

CURRENT THEOLOGY

PROTESTANT THEOLOGICAL POSITIONS TODAY

The meeting of Catholic and Protestant thought always manifests the completely different approaches toward Christianity orientating Catholic and Protestant thinking. Both parties know the same facts and both show the same dedication to Christianity but it means fundamentally different things to the two groups. At the bottom of the diversity lie different conceptions of Christian truth. Protestantism has never been able to make up its mind on what truth is. For some Protestants it is something that was. For others it is something that will be. For the Catholic it is simply something that is. Protestantism has always stressed the flux in reality and Catholicism has always stressed the permanent. From the days of Luther onwards, the Protestant preoccupation is with the reformation of Christianity either by looking back or by looking forward, and this is essentially the production of a church. For the Catholics the anxiety is the vital confirmation of Christian life according to Christ's abiding and unchanging truth presented by the actual Church of today, and this means the conservation of the Church.

I

Filled with the Protestant preoccupation, an important book has just appeared under the title, *Responsible Christianity*.¹ The author is Justin Wroe Nixon, of the Colgate-Rochester Divinity School. As a thinker he shows comprehension, sincerity and penetration. As a man he manifests a gentle love for all men and an ardent desire to have mankind enjoy the best there is. He will have no foes; he wants only friends. His book is a kindly but urgent protest against the present mind which he calls naturalism in accord with the label which the representatives of this kind of thinking have chosen for themselves; others would call it the new materialism, the new paganism, secularism, scientism, or simply positivism. Nixon's task, necessary beyond doubt, was undertaken with some reluctance. He puts it very well in the following words:

American Christianity today is engaged in a struggle on two fronts. To Christians who have received their higher education in the first quarter of this century it has long been apparent that a vital Christianity has to struggle with the past. It has come as something of a shock to many Christians engaged in this struggle

¹ Justin Wroe Nixon, *Responsible Christianity* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950).

with the past to find that they now have a struggle on another front—with the present. For it is the present they have championed.²

Dr. Nixon's words refer to American Protestant theology, but they are also applicable to European Protestant thought. It was a stunned Protestant theology that gradually became conscious of the fact that today, more than ever before in the history of Christianity, the struggle was not with the past but with the present. It was an unpleasant experience, for the Protestant was always of his time, and in the past was one of the principal molders of the then present mood. Now he finds that he cannot go along with the present in its concrete plans for shaping the future. The Protestant theologian suddenly has found himself in a new rôle: he is no longer desirous of reforming radically an existing order, he now defends it. The novelty of the situation has been embarrassing.

One of the effects of the changed attitude was the necessity of a reevaluation of Catholicism. In what was once considered the Catholic's unreasonable intransigence, there is now seen a legitimate defense of Christian truth. The result is a new cordiality for Catholic thinking, which the Catholics themselves have been slow to recognise and with which they have not as yet been very eager to correspond. The Catholic's frigidity is regretted by his Protestant confreres and by not a few Catholics, but there is a psychological explanation for it that frequently escapes Protestants. It is not due to a Roman ukase against collaboration, for Rome has made it quite clear that a common defense against modern materialism is needed and she is not opposed to collaboration for this end. The real cause of Catholic wariness derives from the fact that when engaged in collaboration he is inclined to feel two irritants. First of all, the Protestant struggle with the past was usually a fight with Catholicism either as a Church or as a doctrine. The Catholic has felt himself to be the enemy so long that it is hard for him to realise suddenly that he is now a friend. Secondly, though the Protestant theologian realises clearly that he has on his hands a struggle with the present, in which struggle the Catholic is a sincerely welcome ally, yet he cannot forget that he also has a struggle with the past, which engenders Protestant discomfort, because his ally for the present is also the enemy from the past.

This was rather patent in the position of Protestant theologians when confronted with Paul Blanshard's *American Freedom and Catholic Power*. The points in Catholicism attacked in that book needed attacking according to Protestant thought, but Blanshard's point of view was secularist and

² *Op. cit.*, Introduction, p. 11.

therefore as alien to Protestantism as it was to Catholicism. The result was that most Protestant theologians were forced to do some agile balancing so as not to agree with Blanshard and yet welcome his criticisms of the Catholic Church.³ As thinking Protestants saw, the Catholic Church was bearing the brunt of an attack which in principle could easily be diverted toward the Protestants themselves.

Most Protestants enthusiastically accept the alliance with Catholics against secularism but they have an unspoken confidence that as a result of "getting together" the Catholics will drop some of their commitments which make them the prolongation of the ancient enemy. When this confidence is thwarted by the Catholic's lack of desire to drop the old doctrines, the Protestant feels hurt and annoyed. This is so evident in the English reaction to the definition of the doctrine of the Assumption of Our Lady. This has been a tranquil belief among Catholics for many centuries, and there has been no opposition to the doctrine within Catholic theological circles. The definition will change nothing in Catholic thought and piety. Hence the Archbishop of Canterbury defended no Catholic minority in his opposition to the definition but he only voiced the silent fear of so many Protestants who are earnestly looking for collaboration with Catholics against the new materialism, when he said that the Catholic definition hinders cooperation. It is hard to see why it should, unless the ulterior hope of collaboration with the Catholics is to make them drop or cover over with silence Catholic beliefs unpleasant to Protestants. A conjoint effort will not be possible on the basis of the compromise principle: we'll take back so much and you'll take back so much. Many Catholics feel, rightly or wrongly, that they are invited to collaborate on an unconscious compromise platform, and they have no intention or desire to be in such a position. The difficulty of uniting forces is not entirely on the side of arrogant Catholic intransigence, for even Protestant transigence can be intransigent. Nevertheless, collaboration is absolutely necessary in our time, but it will have to be worked out awkwardly and by salving wounds, real or imaginary, on both sides.

