

Karl Barth: Preaching and Theological Renewal

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Karl Barth is the Twentieth Century's towering theological figure. His name calls to mind the massive *Church Dogmatics*, theological movements from the early dialectical theology to the later theology of the Word. We think of the great European universities, Gottingen, Bonn and Basle, where he taught. Yet, Karl Barth was at heart a preacher of the Word and the great theological renewal of which he was the primary catalyst and which reversed the tide of Nineteenth Century Liberalism had its roots in the local parish, in the pulpit, in the demanding task of preaching. Not while he was a Professor of Theology but while he was a village pastor in Safenwil in his native Switzerland did he ignite the fire that would sweep the continent and dominate the theological discussion of the West for decades to come. Indeed, when he had become a professor and published his first volume of dogmatics under the title *Christian Dogmatics*, he changed the title and began anew under the title *Church Dogmatics*, a significant sign of his recognition that theological reflection arises out of the Church and must be in the service of the proclamation of the Church.

An early collection of addresses, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, gives eloquent testimony to the fact that it was the setting of worship of the local congregation and the desperate need of the preacher for a word to speak that sent Karl Barth to Paul's letter to the *Romans* to wrestle anew with the Christian message.

In 1922 Barth was invited to address a ministers' meeting to give an introduction into an understanding of his theology. He was embarrassed to hear of his theology being spoken of so seriously. He said,

... I must frankly confess to you that what I might conceivably call "my theology" becomes, when I look at it closely, a single point, and that not, as one might demand, as the least qualification of a true theology, a

standpoint, but rather a *mathematical* point upon which one cannot stand - a *viewpoint* merely."¹

Barth claimed to have not yet even gotten to theology proper even though his commentary on Romans had sent shock waves through the theological world. He denied that he or his friends had any desire or intention of starting a new school of theology. Yet if a new movement was in formation, Barth insisted,

... that it did not come into being as a result of any desire of ours to form a school or to devise a system; it arose simply out of what we felt to be the "need and promises of Christian Preaching..."²

Then Barth shared his own spiritual pilgrimage as a pastor. He had received the finest of European University training in theology. Yet he writes,

... Once in the ministry, I found myself growing away from these theological habits of thought and being forced back at every point more and more upon the specific *minister's* problem, the *sermon*. I sought to find my way between the problem of human life, on the one hand, and the content of the Bible on the other. As a minister I wanted to speak to the *people* in the infinite contradiction of their life, but to speak the no less infinite message of the *Bible*, which was as much of a riddle as life.

Continuing in this autobiographical vein, Barth said,

... But it simply came about that the familiar situation of the minister on Saturday at his desk and on Sunday in his pulpit crystallized in my case into a marginal note to all theology, which finally assumed the voluminous form of a complete commentary upon the Epistle to the *Romans*.⁴

The reception of that volume amazed him. As an obscure village pastor it was difficult to get the work published at all. A small firm in Bern risked the venture, publishing 1,000 copies of *Der Romerbrief* in 1919. So, contrary to the current climate of opinion, it was received with dismay in his own country, but the shattering experience of the World War in Germany caused its strange message to find resonance. In retrospect, Barth wrote of the stir he caused,

As I look back upon my course, I seem to myself as one who, ascending the dark staircase of a church tower and trying to steady himself, reached for the bannister, but got hold of the bell rope instead. To his horror, he had then to listen to what the great bell had sounded over him and not over him alone.⁵

But that was looking back. As he spoke to the pastor's conference in 1922, he was still in the early phase of his theological development in which ten years of pastoral ministry had engaged him. Barth declared that the critical situation created by the necessity of having to preach became to him an explanation of the character of all theology. He raises the question as to whether it would not be for

theology's good if it attempted to be nothing more than this knowledge of the quest and questioning of the Christian preacher, full of need and full of promise.

