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Changes in Barth's Theology

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DURING the course of recent years the theology of Karl Barth has undergone considerable change. We naturally ask in what direction it has changed. The Rev. Professor William Childs Robinson of Columbia Seminary, Decatur, Georgia, a Reformed scholar whom we delight to honor for his great work in the interest of the Reformed Faith, answers our question by speaking of "Barth's movement in the Reformed direction." In *The Presbyterian* of October 27, 1938, he publishes an account of an interview he has had with Barth. His conclusion, based upon the interview, may be summed up by saying that for him the difference between Barthian theology and the Reformed Faith is largely one of emphasis. With this conclusion of Dr. Robinson we find it impossible to agree.

We do not deny that there is some plausibility in Dr. Robinson's conclusion. Barth lays more stress upon history now than he did in his earlier works. In his book on *Romans* he compared the incarnation of Christ to a tangent that merely touches a circle, but now he criticizes that comparison and finds it deficient. Again, in his *Dogmatics* of 1927, he to a large extent worked out an existential philosophy apart from the Scriptures, but now he wishes to find no other basis for his theology than Scripture alone. We are not indifferent to, or unappreciative of, these changes, but we see no evidence

in them of an approach to the Reformed Faith.

Time

Barth, we are told, is willing to say that he accepts the virgin birth, the death and the resurrection of Christ "as actual and as significant facts." This would seem to point to his full acceptance of historic Christianity. However, Barth has his reservations when he accepts such "facts" as the virgin birth and the resurrection. These reservations are largely based upon his conception of time. We therefore turn to a brief analysis of his conception of time.

Barth speaks of three kinds of time. In the first place, there is creation-time. That time is now "hidden and withdrawn" from us (*Kirchliche Dogmatik* I. 2, p. 52). In the second place there is the time we as sinners know. "Time, after the fall, is a different, a new time" (*Idem*, p. 52). As sinners we have time, not in virtue of our being created, but by the special goodness of God (*Idem*, p. 53). In the third place there is revelation-time. It is called revelation-time because God has revealed Himself in it. In fact, God has created this third time for the very purpose of revelation (*Idem*, p. 54).

But why should a special time have to be created for purposes of revelation? Barth's answer to this question

is a simple one. Revelation could not enter into "our" time as such without losing its character as revelation. A revelation that entered into "our" time as such would be subject to human manipulation. We should be able to apply our judgments of value to it. Thus God would not be "free" with respect to us. Barth stresses this point over and over again in his discussion of revelation.

It follows that if we are to understand what revelation means to us, we must not impose upon it our notions of past, present and future. When the New Testament speaks of any present time, we should remember that over and beyond any calendar-time it refers to revelation-time. In this revelation-time there is a genuine past and a genuine future just because the present to which they stand related is a real present not dependent upon the calendar. Speaking of revelation-time, Barth says:

This is characteristic of the time of Jesus Christ: it is the time of the *Lord* of time. It is, in distinction from our time, controlled, and for that very reason, *real, fulfilled* time. Here we have no dilemma between a present that fades away into past and future, and a past and future that in turn disappear in the present. Here we have a genuine present . . . and for that very reason also a genuine past and a genuine future. The Word of God is. It is never "not yet" or "no more." It is not subject to becoming and for that reason it is not subject to passing away or change. All this may also be said with respect to the Word that became flesh and therefore temporal. Jesus Christ is the same in each moment of His temporal existence, in every Before and After, in which He is revealed as true God and man. The Word spoken from all eternity lifts time, into which it is spoken (without destroying it as time), as now being *His* time into His own eternity, and causes it to participate in the only real Being of God which moves itself, rests in itself, and is sufficient unto itself. It is spoken by God, a Perfect without comparison (not in "our" time, but in God's time, created by the incarnate Word, we find a genuine, real, never to be resolved Perfect!), and for that reason it is coming in the world, a Future without comparison (because again it is not in "our" time, but in God's time, created by the incarnate Word, that we find a genuine, real, not to be resolved, archetypical Future!) (*Idem*, p. 57).

