

Toward a Missionary Theology

Eighth Article on 'How My Mind Has Changed in the Last Decade'

By Emil Brunner

I CAN give a clear answer to the query as to how my mind has changed in the past decade only if I first say a word about the great change that took place in Continental theology shortly after the First World War. For at that time my own thinking also took a decisive turn, in comparison with which all subsequent changes seem of small moment. As regards the great change in Continental theology, it is not entirely correct to associate it only with the line of thought to which Karl Barth's name is attached. This revolution had been quietly preparing for a long time. In the first years of the century, Karl Holl in his Luther researches and the Luther-inspired Swedish theological school (Billing, Aulén) had already broken with the rationalistic, idealistic and historical thinking of the 19th century. It was some time later that the group of theologians stepped forward whose point of meeting was the journal *Zwischen den Zeiten* ("Between the Times") and whose uncontested leader was Karl Barth.

Reaction from Schleiermacher

What was at issue was nothing less than restoring to Christian theology its theme, which is not "religion" or "religious experience" but God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Biblical theologians like Schlatter and Kähler, while they were utterly opposed to any kind of fundamentalistic rigidity and narrowness, had never surrendered this truly Christian theological formulation. But on the other hand they had not been able to break through the theological front—defined by the names of Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Harnack and Troeltsch—which dominated the time. For that, theology needed a radically critical approach and a thorough shaking up; such a frontal attack as was in fact launched in 1919 with Karl Barth's *The Epistle to the Romans*. This was supported by a series of writings by those who shared Barth's views, among whom were Eduard Thurneysen, Friedrich Gogarten and I.

In this connection, it may be worth saying that I never was a pupil of Barth's, though from the very beginning I gratefully learned from him. But like Eduard Thurneysen and Barth himself I responded to the influence of Christoph Blumhardt, Hermann Kuttler and Leonard Ragaz, as well as to that of Kierkegaard, so that I took a theological line which more or less paralleled Barth's. But this is not to minimize in any way Barth's outstanding merit as pioneer of the new movement.

Neither Fundamentalism Nor Neo-Orthodoxy

Since those years, and indeed chiefly as a result of this "dialectical theology," as it was called, the theological picture of European Protestantism has changed completely. Religion, religious a priori, mysticism, evolutionism and so on are no longer subjects of discussion. Continental theology today focuses on the things with which the Bible deals—God's revelatory and saving action in history, the

Old and the New Testament, knowledge of God through his Word. There are probably still people in the United States who see this development as a return to "fundamentalism," with its rigid adherence to the letter of Scripture and its irrelevance to the present problems of humanity, or who would discredit it by stigmatizing it as "neo-orthodoxy." That is an inept judgment of this bold, tumultuous, revolutionary young movement.

Nothing was at that time, nor is today, farther from our thoughts than a return to churchly antiquities. We were concerned about one thing only—God's self-revelation, as it has been granted us in the word of the prophets and in the person of Jesus Christ. This has nothing to do with the antique biblical view of the world or with a Judaistic doctrine of verbal inspiration. Our object was and is to understand God's self-revelation anew and to discover in it an answer to the questions that affect and agitate modern man.

I have on occasion been able to help people who, while sympathetic to the Christian faith, looked upon all theology skeptically by giving them the following definition: Theology is the understanding of the message of Jesus Christ in view of man's problems today; or again, Theology is the interpretation of man's problems today in the light of the revelation of Jesus Christ. At any rate that is the way I understood theology when I wrote my book *The Mediator* and the books on ethics and on anthropology, *The Divine Imperative* and *Man in Revolt*. Nor has my purpose changed in the past ten years.

The Devil Doesn't Stand Still

All of us who were then called "the younger theologians" but now are gray or bald were convinced from the beginning that there is indeed an *evangelium perennis* but not a *theologia perennis*. We are all on the march—first, because we hold with the apostle Paul, "Not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect"; second, because the devil doesn't stand still either. The devil is always modernizing and adapting himself, and anyone who wants to keep on his track must be constantly moving. The devil does not stand today where he stood twenty years ago; the prince of darkness is not that stupid. Only a certain theology is capable of being that stupid—a theology that thinks it must say today the same things that it said in the 17th century age of orthodoxy. The gospel remains the same, but our understanding of the gospel must ever be won anew.

The Hitler era made it comparatively easy for theology to discover one of the principal armies of the lord of darkness and to join battle with its ideology and mythology. This is above all the merit of the theology of the Confessional Church, to which Karl Barth was the chief purveyor of munitions. But it was at this point that certain differences between Barth's thinking and mine—differ-

ences that were there from the beginning—became clearer. However, even with the best intentions to be unreservedly honest, I cannot really speak of changes in my thinking, at least not of changes in my guiding theological ideas. Yet I learned to understand one thing and another more clearly, and at some points I believed I could discern important changes in the intellectual climate which put new problems before theology.

