

KARL BARTH AND "THE THEOLOGY OF CRISIS"*

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KARL Barth, the leader of the movement about which I am venturing to say a few words today, is a man of about forty-two years of age, having been born in 1886 in German Switzerland. After study at a number of the German universities, he entered into the pastorate in his native country. For a number of years he engaged in what seems to have been a kind of socialistic endeavor; but then, becoming convinced that such effort was merely an affair of this earth and did not touch the real issues of life, he launched forth into the remarkable course of teaching and writing that has so profoundly influenced the youth of Germany and that bids fair to make itself felt throughout the world.

Closely related in the character of their teaching with the leader of the movement are Iduard Thurneysen, Friedrich Gogarten, and Emil Brunner. The two first names of these, with Barth himself, are frequent contributors to the journal *Zwischen den Zeiten*, which is the organ of the school.

There are differences between these individual teachers; Brunner, in particular, does not, I am told, have the complete endorsement of the other leaders of the movement. But these differences will not here be taken into account. All that I can hope to do is to present a very rough composite picture, using now one and now another of the four writers that I have named and even now and then some less prominent or less regular adherents of the same general point of view. I am fully conscious of my incompetence for such a task. The Barthian teaching is by no means altogether a simple thing; and it is quite possible that my present understanding of it might have to be radically modified if my knowledge of it were more complete; I can only give you my present impression for what it is worth.

The teaching of Karl Barth and his associates is commonly called "the theology of crisis." The "crisis" or "decision" that is meant in this title is the one that is forced upon a man when he is placed before the dreadful antinomy between time and eternity, the world and God. That antinomy is at the root of the Barthian teaching. At the very foundation of everything that Barth says is the conviction of the awful transcendence of God, the awful separateness between the created world in which man lives and the boundless mystery of the Creator. Away then, say these writers, with all efforts to find God in the world itself! Away with the mysticism of Schleier-

* A paper read to a small group of ministers in Philadelphia, April 23, 1928.

macher, discovering God in one particular area of the human soul, in the feeling of absolute dependence; away with the intellectualism of Hegel, setting up an antinomy that is not final, a thesis and antithesis transcended in a higher synthesis still within the world, a dialectical process that is itself thought to be God; away with the moralism of Ritschl, finding God in the human goodness of Jesus, looking upon Jesus as the highest embodiment of human goodness and regarding that human goodness as revealing in itself the nature of God! These three great movements, say Barth and his associates (especially Brunner), are just so many efforts of man to transcend the gulf that separates him from God; they are just so many efforts to drag God down into the sphere of this world. Quite different from all such imaginings of man's heart is the living and true God. From such a God, man is never so remote as when he thinks that he has found him; religion as well as civilization comes under the same great condemnation; it is finite, not the infinite, time not eternity; it is of man, not of God. God is not another name for the totality of this world; and he is not to be found in any experience of man. He is, with respect to this world, the "completely Other," *der schlechthin Andere*, the One who is incommensurate with anything that can possibly enter into the life of man.

Such is the stupendous dualism between the world and God that is at the root of the thinking of Karl Barth. But this dualism seems not to be ontological; it is not based upon any denial of the creatorship of God. On the contrary, the dualism between the world and God is conceived of as being due to sin. There we have one of the most profoundly Christian elements in the thinking of these writers. The world, they hold, has been estranged from God by the awful fact of sin. God is creator; but the creature has been estranged from him by this awful gulf. Sin is no merely individual thing; it has a cosmic significance; it determines the whole situation in which the world stands with respect to God.

As the world is now constituted, there is no possibility for the world to bridge the gulf that separates it from God. All efforts of man to bridge that gulf are only so many manifestations of sin; the very essence of sin is found in the overweening pride that leads men to think that they can by searching find out God.

It looks, then, as though the darkness were complete—God enveloped in impenetrable mystery, man separated from God by a chasm that can never be bridged. But then the darkness is relieved by a divine and glorious light. Man can never bridge that chasm, but God has bridged it. It is impossible and inconceivable that time can have contact with eternity; that man can have communion with God; but the impossible has actually been accomplished, the inconceivable has actually been done. Barth is never tired of ringing the changes upon this paradox. The impossible has become a fact.

