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Some Recent Trends in Swiss Theology

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Some Recent Trends in Swiss Theology.

IT was an interesting and rewarding experience after an interval of nine years to plunge once more into the living stream of Swiss theology in Zürich. Unfortunately my visit was too brief and preoccupied to afford the leisure necessary to gain a comprehensive picture of the theological scene. In retrospect one feels like a traveller who has enjoyed the view from a few scattered peaks but remains abysmally ignorant of whole tracts of country lying between them. The existence of these unilluminated spaces should not be forgotten in the description which follows.

Protestant theology on the Continent has always tended to pay more attention than its counterpart in the Anglo-American world to systematic studies (*Dogmatik*), and the Switzerland of today forms no exception. Biblical, exegetical, textual, historical questions are in no way neglected, but attention is focused on the systematic presentation of Christian doctrine in a degree which has no parallel here, and it is no accident that the two greatest living Swiss theologians, Barth and Brunner, are each at present engaged in writing a *Dogmatik*. It is, however, precisely these theologians who have placed the Bible once more at the heart of all theology, and the deepest *motif* of Swiss theology might perhaps be found in the urge to utter the essential message of the Bible with convincing power to a world so desperately needing it. That message is the redemptive revelation in Jesus Christ. Textual and historical questions are but the handmaids of *theologia redemptionis*.

No attempt is made to conceal the fact that this redemption is a miracle of grace accessible only to faith and transcending intellectual comprehension. *Finitus non capax infiniti*. It can therefore as a sublime mystery be expressed only in paradox. Infinite God becomes finite man. The sinless Saviour suffers. The holy God forgives. Such is the dialectic Barth finds in the Bible—a dialectic akin to Kirkegaard rather than Hegel. And the background for this dialectic are the *misère* of man's sin and the *grandeur* of God's grace.

In their insistence on this central theme Barth and Brunner are at one. They modulate it, however, with distinctive variations. Barth is the imperious Paul speaking words of flaming insight, the iconoclast smashing ruthlessly all idols, the orator declaiming

massive truths without concern for minor nuances. Brunner proclaims the same truths with the mellower grace of John and the contemplation of a philosopher aware of the secondary distinctions no less than the primary affirmations.

At six main points Brunner adds his distinctive rider to Barth's axiom. The first three divergencies had emerged before the outbreak of war in 1939. The second three have become apparent during and since the war.

(1) *Revelation.* So overwhelmed is Barth by the wonder and magnitude of God's revelation in Christ, that he can see no other. Apart from Christ, God is wholly *deus absconditus*—the hidden God. Brunner is no less convinced that only in Christ is God's saving grace revealed. Yet "his eternal power and godhead" (Rom. 1. 20) do not cease to be manifest in the very face of nature, and are recognised however dimly, even by the heathen.

(2) *The divine image in man.* In his zeal to demolish the idealistic view of man as essentially reasonable and good, Barth asserts the doctrine of total depravity with such radical thoroughness that the divine image in man is utterly obliterated. For Brunner the *imago* is horribly corrupted, and man's intellect and will perverted. Yet even in his sin man remains the crown of God's creation, and, far from being *truncus et lapsus*, retains his *humanitas* and responsibility.

(3) *The "Point of Contact."* So depraved is man in the Barthian view that there remains in him no point of contact whatever with the divine. He has become the "wholly other" from God. The work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration is thus an utter miracle, and regeneration is not a transformation, but a new creation. The question *what* it is in man which responds to the divine grace is brushed aside by Barth as a mischievous irrelevancy. Brunner fully recognises the importance both of the doctrine of human sin and of the work of the Holy Spirit, but refuses on Biblical, anthropological, soteriological, and evangelistic grounds to overlook this problem of contact. Barth would simply cast the gospel at a person's head and pray for the power of the Holy Spirit. Brunner would "speak to the condition" of the unconverted without minimising the gospel or praying less fervently for the inspiration of the Spirit.

Such were the questions hotly debated between Basle and Zürich when I left Switzerland in 1937. In 1946 I found that the principal controversy had shifted to three others.

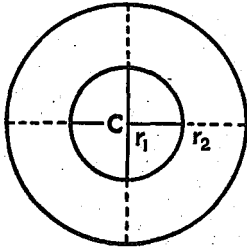
(4) *The Relation of the Old and New Testaments.* Barth's synoptic mind has seized on the essential unity of the old and new dispensations. The Old Testament is not a worn-out garment which can be thrust aside when the new is put on. The God of the Old is the God of the New, and Abraham is still the father

of the faithful. Indeed the history of Israel is an unveiling of Christ, the Word of God. This view is unfolded in detail by Barth's disciple Wilhelm Vischer in his *Christuszeugnis des alten Testaments*, soon to appear in English. Here the Christological significance of the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings is expounded with a brilliance which sometimes becomes extravagance. Brunner, no less than Barth and Vischer, perceives the unity of old and new and would in no way restrict Christology to the new, yet he insists also on their difference. The old is but prophetic. The New is apostolic. The former breathes the Messianic *hope*. The latter states the Messianic *fact*, for the "fulness of time" has come. Thus the relation of old to new is dialectic—they are the same, yet not the same.