A 'Missionary' Approach to Theology

The first of these new understandings is that of the "missionary situation" of the church. This too is probably a matter that distinguishes my thinking from Karl Barth's. Barth thinks as a churchman for the church; I think rather as a missionary. More and more I come to the view that the church nowadays speaks not chiefly to Christians, as it did in the Middle Ages and at the time of the Reformation and even a hundred years ago; it must speak primarily to "heathen." Therefore, in combating the secularism which this 20th century takes for granted, it must start out theologically from the Christian understanding of the nature of man.

Kierkegaard's life work, this aspect of which is little known even to those who have read him a great deal, has been of the greatest significance to me on this point. This is the problem of my *Man in Revolt*, and especially of the two books that followed it, *The Divine-Human Encounter* and *Revelation and Reason*. But I am aware that I have only begun this task. Unless God gives me the age of a patriarch along with undiminished mental powers, I shall probably not carry it much farther but shall have to entrust its continuation to the younger generation. The word I shall leave with them is, "Missionary Theology." Perhaps my Gifford lectures, *Christianity and Civilization*, will give them some guidance in this undertaking.

The Menace of Totalitarianism

The second thing I grasped in these years—which was indeed a new fact in the time—belongs to the sphere of ethics rather than to that of dogmatics, namely, that the greatest threat to humanity today, and thus also the most powerful of the devil's instruments, is the totalitarian state. Whether this has nazi or communist coloring or even wears the form of a bourgeois democracy is immaterial. The totalitarian state is not the opposite of democracy. Democracy is a form of government, as is for instance dictatorship. But totalitarianism is something much more momentous than any form of government. It is the "state-zing" of the whole of human existence, the lordship of the state over man, body and soul, whatever its governmental form. The totalitarian state is essentially irreconcilable to the nature of man as understood from the Christian point of view.

This also is a thesis which Karl Barth, in spite of his battle against Hitler, has not made his own. But it forces itself upon me ever more clearly and imperatively. That is why I wrote the book *Justice and the Social Order*, for this is its theme. I had no real understanding of that theme when I wrote *The Divine Imperative*. At that time the antithesis between capitalism and socialism was in the foreground of my thought. Since then I have come to perceive that this antithesis already belongs to the past, that

it no longer has reality. Capitalism in the earlier sense and with its earlier power no longer exists. True, there remain what one might call monstrous vestiges of the era of the social dinosaurs; but they are merely survivals and are on the way to extinction. Socialism, however—at least so far as it bears the stamp of Marxism—has more and more become communist and therefore totalitarian. That is why the battle against bourgeois ideas and ideals is a tilt against windmills. What is at stake today, at least in Europe, is the saving of those elements of bourgeois life which are inseparable from the Christian faith, especially marriage and the family.

This mighty social change is to be sure not yet so visible in the U.S.A. as in Europe, although in the United States too capitalism has already entered upon its final phase, and there too it is, in an increasing degree, more necessary to defend the freedom of the individual as against the state than to defend justice as against capitalism. At any rate, in Europe it is plain that the power of capital is no longer the Moloch which most threatens man; the greatest threat is the state, which is constantly becoming more totalitarian.

The State, Not Capitalism, Threatens

That does not mean that the state is no longer bound to see that social justice is done. It does mean however that the state, even where it is genuinely democratic, increasingly takes possession of man and leaves him less and less room for free action. It is precisely a state which aims to bring about social justice, and therefore introduces far-reaching socialization, that is in process of becoming Humanity's Enemy No. 1. It is not yet that, but only a narrow space separates it from the real totalitarian state. But please do not confuse this thesis of mine with the old capitalistic theory of laissez faire and the old slogan of "free enterprise." How completely different my meaning is will be clear to readers of my book *Justice and the Social Order*.

If I have time and strength—and this is a third new insight, which issues from the other two—I should like to devote myself to a principal task of theology, one which has as yet scarcely been recognized: a "demonology of today" projected from the standpoint of the Christian faith. I do not think I err when I say that Paul Tillich is capable of making a large contribution to this theme. But in such a project care must be taken to lay hold of it from the point of view of the biblical Christ-kerygma and not from that of some gnosis, such as Schelling's.

