the while remaining in himself as he was, yet,—in Christ—becoming a new being, an altered being, involving, not the potentiality of new being, but the gift of a new subject introduced in Jesus Christ. Moreover, since this "new subject" is Jesus Christ, the new reality embraces not only individual persons but also a community of men and all men. All human decisions and deeds are thus related to the event of Jesus Christ—implicitly on the part of the "world", explicitly on the part of the Christian community as the restored covenant partner of God.

4

The Christian community is placed under the divine verdict according to which Jesus Christ, representatively, gave the saving answer in our place. The Christian community accepts the divine direction that man does not exist each one for himself but for community-in-love, which is the bringing together in genuine force of man with man on the deepest levels. The Christian community looks eagerly forward in hope to the perfection and wholeness of being in the service of God and is already seized by this promise; the ultimate already lights up and beckons to the provisional and turns the provisional, both being and action, into a sign and summons of the ultimate.

5

The Christian community, viewed anthropologically, refers to persons—potential and partially realized—constituted by existence in the new community, and at the same time refers to the new community—implicit and partially actualized—constituted by such persons. The Christian community thus described in terms of co-humanity is not a race segregated from other men, since co-humanity is also the fundamental mark of the common nature of man as such, of real man, that is, man in the intention of his Creator. According to the concept of co-humanity, the *humanum* of man is ordered by the principle of encounter—self-encounter inseparable from the encounter with selves, encounter with the other not as remaining the other but as related in community. Thus essential human nature is to be seen as co-humanity and consequently the realization of "persons-in-community" in Christ does not mean the extinguishing of our humanity but rather its establishment.

19 The Christian community is therefore called to be the provisional representative of the whole world of humanity: there is a solidarity of all men in the event of Jesus Christ and a special solidarity of those who are aware of the event—aware, in other words, that the *humanum* of man, which is his co-humanity, can only be established as an existence in the presence of God-in-Christ—but aware of it only as predecessors of those who still are isolated and scattered. Christian ethical action is different from ethical action in general, in that it is action-in-awareness, but it is not unrelated thereto since it is action on behalf of all humanity. The way of the church in ethical action is a representative way, not a triumphant but a modest, even stammering, way; indeed, it is nothing but the way of sinful humanity aware only of its justification in Jesus Christ and only pointing toward the New Humanity in Christ.

7

All that takes place in the sphere of Christian ethics is shaped by the fact that God's command arises from his gift of justification by grace. Law is the form of the gospel whose content is grace and thus the proclamation of divine grace is prior to the claim of the law. The law is not an interior, an inferior, an alternative or a supplementary road to justification but is the form of the response demanded by that justification. From what God does *for* us, we infer what he wants *with* us and *from* us. Thus ethics is concerned with the conformity of our action with his action. It is not for us to "fulfill" the law since Jesus Christ accomplished representatively what God wants of man. Our obedience to God's command means acknowledging this representative obedience and allowing it to count as our life. Otherwise, we change the "You are" and the "You shall be" of the law of the Spirit of Life to the "You ought" of the law of sin and death. And then each of us pounces on a different letter and shred of the law by which we imagine we may satisfy God's command, but which in fact is nothing but the gigantic deception of self-justification. The ethics of divine justification re-establishes the law as the form of the gospel; the details give way to the totality of the One Single Command, "You are and shall be for I am". The command therefore is not a claim on our accomplishment but on our trust.

8

Furthermore, all that takes place in the sphere of Christian ethics takes place between-the-times and thus is still marked by the stubborn shadow of that which is no more; yet, at the same time, it is also marked by the anticipation of that toward which it is moving, which, moreover, is already intimated in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christian ethical action must come to terms with the fact that while the new man is summoned to advance, the old man refuses to do so: but equally, and even more so, it must count on the fact that this old man belongs to the past whereas the new man belongs to the future: that which now—in Christ—is man's real being, already created, present and in force. Thus Christian ethics must come to terms with the fact that choice and decision are relative and conditioned, and consequently open to distortion and corruption; while at the same time—and more so—Christian ethics must count on the fact that, being oriented to the

great hope, it may act, indeed is obliged to render the small, provisional, imperfect, day-by-day service of God which points to the great and final service of God.

9

But not only Christian action but all human action now takes place between-the-times. Specifically, the political sphere is given the task of preventing the irruption of chaos and thus secures time for man—time for the proclamation of the gospel and time for the hearing of the divine command. Moreover, the state carries on its responsibilities not simply within a general sphere of creation but within the Christological sphere, which is seen in the New Testament teaching both of the Lordship of Christ and of the Heavenly Polis. According to the first, the state belongs ultimately to Christ, despite its comparatively independent status, for he has gained the victory over all principalities and powers, so that all might and authority are under his dominion. According to the latter, the order of the new age is a political order; the goal of the new-humanity-in-Christ is not a heavenly church but a heavenly city. Thus the state has a center and goal in common with the Christian community.

