Self-presentation (1962)

By Karl Barth

In the fall of 1964, it will be 60 years since I turned to the study of theology. I owed the impetus for this practically decisively to the confirmation classes I received from a preacher working in Bern at the time, Pastor Robert Aeschbacher, whose freedom and determination introduced me to the prerequisites and problems of Christian knowledge in such a way that I found myself called to pursue them further. In this dark urge – less for preaching than for better understanding! – I went to university. My teachers were initially (in addition to my father, the church historian Fritz Barth, who remained honorable to me throughout my life) the Old Testament scholar Karl Marti, a strict student of Wellhausen – the New Testament scholar Rudolf Steck, a last, sharpest representative of the Tübingen school, who also considered the four main Pauline epistles to be "inauthentic" – and the systematist Hermann Lüdemann, who knew exactly how to teach us, with bitter polemics against Ritschl and his followers, about what the Christian not only believes but knows "by virtue of his religious consciousness". What one can have on one's mind against "the old orthodoxy", against all uncritical biblicism, etc., and that all of God's ways must begin with Kant and possibly also reach their goal, was I was seriously told and learned in my Bernese semesters. The picture changed (without becoming completely different) when I continued my studies in Berlin with Harnack, Kaftan and Gunkel and later in Marburg with Herrmann, Jülicher, Heitmüller, Rade and Stephan. The possibility of a religious-historical understanding of the Bible became clear to me and Schleiermacher, alongside Kant, now entered my consciousness more clearly than before. It was characteristic of the state of my knowledge at that time that I did not know what to do with Schlatter in Tübingen. At the end of my student days, I could hardly have been surpassed by any of my peers in my faithful approval of the elements of the then "modern" theology. In 1909, I took up the pastorate in the spirit indicated by this.

Socialism and especially "religious" socialism, preferably in the form represented by Hermann Kutter, became a relatively new educational element for me. As a result, the relationship between my preaching and the Bible, on whose texts I had to preach every Sunday like every pastor, initially became increasingly problematic for me due to my individualistic religionism and moralism. The outbreak of the First World War then led to a crisis in my hitherto unbroken trust in the goodness of exegesis, dogmatics and ethics, which seemed to suggest to my former teachers that their position "for emperor and empire" was deeply alien to me. Of course, I had also studied Luther and Calvin to a certain extent. But because I had done this through the lenses of the glasses that were peculiar to me from my years of learning, it was not them for the time being, but Blumhardt, Dostoyevsky, Kierkegaard – for a while, strangely enough, also J.T. Beck – from whom I now sought positive instruction and guidance and also found a good deal of it. God and his kingdom came powerfully to the forefront of my thinking compared to the world of human piety and morality with which I had previously been solely familiar. At the time of this breakthrough, I wrote – originally from writing exercises in which I initially only wanted to give an account of my changed position and place to myself and a few friends! – The "Epistle to the Romans", which was published in 1919 in a still rather cloudy, speculative form, and in 1922 was completely reworked into a sharply contoured antithetical work for the general public. To my own astonishment, I found myself – hitherto hidden in the cave of my Swiss country parsonage – suddenly "famous", so to speak, and immediately called upon to take on extended responsibilities as an academic teacher in the German post-war era. Only now did I really get to see the Reforma tors and their message of the justification and sanctification of the sinner, faith, repentance and works, of the nature and limits of the church, etc. I had learned many new things from them. I had to learn a lot of new things from them and at the same time I also had to come to terms with Kant and

Schleiermacher and the other fathers of modern theology. By "the Reformation line", as it was called at the time, I soon felt compelled to continue along it: to organize the relationship between law and gospel, nature and grace, election and Christology and thus also philosophy and theology more precisely and differently than I had found them organized in the 16th century. However, as I could not become an orthodox "Calvinist", I was certainly not able to sympathize with enthusiastic confessionalism. And in all of this, I had to relearn a second time insofar as I could not simply stop at the theoretical-practical diastasis between God and man, which I had begun in the time of the "Letter to the Romans" without abandoning it. Step by step, I had to understand the free love of the high God, his covenant with wretched man, but also man's destiny, obligation and liberation to bear witness to him – in short, I had to understand Jesus Christ and move him from the margins to the center of my thinking. Moreover, I cannot consider subjectivity to be the truth, so I had to move away from Kierkegaard again after a brief contact. From there, I also had to make the somewhat neglected turn from the church to the world after my experiences and deeds as a socialist pastor – because I was initially occupied in a different way in terms of time and energy: to become active as an advisor to the Confessing Church during the Hitler era, subsequently to contribute my part to the internal resistance in Switzerland against the political threat from the North and, after 1945, to join the opposition to the "Cold War" between East and West in all its forms (right up to the madness of preparing for nuclear war), which I resented so much. From 1932 onwards, I had to devote most my time and energy to the service of "Church Dogmatics" after I had gained further important insights through my study of Anselm of Canterbury.

In all of this, it was not possible to leave without much opposition to old gods and friends, but also without all kinds of divorces from earlier companions who were apparently or really on the same path. The most important of these in the second post-war period was that of Rudolf Bultmann. What compelled and still compels me to exercise restraint towards him is much less his "demythologization" of the New Testament, which the majority of his opponents criticized, than his "existentialization" of its statements, in which I see theology only running anew into the dead end of a philosophical anthropology, from which I have now thought I had to call it out for four decades. That "speaking of God" means more than: "speaking of man in a somewhat elevated tone" – that was once my (and I thought: not only mine) critical starting point (in the mildest formulation). I now see it exposed anew. I do not deny that Bultmann and his students can sail more with the wind of the times than I can, so that I have to accept that my objection to their teaching is simply astonishing to some sections of the younger generation. I can be surprised by this, but not annoyed, as I still had my hour and opportunity and, incidentally, as I can enjoy so much understanding attention and cooperation even in the circles of Roman Catholic theology and as far away as America and Japan. Sailing against the wind, I once started my new journey and that is exactly how I now want to continue and end it, resolutely but gratefully and therefore peacefully.

With regard to the future of what I have undertaken in theology, I dare not hazard a guess. "There is a time for everything". I know at least some of the weaker parts of my ability and accomplishments. And so, I am really far from considering what I have wanted and presented to be unsurpassable in its execution, but have reckoned from the beginning that one day everything could be done better with other means and methods than was possible for me. How should I dislike it, how should I not welcome it for the sake of the cause, if I should live to find myself truly outdated and superseded in the representation of this cause.

The conditions under which I could recognize myself as legitimately replaced in this sense would, of course, have to be the following: A new theological program (1) with regard to the origin, object and content of all theology worthy of its name would not have to deny the basic

intention of my particular drafts, but rather take them up in a better form. It would (2) have to identify itself as a new program in it would point forward and not backward in a better fulfillment of this basic intention, and would lead to the continuation of the exodus from Egypt and thus not, like the program of the Jews in the late period of Jeremiah, call for and guide them to return to that land. And it should (3) not be a mere project (announcing itself in ever new twists and turns) – it would rather have to be presented in a reasonably consistent and complete execution would also formally correspond to what I have tried to present. I may have become hard of hearing, but the new song to be sung to the Lord in accordance with these conditions has not yet reached my ears. And so, in all modesty, I must not yet consider myself outdated and superseded. But be that as may: Dominus providebit. It only remains me to wish systematic theology (whatever my contribution may be) that in the near and distant future it may remain or become again the modest but free, critical but cheerful science that it has become dear to me through all peripeties and temptations and that it has been worth the effort.

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