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The Barthian Challenge to Christian Thought.

THE suggestion that the theological world is as subject to fashion as a draper's catalogue might savour of impertinence. But if one were so malicious as to make it, considerable support could be found in the reception accorded to the theology of Karl Barth. "The most interesting event in the post-war religious world," says the Rev. J. McConnachie, "has been the phenomenal suddenness with which the word of Karl Barth has captured the ear of Europe and transformed within a few years the whole outlook of Continental theology."[1] Five or six years ago there were distinct signs that something of the same transformation might occur amongst us. Expositions of Barthianism appeared and found a ready sale; the religious journals and newspapers discovered and exploited the news-value of the new movement; every ministers' Fraternal caught the echoes of debate.

It is not surprising that the new movement should have captured the imagination. *Prima facie,* it contained much commending it to English modes of thought. We English people are particularly susceptible to the argument from success. Barthianism has meant in Germany a profound spiritual revival. Might it not have the same desirable result here?

Again, we found ourselves in complete sympathy with many of the causes in behalf of which Barth fights so valiantly. It was no vague onslaught upon Modernism which Barth launched, but a well-directed attack upon certain specific tendencies in modern life which cause us grave concern. Matthew Arnold's description of Goethe as skilled in the art of diagnosis applies pre-eminently to Barth:

> He took the suffering human race,
> He read each wound, each weakness clear,
> And struck his finger on the place
> And said—Thou ailest here, and here.
> —(*Memorial Verses,* April, 1850).

Just so did we feel as Barth made one shrewd hit after another at the disquieting features of modern thought. There is a subjective cast to much of our thinking that is very distressing. The sense of Divine authority has largely vanished. Defeatism intrudes itself into many of our private thoughts and even our

[1] *The Significance of Karl Barth,* p. 13.

public utterances. The ring of confidence has gone from our voices. We are commercial travellers commending our wares to a falling market, not ambassadors declaring the authoritative will of God. Across all this welter of humanism comes Barth's challenging call, "Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils; for wherein is he to be accounted of?" If only we could escape from this "glimmer of twilight" into "glad confident morning again"! And so we looked wistfully to the Continent to heal the hurt it itself had inflicted. Might we not owe it to Barth that after the reign of chaos there should be once more "a firmament in the midst of the waters, dividing the waters from the waters"? Was he, if not the last refuge, at least the latest hope?

If this roughly describes the situation of five years ago, how different is the attitude to-day! It may be an exaggeration to assert that the Barthian movement in England is a spent force, but it is at least true to say that its public appeal has passed. The place it then occupied in the popular mind is now filled by the Oxford Group Movement, which has widely different connections and a totally opposite background.[2]

Now a movement may lose its appeal because the state of things that gave it relevance has passed away. The "crisis" may be surmounted, and then the remedy for the crisis passes out of demand. Or again because its leading ideas have been analysed and found wanting. Neither of these reasons can be called upon to explain the loss of interest in Barthianism. Humanism is still rampant among us; the quality of spiritual life is not demonstrably higher; the problems which we hoped Barthianism would solve still remain. Nor can it be said that any adequate assessment of Barth's ideas has been undertaken. On the contrary, it is the descriptive rather than the critical note that has been struck. McConnachie's book is undisguisedly the work of an enthusiastic admirer. It shows how powerfully Barth can affect those who come within the range of his personal influence, but it makes little attempt critically to consider the problems it raises. The more objective treatment of Birch Hoyle offers criticism at sundry points, but, on second thoughts, refrains from the attempt "to assess the value of this new mode of dealing with the problems of to-day."[3] Tennant, in his stupendous *Philosophical Theology,* finds it possible to consolidate his position without mention of Barth, and Matthews in his *God in Christian Thought and Experience* observes the same reticence. In Barry's *Relevance of Christianity* there is a solitary reference to the incoherences of

[2] I am merely noting the change, not evaluating it.
[3] *The Teaching of Karl Barth,* p. 277.