10

This inner and vital connection between the sphere of political action and the sphere of Christian action points to an analogical relationship between the external order, the provisional peace and the relative justice of the state, on the one hand, and, on the other, the Order, Peace and Justice of God. Consequently, the task of the political sphere is to provide an external, relative and provisional order and freedom and to safeguard the external, relative and provisional humanity of individual and community. The state and its justice are not autonomous, for the state has the vocation of reflecting indirectly, as in a mirror, the truth and reality of the Kingdom of God which the Christian community announces.

11

In view of the true vocation of the political order, the Christian community honors the earthly state and constantly demands the best from it. It is impossible then for Christian ethics to assume an indifferent, neutral or non-political attitude toward the state. The Christian community not only prays for the state, but also assumes an active responsibility for and participation in the affairs of the political sphere. The Pauline injunction to "subordination" does not mean to assume an attitude of unquestioning assent to the "powers that be", but rather to assume joint responsibility, i.e. to cooperate in doing what is required for the establishment and maintenance of the civil order which exists also under the authority of Jesus Christ. Thus the responsibility of the Christian community is not from above the struggle but from within. She must not arouse herself only when her own interests are at stake, must not remain politically asleep except for favorite "moral principles" and must not arrive on the scene too late or only when there is no longer any risk, but on the contrary must be a continual participant in the struggle for social justice. While it is true that one function of the state may be expressed in terms of providing an order within which the Christian community may exist and witness, nevertheless the state does this best, not by the granting of special privilege to "religion", but by the

quite "secular" way of seeking peace, order and justice for the population as a whole. There is no such thing as a *Christian* political party, for Christian decisions in the political sphere can only be decisions which could be made by any citizen striving to preserve and develop the common life. Consequently, the judgements and choices of the Christian community in the political sphere will be for those possibilities which suggest a correspondence to, an analogy and reflection of, the Kingdom of God, in terms of an external, relative and provisional order, peace and justice. Finally, the relatively just state can demand responsible participation on the part of its citizens, but it cannot demand love, nor ultimate loyalty and the Christian community will resist this total claim on the whole man and when necessary support the revolutionary overthrow of the unjust state that is, in the name of the relatively more just state for which it is striving.

12

The Christian community then is independent in regard to the form of the state and consequently will participate in the human search for the best form in any given circumstance, being at the same time conscious of the limits of all forms, whether ancient or modern and including empirical democratic states, and being conscious of the provisional, relative nature of all human justice. At the same time, the Christian community will take this search and struggle seriously, not assuming a superior attitude which considers the political sphere as a night in which all cats are gray, but striving to distinguish between greater and lesser justice, between order and tyranny, between community and collectivism, personal rights and individualism, and, in the extreme instance, between the state of Romans 13 and the state of Revelation 13. Such clear distinctions however are generally not to be found and the vital task is that of discerning the "less-or-more" in respect to empirical states. For example, while Christian ethics has an affinity for political and social democracy, nevertheless it must not be enamoured of the slogans "democratic way of life." "free world" etc., without regard to the actual concrete situations and furthermore must recognize that at certain times and in certain places other forms of government may better foster the desired goals. On the other hand, distinctions must also be made between "brands" of totalitarianism: one for example, which was a product of madness and crime without any trace of reason and another which, although by no means lacking in madness and crime, yet has positive intentions and can point to constructive social achievements. However, though such a distinction is necessary, still Christian ethics must be vigilant and resist when the state subordinates human beings to an abstract cause—whether anonymous Capital, the organic state, or the welfare of future generations etc.—or when the state does not leave its citizens freedom in certain areas (family, education, science, art, religion, etc.), safeguarded but not directed or dictated. Finally, the Christian community must not allow itself to be drawn into an absolutizing of political or ideological conflicts. Christians living on either side of a given conflict may not confuse either cause with God's cause, for His cause is mankind's cause and not the cause of any political, economic or ideological system erected into an absolute.

The concern of the Christian community is not with principles, or "isms", or theoretical systems but with historical realities, with definite and concrete empirical constellations in definite and concrete historical and cultural circumstances. It has no system of its own so it must never think or act "on principle". It judges by individual cases and preserves the freedom to evaluate each new event afresh with regard to its concrete reality. It may speak "conservatively" today and very "progressively" or even "revolutionarily" tomorrow. It does not have a "programme" but a direction under the Lordship of Christ. The Christian community must be allowed to be silent when necessary and to speak only from its own center. "It trusts and obeys the power of the Word by which God sustains all things". (Barmen)