

# Bulletin

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**An Interview With Professor Karl Barth**

**By Prof. Wm. C. Robinson**

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# AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR KARL BARTH

By Prof. Wm. C. Robinson

[The interviewer spent the summer semester, April-July, 1938, as a student under Professor Karl Barth at the University of Basel. During the several seminars, open-evenings, and private interviews in which he participated during this period certain of the matters herein touched upon came to light. As a result, the interviewer drew up a series of questions, in some cases with answers or partial answers from these earlier expressions and from Barth's recent writings, and laid them before the Professor on a Wednesday with the understanding that either questions or answers, or both, might be modified in any way which he suggested. Accordingly the interview which follows was completed on the following Saturday—July 2, 1938—and Prof. Barth gave his approval to plans for its publication in America.]

PROFESSOR BARTH, you have been recently represented in America as holding views different from those which I have found in your lectures and recent books. These misapprehensions as to your position may be due in part to earlier views which you no longer hold, or to ascribing to you views held by other representatives of the so-called Crisis Theology. In order to correct misunderstandings as to your present teaching, I wish to avail myself of this privilege of asking you some questions.

## REVELATION

Q. I understand from your *Kirchliche Dogmatik* that you have seriously placed your theology under the authority of the Word of God and are continuously striving to bring it into closer conformity therewith.

A. This has been my program and it must be executed more fully from year to year. The Bible stands above our theology and the Lord Jesus Christ above the Bible. The Reformed Faith is a faith continually reformed by the Word of God.

Q. Do you regard the revelation attested in Holy Scriptures as the unique, sufficient, and exclusive revelation which God has given to us sinful men?

A. Yes.

Q. Does this mean that our preaching is unconditionally bound to the Holy Scripture and to the Lord Jesus Christ who is the theme thereof?

A. Yes. The Scripture is under all conditions more right and more important than the best and most necessary thing that we ourselves have said or can yet say. (*Kirchliche Dogmatik*, 1.2.306.)

Q. Exception has been taken to "spiritual" exegesis.

A. I never use that term and I do not like it. There is one rule for all exegesis, the text, the matter which is testified in each text; and it will not be possible to introduce into the text what is not there. I cannot admit that there is an historical and a spiritual exegesis.

Q. Do you hold that Jesus Christ is the theme of the Bible; and that the Bible becomes the Word of God here and now by the free application of the free grace of God, by the power of the living Christ, by the work of the Holy Spirit in saving sinners?

A. Yes.

Q. Your colleague, Professor Thurneysen, in a recent seminar advised students to study the commentaries of those who believed that Jesus Christ was the theme of the Bible—in particular the commentaries of Luther and

Calvin—to discover the true exegesis of a passage. Would this be your advice also?

A. Yes. Luther and Calvin were truer than most.

Q. What are the further conditions for the right interpretation of Scripture?

A. Only in the Church of the Word can the Bible be properly interpreted, and reciprocally, the true interpretation of the Bible makes the Church of the Word. There is a similar reciprocity between the preaching of the Word and the faith of the Triune God, so that Christians must put the highest, the particularly Christian, the Trinitarian Christological knowledge again at the peak of their affirmations, and view that as the foundation of all their other affirmations (K.D. 1.2.136).

### ORIGINS

Q. In the recent meeting of your *Dogmatische Sozietät* you indicated that God had made all things good and that evil (sin) was not in the least created by God. Does this mean that the creature is wholly the cause or author of sin?

A. Wholly the author of sin. I do not like the term “cause,” because sin is a moral evil, and morals do not come under the category of science but of personal relations.

(The thought here expressed is a desire for a theology which derives its form, expression or terminology as well as content from the Word rather than from philosophy or science.)

Q. Does this also mean that sin is not a metaphysical necessity arising from the creation, as such, or from time as such; but a moral evil which is directed against God?

A. Yes.

Q. Would you describe sin as the transgression of the law of God?

A. Not primarily. Sin is first a protest against grace. There is no law apart from grace. Of course, grace gives a law, but what makes sin condemnable is our resistance against His love, not against His commandments. The Gospel comes before the law and love before the claim.

Q. In America you have been described as agreeing with Brunner's view that surrenders the historic Adam as one who was created in the image of God and actually fell from that estate by sin, and that likewise surrenders all relation of the human race to Adam and his Fall. However, in the *Dogmatik* you speak of Adam as not observing the ordinances of Paradise, the limits of his creaturehood; and further declare that Christ, the guiltless One, suffered what Adam and what we in Adam have all deserved. Wherein do you differ from the view which has been ascribed to you in America?

