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Introducing This Issue 3
Vernon Grounds

On Ecclesiastical Provincialism 4
Carlyle Marney

Karl Barth: 1886-1986 4
T. F. Torrance

How Karl Barth Changed Their Minds 5
Donald K. McKim

Karl Barth: Socialism and Biblical Hermeneutics 8
Steve De Gruchy

The Evangelical Witness To the Poor and Oppressed 11
Thomas Hanks

The Challenge of Religious Pluralism 20
Harold Netland

Book Reviews and Comments 25

Letters To The Editor 43

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On Ecclesiastical Provincialism

by Carlyle Marney

The awful sadness, the conviction for sin, the curse of that provincialism that throttles a man, is in part the reflection of his awareness that his church does not yet know to whom it belongs, nor from where its only source rises, so he longs for the kingdom of God and rebels against the confinement of his provincialism and stands with his chest against the fence wanting freedom to seek this beatitude of universal love on his own.

Why does he stay where he is? How can one stay within a framework he has already discovered to be provisional and provincial? By what processes of compromise and death does a man remain a member of a limited communion when with all his soul he longs for membership in the larger frame?

He knows, first, that any escape that will come to him will provide release only to another, perhaps larger, but limited pasture. He knows any escape is therefore abortive, temporary, and provisional. Should he abandon wholly the frame within which life first found him, he knows that his escape from this immediate delimitation of community will only subject him to newer, more subtle, and even more vicious provincialisms. That is to say, he knows the relative nature of any release and finds even in this a consciousness of kinship with all those men of other confessions, creeds, and nations who stand pressed against their fences, too. He stays where he is because he learns that there is no place to go. He feels the agony of confinement native to finitude and, therefore, joins the human race, where he is.

He can stay where he is, second, because he knows that

The late Carlyle Marney was a well known preacher and prolific writer. He served as senior pastor at Myers Park Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, leaving there to become director of Interpreter's House, an ecumenical center at Lake Junaluska, North Carolina.

there are values and potentials trapped within the lower form, his own community. He is aware of submerged worthwhile-ness, of hidden possibilities that must not be forgotten or destroyed. He sticks around to be used in the saving of the salt. He will not go outside and throw rocks from a larger pasture. He knows there are values hidden here that are worth his life to preserve and in spite of his despair, he has come to love the place.

Third, he senses, then comes to know, the presence of other climbers on the wall, other travelers on the road. He stays because he is drawn to them by the common agony and delight of the seeking and finding. A new church happens for him. Communion comes in a touch of the hand, a flick of the eye, and frequently, on this road, a confession of the heart late at night. There is constituted for him a most holy, most secret, most intimate personal church. In its light and strength and communion he lives his life, knowing he belongs simultaneously to these and to this, and that this fellowship with other climbers exists only because there is a climb to be made.

All this is to say that a man can stay in a framework he knows to be provisional and provincial because he knows all the time that he belongs to a higher community. To this higher community both his institutional framework and his "fellowship of other climbers" belong and exist as a reflection. In this awareness of belonging always to the higher, he finds ability to live. More, he feels the call of the higher community to come and to stay. He does both; he comes and stays, knowing all the time that this kind of call will split him. He knows all this and comes to know that this is what it means to live on a cross, for the cross means here the tension that maintains between the higher good and the local potential. Yet on every day's journey he feels the invasion of the higher into the lower community in that penetration of love that will not leave us as we are and gives us friends for our journey.

Karl Barth: 1886–1986

by T. F. Torrance

Karl Barth was unquestionably the greatest theologian that has appeared for several hundred years. Protestants honor him among the real giants of the Church: Athanasius, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin. Pope Paul went so far as to say that he was the greatest theologian since Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century. That was a surprising tribute from a Roman Pope, for Barth's critical analysis of Roman dogmas was as sharp as it was profound, although he also found much to appreciate in Roman Catholic theology. Yet perhaps it was not so surprising, for Karl Barth, one man, had a greater impact upon the Roman Catholic Church than four hundred years of Protestantism!

Born in a Swiss Manse in 1886, Karl Barth entered the ministry of the Reformed Church, serving first in Geneva and then in Safenwil, Argau. Very soon he found himself struggling hard to be faithful to his divine call to expound the Bible week by week, preaching the Gospel "in the Name of the

Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." How could he, a mere man, speak *the Word of God* to others? The seriousness with which he took his ordination plunged the young pastor into a deep spiritual crisis, for he found a "strange new world within the Bible" that conflicted sharply with what he had been taught in the Theological Faculties of Germany.

What was it all about? Karl Barth discovered that the Holy Scriptures don't just speak about God, for in them God himself speaks directly and personally to us. God speaks to us in the Bible as a person speaks to his friend, and yet in such a way that as we listen to his voice we know that we are face to face with the sheer majesty and mystery of God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. If that is what the Bible is, then the Theological Faculties had got it all wrong; for the Bible must be treated in an utterly different way. When he tried to come to terms with his discovery in a commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, in which he called upon the Church to *let God be God*, the book exploded like a bomb among the theologians of Europe, and provoked screams of anger from some of his most famous teachers!

T. F. Torrance held for 29 years the Chair of Christian Dogmatics at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland.