It has become a fact by the act of God and God alone. That act of God is not to be thought of under the mere category of cause; it is not to be thought of as merely the sowing of a new seed in humanity, which has

flowered into the glories of historic Christendom. Such merely biological analogies will not do. God has not dealt with us in any such impersonal fashion; he has come to us not in the gift of a new impulse but in a true communication addressed to responsible beings; he has come to us not in a feeling or in an experience, but in his *Word*. That Word of God is not something that grows out of the life of man; psychology can never reveal it; it has come *senkrecht von oben*, directly from above. It is not an idea, but "revelation."

By this revelation from God the helplessness, the sinfulness, the awful guilt of man are made clear; in fact a man never truly knows the guilt of sin until the message of salvation is already knocking at the door of his soul. The fate of the sinner is to be contented in his sin, to hope by his relative goodness to attain unto God. But then comes God's Word. It is a message of wrath. We are far removed here from the Ritschlian notion that God is only love, and that salvation consists in destroying in our minds the delusion of God's anger. Little difficulty have Barth and his associates in showing that the wrath of God is at the very center of the Bible and of all true Christian teaching. That wrath is concealed from the men of the world, but when God's Word comes to a man then wrath is revealed.

Thus the Word of God, according to Barth and his associates, brings in a complete negation of all the achievements of man, a complete negation of human wisdom, human feeling, human goodness, human religion. So long as a man defends these things he is still in rebellion against God. But when his last defenses are broken down, when he knows that he is guilty and lost, when he utters over against all civilization, all religion, all feeling, all willing, all thinking, an utterly despairing "No," when he acquiesces in the terrible judgment of God, then indeed the Word of God has come nigh to him.

And that word is not only a word of condemnation: it is also a word of grace. The wonder has been accomplished. God has bridged the impassible chasm; we could never go to him, but he has come to us.

He has come to us, say these writers, in the person of Jesus Christ. It is inconceivable, indeed, that God should come in the flesh. It would not be inconceivable if God were what he is thought to be in the immanence philosophy of modern times; on such a view the incarnation becomes merely the highest illustration of a permanent truth that God and man are one. Very different is the view of Brunner and of Karl Barth. To them the incarnation is the wonder of wonders. How can the infinite thus condescend to the finite; how can eternity thus enter into time? How can God become man?

These questions, according to Barth and his associates, are unanswerable; the incarnation can never be comprehended or conceived. Never can we support by any argument this inconceivable, this stupendous Word of God. What then can we do? We can only receive it by faith.

And faith itself is no work of man; it is the work of God. God alone can speak this Word, and God alone can hear. God can hear in the Person of

his Holy Spirit, who returns the answer of faith in the human heart to the Word which has been spoken by God.

So we have, in the *Dogmatik*, the latest book of Karl Barth, a doctrine of the Trinity. It is hardly the doctrine that has been held by the historic church. But I do not think that it is merely a modal Trinity; certainly it is not a Trinity that is found only in the operations of God within this world. Rather, God has revealed to the eye of faith something of the eternal mystery of his Being.

So God's Word, according to Barth and Brunner, has come to man. When it comes, it puts man at the place of decision. Here we have the "crisis" that gives "the theology of crisis" its name. Time or eternity; the world or God; rebellion or obedience? Faith is the answer to that stupendous challenge, which God brings to man.

But when the answer of faith is given, it is no merely static condition in which the redeemed man stands. We live in this world by faith, not yet by sight. We have not yet entered into eternity; we are living still "between the aeons," *zwischen den Zeiten*, between eternity and time. And so our theology must be expressed in questions, in antinomies, in paradoxes. There we have the strange "dialectic" of Karl Barth. Do not ask me to explain it. I cannot explain it; for I should find it difficult to explain what I do not understand.