A. The difference is that what Brunner calls Adam is for him only an idea and no more the real man, and I am opposed to this way of dissolving the figure of Adam in an unreal way. Further, I agree with the statement in Wollebius' *Compendium* that in this transaction Adam is not to be considered as a private, but as a public person, and so as the parent, head and root of the whole human race.

But Adam is an historical figure in another sense than the Christ. It is not accidental that Christ came in the midst of human history, and that His historical existence in time and space can be vindicated. What is said of Adam is said in the form of a *saga*, or story, or tale; but it is not a myth or fairy tale.

## HISTORY

*Q.* You have been represented as holding to the contrast between the historical and the super-historical, which some regard as characteristic of Neo-Platonism. However, in the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* 1.2.64, you specifically reject the contrast between history and either *Heilgeschichte*, *Ubergeschichte*, *Urgeschichte*, or any other qualified history, and insist that history must be a predicate of revelation, not revelation a predicate of history.

*A.* That is correct. I have not held to the contrast between history and super-history for eleven years.

(Barth holds that the relation between Revelation and history is analagous to that between the Divine and human natures in Christ.)

*Q.* If one approaches any point in the history of Jesus Christ from the viewpoint of Revelation then that historical event will have such importance as the Revelation ascribes to it, will it not? So, for example, the Cross of Christ has the historical significance the Revelation ascribes to it.

*A.* Yes.

*Q.* You do not then hold that such historical events in the life of Jesus of Nazareth have no saving significance or importance?

*A.* No. I have never held that view. With Wollebius, I hold that God's Providence doth not take away, but establisheth the second causes; accordingly, the saving significance of Jesus necessarily carries with it the historical events of His life. But in accord with the former question, we come to these events by way of Revelation. By the testimony of the Holy Spirit, these events have saving significance for us. It is not history as such that is saving us, but God who is saving us when He is speaking to us through the events of the Bible. There is always God in action. The Bible can remain closed to us and must remain closed without God's Spirit.

*Q.* Last fall when Professor Bultman advocated the view that the super-historical was the only thing that matters, and that it made no difference whether Jesus ever lived or not as an historical character, did not you and your colleague, Prof. K. L. Schmidt, vigorously controvert this position?

*A.* Yes. Because of John 1:14. We must maintain the historical Christ, not because we give particular value to historicity as such, but history becomes important because the Word became flesh.

*Q.* Do you hold that faith was a necessary pre-condition on the part of the disciples for seeing the risen Christ so that faith was first and the appearances second; or do you hold that whatever faith they had was so shaken or shattered by the Crucifixion that it took the appearance of the Risen Christ to those whom He had chosen to awaken faith in them, so that the appearances were first and the faith second?

*A.* I hold the latter rather than the former view. However, I would em-

phasize that He did not appear to all, but to those whom He had chosen and to whom His appearance and the work of the Holy Spirit would produce faith. It is not wise to separate faith and the object of faith.

Q. I understand then that you accept as actual and as significant facts the Virgin Birth, the Death, the Resurrection and the Ascension of Christ?

A. Yes. All are of importance, but not all of equal importance.

(Barth does not ascribe as much importance to the Virgin Birth as he does to the Resurrection; but he devotes a large section in the second book of the first volume of the *Dogmatik* to its defense, in which he ably answers the reasons which are advanced for not accepting the Virgin Birth.)

Q. From reading your *Dogmatik*, one also gets the impression that you accept the great facts of the eschatological hope such as the Return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the judgment, the new heavens and the new earth as events that will occur. Is this correct?

A. Of course. These events will occur but eschatological events—in distinction from apocalyptic—are important also for our present life. The whole contents of our faith are eschatological events, not only the latest but also the first. All the doings of God are eschatological. Creation, the Resurrection of Christ, the Work of the Holy Spirit not less than the Coming Again of Christ.

Q. In an older volume you speak of the thousand-year Kingdom which cannot be erased from the Bible. Is that still your position?

A. Yes. I am sure that it is not possible to reject it; but I do not see my way clear to explain it. I think that it is a kingdom on earth, but whether it is before or after Christ's Return, or before or after the final judgment or other details, I cannot say.

## REASON

Q. Do you regard the paradoxes or dialectics as applicable to God, or to the Word of God, or do you regard Revelation as above these paradoxes?