Barthianism. Principal Franks calls our attention to another Karl, a little-known German theologian, Karl Heim, whose "theology would do us more good than the Barthianism which is now so loudly proclaimed upon the housetops."[4] Canon Raven welcomes Barthianism as a valuable protest against a too-confident humanism, but describes it on its positive side as a "noble but demonstrably one-sided and therefore sub-Christian theology."[5] In his valuable little book, *The Ground of Faith and the Chaos of Thought,* Canon Quick gives a penetrating analysis of the Barthian attitude to thought. It is distinctly unsatisfying to find such an analysis closing simply with the rhetorical question, "And yet how far is it true that the theology of crisis is but a gesture of intellectual impatience after all?"[6] Yes! How far? That is precisely what we want to know.

At the moment it is true that there is a revival of interest in Barth, due to the conspicuous part he has played in the German Church crisis. His outspoken pamphlet—translated into English under the title *Theological Existence To-day*—points out how the Nazi attempt to control the Church in Germany threatens the very foundation of religion. His fearless condemnation of the application of nationalism to religious fellowship and his unqualified demand for autonomy within the Church have won approval from many who are not commonly concerned about theological doctrines. This may lead to considerable enquiry about the man and his teaching, but it is not certain that it will issue in a serious critique of his system.

In thus treating the theology of Barth, I suggest that we are unfair to him. He constantly asserts that he has no desire to found a school or to develop a system; but he does demand that his point of view shall be examined. McConnachie assures us that the description of himself that would most satisfy Barth is, "Barth is a scandalon, a stumbling-block, a question mark, to stir men out of their easy solutions, to disturb them, it may be even to make them angry, that they may begin to think again, to think more deeply and to think in God."[7]

I suggest also that we are unfair to ourselves. Simple acceptance of Barthian paradoxes may stultify thought; simple rejection may easily impoverish it; picking out the bits we like and calling the others "incoherencies" or "sub-Christian" is an eclecticism that is neither dignified nor in the end profitable. But the critical estimate of Barth's point of view, the attempt

[4] *Metaphysical Justification of Religion,* p. 38.
[5] *Jesus and the Gospel Love,* p. 57.
[6] *op. cit.,* p. 107.
[7] *op. cit.,* p. 242.

seriously to evaluate his central assertions, cannot fail to be useful. It may lead us to discover elements of the truth in respect of which our emphasis has been feeble or non-existent; it may enable us to see how far the things we call vital can be expressed in his terms. Even if it leave us unconverted to the new teaching, it cannot leave us uninfluenced. We shall hold to our own point of view in spite of the vigorous challenge of Barth and we shall therefore hold it more securely.

Now it is one thing to see that such an examination is desirable; it is quite another to be able to provide it. To do that for the system as a whole lies wholly beyond my competence. But Barth gives a very distinctive account of the office of the preacher and it may be worth while to examine what he says.

In considering Barth's conception of preaching we are at any rate approaching his theology correctly. For in a special sense this conception is central. In it, all his important affirmations appear—the Absolute Authority of God; the complete separation between man and God; the distrust of human experience; the total depravity of human nature; the instant and urgent need of Grace.

Again, Barth's primary interest is in preaching. Though he now holds a university chair in theology, he is still the preacher concerned with the formulation of a gospel that can be preached. It was in a crisis of his own preaching experience that his system was begotten. McConnachie gives a graphic picture of the eight years' spiritual struggle at Safenvil—a struggle which probably many ministers know. For the essence of the conflict lies in the difficulty of translating the ideas which seemed adequate enough in student days into terms which afford guidance for the common experience of common men. This contact of ideas with life has to be achieved in some way if the preacher is to be not a mere echo but an authentic voice. I am not disposed to belittle college lectures; but it must be remembered that they cannot simply be transferred from classroom to pulpit. The ideas need to be fertilised by experience before they reveal their significance. This it is that gives to those oft-quoted lines from Sir Henry Newbolt's "Clifton Chapel" their profoundly moving appeal.

> This is the chapel. Here, my son,
> Your father thought the thoughts of youth,
> And heard the words, which, one by one,
> The touch of life has turned to truth.