The Incarnation

It is in the light of Barth's conception of time that we are to under-

stand what he says about such matters as the incarnation, the virgin birth, the resurrection and the return of Christ. As far as the incarnation is concerned, we observe that Barth virtually identifies it with revelation. The incarnation therefore takes place in revelation-time. In fact, it is the incarnation that makes revelation-time what it is. Thus the incarnation does not take place in "our" time as such.

This is, we believe, the most charitable construction that can be placed upon Barth's discussion of the incarnation. If Barth in some places speaks as though the incarnation has something to do with "our" time, he adds in the same breath that "our" time must be lifted into God's time. Thus he comes very near to the borderline of pantheism. But we ignore this for the present to emphasize the fact that for Barth the incarnation does not occur in "our" time.

The Virgin Birth

That our interpretation of Barth's conception of the incarnation is essentially correct may also be noted from what Barth says about the virgin birth of Christ. Barth accepts the "fact" of the virgin birth. He even writes at length in its defense against Brunner and others who do not accept it. But Barth accepts the virgin birth only as a *sign* which points to something that takes place

in revelation-time (*Idem*, p. 200ff). Barth illustrates what he means by the virgin birth by comparing it with what happened when Jesus was baptized. When the dove descended upon Jesus it did not mean that Jesus then and there *became* the Son of God. The sign of the dove merely *pointed* to the Son of God who existed quite apart from the sign. "The sign at the Jordan baptism, like the sign of the Virgin Birth, points back to that which is, even without this sign, the Mystery of the Being of this man . . ." (*Idem*, p. 218). Thus the virgin birth is certainly *not*, according to Barth, the point at which the incarnation really takes place in "our" time. When Barth says he accepts the virgin birth as a significant fact, he means a *signifying* fact. But the sign and the reality, Barth warns us, must never be identified. If I wish to visit President Roosevelt, I may see a sign that points me to the White House. The sign may be a genuine sign and I may defend it as such. But the sign is not the White House.

The Resurrection

Our interpretation of Barth's conceptions of the incarnation and the virgin birth is corroborated by his conception of the resurrection of Christ. Barth is far from clear in telling us what he thinks actually took place in "our" time when Christ rose from the tomb, but he is very clear in telling us that the *real* resurrection did not take place on any day dateable by our calendar. To be sure, Barth does speak of a dateable time with respect to the resurrection of Christ, but his date refers to an eternal present. Speaking of actual dates in relation to the resurrection he says:

The resurrection of Jesus is not a fact that belongs to the past. What happened here, according to the witness of the New Testament, can in accordance with its nature not be *no more*, as little as it can be *not yet*. This witness refers to a reality which is not subject to passing away and needs no becoming (*Idem*, p. 127).

A little further on Barth discusses the nature of the memory that fixes itself upon the resurrection of Christ. He tells us that such a memory in the nature of the case can have only one
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this settled; I must be sure if this is true. You wire my husband for me." And in her own words, at her dictation, I wired: "Met a Hebrew Christian, am staying to learn about Christ."

After talking the rest of the afternoon with my father the lady was convinced that the Lord Jesus was her Saviour too. And she wanted us to take her that very night to a meeting to confess Him as her Saviour before she went back to New York. She is now working in a mission in the city and is happy in the Lord.

Are the Jews reachable? Yes, thank God, they are. God has His own, a remnant according to the election of grace. Now is the time to reach them. Judaism is not satisfying the Jews. They are seeking for something new. Even the rabbis deplore the fact that Jews are drifting into atheism and materialism. In New York city alone 60,000 Jews have entered Christian Science and numbers have gone into Spiritism and New Thought. Many have become Roman Catholics. It is estimated that there are over 20,000 Jewish Christians belonging to evangelical churches in the United States. Now is the opportunity to reach Israel with the gospel of Christ.

Although I did not wish to start a work in Philadelphia until I could be relieved of home duties, it seems a work is already well under way. We are teaching a Jewish couple, refugees from Germany, who have been passing through much persecution and trial. They are intensely interested in that which we believe, and we have had opportunities to talk with them about the Word of God. We are the only Christian Jews they have ever met and perhaps the only Christians with whom they have been in close contact.