But that dialectic does not seem to mean, at any rate, that the church, according to Barth, has no positive message. On the contrary she has a message, that she derives solely from the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, not (God forbid) the Scriptures as a record of human experience, but the Scriptures as containing the Word of God. By the Scriptures all preaching must be tested—the church teaching on the basis of the Scriptures, and the Scriptures bringing a revelation from God. There we have the links that unite us with God. There is no immediacy here, no mysticism, but God speaks to us through his Word, and as the substance of his Word the Logos, Jesus Christ, the only Mediator between God and man.

This teaching of Barth and his associates, which we have just tried to outline, sounds—much of it, at least—like a simple return to evangelical Christianity. What is there new in most of what we have just said? The living and Holy God, man lost in sin, God's grace in the gift of Jesus Christ his Son, faith as itself the gift of God—it sounds like John Bunyan and John Calvin and the Shorter Catechism and the Reformed Faith. And indeed Barth does regard himself as a follower of Calvin and a follower of the apostle Paul. It is no wonder that malicious tongues have uttered against the Barthian school a charge, the most insulting that could possibly be uttered against a modern German, the charge that their teaching is nothing but "orthodoxy" after all.

That charge of orthodoxy is denied by these writers in the most indignant way. What is the substance of their defense? How do they differ from what we on our part have been accustomed to think of as the teaching of the historic church?

They differ, I think (if we may ignore details and come at once to the center of things)—they differ in their epistemology, and they differ in their attitude toward the plain historical information that the Bible contains.

On the former point I speak with much hesitation; for I am not at all certain that I understand what the Barthian position is. There is certainly a large measure of agreement, regarding the knowledge that is at the basis of Christianity, between us who are not ashamed of being "orthodox," who are not ashamed of trying, however unworthily, to practice that "straight thinking" which orthodoxy, in accordance with the etymology of the word, involves—there is a large measure of agreement between us on the one hand and these denouncers of orthodoxy on the other.

Barth and Brunner, for one thing, have restored theology to something like the place of real dignity which we think it can rightfully claim. They have made short work of the notion that what is primary is a religious experience that clothes itself indifferently in various thought-forms to suit the intellectual needs of different generations. It is true, Barth regards the function of theology as being critical merely; he regards theology as not dealing directly with God but as protecting the human proclamation of the Word of God from the introduction of matters extraneous or hostile to the Word itself. Nevertheless the actual operation of Barthian teaching is to restore theology to something more like its rightful place: the Word of God is prior to Christian experience, not identical with it or subsequent with it, and theology deals not with Christian experience but with the proclamation of the Word.

This attitude toward theology, or rather this attitude toward the divine revelation with which ultimately theology is concerned, has as its corollary an attitude toward differences of opinion in the doctrinal sphere which is very different from the prevailing attitude today. There could be no more salutary reading for the modern church than the work of Brunner on "Mysticism and the Word" (*Die Mystik und das Wort*), in the course of which he shows how inevitably the boundless tolerance and syncretism of the modern religious world grows out of the mysticism of Schleiermacher which finds God in an experience of the human soul, and how totally contrary such tolerance and syncretism are to the very roots of the Christian faith. I wish also that the leaders of our church would peruse the noble essay of Karl Barth, which he submitted in an English form, I think, to the Cardiff Conference of the Alliance of Churches Holding the Reformed System, on the question whether the formation of a common creed for the Reformed Churches is at present possible or desirable—an essay in which he contrasts this modern business of forming a creed for mere purposes of convenience, merely with the notion that it is convenient for various ecclesiastical bodies to come together and that convention requires that a common church should have a common creed—in which he contrasts this whole business with the true creeds of the church which were born in agony and conflict, when the church felt compelled to set forth God's truth in the face of the

error that was rampant in the world. Certainly most persons who talk so lightly about creedal statement today have not the slightest inkling of what a creed really is; and it would be well for them if they would listen to Karl Barth.