The Protestant recognition of the anti-Christian structure of the modern mind has never been so clearly nor so forcefully put as in Dr. Nixon's book. The first chapter, "Our Changed Spiritual Climate," should be read by every one who is interested in understanding the time in which we live. Dr. Nixon is familiar with the thought of all the speakers for the modern vision of reality. He interprets them as kindly as is humanly possible, but he

³ Cf., e.g., Georges A. Barrois' review of Blanshard's work, *Theology Today*, VI (1950), 561-63.

brings out clearly that their ultimate message is: man is an animal, substantially like other animals, struggling to adjust himself to a world which makes itself important to him only in as far as it favors or thwarts the desires that well up from his inscrutable depths; which is known to him exclusively in the impact it makes on his experience; which spawned him without desire and will shortly swallow him up with no regret. Dr. Nixon is rightly concerned about the future of our civilization if this philosophy sweeps away the religious heritage of the past. By this new vision man is without dignity or significance, and freedom, that imperiled value, will surely disappear.

Dr. Nixon proposes a vision which he considers healthier. It is the vision of Christianity, but a Christianity congenial to our time. He is engaged, like all good Protestants, in church building. With the divining rod of his own religious experience, conditioned in part by the liberal and critical theology of the past century, he moves over the Hebreo-Christian field and pulls out four rocks: the biblical God, a moral law related to Him, a holy community, and a divinely ordained destiny. On these four stones, mortared together with the thought of Jesus, he will build his church whose concrete structure will rise in obedience to the needs of time and place. It is his belief and hope that it will be an acceptable and sturdy shelter for man.

II

Not all Protestants will be enthusiastic over Dr. Nixon's future church. The more conservative Protestant theologians think that the Reformers' building will do very well. The Princeton Presbyterian group is publishing works dedicated to the notion that Christianity is more than a field of stones to be collected by a church builder. It is the opinion of this group that Christianity is a structure which cannot be changed without losing its right to be called Christian. Among the works published by this circle is a volume of Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield's Christological studies gathered together by Samuel C. Craig under the title *The Person and Work of Christ*.⁴ Different essays from the fruitful pen of Dr. Warfield are presented again, and it is evidently the supposition of the editor that these studies are a useful contribution to our time, even though Dr. Warfield died in 1921.

It is interesting to compare the spirit of Dr. Nixon's book with that of Dr. Warfield. Dr. Nixon would take a broad view of the importance of the Council of Chalcedon, but Dr. Warfield was stoutly attached to its precise doctrine which he wished to justify by a sober scriptural philology. Dr. Nixon's work is not "polemical" even though he is opposing a whole school

⁴ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ* (edited by Samuel C. Craig; Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1950).

of thought, while Dr. Warfield was consciously and earnestly jousting with men of his time. The gravity of a knight in armor and the formality of a tournament fought in high seriousness according to an etiquette characterise the Warfield studies. One meets again the names of Renan, Jülicher, Zahn, Hahn, Swete, and the Schweitzer of the "historical Jesus" days. The heavy philological apparatus, the lengthy footnote, the aloof objectivity, so dear to the last years of the 19th and the first fifteen of the 20th century stir up memories of times gone by. There is much solid scholarship in these essays along with a forthright attack on the liberal theology in full flower during the writer's life. However, it makes strange reading today, and we can appreciate why Dr. Nixon wishes to get away from this type of theology. It has so little to say to our people, and it is difficult to know if this be a criticism of our age or of the stodgy theology of the historicists.

III

But the kind of work done by Protestant theologians of the first quarter of this century can be continued in a fashion more in accord with the prejudices of the midcentury. This is made patent in the work of Rudolf Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*.⁵ Superficially this seems to be a theological investigation very like those made by Dr. Warfield, but even a casual perusal shows that it is a philology quite different from that in vogue in the early years of the 20th century. The footnotes are few nor are they long. The analysis of the New Testament documents is made not in terms of lexicographical research but by interpreting key words of the text in the light of a unifying theory produced by an existentialist intuition of the meaning of the whole. A theology is being presented and not merely a philological commentary or a critical atomism. Harnack, Pfeleiderer, Gunkel, and the old trustees of yesterday are not quoted. Schweitzer and Bousset are mentioned and used but they are really transitional figures. Even Catholic scholars are given a special place in the introductory bibliography. It is clearly a different treatment than we were given forty years ago.

It is also different in its content. There is no "quest of the historical Jesus," and instead we have a theology given in terms of the teaching of the original Jesus, its modification and expansion by the evolving Church, and the personal synthesis of Paul. Many of the questions that years ago were treated with pages and chapters are now dismissed with a sentence.⁶ Christ's message is no longer the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God, an idea

⁵ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments, Erste Lieferung* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1948).

