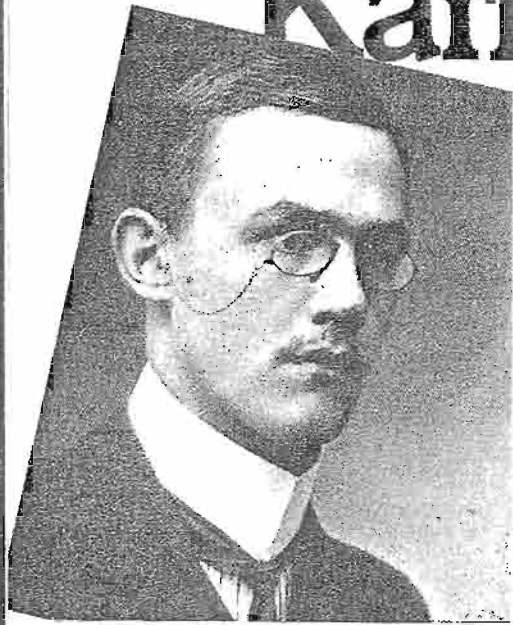


Karl Barth And Us



The groundwork
for our theological task.
by Jacques Ellul

We are the generation of those in France who lived through the rise of Nazism, the anti-fascist struggle, and the unbelievable theological upheaval of the 1930s, coming soon after Barth's early writings were translated into French. Our theological era is often judged to be "post-Barth," and the work of Barth to be obsolete or old-fashioned. But I have often declared that those who held that opinion had never really read Barth and had only a passing acquaintance with him. It is true that "after Barth" there was the Bultmann vogue and demythologization, and then the Moltmann vogue (with Bloch). But after a brief blaze of enthusiasm we abandoned these dead ends.

Photos from Karl Barth, *How I Changed My Mind*, John Knox Press

Whether we like it or not, Barth endures, not as a historical block of work that we can admire like Saint Thomas or Abelard, but as a current resource for continual theological research. Calling oneself "Barthian" would be unfaithful to the spirit of his thinking, which is provocative and evocative, always in motion, renewing itself, never following a merely logical development of principles, but rather expressing a wealth of life as well as of understanding. He did establish a "body of doctrine," but not so that disciples could apply it: so that subsequent generations could do *their* work proceeding from his.

Thus it is useless in discussing Barth to rehearse again the relationship between the word of God and the words

of humans, or to discuss the absolute transcendence of God which apparently would lead to a negation of humanity. (If that were true, why was Barth so often involved in political struggles, not against Nazism alone? He often repeated the phrase concerning various political regimes, "At night, all cats are not gray!") Nor is it worth our time to dwell on the relationship between a God alone existing objectively and the constant affirmation that "God is always subject, never object, because God alone speaks of God."

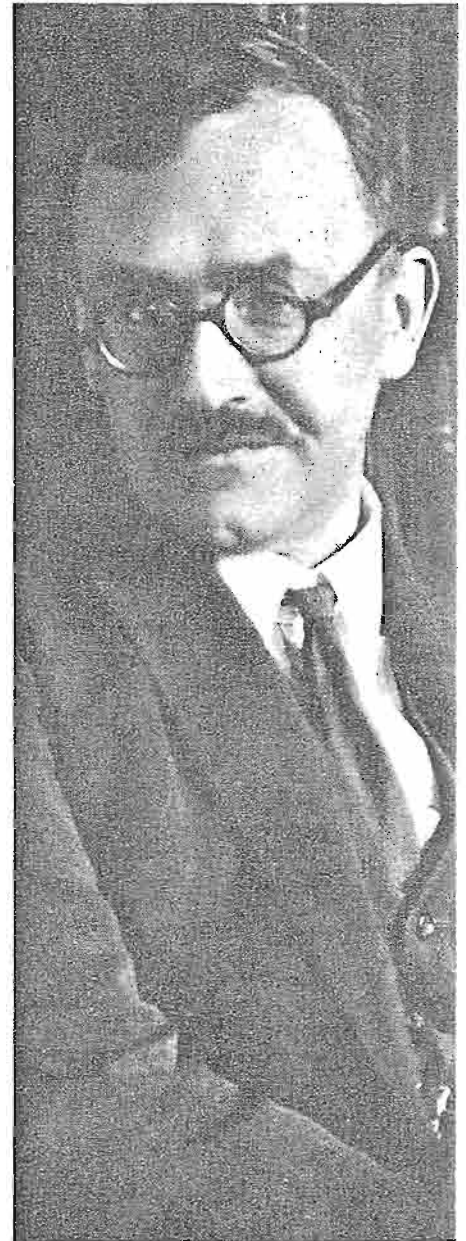
Remembering that period 1930 to 1940, what seems to me to have first agitated young French Protestants was the feeling of an "unblocking" in all areas: unblocking of traditional opposition in the church and of classical positions on the reading of the Bible.

