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CHARLES J. WOODBRIDGE,
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THOMAS R. BIRCH,
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To the Readers of The Presbyterian Guardian

AT THE time of Dr. Machen's death THE PRESBYTERIAN GUARDIAN was in the fortunate position of being able to carry on its work for some time under the sole editorship of Dr. N. B. Stonehouse who had been Dr. Machen's colleague in that great task. It was clear from the beginning that such an arrangement could not be permanent because of the great additional load thrown upon Dr. Stonehouse's shoulders by the absence of Dr. Machen from the work of the Department of New Testament at Westminster Seminary. In the meantime, however, Dr. Stonehouse undertook a staggering burden of work and has most ably and successfully carried on, since Dr. Machen's death, both the work of the Department of New Testament at the Seminary and the editorship of THE PRESBYTERIAN GUARDIAN. He has been pressed almost beyond measure in so doing, but he has nobly borne the standard in both fields with eminent ability. The readers of the GUARDIAN as well as the members of the publishing corporation owe him a debt of gratitude that cannot easily be expressed. His editorial utterances have been notable guides in difficult days.

The Presbyterian Guardian Publishing Corporation is very happy to say that it is now able to grant Dr. Stonehouse's request for release from the duties of the editorship, and simultaneously to announce the acceptance of the position of Editor of THE PRESBYTERIAN GUARDIAN by the Rev. Charles J. Woodbridge.

Mr. Woodbridge is probably already well-known to nearly every reader of the GUARDIAN. A graduate of Princeton University and of Princeton Theological Seminary before its reorganization, he has served as a Presbyterian pastor in Greater New York and has also

had notable experience as a missionary in Africa and in connection with the missionary enterprise in his native land, China. In recent years he has been greatly blessed in the task of organizing and administering the work of The Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions until its recent failure to remain loyal to its charter. Mr. Woodbridge is now serving as the General Secretary of the missionary committees of The Presbyterian Church of America.

When I express to Mr. Woodbridge a hearty welcome to his new task, I believe that I do so not only on behalf of the corporation but on behalf of the many readers of the GUARDIAN. We wish him God-speed and a rich blessing as he endeavors to make the GUARDIAN effective in its great enterprise of setting forth plainly the truth of God and of telling of the progress of the proclamation of that truth.

The trustees of the corporation also wish to announce that, effective with this issue, the publication of the GUARDIAN will be placed on a monthly basis. This decision has just been reached, and it is our hope that, by enlarging the size of each issue somewhat over that which has recently obtained, our readers will be partially assisted in curbing their impatience until the next month's provision arrives.

Mr. Birch continues his highly-prized services as Managing Editor. Let us all, readers and staff, work together with Mr. Woodbridge and Mr. Birch for the increasing success of our great enterprise.

Yours in a common service,

PAUL WOOLLEY,

President, The Presbyterian Guardian
Publishing Corporation

Karl Barth and Historic Christianity

By the REV. PROFESSOR CORNELIUS VAN TIL, Ph.D.



Dr. Van Til

IN A previous article we have seen that Karl Barth rejects the Protestant doctrine of the Bible (THE PRESBYTERIAN GUARDIAN, Jan. 9, 1937). Together with Modernism Barth makes no objection of principle to the negative criticism of Scripture.

In another article we have pointed out that Barth virtually rejects the creation doctrine (*idem*, Feb. 27, 1937). Together with Modernism Barth can make no objection of principle to evolutionism.

Keeping these two points in mind we cannot reasonably expect that Barth will stand squarely with orthodox theology against Modernism when the question of historic Christianity is at stake.

Yet here too Barth's first and main attack seems to be against Modernism. Against those who hold that it really makes no difference whether Jesus actually lived and died and rose again, Barth insists: "The name of the Roman procurator in whose term of office Jesus Christ was crucified, proclaims: at such and such a point of *historical time* this happened" (*Credo*, p. 79). Barth wants to burn down the house of modernist Christianity which is indifferent to historic facts.

Then too Barth wants to burn down the house of Modernism when it recognizes the "Jesus of history" but does not own Him as the unique and eternal Son of God. In this we rejoice.

The Sovereign God

But Barth thinks he cannot burn down the house of Modernism unless he also burns down the house of orthodox theology. And why does he think so?

The reason is that both Modernism and orthodox Christianity believe that in history we have the expression of God's plan. Modernism holds that man in his own power works out his own program in history; orthodox Christianity holds that God through man realizes His program in history. These two programs are radically opposed to each other. We feel that all

men must naturally participate in the work of either the one or the other. We feel that men are *for* God if they oppose Modernism and *against* God if they favor it. Not so with Barth. He says we are *against* God if we hold to any sort of program or system, whether modernist or orthodox.