⁶ E.g., on p. 27 a single short affirmation tells us with extreme brevity that Messiah and Son of Man are two names for the eschatological savior, without any difference in meaning.

so dear to the old liberals, but rather a cry of protest as Barth would like it, and a preaching of God as the source of demand on men whom He meets in a personal encounter.⁷ The notion of the Church is now recognized as a true biblical idea, evolved by a growing Christian community which was always conscious of itself as an eschatological *Qāhāl*.⁸ In Paul this Church becomes the Body of Christ, the eschatological congregation of the elect, whose initiation formula is baptism and whose bond of union is the Eucharistic Supper, though neither one nor the other works its effects except as the dramatic Christian preaching of the Christian hope.⁹

All this is so different from the work of the old critical theologians and the only thing left of their thought is the acceptance of the Schweitzerian eschatological Christ; but even here we note a change. Not only is the Kingdom preached as coming but as already present in its dawn. Its full morning splendor is left to the future, for the early Christian hope as manifested in the New Testament is a new world to come, according to the teaching of Jesus, now accepted as the Christ.¹⁰

It is interesting to note the simultaneous appearance of Warfield's and Bultmann's works. It means the tacit by-passing of liberal criticism in modern Protestant thought. The work of the liberal days which is republished is the effort of an adversary of the dominant figures of that period, and the modern continuation of their efforts is executed in a way quite alien to their mode of procedure. There is as much of Barth in Bultmann as there is of Ritschl and Harnack; in fact there is more. Of the great men of 1910 only Schweitzer has survived vitally, and he in their time told the historicists that they were trying to gather figs from thistles. However, the spirit of Harnack is not dead altogether. Evidently accepting certain conclusions of the older critics as definitive, Bultmann tells us that the present Synoptic Gospels are stories that rest on *Urmarkus*, a book whose existence is postulated, and on Q, the catalogue of Jesus-sayings dimly visaged in positive research. These elements were put together along with legendary and anecdotal traditions by a growing Church anxious to justify its own institutions. The complete work passed through the hands of various editors who gave literary unity to the whole, until a universally accepted version became the common property of Christianity.¹¹ This much, at least, sounds like the Protestant theology of fifty years ago.

IV

However, neither Warfield nor Bultmann represents the most typical theological thinking of modern Protestantism. The most brilliant work is

⁷ *Op. cit.*, pp. 10-25.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 302 ff.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 38 ff.

¹⁰ Cf. *op. cit.*, pp. 6-9, 38 ff.

done in what Protestants call dogmatics. This is not exactly what in Catholic circles is labeled as dogmatic theology, but it is very similar, though it can be projected into a wider framework to become what Dr. Paul Tillich names philosophical theology. The sheerly philological approach is not congenial to the modern mind, and Professor Tillich considers such an attack helpful and legitimate, but not to the point.¹² The best known contributors in the dogmatic field, though not necessarily the ablest contributions, are Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. They are hardly new names but some of their newer works are on the book-store shelves.

Dogmatics in Outline is the English title for the lectures given by Karl Barth in the Bonn summer school of 1946.¹³ The small book is a Barthian theology explained by pegging it onto the Apostles' Creed. According to Barth's own preface, he had to lecture without manuscript under the adverse conditions of the post-war situation. The lectures were taken down as he gave them and these were slightly polished by the author. He warns us that there is nothing in these lectures that will not be found at greater length in his *magnum opus*, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*. Now Barth's work is frankly and exclusively dogmatic. It is overtly and consciously systematic. There is a full theology outlined in this little book, and what is more important, there is a discussion of the meaning of theology.

Barth's concept of this discipline cannot but interest a modern theologian. Without it, his doctrine in detail can well be misunderstood. A theologian like Warfield would be pleased to read Barth's doctrine concerning God and Jesus Christ, but he would be misled if he believed that he and Barth are in agreement. Concerning Jesus, Barth seems to teach the same doctrine that is proposed by the Nicene Symbol and he quotes it approvingly.¹⁴ According to Barth, Jesus Christ is true God, true Son of God, God made man. This seems to be an unreserved profession of faith in the divinity of Jesus Christ, but I doubt if Barth means by the terms what Warfield and Thomas Aquinas understood by them. To Warfield's possible question: is Jesus really what the words, Son of God, true God, mean?, Barth would give an evasive answer. He would simply consider any abstract notion of divinity as irrelevant to the discussion. Any philosophic content in the words is not affirmed by Barth, because he believes that such abstractions should not be attributed to the God whom he has met in faith through Jesus the Christ.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹² Cf. my article, "Contemporaneous Protestantism and Paul Tillich," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES*, XI (1950), 177-202.

¹³ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (translated by G. T. Thomson; New York: Philosophical Library, 1949).

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 85-87.

I said that God is He who, according to Holy Scripture, exists, lives and acts and makes Himself known. By this definition something fundamentally different is taking place from what would happen, if I should try and set before you conceptually arranged ideas of an infinite, supreme Being. In such a case I would be speculating. But I am not inviting you to speculate. I maintain that this is a radically wrong road which can never lead to God, but to a reality called so only in a false sense. God is He who is to be found in the book of the Old and New Testament, which speaks of Him. And the Christian definition of God consists simply in the statement, "He is spoken of there, so let us listen to what is said of Him there."¹⁵

And it is part of this, that God is not only unprovable and unsearchable, but also *inconceivable*. No attempt is made in the Bible to define God—that is, to grasp God in our concepts. In the Bible God's name is named, not as philosophers do it, as the name of a timeless Being, surpassing the world, alien and supreme, but as the name of the living, acting, working Subject who makes Himself known.¹⁶

Now this doctrine indicates an epistemology of purest existentialism, although Barth does not wish to be committed to this philosophy. That which is known in Barthian faith is something that we cannot express conceptually, even when we use concepts to do so, for just how are we to express ourselves except by concepts? Consequently the Barthian acceptance of the Nicene formula for Jesus Christ, or of the term *filioque* in the explanation of the procession of the Spirit,¹⁷ does not commit Barth to any philosophic explanation of these dogmas.