On the first point, we should recall that Protestantism was divided into orthodox (meticulously faithful to the thought of Calvin) and liberal (those who tried to make reason and science prevail in the understanding and interpretation of Christian ideas). This opposition, very violent between 1880 and 1920, became established little by little, stabilized, and the positions of the two trends (which had led to a split in the church) hardened.

Arguments were repeated. For the young, neither one was better. Calvin remained very scholastic; the liberals seemed very far from the word of God.

All of a sudden Barth appeared, to declare that if Calvin is right we must rethink the revelation today, and not in terms of the 16th century; and that the liberals have brought to theology a great richness of ideas and of research which we must recapture in the development of our thinking—thinking otherwise resolutely faithful to the revelation as it is given in the Bible and nowhere else.

It was an unblocking at the same time of the reading of the Bible: here again there were two completely opposing and jarring tendencies. On the one hand fundamentalism, theosophy, and pietism (sometimes magic which led people, for example, to open the Bible like a recipe book to find answers by sheer luck), and on the other hand the historical-critical attitude treating the biblical text just like any other literary text. Then came Barth, showing us that on the one hand the scientists have done excellent work in their criticism and analysis, that they allow us to deepen our understanding of the Bible and to renew our interpretation. However, this biblical text is unique and inspired of God (but not by the letter), truly



containing the word of God. Barth showed how the two currents were perfectly complementary.

But this entailed an astonishing reversal: we learned that the Bible is not a collection of answers God has given to our questions; on the contrary, it is the place where God addresses us, where he asks *us* the question *we* have to answer. To hear the word of God is to hear the question which God asks of me, to which I must give a response out of my life and faith. I am made responsible (compelled to give a response). Thus when this all-powerful God speaks, he does not annihilate us, but renders us answerable.

It was a complete reversal of our



thinking. In the same manner, we entered into a renewal of thought in the existential sense (well before the existential fashion spread by Sartre). The Bible ceased to be a collection of laws, commandments, or meditative texts, and became the place of a dialectical discussion shown to us "of the sorrow and the promise" of life itself, *our* life itself. There was not on one side our life and on the other the universe of God revealed in Jesus.

It was no longer possible to maintain what Barth called "the situation of Sunday morning" (Christian only on Sunday). The Bible was existential and so was the concept we could have of our relationship to God. This was neither intellectual, nor sentimental, nor moralistic, nor experimental, but was at the heart of our existence.

Accordingly, on the theological level we understood very quickly that it was no longer possible to separate theology and ecclesiology, dogma and ethics, soteriology and eschatology. All of these went inevitably together. All our categories and habits of thinking were overthrown.

We saw, slowly and with difficulty, that this change originated from a new way of thinking as well as a new way of reading the Bible. At that period we scarcely spoke of a dialectic. We knew little of Hegel (who was scarcely in fashion in 1930), and little more of Marx. I had the greatest difficulty in understanding Barth's steps in thinking, always posing opposites and then going beyond them and synthesizing them in a new development—all of this not as an intellectual game, but because one was situated precisely at the existential level, where life itself unfolded.