In Barth's case, the "touch of life" served to reveal the slenderness of the foundations on which his faith was built. Trained in the Ritschlian school under the "unforgettable

teacher, Wilhelm Hermann," he accepted, though with some misgiving, the view that religious experience must be self-authenticating, that the truth of religion rests upon a value-judgment. The practical work of the ministry made him realise what to many of us seems obvious on an analysis of ideas, viz. that in the end such a foundation can give no solid assurance of truth. For value-judgments express strong but not necessarily true convictions. We must reach deeper ground than a subjective value-judgment if we are to cure the universal doubt and the unwillingness to commit oneself to decisive action which are so characteristic of modern life. "The modern man," writes Brunner, "no longer believes in an Absolute in whatever form it may be offered. If he believes in anything at all, he believes in absolute uncertainty. An age which has lost its faith in an Absolute has lost everything."[8] The restoration of faith in an Absolute seemed to Barth the one thing which it was the preacher's task to achieve. But if he is to transmit assurance, he must first possess it. How can a man preach if he is not certain of his message? That certainty Barth felt he could not reach along the lines of his theological education. So he came to the parting of the ways; the religious subjectivism of Hermann and the historical relativity of Harnack must be alike abandoned. Yet it must be noted that Barth was spared the ultimate questioning. His crisis did not arise through any weakening of the religious values. They stood unchallenged and unchallengeable. It was the grounds upon which he had learned to rest these values which were giving way. Somewhere there must be a surer basis for man's faith than man's hope.

Barth himself tells us that he came to find rest in St. Paul.[9] This is not in itself surprising; many a troubled soul has done the same. But it is the specific form in which Paul laid hold of him that is interesting. For it seems that at first it was not the content of Paul's thought that impressed him but a subtle quality in the manner of his speech. "This man evidently sees and hears something which is above everything, which is absolutely beyond the range of my observation and the measure of my thought."[10] Barth was gripped by the jealous insistence of Paul that he had received neither his ordination nor his gospel at the hands of man. "I received of the Lord that which I also delivered unto you." "I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man nor was I taught it, but

[8] *Theology of Crisis*, p. 8.
[9] *Word of God*, p. 62.
[10] *ibid.*

by revelation of Jesus Christ." The obvious interpretation that Paul's insistence upon special revelation had behind it his desire to substantiate his claim to Apostolic authority, Barth ignores. He assumes that in the same quality lies the warrant of the preacher. From this assumption he draws two conclusions :—

(*a*) The preacher's attitude to God must be that of a simple listener. He must hear the voice. He must listen-in to the Almighty. We are not altogether unacquainted with the idea. Isaiah authenticates one of his messages with the words, "In mine ears, said the Lord of Hosts." Browning makes his Abt Vogler claim a special source of illumination in music;

> But God has a few of us whom He whispers in the ear,
> The rest may reason and welcome—'tis we musicians know.

Milton hits off the attitude exactly when in the Comus the Attendant Spirit describes his experience as he listens to the Lady's song—

> I was all ear
> And took in strains that might create a soul
> Under the ribs of death.

(*b*) The preacher's function must be that of simple Witness. Again the notion is not unfamiliar. "Ye shall be witnesses unto Me" says the risen Christ on the eve of the Ascension. The sermons of St. Peter in the early part of the Acts are simple testimonies to the Resurrection. "We cannot but speak of the things that we have seen and heard." So was it in the great days of the Church; so must it ever be if preaching is to do its perfect work.

Such general statements contain what indeed may often be overlooked but what is seldom denied. It does not seem possible, however, by means of them alone to explain the tremendous upheaval which Barth experienced. Yet that the crisis was real and that in this conception of the preacher's function he found real relief is unquestionable. We begin to see how this came about when we remember that it is not so much abstract statements of principle as their particular applications that cause differences of outlook among men. And Barth brings to the interpretation of these generalities a point of view which, under the influence of Kierkegaard, had gradually taken possession of his mind. He translates the positive principle—"The preacher must listen to God"—into the negative one—"The preacher must not listen to man." Here comes in the rigid exclusiveness of his categories—Either; Or. If the revelation is of God it can owe nothing to man. "Hermann had taught him to find in the Bible 'the pious thoughts of

others.' Now he knew that we have in the Bible, not what man thinks of God but what God thinks of man." [11]