... Must not everything else result from this knowledge? ⁶

Stating simply where he was coming from, Barth said,

... I do not really come to you armed with a new and astonishing theology, but I want to make my place *among* you with a theology ... which consists simply in an understanding of and sympathy for the situation which every minister faces. ... If then I have not only a *viewpoint*, but something also of a standpoint, it is simply the familiar standpoint of the man in the pulpit. Before him lies the Bible, full of mystery; and before him are seated his more or less numerous hearers, also full of mystery.... *What now?* asks the minister. If I could succeed in bringing acutely to your minds the whole content of that, "What now?," I should have won you not only to my *standpoint*, which indeed you occupy already, but also to my *viewpoint*, no matter what you might think of my theology. ⁷

The whole gigantic enterprise of Barth's long and fruitful career was the outworking of the standpoint of the pulpit. It is in the act of preaching that the Word of God encounters people where they live, where the Word engages the world. If the engagement is to prove fruitful, then the preacher must know both the Word and the world. In Barth's colorful expression, the preacher must preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Only then will the sermon "speak." Only then will the deeper longing of the people be met and the unspoken question of their lives be addressed.

THE PRESENT HORIZON TO WHICH THE WORD IS SPOKEN

It is in the congregation that the two constants of theological formulation come together: the message and the present horizon which is represented in the lives of the people. That present horizon must be understood by the preacher. It provides the approach, the access to the questions of the people. Barth speaks of the strange situation of Sunday morning. The strange building with its strange appointments, its ancient traditions, singing, praying to *God*! And then - "here is daring" he says, *the preaching*. Pervading the whole strange Sunday morning episode is a sense of expectancy because everything seems to point to the conviction that *God is present*. Yet the people come with *expectancy* not only, but also with the haunting question, "Is it true?"

... And so they reach, not knowing what they do, toward the unprecedented possibility of praying, of reading the Bible, of speaking, hearing, and singing of God. So they come to us, entering into the whole grotesque situation of Sunday morning which is only the expression of this possibility raised to a high power. ⁸

"Is it true?" That is the question beneath the surface that animates the people as they come to church. They may or may not be consciously cognizant of their

question and certainly they will not let on the seriousness of their quest even if they recognize it.

People naturally do not shout it out, and least of all into the ears of us ministers. But let us not be deceived by their silence. Blood and tears, deepest despairs and highest hope, a passionate longing to lay hold of *that* which, or rather of *him* who overcomes the world because he is its Creator and Redeemer, its beginning and ending and Lord, a passionate longing to have the *word* spoken, *the* word which promises grace in *judgment*, life in *death*, and the beyond in the *here and now*, God's word... They expect us to understand them better than they understand themselves, and to take them more seriously than they take themselves. ⁹

It is with that profound sense of the longing of the people, of the deep question of their life that the preacher must approach the pulpit.

The serious meaning of the situation in our churches is that the people want to hear the *word*, that is, the answer to the question by which, whether they know it or not, they are actually animated, *Is it true?* The situation on Sunday morning is related in the most literal sense to the *end* of history; it is eschatological, even from the viewpoint of the people, quite apart from the Bible. That is to say, when this situation arises, history, further history, is done with, and the *ultimate* desire of man, the desire for an ultimate event, now becomes authoritative. ¹⁰

Then Barth continues with words that must burn in the consciousness of every person on whom the call to preach is laid:

... If we do not understand this ultimate desire, if we do *not* take the people seriously (I repeat it, more seriously than they take themselves!) at the point of their life perplexity, we need not wonder if a majority of them, without becoming enemies of the Church, gradually learn to leave the Church to itself and us to the kind-hearted and timid. ¹¹

Thus Karl Barth well understood that sensitivity to people, to their concrete existence lived out in the real world provides the present horizon which must be addressed - addressed not with a word of speculative philosophy or human cleverness of whatever sort but addressed by the Word of God.