Barth tells us that he is preaching the doctrine of a *sovereign* God. Now a sovereign God, he feels, cannot and does not bind Himself to any program. A sovereign God, Barth holds, cannot and does not bind Himself even to a program that He Himself might devise. God would not be truly *free* if He had to act in accord with a program in history.

Creed and System

Now if God has not expressed Himself by way of a program in history the Bible is not the story telling us of the program of God. Thus if the church seeks to set forth in a Confession of Faith the system of truth taught in the Bible it is seeking to do the impossible. The church, in its "I believe" in which it attempts to set forth the content of the Word of God, must always be mindful of the "frontier" of the Sacrament, "through which the Church is reminded that all its words, even those blessed and authenticated by God's Word and Spirit, can do no more than aim at that event itself, in which God in His reality has to do with man" (*Credo*, p. 9).

This position of Barth would condemn the Westminster divines as they wrote the Shorter Catechism definition of God in dependence upon the Bible no less than the Hegelian philosophers who wrote their definitions of God independently of the Bible.

Christ Our Contemporary

That Barth does not accept historic Christianity as it is portrayed to us in Scripture may be seen from the fact that he constantly speaks of Christ as our contemporary. In his recent book, *Credo*, Barth tells us briefly what he means by the facts that Christ was born, that He suffered, was crucified, dead, buried, raised again and seated at the right hand of God. Did these events take place a certain number of

years ago on our calendar? Not at all, says Barth. Something, no doubt, did take place, at a specific time on the calendar, when Christ was born, buried and raised again. Yet this something that did happen in history was not the real thing, the important thing. The historical event could only *point* to the real event. The real event took place in "revelation time" which is not measured by our calendar. "So far as the Church lives by revelation and in faith, it lives contemporaneously with the divine act depicted in these Perfects" (*Credo*, p. 117). By "these Perfects" Barth refers to "was crucified, dead, buried, raised again and seated at the right hand of God."

According to Barth, then, we, to the extent that we are true Christians, live contemporaneously with the virgin birth of Christ, with His passion, His death, His resurrection, His ascension and His session at the right hand of God.

On the other hand, we do not live contemporaneously with our neighbors to the extent that they are not true Christians.

"The contemporaneousness in which the church lives with the mighty saving act accomplished in Christ, has its reverse side; its non-contemporaneousness with the man of disobedience and disorder overcome in Christ" (*Credo*, p. 118).

Now it goes without saying that we *do* live in the year 1937 with all our neighbors, Christian and non-Christian. It also goes without saying that the events of Christ's humiliation and exaltation took place some nineteen hundred years ago. What Barth means, then, by our living contemporaneously with Christ is something that is supposed to take place in some other realm than that of history. And it is in that *other realm*, according to Barth, that the real events of Christ's mediatorial work take place.

The Virgin Birth

As a specific illustration of what Barth thinks of the facts of Christ's life and death we mention his conception of the virgin birth. If a fundamentalist were to ask Barth, "Do you believe in the virgin birth of Christ?" he would no doubt answer promptly that he does. He might point to the fact that he has even defended this doctrine against his opponents.

But what does Barth mean by the virgin birth? He himself illustrates

what he means by referring to the story of the healing of the man with the palsy. Jesus first said to this man: "Son, thy sins are forgiven," and thereupon performed the miracle of healing. What was the relation between the forgiveness of sins and the miracle? We quote from Barth:

"As a matter of fact, there is no knowing to what extent the doctrine of the Incarnation could not be understood as self-substantiated, or to what extent it should, so far as content is concerned, be in need of supplementing from the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. But it certainly could not be said that the truth and power of the forgiveness of sins pronounced by Jesus (Mk. 2: 5) on the sick of the palsy was based on or increased by His afterwards (Mk. 2: 10) bidding him with such effect take up his bed and go home. Yet this story can manifestly not be read and understood without this miracle of healing. That order to the sick of the palsy is made, according to Mk. 2: 10: *'That ye may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins . . .'* This is exactly the relationship also between the mystery of the Incarnation and the miracle of the Virgin Birth. The miracle of the Virgin Birth has not ontic but noetic significance. It advertises what here takes place. As miracle in general, and now as just this special miracle, it is the watch before the door drawing our attention to the fact that we are here concerned with the *mystery*, with *God's free grace*" (Credo, p. 69).

According to Barth, then, the virgin birth which occurred in history is merely a sign-post pointing to the incarnation which itself does not take place in history. On this point, as on the point of the authority of Scripture, Barth could readily sign the Auburn Affirmation.