There follows from this that the conception of Witness must be interpreted in so narrow a fashion as to make man's part in preaching almost wholly passive. Here comes in his distrust of everything human. Now, that the preacher is the ambassador of God, charged to declare His authoritative will, is what we all in our hearts believe, however difficult we may find it at times to live up to the height of this conviction. The preacher is the servant of the Lord and not the employee of a congregation. It is his duty to wait upon the Lord for His message and to speak it forth when it comes as it comes. But this does not mean that he is the instrument of a force other than himself, that the message comes independently of the character of him through whom it comes. Preaching is a function and cannot be expressed in passive terms. In the illuminating phrase of Phillips Brooks it is a function of personality—the expression of truth through personality. We may have to admit that in some cases the personality obscures the truth and that the peril of this lies very close to us all; but it does not follow that the weaker the personality the more powerful the truth. May we not here cite Barth against himself? Is he not a supreme example of the power of personality?

The attempt to assess the value of the Barthian point of view is confronted with a serious difficulty. On the one hand there are the values which Barth stresses—the Absolute authority of God, the miracle of Revelation, the fundamental difference between culture and salvation, the insufficiency of all else save the grace of God. To men dominated by humanist conceptions it is important to affirm the stark reality of God. To men seeking God and not quite sure where to find Him, it is good to assert that, after all, the supreme thing is God's search for us. This it is that makes our message a *Gospel.* We catch the sound of it in the early chapters of Genesis, where God walks in the garden with the cry, "Adam, where art thou?"; Job felt the comfort of it as, after his pathetic cry, "Oh! that I knew where I might find Him," he comes back from his unsuccessful search to rest in the assurance "He knoweth the way that I take"; it comes to its perfect expression in the saying of Jesus, 'The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost." Christian preaching rests upon the conviction that our salvation comes about through what is done for us and not by us, not by the development of forces resident in human nature but by the invasion of human life by a spiritual force—the redeeming love of God.

[11] McConnachie, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

On the other hand Barth seems to be destroying the values he finds by the process by which he finds them. For it is not the mere fact of finding God that is important; the vital thing is the character of the God that is found. And the "Deus absconditus," alone in His awful majesty, is not God as many of us see Him in the face of Jesus Christ. That Jesus is the supreme revealer of God surely has its implications. Can we say that God and man are Wholly Other if God becomes incarnate in man? Can we say that human nature is essentially evil if through it God manifests Himself to us? Can we find a place for Christian preaching unless God, speaking to man, speaks through him? "*As ministers,*" says Barth, "*we ought to speak of God. We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God. We ought therefore to recognise both* our obligation and our inability, *and by that very recognition give God the Glory.*" [12] Our obligation and our inability! Is that the last word? Ultimately, no doubt, all revelation comes from God. But when we ask how it comes, the answer surely is that in large part it comes through God-inspired men, in Hermann's phrase, "the pious thoughts of others." To insist on this is not to rob God of His glory. It is still God who is revealing Himself; for as Fra Lippo Lippi reminds us—

> God uses us to help each other so
> Lending our minds out.

When the Psalmist declares that the Lord is his Shepherd I learn what he thinks of God, and by the light of his thought I may come to say for myself "The Lord is my Shepherd." And both the Psalmist and myself may be right. God may be what men think Him though no human thought can compass what He is.

"'A number there are,' says Hooker, 'who think they cannot admire, as they ought, the power of the Word of God, if in things divine they should attribute any force to man's reason.' The circumstances which called forth this remark contrast strangely with the main controversies of the present day; (the time reference is to 1865) but the caution is equally needed. The abnegation of reason is not the evidence of faith but the confession of despair. Reason and reverence are natural allies, though untoward circumstances may sometimes interpose and divorce them." [13]

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[12] *Word of God and Word of Man*, p. 186. Italics original.
[13] Lightfoot, Galatians, Preface to First Edition, penultimate paragraph.