A. I do not like the terms "paradox" or "dialectics," but we must say that God is both above and in the paradox, for there is only one God in Heaven and in Eternity and in Revelation. When we read there both of His love and of His wrath, these are contradictory, a paradox. For us it is a paradox, but what is a paradox for us exists truly in Him. We must neither endanger His unity nor hold that there is a God behind His Revelation of whom we can know. God does not divide Himself so that only a part is revealed. God does not reveal Himself piecemeal (*Stückweise*), because He is not a piecemeal God. The whole Deity is comprehensible to us, and the whole Deity is incomprehensible to us. God makes Himself comprehensible to us in the Death and Resurrection of Christ; and yet it is clear that He is incomprehensible to us there. In the revelation of God there is an identity of revelation and of hiddenness. God dwells in light inaccessible which no man can approach unto, and God is the light of the world.

(Barth is opposed to Nominalism in theology and to progressive revelation.)

Q. Do you hold that the paradoxes as you use them present ultimate contradictions, or is there complete coherence in God's perfect wisdom, whether or not we can understand how certain things cohere?

A. Why do you speak of my use of the paradoxes? I get the paradoxes from the Bible. I have no desire to press them further than the Bible, and I cannot say less than the Bible says. There is complete coherence in God's perfect wisdom. But also in God the Triunity is as ultimate as the Unity; the plenitude as the simplicity; the Herlichkeit as the Herr, and there is no more ultimate Word.

(Barth first said the plurality is as ultimate as the unity, but withdrew the statement as being too philosophical in form.)

Q. Do you hold that man's reason is so disabled by the Fall that he is unable to build a foundation with his philosophy or natural religion on which to erect Christian truth as a superstructure; and unable by his reason to supplement the revelation made in the Word of God by material drawn from true or supposed revelations made by God in nature—or in blood, race, and soil; and further unable to form a rational connection-point which can accept a logical presentation of the Gospel—but that he be saved by the event of God's grace, the presence of Jesus Christ, the testimony of the Holy Spirit to the Word?

A. Yes. Material from our human nature—and from race, blood, and soil—can be used, but only by God's grace.

Q. Does this mean that you hold man has no reason, or that reason is sin; or do you acknowledge and use reason and thereby seek to understand, formulate, and present the truth of God according to the analogy of faith?

A. Reason is a good gift; by all means let us use it, especially today. Tell the people of America that Karl Barth hopes to be a rational being.

Q. The theology of crisis has been represented as teaching that all of God's things are *ganz-andere*, that there is no having nor possessing of the things of God; that the revealing of God is by a riddle, a logical absurdity. However, in your *Dogmatik* you speak of knowledge as a necessary ingredient of Christian faith, and say that when the Church apprehends the Bible on the Divine side, the certainty of her knowledge cannot stand in question. Will you indicate which you do and which you do not hold of these apparently different statements?

A. *Ganz-andere* is also one of the old patterns used twenty years ago and not in use today. For the rest the contrast has not been properly understood. It is between *mastery* and *service*. There is no having or possessing of God as though we could control Him or take Him into our service. But in the service of God, in the obedience of faith, we know. There is no faith without knowledge.

Q. In an earlier volume you spoke of the certainty of eternal salvation as a later accretion to Calvinism that had been over-emphasized. Do you now hold that God freely gives a believer an assurance of eternal salvation by His Word and the testimony of the Holy Spirit?

A. More and more I emphasize the certainty of salvation, but it must be a certainty of faith, not of experience. I do not say "there is" but that "He gives" a certainty of salvation.

Q. From your chapter *The Christian Apprehension of Revelation* I understand you to teach that the Theology of the Word cannot become a

synthesis of human thinking, inclusive of science and philosophy and offering a world and life view that will solve the political, economic, and social problems of the day. Accordingly, would you find yourself in agreement with the sentiment of one of our former teachers, "The Church has a creed, she does not have opinions"? (Thornwell.)

A. Yes.

Q. However, this would not mean that the truth revealed in the Word was not normative for a man in his every relationship in life, would it?

A. No.

Q. You would hold that a Christian was obligated to be honest in his business; a statesman to recognize the authority of God's justice rather than make national expediency ultimate; a philosophy to recognize the Creator in his Philosophy?

A. Of course. I answered that question in my recent address at Liestal by showing that right (civic and personal) rests not on natural or Roman law, but on the Divine justification which the Church preaches.