Pontius Pilate

In this connection someone may point out that Barth militates against any sort of "Gnostic Christ-idealism." Does not Barth teach that what happened to Jesus Christ "happened at a definite and definitely assignable time within that time which is ours also" (Credo, p. 79)? This is true, but the virgin birth also occurred at a definitely assignable date while yet it had, according to Barth, no *ontic* but only *noetic* significance. By this he means that the virgin birth has no significance in the field of reality or being, but only in the field of knowledge. All the events of Christ's humiliation and exaltation took place in our history, but they were merely sign-posts of the mysterious realities that lie not in our history.

The Resurrection

Barth has not materially changed his views on these matters. In *Romans* he wrote of the resurrection as follows:

"The Resurrection is therefore an occurrence in history, which took place outside the gates of Jerusalem in the year A.D. 30, inasmuch as it there 'came to pass,' was discovered and recognized. But inasmuch as the occurrence was conditioned by the Resurrection, in so far, that is, as it was not the 'coming to pass,' or the discovery, or the recognition, which conditioned its necessity and appearance and revelation, the Resurrection is not an event in history at all" (p. 30).

The resurrection of Christ is in one sense an occurrence with an assignable date on our calendar, but this event merely points to the real event which takes place in "resurrection history" (Credo, p. 98) in which there are no assignable dates, in which all "events" are contemporaneous. "What happens in the 'raising' of Christ in His resurrection from the dead is that He is now manifest in His supreme sovereignty" (Credo, p. 108).

The Ascension

That Barth really disposes of historic Christianity completely may be learned again from what he says about the ascension of Christ. We quote in full:

"So much is certain, that it, too, is to be estimated first of all as the 'sign and wonder' that accompanies the secret of the Christian faith in the act of its revelation. Ascension as visible exaltation—i.e. exaltation that is perceptible as vertical elevation in space—of Jesus Christ before the bodily eyes of His disciples is obviously not the way to that ascension at the right hand of God. For the right hand of God is no place, least of all a place to be reached by some sort of natural or supernatural way through atmospheric astronomic space. As sign and wonder this exaltation is a *pointer* to the revelation, that occurred in His resurrection, of Jesus Christ as the bearer of all power in heaven and earth" (Credo, p. 113).

We may compare this passage from Barth with the words of Charles Hodge, who, speaking of Acts 1: 9-11, says:

"From these accounts it appears, (1) That the ascension of Christ was of his whole person. It was the Theanthropos, the Son of God clothed in our nature, having a true body and a reasonable soul, who ascended. (2) That the ascension was visible. The disciples witnessed the whole transaction. They saw the person of Christ gradually rise from the earth, and 'go up' until a cloud hid him from

their view. (3) It was a local transfer of his person from one place to another; from earth to heaven. Heaven is therefore a place" (*Systematic Theology*, II, p. 630).

The Last Things

Barth's virtual rejection of historic Christianity appears perhaps most clearly of all in his doctrine of the last things. The question is sometimes asked whether Barth is premillennial, postmillennial or amillennial in his conception of the last things. The answer is quite plain. He is none of these. Speaking of the church and what it expects Barth says:

"But what it looks forward to cannot be any sort of neutral future, nor yet the content of a present of world time that has not yet come to pass and that is either near at hand or still far off. In the Cross of Christ that time, with all its past, present and future possibilities, is in its totality concluded and become past. In it, that is, in the development of events that we call world history, the Church has nothing to expect except the 'signs of the time,' i.e. the indications of its being past and therefore the indications of the real *future*, distinguished from mere futurity. What this real future is and what therefore the object of the actual and earnest expectation of the Church is follows immediately and cogently from its present as that is constituted by the Lordship of Christ. This present, as we saw, means *contemporaneousness*, the having of Jesus Christ as our contemporary. In this present the divine power is *operative*. In this present, therefore, the Church remembers revelation time. When it is really remembered, then it is also expected" (Credo, p. 119).

This passage is self-explanatory. Real futurity has nothing to do with the years of our calendar. When the church looks "back" to the resurrection of Christ, and when it looks "forward" to His return it really does the same thing. It *remembers* and *expects* the same object. Such is Barth's contention.

But according to the belief of historic Christianity we can *remember* the resurrection of Christ and *expect* His return while we cannot expect the resurrection or remember His return. To speak as Barth speaks is to play fast and loose with the facts of redemption and thus to play into the hands of Modernism. And incidentally, the "sovereign" God in whose behalf this destruction of the real significance of history is made, would, we believe, be better served, if He were not contrasted with history, but if He were shown to work His sovereign plan within history.