Perhaps the most important of my new insights—the ground for it was probably laid earlier, but it attained full clarity only in my little book *The Divine-Human Encounter*—is the significance of personalism in the understanding of the gospel. By this I mean both personalism in revelation and faith as the divine-human encounter, and personalism as the basis of the Christian ethic. In contradistinction to the gods of the philosophers and the gods of the Eastern religions, the God of the Bible is the God who says: *I am the Lord thy God*. He is the God who in addressing us reveals to us his mysterious *I*, who in addressing us makes us responsible persons by bestowing on us his holy love. This Christian personalism has no relation to rationalistic or idealistic individualism, for it identifies being a person and being through love, and thus makes

correlates of person and community. One can be a responsible person only in community, and one can be in community only as a responsible person.

From this center all biblical concepts and the entire biblical message are to be understood anew, and so they become the key to a correct understanding of the problems of our time. Only from this point of view can we fully realize that depersonalization is the fundamental evil of our day, an evil which reaches its maximum in the totalitarian state. This personalism is not a philosophical idea. It is identical with apprehension by faith of the revelation in Christ. Through his Word, God discloses to us the fact that he is a person and makes real persons of us. This personalism is at the same time "communionism." Whoever partakes of Christ is a member of his body, the church. This communionistic personalism or personal communionism has become the leitmotiv of my dogmatics. Increasingly I find that it lights up formerly dark problems and helps me to solve even "insoluble" problems.

May I say a word about the dangers, as I see them, in the present theological development on the continent. The first danger is a certain tendency to fundamentalistic-orthodox biblicism. This lies very close to the central truth: that we attain true knowledge of God only through the Bible. But literalism is a misunderstanding of this truth, an old but most grievous misunderstanding. The Holy Scripture is not the *object* of faith, but the *means*. Through the Scripture God creates faith. But this is not faith in the Bible; it is faith in the God who reveals himself in the Bible. The doctrine of verbal inspiration is a Judaistic, legalistic misunderstanding of the Christian revelation which springs from mental laziness and a false need for security.

The second danger is related to the first: the com-

placency of a theology which is detached from the problems of the world and humanity today and is therefore not heeded by the world. Much more seriously than hitherto, theology must distinguish between kernel and shell—the kernel of God's revelation in the shell of an antique world view. It must energetically set about translating biblical concepts into those of modern men in order to make them understandable without altering their substance.

The third danger is sectarianism—a recurrent threat on the Continent, especially in Lutheran circles. But when not only Lutheran but also Presbyterian and Reformed theologians behave like sectarians it is especially ridiculous. Of course we are glad that we have once more arrived at a somewhat better understanding of the centrality in the New Testament of the concept of the church. But at the same time we ought to perceive how far this New Testament "church" is from all that sectarianism means and purposes. There are a churchliness and a church-mindedness that we ought to leave altogether to the Church of Rome.

I have almost reached the limits set for me. If my account of my "changes of mind" has issued in a series of postulates, that means only that I see a number of new problems but am aware that I myself shall hardly be able to solve them. Let the younger men take comfort from that! In any case I do not in the least entertain the notion that we older men have already accomplished the most important things and that all that remains for the younger men is to round off our achievement. On the contrary, we are only at the beginning and the main thing is yet to be done. But it can be done only if the younger men seek out the wellspring of theology where we sought it and ever again seek it—in the holy, gracious revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

The Case for World Government

(Concluded from Last Week)

By Harold C. Urey

TO BE PRACTICAL, what countries might be induced to join with us in the establishment of a limited world government at the present time or in the foreseeable future? And what are the difficulties we as a people face in inducing other peoples to trust themselves with us in such a government?

Because of our long habit of working with a federal government in our own country, we of course think that this world government should be federal. The application of the federal principle is one of the most important contributions that the United States, along with some other countries, has made to history. As a matter of fact it seems to me the only possible principle on which a world government could be set up, for it is important to respect the differences among the various peoples and to disturb their cultures and ideals as little as possible.

This can only be done by assigning to a world federal government a very limited range of sovereignty. While some countries besides our own are acquainted with a fed-

eral system, many are not, and it will probably be difficult to persuade them to adopt our system. We must try to bring them to see that our federal system alone will make it possible for them to remain culturally independent at the same time that the troublesome area of foreign affairs is transferred to a responsible authority.

Let us consider some concrete examples. First, Canada. We have a tendency to take Canada for granted and to interfere in her private affairs in a very highhanded fashion. Canada fears us because we are so much larger than she is, and Canadians are afraid that we will come to dominate their economic and cultural life completely. This is perhaps the most important problem of the United States when thinking of Canada as a partner in a federal world government. Canadians must speak for themselves, but I would hope that with proper safeguards against domination by their larger neighbor to the south they would be willing to join. The same considerations apply, with modifications, to other parts of the British Commonwealth.



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