(5) *Creation and Redemption*. Barth sees creation and redemption as but aspects of the same mighty sweep of God's astounding work in Christ. Redemption and creation are more closely linked than ever before, and the work of Christ as the agent of both tends to become universal and ensure the ultimate salvation of all. Since Christ has suffered the divine wrath "rejection can never again be the lot of men" (Barth, *Dogmatik II*, p. 182.) Here Brunner utters his objection in the interests of Biblical exegesis and human responsibility (see *Dogmatik I*, pp. 375-379, soon to appear in English in Olive Wyon's translation.) Barth has apparently reached the supralapsarian position, but with a single instead of double predestination. In Brunner's view Christ is indeed the medium of both creation and redemption, but that does not make creation and redemption the same thing any more than a chair is a table because it is made by the same saw. Nor can the dreadful prospect of hell for those who reject Christ be so neatly disposed of. If it could, what would happen to the missionary urge?

(6) *Church and State*. Linking creation and redemption so closely together through Christ, Barth is irresistibly driven to his next step—the almost complete identification of Church and State. The first indications are seen in his *Rechtfertigung und Recht*, translated by G. R. Howe as *Church and State* in 1939. Arguing with logical rather than exegetical precision from a very small number of passages, he argues that both Church and State have a Christological foundation and are practically the same thing. His thought is continued by Oscar Cullmann in his *Christus und die Zeit*, 1946. In what strikes one as by far the weakest section of an otherwise excellent book, Cullmann, arguing from his interpretation of *ἐξουσία*, co-ordinates both the State and the Church under the *regnum Christi*. I translate his words and give his diagram (p. 166.) "The Church and the world are not two circles which lie so to speak side by side, and perhaps

touch or intersect. They are also not quite identical. We should rather conceive them as two concentric circles whose common centre is Christ. The whole area ($r_1 + r_2$) is the *regnum Christi*; the inner area (r_1) is the Church, and the area between the two circles is the world.



C = Christ.

r_1 = Church.

r_2 = World.

$r_1 + r_2$ = Regnum Christi.

The inner circle stands nearer to Christ than the outer, yet Christ is the common centre."

Brunner objects vigorously both to the attempt to ground the State in Christ and to bring it into close proximity to the Church. To him, although Christ is the agent both of creation and redemption, the State nevertheless belongs purely to the orders of creation and the Church to the order of redemption.

A conception common to most Swiss theologians today is that of salvation as *Heilsgeschichte*. God is seen breaking into history to create His Kingdom of the redeemed both within history and beyond. Wilhelm Vischer concentrates on God's saving acts in Israel and their connection with His saving act in Christ. W. G. Kümmel (*Verheissung und Erfüllung*, 1945) in a very careful New Testament study demonstrates the limitations of Dodd's "realised eschatology." The teaching of Jesus does contain elements in which eschatology is fulfilled in the Incarnation, but it also embraces elements which can be fulfilled only in the Second Advent. The onesidedness of both Dodd and Albert Schweizer is thus rectified; a place given to both the historical and the Coming Christ, and the Church seen, as emphasised so often by both Barth and Brunner, as living "between the times" of ascension and parousia. Building on Kümmel's foundation, Cullmann (*Jesus und die Zeit*) develops more fully the idea of *Heilsgeschichte*, showing the line running through the Old Testament to Christ, both the Christ of history and the Christ of the parousia, and indicating the significance of Christ for world history and the individual. What one misses in this significant book is Christ's meaning for the Church.

Straightforward exegesis is in no way overshadowed by this

wealth of systematic thought. A new Biblical commentary, predominantly theological but also reverently critical, is appearing volume by volume under the title *Prophezev*. The parts I chanced to see appeared excellent.

In the realm of pastoral theology two important books have recently appeared, Ludwig Köhler's *Nöte und Pflege des innern Lebens* (The Needs and Nurture of the Inner Life) and Eduard Thurneysen's *Die Lehre von der Seelsorge* (The Doctrine of Pastoral Care.) Both assume the priesthood of all believers and write for the layman as well as the cleric. Köhler illumines his principles by innumerable concrete examples. Thurneysen, who in his student days was acquainted with that great pastor of souls the younger Blumhardt, makes the Bible the basis of all his thinking, but is willing to receive light cast upon it by the researches of psychologists like Freud and Jung.

The uprush of theological energy in the Switzerland of our day is no accident. It is led by men who saw at closer quarters than we the demoralising effects of the first world war, men who turned to the Bible as the only fortress in a world threatened with disaster, men whose life is nourished by deep devotion. Brunner invariably begins his lectures by singing a hymn with his students. Rarely indeed does one find such glorious devotional writing as Alfred de Quervain's article, *Vom Gebet als dem rechten Gottesdienst und dem eigentlichen Werk des Christen* (Prayer as divine service and the truest Christian work) in the *Theologische Zeitschrift* of the University of Basle (2. Jahrgang Heft 3, 1946.) "Once more, and with clearer emphasis we must repeat that the command in virtue of which we pray is nothing less than the whole glad tidings of the gospel." Such is the spirit of Swiss theology today.

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