But despite all that, despite the fact that this new teaching in practice involves a mighty reaction against the anti-intellectualism of the modern church, I cannot be quite sure that the knowledge of God which it sets forth is, in theory at least, real knowledge at all. The Word of God can be received, Barth says, only by faith; it cannot possibly be supported by argument; apologetics must be altogether eschewed; argue in defense of the truth of God's Word, and you show that the Word has not really come to you; the Word of God will brook no human advocate; faith is distinct from all reasoning; God speaks, and that is all. A great truth certainly underlies such an attitude. It is certainly true that argument alone never made a man a Christian; there must be a mysterious act of the Spirit of God; God's message must be brought home to a man by God himself; "ye must be born again." But because argument is insufficient, it does not follow that it is unnecessary; and as a matter of fact it is God's will that his Word should be so presented to men that acceptance of it shall be a profoundly reasonable thing. What the Holy Spirit does is not to render unnecessary the gift of reason; but to free reason from the effects of sin and enable a man again to see clearly. We could never indeed reason out the truth of the things that God has told us in his Word, but to accept it as God's Word is not contrary to reason but on the contrary is possible only when reason, by the act of God's Spirit, ceases to be blinded by sin.

I have an uneasy feeling, therefore, with regard to the Barthian epistemology. Does Barth mean that the doctrine of the Trinity, for example, and the doctrine that sets forth the redeeming work of Christ, are not true until they are accepted in faith, and that they are true only to the man who thus accepts them? Does he do away with the objectivity of truth; does he fall back at last into that subjectivity against which his whole teaching starts out to be a mighty protest? I am not sure that such is his meaning. But there is a side of his teaching that might seem to bring us near to such an epistemological abyss. What, moreover, do the Barthians mean by "creation," for example, and by "sin"? One cannot escape the impression that a similarity of terminology in these writers, as over against historic Christianity, makes a very profound difference of view.

My objection becomes acute when we come to the second point that I mentioned, when we come to the attitude of Barth and his associates toward the historical information that the Bible contains.

We have seen that the writers of the Barthian school regard Jesus of Nazareth as the incarnate Son of God. Brunner in particular in his notable book "The Mediator" (*Der Mittler*) is concerned to set forth the sheer, the absolute, uniqueness of Jesus. Not only, Brunner says, is there as a matter of fact only one Mediator between God and man, but in the very nature

of the case there could be only one, and that one is Jesus Christ. Surely, we might say, holding such a view of Jesus as that the Barthian writers must join issue sharply with the historical criticism of the present day. But that is not at all the case. Indeed, Rudolf Bultmann, who represents the very extreme of skepticism in the historical sphere, who holds that our sources of historical information are so uncertain as to prevent us from any certain knowledge of what sort of person Jesus was—Rudolf Bultmann is a contributor to the journal *Zwischen den Zeiten* and is apparently accepted by Barth as an orthodox member of the school! Thus the Barthian writers try to make Christian faith quite independent of the findings of scientific history with regard to the life of Christ.

That effort might be understood in various ways. It might be held, for example, that although scientific history can never establish the facts about Jesus, particularly the fact of the empty tomb, yet faith can do so. If that understanding were correct, then the negative criticism of Bultmann, to which he subjects the NT documents, would merely be a *tour de force* to show how, when history proceeds on naturalistic principles, and with aloofness of the historian from this subject-matter, it can never establish the facts upon which Christianity is based. Thus scientific history would be discredited simply in order to leave a clear field for faith. We should then still have the facts that are set forth in the NT, but these facts established by a more immediate method than the historical evidence in the ordinary sense can afford. But I fear that no such thing as that is meant. Certainly it is not meant by Bultmann, and probably is not meant by Barth. I fear that the real meaning is that we can hear the Word of God in the NT, as addressed to our own soul, no matter what the facts about Jesus of Nazareth were. Thus a consistent Barthian might even not be disturbed if scientific history should prove that Jesus of Nazareth had committed, for example, positively immoral acts; Jesus, on Barthian principles, might still bring to us the Word of God, the great central message of justification by faith, no matter what sort of person he was according to the flesh. I cannot think that all the writers of the school would push consistency so far; Brunner, for example, would, if I understand aright, repudiate such a view. But if so, then Christian faith cannot be indifferent to the findings of historical criticism after all. Certainly if it is indifferent, it cannot be true to the NT. The NT does, indeed, present a message of God to the individual soul. But that message contains the homely testimony of men and women who saw certain things in the external world; it contains, for example, the testimony of women who went early to the sepulchre and repeated what they there had seen and heard. We cannot possibly evade the question whether that testimony is true or false.

