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Blumhardt, Johann Christoph (1805-80) and Christoph Friedrich (1842-1919) - A dictionary entry

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Blumhardt, Johann Christoph (1805–80) and Christoph Friedrich (1842–1919)

Father and son who pastored and led the German evangelical community at Möttlingen and later at Bad Boll. They became renowned for the depth and breadth of their pastoral work, which included a ministry of healing for mental and bodily illness and an extraordinary revival, as well as initiatives in global missions and politics. Due to the relative isolation of their ministry and since the cumulative impact of their work coincided with the First World War, they have remained relatively unknown in the English-speaking world, their writings being largely untranslated. Nevertheless, their conversations with the many visitors to Bad Boll, as well as their collected writings, influenced a scattered but important group of pastors and theologians including *Barth, Thurneysen, *Brunner, *Bonhoeffer, Ellul and *Moltmann. The four volumes of Christoph's collected writings in German have, as their titles, themes corresponding to the four main periods of their ministry. These usefully summarize their thought and reveal how the son's work was grounded in and developed that of the father.

1. *Jesus is Victor!* Karl Barth adopted this phrase from the elder Blumhardt's dramatic report regarding a certain Gottliebin Dittus, a woman who had been tormented, dominated and persecuted by what Blumhardt could only

2. *Die and Jesus Will Live!* Though he established a reputation as a faith healer, Blumhardt held that one should neither be surprised if irruptions from the coming kingdom break in, nor should one build the altar there. 'To be cleansed is more important than to be healed! To have a heart for God's cause, and not to be chained to the world, but to be able to move for the kingdom of God!' (Lejeune, p. 49). The elder Blumhardt again sounded a different note from the Pietism of his day when he chastised a constricting attention on individual life and faith. 'Yes dear Christian, make sure that you die saved! But the Lord Jesus wants more. He wants not only my redemption and yours, but the redemption of all the world. He wants to finish off the evil that dominates in the world and make the whole world free that occupies itself in sheer godlessness.' Thus Blumhardt explored a new (or newly discovered) way of hope. Whereas Pietism focused on the soul, the interior, the human conscience, Blumhardt hungered for the Holy Spirit to be poured out on all flesh, including the healing of body, soul and even community. 'To this degree, Blumhardt's thought is Eastern-Christian and not Western' (Barth, *Protestant Theology*, p. 650).

3. *You are God's!* 'You men are of God! Whether you are still godless or already devout,

in judgment or in mercy, in salvation or in damnation, you belong to God! You man, listen: you are of God, no hell has any claim on you.' In his next period, Blumhardt was led fully into the world, seeking the kingdom of God not in any religious church form. 'The kingdom of God comes onto the streets, where the poorest live, the outcasts, the miserable' (Lejeune, p. 54). Blumhardt came to interpret the working for social justice as a great prophetic sign of God's kingdom. The striving for a new social order was, for him, grounded in his faith that God's kingdom, promised by Christ, was coming to transform the entire created order, including social relationships. Because he now publicly sided with Democratic Socialism, Blumhardt was asked to renounce his title and rank as pastor of the church of Württemberg. He allowed himself to accept a candidacy for the legislative assembly, serving a term of six years (1900–06). Though later he withdrew from such political activity, he continued to view the movement for social justice as both God's judgement and promise. Not content simply chasing ambulances to tend the wounds of the next casualty, Blumhardt insisted that the church's witness address the larger social roots of particular evil situations.

4. God's Kingdom Comes! 'There is a credible tradition that at Bad Boll a coach was kept ready, year in, year out, with all its equipment, ready to begin the journey to the Holy Land to meet the returning Christ, if need be' (Barth, *Protestant Theology*, p. 647). Though the early Christian hope of a new coming of the Lord had been placed under a bushel, Blumhardt again placed the light of this hope upon a lamp stand. His hope was a longing for a real kingdom and government of God which historically begins, continues and is perfected on earth until God is all in all. Blumhardt saw the present world as temporary, not something to accept in resignation, but full of barriers that obstruct God's help and which we should push aside. In the meantime, believers are summoned to wait with an eager longing which does not express passive inactivity but an expectancy that the decisive help comes finally from Christ. Because this waiting is not just for a future coming, though, Blumhardt preferred to say that the Saviour is on the way. 'It is right to say with the apostles, "He is at hand, He will come soon!" He will not only come at some moment which lies in a

distant future; our whole life is filled with the coming of the Lord Jesus. Daily we rejoice at His coming' (Lejeune, p. 225).

ROGER NEWELL

FURTHER READING: *Texts:* Karl Barth, *Action in Waiting* (Rifton, NY, 1969), on Christoph Blumhardt, including his 'Joy in the Lord'; R. Lejeune, *Christoph Blumhardt and his Message* (Rifton, NY, 1963), biography and sermons; Christoph Blumhardt, *Evening Prayers for Every Day of the Year* (Rifton, NY, 1975); Johann Christoph Blumhardt and Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt, *Now Is Eternity* (Rifton, NY, 1976); *Thoughts About Children* (Rifton, NY, 1985); *Thy Kingdom Come: A Blumhardt Reader* (ed. Vernard Eller; Grand Rapids, 1980). *Studies in English with significant mention of the Blumhardts:* Eduard Thurneysen, *A Theology of Pastoral Care* (Richmond, VA, 1962); Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.3, 'The Doctrine of Reconciliation' (Edinburgh, 1976); *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Valley Forge, PA, 1976); Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (London, 1976); *Revolutionary Theology in the Making: Barth-Thurneysen Correspondence, 1914–1925* (ed. James Smart; Richmond, VA, 1964); Theodor Bovet, *That They May Have Life: A Handbook on Pastoral Care for Christian Ministers and Laymen* (London, 1964).