THE WORD

Before the preacher on Sunday morning is the open Bible, the second pole, the other side of the equation. If it is imperative that the preacher have a great sensitivity to his people, it is equally necessary to grasp the message of the Word of God in order that that message may be translated into the idiom of the contemporary world. The Word of God must sound forth again. The preacher's task is to communicate the Everlasting Gospel so that the message comes through. That message is in the Bible but the message will be released only when that which occurred in concrete history and thus received a concrete shape and

sound is translated into the shape and sound that will "say" the same thing in a new historical situation.

Barth had a profound confidence in the Word of God. The movement that he effected has been labeled the theology of the Word. With the open Bible before him, the preacher becomes the servant of the Word. We can never abandon the Bible

... because it has a somewhat uncanny way of bringing into the church situation its *own* new and tense and mighty (mightier!) *expectancy*. If the congregation brings to the Church the great *question* of human life and seeks an *answer* for it, the Bible contrariwise brings an *answer*, and seeks the *question* corresponding to this answer: it seeks questioning people who are eager to find and able to understand that its seeking of them is the very answer to their question. The thoughts of the Bible touch just those points where the negative factors in life preponderate, casting doubt over life's possibilities - the very points, that is, where on the human side we have the question arising, Is it true? ... where that last perplexed craving has seized him and leads him, let us say, to church.¹²

And what happens when the perplexed person full of longing makes his way to church and is encountered by the Word? Barth answers:

The Bible responds without ado to the man who has awakened to a consciousness of his condition and to whom certainty has everywhere begun to waver; and its way of answering him is to ask with him, in its own way - think of the forty-second Psalm, think of Job - *Is it true?* Is it true that there is in all things a meaning, a goal, and a God?¹³

The Bible takes the question of our life which drives us to church and gives it depth; shows us that the *question* beneath all the questions of our life is a question about *God*. And further Barth declares,

... as the *Bible* takes these questions, translating them into the inescapable question about *God*, one simply cannot ask or hear the "question" without hearing the *answer*. The person who says that the Bible leads us to where finally we hear only a great NO or see a great void, proves only that he has not yet been led thither. *This* NO is really YES. *This* judgment is grace. *This* condemnation is forgiveness. *This* death is life. *This* hell is heaven. *This* fearful God is a loving Father Who takes the prodigal in his arms. The crucified is the one risen from the dead. And the explanation of the cross as such is eternal life ... The question is the answer.¹⁴

When the question of our life is understood to be the question of *God*, then the question has become the answer; then the reality of a great grace fills the yearning void and stills the restless fear.

But we are not yet finished. Every Christian sermon finds rootage in the Bible, the Bible that has the uncanny power, as Barth says, to bring the answer to the question which *animates* the human quest. But something critical must happen

in the process by which the words of the text become the Word which is heard in the words of proclamation.

THE WORD PROCLAIMED IN THE SERMON

The Word of God - what is it? Essentially it is the message of His redemptive grace through which He effects His purposes of salvation.

Where do we find it? We find it in the Bible. The Bible is not God's Word in some static sense whereby we can say between these leather covers we have God's Word. God's Word is always active, living, dynamic because it is God speaking. But the Bible is God's Word in the sense that for us, God speaks through and by means of this word written.

The written words of the Bible are the reverberations of the Word of God which is the message of God's redemptive grace; or could I use the word "residue?" - the written words of Scripture are the residue of the "happening Word," and the connection between the Word and the words is the Spirit of God. It is the Spirit of God that illumined the Prophet's mind and heart. The Truth exploded in the person of the Prophet - who spoke the Truth to God's people and wrote the message so that the message could be communicated further. That Word, which "happened" to the Prophet and was then put into words, now becomes the occasion for the Word to happen again.

Every message from a Christian pulpit is tied to a written word. Every message is an attempt to set free the Word that is in the words. At times we read the Bible and, closing it, realize that we know nothing of what we have read. But at other times we read a verse or chapter and feel its truth penetrate to our soul. What is the difference? Same book. Perhaps the same words. But when the Word happens, the words become the vehicle of the Spirit Who looses its meaning on us; the Word happens again.