The truth is that the radicalism of Barth and Brunner errs by not being radical enough. These men have broken with the whole development of theology since Schleiermacher and with the entire immanence philosophy upon which it is based. That is a notable and courageous act. It may prove

to have introduced a new era in the history of the church. But they must carry their radicalism a step further if what they have done is to be permanent; they must break not only with the immanence philosophy of the past century, but also with the application of that immanence philosophy to the historical problem that the NT presents. And why not? I do not wonder at it, if the Barthians are impressed by the mighty edifice of modern negative criticism in the NT field. I do not wonder, if they desire to avoid attacking such a fortress. But attack it I think they must if they are really to proclaim the Word of God to a lost and dying world. And why should they fear? Modern skepticism is, indeed, imposing, as it is applied to the NT field. But it may fall away like a house of cards if once its presuppositions are attacked. And its presuppositions are attacked, and attacked in the very citadel, by the assault of Barth and Brunner upon the evolutionary philosophy of Schleiermacher and his successors. What we need is a more consistent Barthian than Barth; we need a man who will approach the NT documents with presuppositions that are true instead of false, with presuppositions that will enable him to accept at its face value the testimony of salvation that the NT contains.

But as it is, the attitude of Barth and his associates toward historical criticism constitutes a deadly weakness of the school. These writers are bringing to us the Word of God; but they are trying to enable us to accept it on entirely too easy terms. Much more radical still must be our break with the philosophy that would prevent us from finding in the midst of human history, in the coming and in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, a creative act of God.

I have also another word of criticism that is intimately connected with the one that I have just ventured to express. It concerns the attitude of Barth and his associates toward the detailed account of the words and deeds of Jesus that the Gospels contain. With much in that attitude I have the warmest sympathy. I agree fully with Barth and Brunner in holding that what is primary in the NT account of Jesus is not his teaching or his example but his redeeming work. I agree fully with the emphasis that they place upon the cross and resurrection of Christ (though what they mean by the resurrection I do not quite know) as distinguished from his words and deeds in Galilee. I rejoice with all my heart in their rejection of the modern notion that a mere contemplation of the character of the man Jesus will wipe away the guilt of sin or bring a man into communion with God; I rejoice in their final rejection of "the liberal Jesus." That Jesus never existed upon this earth, and if he did exist, he could not bring salvation to the souls of men. It is profoundly true, as these writers hold, that a man who merely studies the life of Christ as a record of a man who lived long ago is without real understanding even for the simplest things which according to the Synoptic record Jesus said and did. Such knowledge is superficial indeed; it involves knowing Jesus only according to the flesh. A man who knows Jesus only so, knows him really not at all. Only in the light of the

cross can the Sermon on the Mount be truly understood. The true Jesus everywhere, even in his simplest acts, is the divine Logos who came into this world for the redemption of men.

But while all that is true, it does not follow that the Christian can be indifferent to the details of what Jesus said and did. In their effort to make the Christian message independent of historical criticism, one has the disturbing feeling that Barth and his associates are depriving the church of one of its most precious possessions—the concrete picture of Jesus of Nazareth as he walked and talked upon this earth. These writers insist indeed upon the reality of the incarnation; it is important to them that Jesus lived in this world. But what sort of person he was when he was here—that question at times seems, in the logic of their view, to be of no concern. They speak of the *offense* of Jesus' human life; it was, they say, such as to conceal from the unredeemed the fact that Jesus was truly the Word of God. But is that altogether true to NT teaching? Does not the NT speak also of the glory of the incarnate Word that was manifested here upon earth? "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth." There have been many efforts to cut Christianity loose from the concrete picture of Jesus of Nazareth that is contained in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Is the Barthian movement only another such effort? I am not quite sure that it really is. I am not inclined hastily to apply the term "Gnosticism" to a teaching that in some respects seems to me to be a recovery of precious truth. But unquestionably there is a danger here. In their effort to avoid a clash with naturalistic criticism these teachers must not be allowed to deprive us of the Jesus whom we love, the Jesus of the Gospels, the Jesus who spake words such as never man spake, the Jesus who went about doing good.