There are many more refugees now coming into Philadelphia. What a grand opportunity! What a challenge to all Christians everywhere! Here is our opportunity to show them Christ as their Saviour and the only one who can give them peace and joy, and satisfy their every need.

We ask your prayers for God's sustaining hand upon those who have already acknowledged the Lord Jesus Christ as their Saviour, that they may be able to withstand the almost inevitable persecution of their fellow-Jews. For those who are wavering on the brink of decision, pray that the

Holy Spirit may accomplish His eternal purpose in their lives. And for the whole evangelistic enterprise, pray that more friends will be found who are willing to pray and give that the gospel may be proclaimed "beginning at Jerusalem."

Changes in Barth's Theology

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object. It is a memory that is itself lifted out of "our" time by virtue of the object upon which it fixes itself. Then Barth returns to the uniqueness of the object of the memory of which the New Testament speaks, in the following words:

Memory of an eternal time, such as we have in the memory of the risen one, is of necessity a memory of such a time as transcends "our" time, and therefore cannot be limited to a dateable time to which it has proximate reference. Memory of *this* time must also be expectation of *this same* time. Our whole time must, if it is true that God has time for us, be surrounded by the reality of the divine time (*Idem*, p. 128).

It appears that, in his doctrine of the resurrection of Christ no less than in his doctrines of the incarnation and the virgin birth, Barth still denies historic Christianity. Historic Christianity cannot be maintained by one who takes the facts of redemptive history out of "our" time as Barth does.

Eschatology

From the quotations given above we may also learn what sort of eschatology to expect in Barth. We need waste no words on the question whether Barth is pre-, post- or amillennial in his view of the return of Christ. The adherents of these positions, however much they may differ among themselves, fully agree in expecting the return of Christ in "our" time. They all take the calendar seriously. Barth, on the other hand, in his latest major work no less than in the *Credo*, undermines the conception of time that underlies all these views. To say that you *expect* and *remember* the same event is to make nonsense of the calendar. Barth's position is destructive of all true eschatology.

The Bible

In conclusion we call attention to what Barth thinks of Scripture. Has

Barth a higher conception of the Scriptures now than he formerly had? We do not think so. Barth feels free now, as he has felt free from the first of his published writings, to engage in negative criticism of the Bible. Does he show any more reverence for the Scriptures on this point than the Auburn Affirmationists do? It does not seem so. When Barth discusses the doctrine of the virgin birth, does he believe in it—if he may be said to believe in it at all—because Scripture tells us of it as an event that actually took place? No, he does not! He accepts it on the basis of its propriety, on the basis of the fact that it fits in with his conception of revelation. In other words, the Bible or a part of the Bible, *becomes* to Barth the revelation of God.

Barth is, as we should expect, very much in arms against the Bible as a once-for-all revelation of God (*Idem*, pp. 78, 110, 112, 113). To hold to the Westminster Confession's conception of Scripture would be, for Barth, to destroy the very notion of revelation. It would be to bind God to something that has come into existence in "our" time. Thus Christ's real revelation and Christ's real presence would be taken from us.

All in all, then, we do not wonder that Barth himself speaks of mutual hostility between the followers of the late Abraham Kuyper and himself (*Idem*, p. 931). The followers of Abraham Kuyper hold fast to simple historic Christianity as expressed in the Reformed Faith. They believe in the facts of the virgin birth, the resurrection and the return of Christ as events that have taken place or will take place in "our" time. They do not play fast and loose with the calendar. They believe, moreover, in the Scriptures as the very Word of God which has come once for all in "our" time. They believe that it is possible to build a system of doctrine upon the basis of Scripture, which system of doctrine is essentially correct in its statement of Scripture truth. In all this they find Barth to be their foe and not their friend.

Those who seek to preserve and develop the Reformed heritage in our day can ill afford to reduce the difference between Barthian theology and the Reformed Faith to one of mere emphasis. If they do, they have no further right to oppose subjectivism in general.