Sermons are that way. In fact, *Karl Barth distinguished the Word written and the Word proclaimed as two forms of the Word*. Again, sometimes the message strikes no fire, sets no cord of the heart vibrating. Sometimes in a message the Word happens.

Having distinguished two forms of the Word, Barth added a *third - the Word made flesh - Jesus*, the Word incarnate. We read in the opening verses of Isaiah 61 how the prophet connects the agency of the Spirit with "the word of proclamation.

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the humble, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to those in prison; ...

The passage goes on; it is a message of grace and redemption - a beautiful, hopeful message; it is God's Word proclaimed in words by the prophet anointed by the Spirit - that is, authorized and authenticated by the Spirit - by God.

The words are familiar because they are the words Jesus selected to use as his text when he returned to his home synagogue in Nazareth. (See Luke 4:18-19). That was a tremendous claim that Jesus made and the hometown folks did not receive it kindly. They drove him out of town. Jesus was claiming the Spirit of God as His authentication and authorization and he was saying - in me today in your presence the salvation of God is present. Jesus used the words of the Bible to point to himself as the incarnation of the Word of God - the one Truth, the message of redemption and freedom.

The Word of God is the message of a redeeming grace and a saving purpose. It finds expression through the power of the Spirit of God:

- when the Spirit created Jesus ("conceived by the Holy Spirit");
- when the Spirit enlivens the written words of the Bible so that the Word happens;
- when the words of Scripture find expression in the proclaimed word of the sermon and the Spirit drives home the Word behind the sermon and the written word from which it arises. Such is the Word of God.

Behind the word preached, behind the word written, behind the word made flesh, is God, the God of grace and salvation.

That powerful conception of the Living Word of God we owe to Barth and that dynamic and promising view of preaching we owe to him, as well.

It was the task of preaching that drove Karl Barth to the Bible and it was out of that encounter that the theological renewal of our century arose. It was in the service of the Church that proclaims Jesus Christ that Karl Barth labored fruitfully throughout his life. His great legacy to the Church is the recognition that all theological reflection must arise from and be directed to need and promise of preaching.

To the end of his life he preached. He was a regular preacher at the Basle jail. Asked why he went there when he could command the great pulpits of the world, he replied that if he preached in a cathedral people would come to hear Karl Barth; at the Basle jail they came to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. On New Year's Eve, 1962, he preached at the jail on the text, "My grace is enough." In beautiful simplicity he declared:

My grace - that is *myself*: I for you, I as your Saviour in your place - I who set you free from sin, guilt, misery and death, all of which I have taken on myself and so away from you - I who show you the father and open up the path to him - I who let you hear the great Yes which he has spoken to you too, to you personally, from all eternity ...

That is my grace. *And this grace of mine is enough*. It is what you really and truly need, and what you, moreover, may and must have. You can hold on to it, you can live by it. You can also die with it. It is enough for you just now, it will also be enough for you to all eternity.

... But say it to him! He hears it and is glad to hear it from you. He expects nothing more from you and from me than that we should say it to him as "the echo of what he says to us: "Yes, your grace is enough." Amen.¹⁵

ENDNOTES

¹ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*. (New York: Harper and Row, Harper Torchbook Edition, 1957), p. 97F.

² Ibid., p. 100.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 101

⁵ Karl Barth, Forward to *Die Lehre vom Worte Gottes: Prolegomena zur Christlichen Dogmatik*. (Munich, Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1927). p. IX.

⁶ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*., p. 102.

⁷ Ibid., p. 103F.

⁸ Ibid., p. 108.

⁹ Ibid., p. 108F.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 110.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 110F.

¹² Ibid., p. 116.

¹³ Ibid., p. 117.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 120.

¹⁵ Karl Barth, *Call For God*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 83F.

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