We were still very far from comprehending that, in doing this, Barth was introducing us to the very movement of the unfolding of the Bible itself. The Bible is not a metaphysic of duty,

but a living history of God accompanying humankind.

I believe that these are the principal factors in the incredible reversal that Barth made us undergo, a veritable conversion. It is in this sense that I would like to speak of a period "after Barth"—not as something which is finished, but as an event which renders it impossible for us to return to former positions now radically surpassed.

Iwould like to go on to another aspect of Barth entirely. Just as we have heard the famous remarks around Luther's table, so we can gather little stories from those of my generation who knew Barth. The jokes of Barth. He had a great sense of humor and his remarks were often funny as well as profound.

The first story relates to the limitless admiration which Barth had for Mozart (he wrote an excellent essay on Mozart). To a friend who was eternally speaking of J.S. Bach, the fifth Evangelist, Barth said, "Yes, yes, I know of course that in the great heavenly ceremonies when the angels are before the eternal Father they play Bach, but I also know that when the angels are among themselves and play for themselves alone, then it's *Mozart* that they play!"

Compare this with another observation: when Barth visited Paris for the first time, he didn't have much time to spend. Even so, his friend Pierre Maury wanted to show him the capital. As Barth stood full of admiration before the Louvre, all of a sudden he said, "It is truly too grand for me to see now; we don't have the time. Fortunately, in the kingdom of God I will have all the time in the world to visit the Louvre which will be there!"

Now these two remarks opened vast horizons for me: Human works were not abolished by God, but were valuable to him too. (Which is not to say that artists reveal to us something of God. Quite the contrary.) God would gather to himself, in his kingdom, what people had created, hoped, and wished during the course of history. God's kingdom was not the result of human efforts, but neither was it a world without relationship to the human one.

Another anecdote shows Barth's re-centering of scriptural interpretation: One day during a meeting with some students, Barth was speaking of the book of Genesis. He was interrupted by a young theologian of the school of critical analysis. "Do you yourself really believe that the serpent spoke in the garden of Eden?" Barth replied, "In the end, whether the serpent spoke or not is not important: what is important is what he said!"

Barth had been invited, in 1934 or



From left: Karl Barth, 18 years old, as a university student in 1909; as a professor of systematic theology in 1924; and in 1931, and at work in post-war Germany.

1935, to a parish to preach and lecture. He was received by the minister, who served him a rather sparse meal of vegetables. Now, Barth was quite an eater. At the end of the meal, Barth took out a cigar and began to smoke. The minister was a little shocked and said, "Oh, Professor. I am astonished—you smoke? But how can a Christian smoke? Tobacco is a sin."

"Well, well," said Barth, "tell me, do you have some cognac or a liqueur to offer me?"

"Oh, Professor, there is no alcohol here; alcohol is a sin."

"Oh," said Barth, "I see that you don't smoke."

"Certainly not!"

"And you drink neither wine nor liquor?"

"Certainly not!"

"And I imagine also that you never eat meat, that you're a vegetarian?"

"Oh yes, yes, Professor."

"Ah," said Barth, "how interesting. Then you are exactly like Mr. Hitler!"

Barth was once visiting a parish, preaching and lecturing. This time he was greeted by a minister who was a fervent pentecostalist. "Oh, Professor," cried the minister, "I am always in touch with the Holy Spirit."

Barth: "Very good, very good."

"Yes, every time I have a decision to make, I pray that the Holy Spirit will guide me."

"Yes, I see."

"And I do all that the Holy Spirit tells me."

"Everything; well that's very good."

"Yes, yes, Professor, and I always wait for the Holy Spirit to speak before I do anything; I only do what the Holy Spirit orders."

"Oh," said Barth, "but doesn't that make you just a little bit lazy?"

But all this was said with the greatest sense of humor, never critically.

Once, in Switzerland, Barth was a little unhappy not to get the seat in the church that he wanted. If he was known throughout the world, he was rather less appreciated by the clergy and was only rarely offered the chance to preach. One time he seized an opportunity—to be a prison chaplain. Each week he preached to the prisoners (which led to an excellent collection of pieces entitled *Liberty to the Captives*, by which I always begin the study of Barth among simple people). With humor Barth would say, "At least they are compelled to listen!"