What does he understand by the formulas? He does understand something.

The Creed of Christian faith rests upon knowledge. And where the Creed is uttered and confessed knowledge should be, is meant to be, created. Christian faith is not irrational, not anti-rational, not supra-rational, but rational in the proper sense. The Church which utters the Creed, which comes forward with the tremendous claim to preach and to proclaim the glad tidings, derives from the fact that it has apprehended something—*Vernunft* comes from *vernehmen*—and it wishes to let what it has apprehended be apprehended again . . . *Pistis* rightly understood is *gnosis*; rightly understood the act of faith is also an act of knowledge. Faith means knowledge.¹⁸

Here we are faced with something hard to understand. We truly know God. By faith we have a rational grasp of the Creator, yet we are told that we do not know Him by concepts, for He is inconceivable. What kind of knowledge is this?¹⁹ This question is never answered with satisfactory clarity

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 37.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 38.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 44.

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 22–23.

¹⁹ It must be noted that for Barth faith is not merely knowledge; it is primarily trust; cf. *op. cit.*, pp. 15–21.

We are told that faith-knowledge is the old scriptural *sophia*, knowledge that looks to life and action.²⁰ It is not a thing for itself, but something that is wholly orientated to a total human activity. It is not the presentation of a picture that may be studied, but rather a beginning of action, which has become luminous by faith-knowledge and which is the flower of that knowledge. However, faith-knowledge is no help to speculation nor a stimulus to it.

If it is safe to interpret this doctrine, I might venture to say that faith gives me knowledge similar to that received when I am put into the vicinity of a fire. I experience its warmth; I see the glow; I am delighted with the play of colors and form: I know fire—but my knowledge includes no theory. Besides, no conception could give me this knowledge, for no conception can produce in me the experienced reality of fire. You may explain fire by the Aristotelian element-theory, by the Phlogiston-theory, by the modern incandescent-change-of-state-theory, but none of these theories will give you, nor enter into, the reality of the heat, colors, form, and glow of fire. I cannot prove that I saw fire, and I need no proof for it, because it has impressed itself on me imperiously. The way I conceive it and describe it conceptually is indifferent. The most I can do with such language is to stimulate the listener to experience what I have experienced.

In theology, then, according to Barth we begin after having achieved a meeting with God. This meeting took place through meeting Christ in the Scriptures. Hence it can be said that in the Bible we meet God because we meet His Christ. This happens through no efficacy of our own but because God freely comes to our encounter. From this meeting of person with person, the foundation of theology, the knowledge of God, is given. All theological formulas, therefore, are only testimonies to the initial encounter. They do not explain what we have met; they are explained by what we have met. This does not mean that all formulas are equally valid. Some deny the content of the knowledge from encounter, and these must be rejected. So the Church did when she fought bitterly about an iota in the days of Arianism. The iota denied that Christ was God, and the whole truth of the Scripture is that in Christ we meet God, and therefore He is God.

Consequently Barth with patient condescension admits that the philosophy of the Nicene Fathers was innocent folly and even alien to the revelation, but it supplied a verbal form, fitted to the Greek mind, which could carry the truth of revelation, namely, that Christ is God.²¹ Through the Nicene formula the Church confessed what she knew by faith-knowledge achieved through her encounter with Christ and God in the Bible.

This particular mode of theologizing has the advantage of leaping over

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 25.

²¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 85–86.

all the obstacles that harass the theologians who use a different approach. However, it is no longer a rational theology, even though Barth says that faith is rational in its proper sense. By his notion of faith, a *Kennen* is possible but not a *Wissen*. But theology should be a *Wissenschaft* and not merely an ineffable *Erkenntniss*. This verbal distinction is possible in most European languages where there are two words for knowing: *cognoscere* and *scire*. Not every knowledge is *scientia*, because such knowing says something more than mere *cognitio*.

It is quite interesting to see how Barth wishes to eliminate philosophy and speculation from his existentialist theology, but a reflection will tell any thinker that existentialism is a theory and a philosophy. Would anyone wish to go so far as to say that Scripture and the act of faith teach this philosophy? And if they do, how can we accept as valid the general proposition that faith prescind from philosophic speculation? And if such precision is granted, how can we do justice to the *logos* in theology? An orderly witness to revelation is possible, a witness expressed in language that will be an efficacious pointing of the finger to the reality encountered in Scripture, but not a rational scheme which relies on the validity of concepts as the dynamism of its procedure.

