

KARL BARTH

January, 1969

On December 9, 1968, one of the good men of our time died at the age of 82. Karl Barth was the most important Protestant theologian since Luther and Calvin. He was unequalled in his grasp of the history of Christian thought, in his skill as a theological interpreter of the Bible, in his ability to state great Christian dogma in the language of our age and to bring the truth of Christianity into decisive encounter with the various world views of this century.

This incredible man emerged at a time when European theology had been quietly put to bed; the Protestant Jesus of those years was cast in the role of a relatively safe ethical teacher, the Bible had lost most of its authority over a large part of Protestantism and Christianity had ceased for many to be a live option. In one single book, his commentary on Romans, Barth challenged the whole framework and drift of Protestantism and to this day the impact of that shake-up has remained. We can never be the same again because of the great themes that were unforgettably sounded by Karl Barth.

He recognized the "wholly otherness" of Almighty God and then dared to spell out the tremendous implications of that fact which stands as a permanent philosophical roadblock to all religion which proposes to work up by degrees to the divine. Barth ruled out all natural religion and affirmed the freedom of God. Since God "must speak for Himself" the acts of religion cannot either prove him or uncover him.

Karl Barth saw clearly the staggering crises of man. He rejected the sentimentalized glorification of man that dominated the Protestant religion of the early 20th Century, a glorification that paved the way for the terrible folk heresies that terrorized our century in the 1930's. Barth had no illusions about man, he confronted us with the fact that our sinfulness was of such a complex nature that mild religious encouragement would never be enough to turn the tide. He affirmed that nothing short of "total help for total need" would rescue our generation from moral crises.

Karl Barth believed in Jesus Christ and this unshakable confidence is the clarifying and central orientation of his whole theology. "Tell me how it stands with your Christology and I'll tell you who you are." Like the Apostle Paul, Martin Luther and John Calvin, Karl Barth believed that Jesus Christ is the very act of God speaking for himself -- the radical intervention of "word and work" in human history. In Christ we discover a real and concrete victory over the real and concrete dangers of our own particular existence because of Christ we have found both the meaning of our own existence and the meaning of God.

To the very end of his life, Barth was a teacher in the greatest tradition. He had little interest in gathering "yes men" around him and would never admit to "Barthianism." In a very moving letter he wrote to

one of his former students Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1937, he made this clear:

"I do not think that there is much reason for speaking of a 'circle' particularly associated with me....As far as I am concerned, you are certainly nearest to me when you do not make the question whether you are 'inside' or 'outside' a matter of special reflection but cheerfully leave it open from day to day."

Nevertheless, this man has had a great circle of followers, not only from the ranks of Protestant Christianity but among Catholic theologians as well. He is the first Protestant theologian to have gained wide-spread attention from Catholic thinkers. It can be said that at the deepest theological level Karl Barth has done more for the Ecumenical encounter of Catholics and Protestants than any other man in the history of the Church.

All of this brilliance and stature he carried with warm wit and Christian humanity. This is Karl Barth who has meant so very much to me and to so many of you.