I will end by stating what was for me (no more than for the group to which I belonged) the principal meaning of Barth's work. When I rethink my progress these last 20 years, it seems that I received from him two great principles and a "mission." The two principles: freedom and universal salvation—not the themes classically thought of when speaking of Barth.

Barth's thought brought me an extraordinary liberation, both intellectual and moral. No more constraints—dogmatic, ethical, or ecclesiastical. We could be open to everything, listen to everything, without judgment or exclusion, closing no doors. As Jean Bosc, Barth's most loyal disciple, said, "One can be so much more flexible and open to all things when one has a firmer central theological certainty." Barth taught me never to meet anyone (nor any doctrine) with my mind made up. It was

certainly not abandoning the "truth." On the contrary, it was learning that this truth is that of love. Barth also brought me freedom with regard to the biblical text—the only and unique pillar of the revelation of God, of course, but thanks to which God speaks in a multiple and diverse manner, allowing us to mine multiple riches from this unique treasure.

Barth initiated me into a freedom both intellectual and spiritual, based on a rigorous structure and on research

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into the *movement* of the Scriptures. No doubt if this had any major importance for me, it was because I was already oriented, politically and humanly, towards this search—Barth led me to the meaning of what I had aspired to for so many years. And I insist on the fact that it wasn't on an intellectual or theoretical plane that he played this role for me, but rather on a human, personal, and spiritual level.

My second great discovery was that of universal salvation. I had partaken of a strict Calvinist idea of predestination. Then I followed the steps of Barth, because his thought evolved on this point (as also on the baptism of children). He progressively discovered the impossibility of a hell where God was not, the impossibility of maintaining two faces of God, of separating the God of justice from the God of love.

Without a doubt universal salvation was already included in two decisive elements originated by Barth: first, that all the suffering and all the punishment had fallen on Jesus Christ alone. Therefore, there is no longer any condemnation beyond him for humankind. Second, grace and the effectiveness of this grace do not depend on the more or less good will or the lesser or greater compliance of persons. These two affirmations lead to the conviction that every person, even outside of the faith, is saved by grace. (I emphasize here the error so often made in the U.S. of considering me a "Calvinist": Precisely this conversion to freedom and universal salvation separated me decisively from Calvin.)

It was not easy on the one hand to free ourselves from the long tradition which taught us the opposite. In the face of heretical currents which had affirmed this universal salvation during the course of history; on the other hand to better understand the biblical texts which seemed to say the opposite and to let ourselves be challenged by them. Barth's thought progression always went this way. For me, reading the excellent volume of the *Dogmatics* dedicated to Judas was the final illumination: I dared to go this far not by my own choice alone or by going along with my own temperament (because all of my character took me rather toward the double predestination of Calvin), but because I began to see there the truth itself.

Besides these two "conversions" provoked by Barth, I also understood that we could receive from him a kind of "mission." This mission seems to me to have two aspects.

I had the impression that the ethical consequences of Barth's theology had never been elicited. I was not satisfied with his volumes of ethics and politics, which seemed to be based on an insufficient knowledge of the world and of politics. However, there was everything there necessary to formulate an ethic without losing any of the rediscovered truth, being totally faithful to the Scriptures, but without legalism or literalism. But this work seemed possible to me only if one conserved the groundwork laid by Barth and did not start over again.

Another aspect of the mission appeared to me but I didn't act on it, since it was specifically theological: Just as Barth knew how to go beyond the "liberal-orthodox" conflict by drawing from both a lesson and true ideas, in the same way in the present extreme theological confusion, we had to affirm not a "Barthism" of strict observance, but to listen to all the tendencies, to take up everything which was good, and know how to take a step beyond, exactly the way he did.

This particular task did not seem altogether mine, however—I was not a theologian—I was not armed to fulfill it. But the model left by Barth was the only possible one, and I leave this question before those who are in charge of theology today. □

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