To read Karl Barth is like reading a 20th century reincarnation of Luther. I think that Karl Barth would be pleased with such an evaluation of his message. Moreover, such an affirmation is not the offspring of mere whimsy, for Barth has the passion of Luther, his impetuosity, his forthrightness, his Olympic disdain for critical objections, his high enthusiasm for Scripture. Even the Lutheran attitude to Catholicism is reproduced. Luther had no quarrel with Catholicism as he conceived it, and he believed himself to be a true Catholic. He merely objected, more violently than Barth, to the scheme of Christianity proposed by the official champions of the Roman Church. He could object and protest on the basis of his encounter with Christ in the Scriptures. However, Luther was not a conscious existentialist, though an existentialist drive is transparent in his work. He still tried to use reason and concepts in his polemics against his adversaries.

This very likeness to Luther makes us fear that Karl Barth's thought will have the same fate that his predecessor's had. Men are not satisfied with a mere encounter with Christ, because no encounter is meaningful until it is made intelligible by a concept. Luther and Barth are unconcerned with concepts, but their unconcern is not shared by others who are attracted by their message. The next step in the evolution of Barthianism will be the second step of the evolution of Lutheranism. The concept will come up for discussion and then two distinct lines of development will come to light. One

line will reject the concept as a legitimate instrument for the understanding of faith, and we shall have an arational sentimentalism as the soul of religion after the fashion of the theology of Schleiermacher. Simultaneously the other line will analyse the possible meaning of concept. If the philosophy of this second group is positivism, which is nothing but a refinement of the nominalism of the Middle Ages, the truth of faith will be watered down to become a naturalistic consideration of values. If the philosophy to be adopted is the realism of the Thomist vision, the Catholic acceptance of revelation will be inevitable. In other words, the Barthian position is only possible for a short time. It cannot be a stable foundation for belief or theology.

Moreover it is vulnerable to a more urgent attack. It is inspiring to say that we encounter God and His Christ in Scripture. It is a scintillating phrase. However, it is clearly a metaphor. I know what it means to meet John Jones on the street. But certainly I do not meet God in that way in the Bible or in any other historical framework. The mystic seems to encounter God; he experiences Him as an empirical "thou," but mysticism is not natural knowledge. What Barth and the other Neo-Orthodox theologians mean by meeting God in the Scripture is that they had an experience, singular and exhilarating, while reading or pondering the scriptural affirmations. They then attach the experience to a reality, but neither they nor anyone else know whether the attachment is valid or not. We do not know, nor do they, whether or not they have merely rationalised their experience or whether they have personified a stimulus whose true nature they do not understand. The Scripture tells us that no man has seen God and lived. Far be it from me to attempt a precise interpretation of these words, but the phrase can certainly be used to express the common persuasion that man acting according to his natural processes of knowledge does not experience God. This common persuasion makes a man look with perplexity on the Barthian insistence that we experience the Lord, for meeting Him can only mean experiencing Him. Until Barth and his colleagues can explain just what this "meeting" is, they will not be able to move men. It is not fair to harp on "meeting" God, because Barth cannot wish to say that we meet God as we meet John Jones, and therefore he is using the word "meeting" in a different sense. One cannot help but desire an explanation of this basic word.

Nor is it very satisfactory to answer that unless one has had the experience one cannot know what it is. This answer is either a banal truism or an evasion. Every experience, simply because it belongs to a closed, unique subject, is ineffable, but that does not mean that it cannot be validly expressed conceptually. My experience of red is incommunicable, but redness

can be defined objectively, and not just described with pointings. It is here that we find the root philosophic dogma latent in Barthian thought: concepts are not grasps of reality but the mere human contrivances of relating experiences to each other. We are back to epistemology again and we are faced with an epistemological doctrine which Christianity until the Reformation had successfully rejected. For the Church concepts were important not because they were apt means whereby a witness to an experienced revelation could be made, but because concepts expressed adequately, even though not comprehensively, the revelation received. For the Church revelation is not only a passing experience but also an abiding truth which has an adequate conceptual expression. Barth uses the word truth and declares revelation to be a communication of truth—but he is hemmed in by the traditional Protestant inability to define it.

In the light of these observations on the Barthian work it need hardly be said that a Catholic gains no great satisfaction on reading Barth's seemingly orthodox explanation of the articles of the Apostles' Creed. He believes in God, the God of the Bible. He believes that God is one in three persons, though he tells us that this only means that God exists and acts in three ways.²² Is this fourth-century modalism come back to life? Barth insists energetically on the divinity of Jesus Christ, according to the Nicene Creed. He believes in the reality and divinity of the Holy Spirit. Yet all these affirmations—and their sincerity cannot be doubted in the slightest—have as much value as the meanings attached to the words. But such meanings will be expressed by concepts, and toward concepts Barth is rather cavalier. In one place, speaking of God's reconciling mankind, he says: "Do not confuse my theory of the reconciliation with the thing itself. All theories of reconciliation can be but pointers."²³ In another place he says:

... we must remember that everything will depend upon the Christians not painting for the non-Christians in word and deed a *picture* of the Lord or an *idea* of Christ, but on their succeeding with their human words and ideas in pointing to Christ Himself. For it is not the conception of Him, not the dogma of Christ that is the real Lord, but He who is attested in the word of the Apostles.²⁴

All these expressions tell me that I simply do not know what Barth means when he speaks of God and His Christ. I personally believe that I have "met" Christ, but I sincerely do not know whether Barth and I have met the same Christ.