(The *Bekenntnissynode* in the Barmen declaration "rejects the false doctrine which says there are provinces of our lives in which we are to own, not Jesus Christ, but some other Lord; in which we do not need justification and salvation through Him.")

## THEOLOGY

Q. Is it correct to call yours a Christocentric theology?

A. No. I do not care for the centric words.

The Christological doctrine—Christ as true God and true man—may be used as organizing principle for the Christian theology and as an analogy by which to test other doctrines; but so may also other doctrines (in dependence upon, not against, the Christological doctrine) be used as the organizing principle, such as the doctrine of justification, of grace, of adoption, of the Church, and of the sacraments.

Q. What are the main divisions of your own dogmatics?

A. The doctrine of the Word of God; the doctrine of God; the doctrine of creation; the doctrine of reconciliation; and the doctrine of redemption.

Q. Is it true that so far from being a Modernist you have drawn lines of separation from them? In your *Dogmatik* do you distinguish the Church of the Word (inclusive of the Reformed, the Lutheran, and the Anglican schools) as definitely from the modernistic Church of Neo-Protestantism as you do from the Roman Catholic Church; and in the *Credo* do you speak of the "liberals" as friends because you are unable to call them brethren?

A. Yes. But insert a little point of interrogation. I am not quite sure yet as to the position of the Anglicans.

## INTERVIEWER'S CONCLUSION

In estimating a theologian one may consider his position, direction, and attitude. As indicated below, the interviewer holds a somewhat different position from Professor Barth. However, he rejoices in Barth's movement in the Reformed direction; and even with reference to some doctrines in which he does not regard Barth's present position as satisfactorily settled, such as sanctification and inspiration, notes that Barth has projected a

further study in sanctification as a course for the ensuing semester, and that he finds verbal inspiration in I Cor. ii:13, while his colleague, Pfarrer W. Vischer, speaks of the Holy Spirit as the hidden author of Holy Scripture. Barth's attitude toward the Church and her doctrines is indicated by the title which he has chosen for his volumes on theology—*Kirchliche Dogmatik* (Church Dogmatic).

Barth's approach to and consequently his formulation of theology is different from our classical Calvinism. One ought neither to obscure the distinctions between the two, nor to become so absorbed in these variations as to overlook the great testimonies in which both concur.

For example, our approach has stressed the beginning; his, the end; both affirm that God is the Alpha and the Omega. We take more the viewpoint of God, the Creator; he, more that of God, the Redeemer; we both worship the Triune God. We are more historical; he, more eschatological; in this day of battle we agree in the Christian Confession—the Apostles' Creed. We preach the Law and the Gospel; he, the Gospel and the Law; we both proclaim justification by faith alone without abrogating either the Law or the Gospel. Our Biblicism has issued from a higher doctrine of inspiration; his, from a deeper sense of the sufficiency—yea, exclusiveness for us—of the Revelation attested in Holy Scripture; we both insist that Christian preaching is the Church's faithful exposition of Scripture. Our concern is more to maintain the Biblical faith against destructive criticism; his, more to purge it from philosophical adulteration; we both testify to the Lord Jesus Christ as the theme of the Bible and look to Him to own that testimony by the power of the Holy Spirit. We hold that the Bible is the Word of God; he, that by the free grace of God the Bible as expounded in the Church becomes the Word of God; both that, by His Word and Spirit, Christ reveals to us the will of God for our salvation. We have given human reason wider scope; he, perhaps more intensive exercise; both agree that God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts, and that our reason must be brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.

For the maintenance of His truth the Lord Jesus Christ is dependent neither upon the one nor upon the other of us. "All flesh is as grass . . . but the word of the Lord abideth forever." And yet by His grace He raises up and uses witnesses to Himself who often differ greatly one from another. One remembers that Athanasius welcomed the Neo-Orthodox even when they did not agree with him in every particular, e. g., the use of hypostasis. And one notices that the European Calvinistic Congresses are graced by some of Barth's closest associates—Peter Barth, G. T. Thompson, W. Vischer. The way in which the Confessional Church of Germany—of which Barth is no insignificant factor—has lifted the Christian Symbol has strengthened the faith of many. It is a stimulus to observe how the influence of Barth has turned the preaching of many back to the exposition of God's Word and the proclamation of the Gospel of the Apostles and Reformers; and an inspiration to note the joy Barth shows in the unfolding of Holy Scripture, particularly as it sets forth the Risen Christ and the Christian hope.