Only, let us not take that Jesus merely as one who lived long ago; let us not be deaf to the dreadful immediacy of his claim upon us; let us not hide ourselves from him by a sentimental contemplation of events of the first century; let us rather say here and now, as in a dread crisis from which we cannot escape, as though this moment were our last, as being indeed between time and eternity, between God and the abyss—let us say to Jesus here and now: "My Lord, I have heard thy voice to me." That much at least we can learn from Karl Barth.

*Appendix*¹

Into that cold world of scientific detachment there has come in recent years in Germany the imperious tones of a new message—a new message that addresses itself to the soul of every man. It is the message of Karl Barth and Thurneysen and Gogarten and Brunner and other exponents of the

¹ [Editor's note: For our readers' interest, we include here an excerpt from Machen's "Forty Years of New Testament Research," *Union Seminary Review* 40 (1929) 9-11.]

so-called "theology of crisis." Barth's famous commentary on Romans is a commentary of a kind strange to the modern world. Not the message of Romans to men of long ago, but its message to men of today, is the subject of this strange exposition of the Apostle's words. Many readers hold up their hands in horror. The long battle for grammatico-historical exegesis, they say, seems to have been fought in vain; we are sinking back into the "pneumatic exegesis" dear to allegorizers of ages long gone by. For such criticism we are not without sympathy. The "Epistle to the Romans" of Karl Barth is certainly a very strange book, and the Apostle Paul would probably be amazed if he could know that it purports to be an exposition of what he wrote regarding the way of salvation to the Roman Church. But as over against his critics Barth has undoubtedly a certain measure of right on his side. A grammatico-historical exegesis so perverted as to involve aloofness of the exegete from his subject-matter has given us at the most but an external and mechanical comprehension of what the Bible says. Only the man who comes to the Bible with the despairing question of his own soul, with the question, "What shall I do to be saved?" can really understand the Word of God. That much insight at least is conveyed by the strange commentary of Karl Barth.

It would indeed be a great mistake to regard the Barthian teaching as a real return to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. There are, indeed, in it profoundly evangelical elements. The awful transcendence of God, as over against the pantheizing teaching of Schleiermacher and of great sections of the modern church, the stupendous gulf between the world and God that is found in sin, the necessity and the all-sufficiency of divine grace, the rejection, as profoundly un-Christian, of the boundless modern "tolerance" and indifference in the religious sphere, the necessity above all of hearkening not to human experience but to God's Word—these are truly Christian convictions in the teaching of Brunner and Barth. But on the other side is to be put the strange epistemology of the Barthian school, which makes us wonder whether these men are not in danger of falling into a skepticism even more complete than that against which they are protesting in the modern world, and the strange indifference to questions of literary and historical criticism with regard to Jesus Christ, an indifference so great that even Bultmann, with his extreme skepticism in the historical sphere, can apparently be regarded as a real member of the Barthian school.

What can be said at any rate is that the Barthian movement, with the remarkable influence that it is attaining among the youth of Germany, has at least thrown the religious world into a state of flux. That fact is only one indication more of what we have already observed—that after the rejection of the New Testament account of the origin of Christianity modern naturalistic historians have not yet been able to put anything in its place. The most imposing effort in this direction, perhaps, was the "Liberal Jesus" of twenty-five or so years ago. But confidence in that reconstruction has today been undermined. It looks, therefore, as though modern naturalistic criticism of

the New Testament were on the verge of bankruptcy. The Christian religion is certainly an important historical phenomenon. How did it come into being? The New Testament has a definite answer to that question. Christianity, according to the New Testament, is based upon the supernatural person of Jesus Christ. But if that answer is to be rejected, what is to be substituted for it? Modern naturalistic criticism has not been able to agree upon any answer.



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