However, if our enthusiasm is not engendered by Barthian orthodoxy, yet it is brought forth by his warmth and rich appreciation of obscurer facets

²² *Op. cit.*, p. 42.

²³ *Op. cit.*, p. 116.

²⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 94.

of Christian doctrine. He expounds the meaning of Christ's mediation²⁵ in so forceful and satisfactory a fashion that it is no exaggeration to say that the Franciscan theology which he follows in the matter has never been presented with greater clarity or greater vigor. This is also true for so many of the Christian dogmas which his brilliance presents with singular charm.

V

In line with this kind of theology is Emil Brunner's *The Christian Doctrine of God*.²⁶ This volume is the first of his complete dogmatic theology. It treats of the notion of theology and the matter Catholics discuss in the treatises *De Deo uno*, *De Deo trino*, and *De Deo creante*. Again we are struck by the apparent orthodoxy of the doctrine and by the existentialist dynamism of the method.

Yet between Barth and Brunner there are clear differences. Barth is vigorous, impatient, a preacher as much as a theologian. Brunner is tranquil, essentially tolerant, and anxious to see the good in every position and assertion. Brunner's work, like that of Barth, is formally dogmatic and is the beginning of his systematic synthesis. He follows the order of the Apostles' Creed in dividing the matter. However, there is a preoccupation with the concept of theology, and of the 353 pages of the book which deals with three important sections of dogmatic theology, 113 are devoted to the question of what theology is and how it should be constructed.

Brunner agrees with Barth in the following positions: (1) Theology is critical thought's witness to revelation. (2) Revelation is achieved in a personal encounter with Christ. (3) Christ is met in Scripture. (4) Theology is not the affair of a mere individual, but rather the witness of the Church to the revelation she has achieved in her encounter with Christ. (5) Natural theology is impossible, because God can only be known by God's revealing free act. (6) The philosophic elements in dogmatic theology are only human media for the expression and communication of a free divine experience. They are pointers to the truth but not adequate expressions of it.

In other words, Brunner and Barth are in basic agreement concerning the nature of the theological task. The differences will be found within the same framework of thought. For example, Brunner leans more to Calvin than he does to Luther. Again, his treatment of the trinitarian problem is more consistent with his basic postulates. In consequence, according to Brunner the question of three in one must not be explained at all. We meet

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 88-94.

²⁶ Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God, Dogmatics*, I (translated by Olive Wyon; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1950).

this truth in revelation, but we meet no metaphysical principle or explanation there. Hence just how it is, we do not know, nor does its truth shed light on an abstract problem. In this way Barthian modalism is not needed. It is simply true that God is the Father, God is the Son, God is the Holy Ghost, and this truth is found in the Scripture. Outside of that context we know absolutely nothing about it or about any related problem. In revelation there is no metaphysics entailed nor given. To put it simply, we know that God is triune, but we do not know what that means, though we know that it is true. Any philosophy of person, substance, and triplicity is excluded from the revelation, and if the Church did use such philosophic explanation, it was without commitment to it and as a mere pointer to the truth met in faith. Where an attempt is made to include such metaphysical speculation in the content of the formulas of revelation, the theologian must resist and protest. The theologian is a witness to faith and not a scientist.

As a mode of Christian doctrine, as a function of the Church itself, dogmatics has primarily no interest in being called a "science." Its primary tendency is certainly not in the direction of intellectual research, but in the direction of the fellowship of faith and the preaching of the Church. The earliest theology of the Church betrays no "academic" aspirations of any kind. It is, therefore, really an open question whether dogmatics can have an interest in being called a "science" and in having to satisfy any kind of intellectual criteria.²⁷

For all these reasons the "scientific" character of dogmatics, if we want to use this terminology at all, is *sui generis*; it can be compared with no other "science"; it must be measured by its own criteria, and it operates with its own methods, peculiar to itself, and unknown in any other science.²⁸

It will be quite clear from these words that the theologian must follow the teaching of the Church, but, unlike the Catholic theologian who does so because the Church gives him the revelation adequately expressed in intelligible dogmas, the Brunner theologian finds the meaning of the dogma not by philosophical or philological research, but in the experience of the revelation in its source, the Bible. The Brunner theologian criticises the Church's dogma by an experience stimulated by the Bible. He understands the dogma by the Bible but never the Bible by the dogma. It is true that he never "understands" the Bible at all, if by understanding we mean a conceptual grasp of the thing, although there is a different kind of understanding, namely, the knowledge of experience.

In consequence, when dealing with God, Brunner does not consider Him under the headings of the divine attributes usually proposed in Catholic

²⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 60.

²⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 63.

and Protestant dogmatic treatises as orientations for the study of God. The reason for this procedure is that such an orientation would be the introduction of a metaphysic as the framework for an understanding of the divine. This, in Brunner's thought, is impossible. Instead he considers God not according to attributes derived *a priori*, but rather according to the properties that Scripture gives to God: God as Lord, God as holy, God as love. Brunner will not admit any reasoning that derives from divine attributes predicated of God as necessarily flowing from His essence. What is more, Brunner dislikes the word necessity as an epithet for God, for God is free and in freedom He is related to the world and in freedom He is known. In like manner man's approach to God is also in freedom, and therefore this Calvinist theologian rejects the whole Calvinist doctrine of predestination as unscriptural. Instead of Calvinism, Brunner teaches that the only doctrine of the Bible on this subject is that man cannot know God except God reveal Himself to him. God's revelation is grace, gratuitous and not necessary. From that point on, however, there is no determination of man, who freely accepts the revelation and freely brings it to term. According to Brunner, Calvin and the other Reformers saw this truth but they did not express it properly because they brought in metaphysical notions by which they tried to understand it. The introduction of metaphysics as content of revelation is always illegitimate. It has a function, but it is a humble one, which consists in indicating a truth to be grasped without metaphysics.