It was "the Godness of God in his Revelation" that Barth had discovered. What God reveals in the Bible is none other than *himself*: not just something divine, not something like God, not something coming from God. "No, God himself is the content of his revelation." Divine revelation is so utterly unique that it cannot be put on the same level as anything else. "As a man can have only one father; as he is able to look at one time with his eyes into the eyes of only one other man; as he can hear with his two ears the word of only one man at one and the same time; as he is born only once and dies but once—so he can believe and know only one Revelation." That is what happens, Barth held, when we meet Jesus Christ and know that he is the Way, the Truth and Life, and that there is no other way to the Father but by him.

When he made that discovery, Barth resigned from the Social Democratic Party, for he did not want to mislead his congregation by confusing the Gospel with politics. That did not mean that the minister of the Gospel must refrain from proclaiming the Word of God to politics, but it did mean that he must address moral, social and political problems *solely on the ground of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ*. That was the stand Barth took up as a professor in Nazi Germany, when he wrote the famous "Barmen Confession" which galvanized the confessing Church in its resistance to Hitler. It is on the Gospel of the sole Lordship of Jesus Christ, Barth taught, that all the powers of evil and tyranny must shatter themselves as on a mighty "Rock of Bronze." When he refused to take the oath of loyalty demanded by the Nazis, Karl Barth was deposed from his Chair in the University of Bonn and deported back to Switzerland.

After the war Barth was more convinced than ever that it was the loss of the Godness of God in his revelation that brought about the secularization of the church in Germany—which was still rampant in all our churches where a secularizing ministry confuses moral and social renovation with the Gospel of redemption through the cross and resurrection of Christ. It was of supreme importance for the Church again to take up the battle for the essence of the Gospel that Jesus Christ is God incarnate, and that there is no other revelation and no other salvation than that embodied in him. That was the supreme truth for which the early Church had struggled in its great theological crisis when the Nicene Creed was born,

and for which the Reformers had struggled when the doctrine of justification by grace was at stake. What God freely gives us in grace is not just something which might be controlled and dispensed by the Church, but his very own Self incarnate in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of mankind.

That is what Karl Barth's theology is all about: *the uniqueness and centrality of Christ and his Gospel*. It is through Christ and in his Spirit alone that we have access to authentic knowledge of God, and through the blood of Christ alone that sinners are reconciled to him in forgiveness and rebirth. If we really believe in Jesus Christ, we cannot place Christianity alongside some other religion, or engage in some sort of interfaith approach to God; for God's unique self-revelation in Christ tells us that there is no other revelation of God and no other possibility of being reconciled to him except through the cross. It is at this very point that the Church today urgently needs to be warned against watering down the Gospel, and secularizing the ministry of the Word of God!

Karl Barth's own commitment to Christ as the Way, the Truth and the Life makes him subject the foundations of human knowledge and culture to the most radical examination. In Jesus, God has become one with us *as we are*. He has taken our actual human nature and made it his own, with all its sin and guilt, misery and death, in order to heal us in the dark depths of our human existence, not the least in the twisted state of our alienated minds. That is why Karl set himself to think out in a quite unparalleled way the nature of human reason in the light of God's revealing and saving activity in Jesus Christ, and to show how God means us to use it in understanding the truth of the Gospel and its implications for all human activity and behavior. In so doing he has given us in his *Church Dogmatics* an account of the Christian faith second to none in the whole history of Christian theology, and one that I find excitingly relevant for our modern, scientific era.

What Shakespeare is to English literature, and Mozart is to classical music, Karl Barth is to Christian theology today. Anyone still unfamiliar with Barth today must be judged theologically illiterate! But what I like most about his theology is that it is evangelical to the core, for it is utterly faithful to the Gospel and its message of the reconciling love and grace of God in our Lord Jesus Christ.

How Karl Barth Changed Their Minds

by Donald K. McKim

1986 is a vintage year for centennials in the theological world. Most notably this is the 100th anniversary year of the birth of two of the 20th century's "giant" theologians—Paul Tillich and Karl Barth.

A couple years ago, when I realized the Barth centenary was coming up, I conceived the project of enlisting prominent contemporary theologians to reflect on how they have dealt with Barth's thought in their own theological development. To do this, I suggested a twist on the rubric made famous by the series of articles in the *The Christian Century* for a number of years, called "How I Changed My Mind." To this series, Karl Barth himself contributed three times. But to have contemporary people reflecting on their interaction with Barth through the years would be of interest right now, I believed. For it would show not only what elements in Barth's life and

thought had made lasting impacts on people but would also indicate how some of the shapers of contemporary theology have either accepted, rejected or remained unmoved by Barth's theological views. In that sense we would have a kind of "freeze-frame" of contemporary theology showing where the theologians are now, 100 years after Barth's birth. So I solicited essays from a number of people, not all of whom are able to contribute. I asked them to write short, personally-oriented pieces instead of formal "scholarly" ones and to be honest in their assessments of their dealings with Barth's thought whether he had actually "changed their minds" or not. I have now assembled 26 essays that are being published by the Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company this fall with the title, *How Karl Barth Changed My Mind*.

This has been an intriguing project which has also been lots of fun. Many revealing "Barth stories" emerged. I sought a variety of contributors and am fortunate to have essays from Barth's two sons, Christoph and Markus, as well as from a

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