Brunner here betrays the weakness of the Neo-Orthodoxy. It is equally evident in Barth. Whether these theologians admit it or not, they teach the double truth that Thomas Aquinas worked so hard to eliminate from theology. Throughout Neo-Orthodoxy runs tacitly this basic proposition: God is unknowable to man's intellect as a faculty of conceptualization. The Neo-Orthodox theology attempts to overcome this primary impossibility by making the knowledge of God possible outside of the structure of conceptualization through the medium of personal encounter, which is conditioned by God who can reveal Himself if He freely wishes it. This is the anti-intellectualism of the Reformation, and it has remained in Protestantism unto our day. Existentialism is a philosophy that is most congenial to this position, and it is no wonder that it was conceived by a fervent Protestant and enthusiastically accepted by many Protestant thinkers as the philosophic background without which no theology can be constructed. To the Neo-Orthodox position St. Thomas would insist that knowing is an action of the human intellect, one and unique. It knows not by mere encounter but by illuminating the encounter with concepts. There can be no knowledge on the connatural human plane where concepts are eliminated and there can be no

concepts without a metaphysic implied. The perennial Protestant urge to get rid of metaphysics is a futile rebellion. You cannot eliminate metaphysics from connatural human knowledge and every attempt to do so must perforce be metaphysical. If God is not grasped in terms of metaphysics, He is not grasped meaningfully at all. It is true that pure *a priori* reasoning cannot discover God,—and that is why Aquinas rejected the ontological argument as a valid approach to Him. God must be met in existence, and only there can we find Him, but it is an existence illuminated by metaphysics. Without it existence and its resulting experiences are meaningless.

Existentialism necessarily makes much of freedom. Now freedom is a fact in human life and it is a basic fact in God's relation to this world. However, freedom must not be so stressed that necessity disappears from the picture. Freedom supposes necessity, without which it is meaningless, for it can only be defined in terms of the necessary. Before existence can say freedom, it must suppose necessity. The first Existent has rightly been considered in Christian thought as the necessary Being. To reject all this on the ground that it is a "metaphysic," is the rejection of thought itself, for thought is a metaphysical commitment. This is an existential fact, and an appeal to existence does not escape it but rather discovers it luminously.

It is clear, therefore, that Brunner's existentialism raises many objections that make us uneasy with his theology. However, it gives to theology certain values that make this science most precious. If anti-intellectualism is a suicidal plunge into nothingness, so too pure rationalism is a fatal curtailment of reality. Faith is not a rationalism, nor is theology, which is the science of faith. Theology is eminently reasonable, and it has no quarrel with reason which it necessarily but gladly uses as an instrument. However, theology should have a warmth which is more than the glow of satisfaction which meets the abstract thinker when he glimpses a vast structure of truth. At the end of his consideration of the nature and rôle of theology, Brunner beautifully describes this added thing that theology should give.

[Dogmatics] is not the mistress, but the servant of faith and of the community of believers; and its service is no less, but also no more, than the service of *thought* to faith. Its high dignity consists in the fact that it is a service to the highest final truth, to that truth which is the same as true love, and it is this which gives it the highest place in the realm of thought. But the fact that it is no more than this service of *thought*—which, as such, does not maintain that love and loyalty which must be expected from the Christian—is its limitation; a dogmatic which is aware of this, shows it is genuine. The dogmatic theologian who does not find that his work drives him to pray frequently and urgently, from his heart: "God, be merciful to me a sinner," is scarcely fit for his job.²⁹

²⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 85.

VI

A pure existentialist theology is not the only theological form being evolved in modern Protestantism. One of the most significant events in the 1949 meeting of the American Theological Society (Protestant) was the presidential address of Dr. W. Norman Pittenger of the General Theological Seminary of New York. He called his contribution *The Theological Enterprise and the Life of the Church*.³⁰

The matrix of Dr. Pittenger's conception of theology is identical with that of the Catholic vision, though he has elements in his theory which Catholic theologians would exclude. Of course, Dr. Pittenger, an Anglo-Catholic, would promptly point out that he never wished to do anything else but give a Catholic theory of theology, but I am sure that he will at least smilingly bear with me if I use the word "Catholic" as identical with the term, Roman Catholic, and "Protestant" as applicable to all western forms of Christian belief other than Roman Catholicism.

What is noteworthy in Dr. Pittenger's address is that he stressed in a Protestant theological atmosphere the following points:

1) Theology, and precisely dogmatic theology, is important and its importance is clearly felt by Protestants today.

2) The theologian does not simply pick and choose among Christian doctrines in order to erect a theory to his own liking, but he must give an intellectual synthesis of the whole Christian tradition as expressed in Scripture and in the continuous life and teaching of the Church from her beginnings to our time.

3) The theologian is an intellectual worker and he proceeds intellectually on the data of revelation as given in Scripture and tradition. He cannot consider revelation outside of its intellectual setting, and therefore the principles of thought valid in all thought disciplines are equally valid in theology. There are not two kinds of truth: truth in revelation and truth outside of revelation; the order of truth is one.

4) However, rationalism, i.e., the restriction of knowledge to the field of naturally achievable truth, cannot be the framework of theology, because the data of revelation go beyond the restrictions of pure reason, although not against its norms. Reason is employed by the theologian as a tool, but it is only one tool, nor is it ever the implement of discovery. Intellectualism must not be identified with rationalism.

5) A valid natural theology is not only conceivable but necessary as the prelude and apologetic for theology.

6) Theology must be a Christian enterprise. It must not stay exclusively

³⁰ W. Norman Pittenger, "The Theological Enterprise and the Life of the Church," *Anglican Theological Review*, XXXI (1949), 189-96.

on the plane of theory but it must become and be a more intense and total incorporation of the theologian into the total life of the Mystical Body of Christ, which is His Church.

These propositions are certainly the backbone of that theological method which produced Origen, Cyprian, Basil and the Cappadocians, Augustine, Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Cajetan, Bellarmine, Newman, Scheeben, and the other universally recognised representatives of a genuine Christian theology. Dr. Pittenger has clearly indicated the way of avoiding the Scylla and Charybdis of naturalistic rationalism and extreme existentialism. His insistence that theology should be an incentive to Christian piety corresponds beautifully to the frequent demands for the vitalization of theological theory which are found in modern Catholic literature and which were met partially in the *corollaria et scholia practica* that gave a special winsomeness to Father Hugo Hurter's theological manuals. It is no wonder that a Catholic theologian cannot help but find deep satisfaction in Dr. Pittenger's outline of theological method.

However, would the Protestant reaction be the same? As this article shows, liberalism, historicism, and existentialism are dynamisms that are at work in the contributions of the best known modern Protestant theologians. Would not the Protestant spirit of enquiry scorn Dr. Pittenger's blueprint of a valid divinity? Dr. Edgar Brightman would certainly answer in the affirmative.

. . . the experiences recorded in the Bible and in other sacred literatures are regarded as data for investigation just like any other experiences; no authority attaches to them other than the authority of experience and reason. For theologians who take this point of view (including most contemporary American Protestant thinkers in the field such as A. C. Knudsen, W. A. Brown, H. N. Wieman, John Bennett, R. L. Calhoun, W. M. Horton, and others), theology is a branch of philosophy of religion. It differs from philosophy of religion simply in the nature of its starting point. . . . For theology, the historical beliefs of the theologian's own religious community are the primary sources. Theology thus has a more restricted field as its starting point; but the materials of this field are studied by the same critical and rational methods as philosophy applies in any field. If the theologian maintains his ideal thus set up, he is a philosopher of religion engaged in a peculiarly thorough and critical philosophical interpretation of the subject matter of some one religious faith. Unfortunately, it sometimes happens that preoccupation with one tradition tends to produce a bias in favor of that tradition which renders objectivity all but impossible.³¹

³¹ Edgar Sheffield Brightman, *A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1949), p. 24.

Brightman himself follows this method in his theological work, and according to the words quoted, so do the majority of American Protestant theologians. Dr. Pittenger is not unaware of these facts, but he probably felt that many Protestant theologians were dissatisfied with this approach to the problem. He does make an overt observation concerning this kind of theology.

It does not seem possible, in my opinion, to call by the adjective "Christian" an enterprise such as that which I once found described in a summer-session announcement: "The Christian Faith. After lectures by the instructor, the student will construct his own statement of belief, on the basis of his study of the New Testament, modern philosophy, and the scientific world-view." That curious description would seem more appropriate to some bright new variety of "christianized theism" than to the attempt to appropriate the Christian faith in all of its historic richness, finding in it a reason for living and a meaning for life.³²

It may well be that Dr. Pittenger's reaction to this kind of theology was shared by others at the theological meeting, but I fear that very many considered ideal that which Dr. Pittenger found so strange.

Even for those who felt that Dr. Pittenger was right, a formidable problem was raised. There seems to be a widespread feeling among Protestant theologians, at least in this country, that theology must deal with the teaching of the Church and not only with the doctrines of the Bible. In fact, it is today quite clear that the theory of article VIII of the Thirty-nine Articles will not meet reality. We cannot understand Christian dogma by the Bible, but rather we must understand the Bible by the dogma. For the Protestant this becomes a heartrending task, for he must decide what is valid dogma and what is not. The Catholic can always turn to a fixed living norm, the authoritative magisterium, but the Protestant will not recognise this test, nor has he anything objective and definitive to put in its place. He must rest content with his own personal opinion sincerely achieved after much study of the history of the Church, stifling all doubts with the hope that he was guided by the Holy Spirit. This is not unlike the action of the summer-session student who constructed his own statement of belief.

In spite of the strong voices that are today heard in Protestant theological circles in favor of a divine science according to the ancient Christian tradition, the Protestant cannot overcome the impulse toward church building. It will always be so because the principle of protest cannot admit that the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church, exists with an indestructible structure

³² W. Norman Pittenger, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

and an infallible teaching power whose pronouncements are enlightenment for the mind and not objects of criticism. This Protestant situation derives from Protestant theology's inability to answer Pilate's question: "What is truth?"

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