

Karl Barth the Preacher

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*By coincidence two articles which came in about the same time are both concerned with the significance of Karl Barth for preachers. The first is by a parish minister who has a particular interest in modern theology reflected in his recent book *The Problem of Polarization: An Approach Based on the Writings of G. C. Berkouwer* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1993).*

We approach Karl Barth's preaching by way of a sermon preached by him on 14th August 1955. This sermon bears the title, 'Saved by Grace'. It has been described as 'truly evangelical preaching'. Before we look closely at the sermon itself, we should note what Barth himself says about the sermons preached in Basel Prison: 'the prayers I gave were to my mind as essential as the sermons themselves'. Here, we have an essential key to understanding Barth's view of preaching. He emphasizes the vital connection between prayer and preaching.¹

Prayer and preaching belong together. This important point is highlighted by the fact that this sermon (together with the other sermons contained in *Deliverance to the Captives*) is preceded by prayer and followed by prayer. This stress on prayer was not an artificial spirituality which the theologian took on when he stepped into the role of preacher. Barth stresses that '(t)he first and basic act of theological work is prayer'. He insists that 'theology... can be performed only in the act of prayer'.² Barth lays great emphasis on the importance of prayer. The theologian and the preacher move forward together 'in the fellowship of prayer'. The preacher and the hearer 'reply on the free grace of God and therefore on prayer'. In our understanding of God's Word, 'the decisive activity is prayer'. Barth stresses that 'we cannot read and understand Holy Scripture without prayer, that is, without invoking the grace of God'. In our

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communication of God's Word, prayer must be given the highest priority. If Scripture is to speak to us as the living Word of God, 'prayer must have the last word'. Through prayer, we acknowledge that the power belongs to God, and not to ourselves.³

Barth begins his sermon by announcing his text from the Bible: 'My dear brothers and sisters, I now read a passage from the Letter of the Apostle Paul to Ephesians (2:5): By grace you have been saved'.⁴ The beginning of this sermon illustrates the principles upon which Barth's preaching proceeds. In preaching, there must be 'a waiting on God'. In preaching, 'God alone must speak'. Scripture must be 'allowed to speak for itself. He stresses that 'preaching should

¹ *Deliverance to the Captives*, (London, 1961), 35-42, 9 (from the 'Preface' by Dr. John Marsh, Principal of Mansfield College, Orford), 11 (from 'Remarks' by the Preacher). Most of the sermons in this collection were preached in Basel Prison (11).

² *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, (London, 1963), 160 (emphasis original).

³ *Church Dogmatics*, 1.2, (Edinburgh, 1956), 840, 755, 695, 684, 531.

⁴ *Deliverance to the Captives*, 36.

be an explanation of Scripture'. In preaching, 'the text will always be from the Bible'. The preacher proceeds on the basis that 'God has spoken and still speaks'.⁵

The priority of the biblical text is emphasized by Barth: 'We are gathered here this Sunday morning to hear this word: By grace you have been saved!'. Barth is concerned that the text 'impress itself upon' his hearers.⁶ Concerning his visits to Basel Prison, Barth has this to say: 'every time I come here I am concerned that not so much my sermon but the text that it follows may really sink in and go with you'.⁷ Concerning the text, 'By grace you have been saved', Barth says: 'No man can say this to himself. Neither can he say it to someone else. This can only be said by God to each one of us'.⁸ God speaks this message of salvation to us through the Saviour, the Scriptures and the Spirit. God's saving message comes through to us where the Saviour is exalted, the Scriptures are honoured and the Spirit is sought.

The Saviour is to be exalted. Barth insists that 'Christian theology is good... when... it is not an end in itself but service-service in which one learns constantly: "He must increase, but I must decrease" On. 3:30'.⁹ The Scriptures are to be honoured. Stressing that '(t)heology is... learning in the school of Holy Scripture', Barth emphasizes that '(t)he position of theology... can in no wise be exalted above that of the biblical witnesses'. The Spirit is to be sought. Barth is most emphatic about this: 'Only the Holy Spirit

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himself can help a theology that is or has become unspiritual... Only where the Spirit is sighed, cried and prayed for does he become present and newly active'.¹⁰

Barth stresses that he, the preacher, is far less important than the message which is preached. Preaching 'to prisoners' at Basel Prison, Barth is also preaching 'to himself'. This is particularly striking when he says to the prisoners: 'Let me tell you quite frankly: we are all together great sinners. Please understand me: I include myself. I stand ready to confess being the greatest sinner among you all'.¹¹ Barth does not seek to draw attention to himself. His aim is to direct attention to Jesus Christ. Concerning himself, he says: 'I myself am not a "Barthian"... Make as little use of my name as possible. There is only one relevant name'.

Concerning the attempt to identify 'the greatest theologian of this century', he writes: 'perhaps some little man or woman who has very quietly taught a Bible class somewhere will... prove to have been the greatest theologian of this century'. He then qualifies this statement with the comment that the whole idea of 'great theologians is strictly a contradiction in terms' since '(a)s theologians we can never be great, but at best we can only be small in our own way'. Alluding to his own place in history, he remarks: 'I myself know someone who has been fairly industrious, has written books, some of them bulky, has taught students, has often been in the papers... One day others will come who will do the same things better... Whether our achievement be great or small, significant or insignificant, we shall all

⁵ *Prayer and Preaching*, (London, 1964), 69, 78.

⁶ *Deliverance to the Captives*, 36 (emphasis original).

⁷ Rolf Joachim Erler and Reiner Marquard (eds.), *A Karl Barth Reader*, (Edinburgh, 1986), 3 (from a sermon on 2 Cor. 12:9—'My grace is sufficient for thee'—, preached at Basel Prison on Dec. 31, 1962).

⁸ *Deliverance to the Captives*, 37.

⁹ *A Karl Barth Reader*, 16.

¹⁰ *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, 49, 31 (emphasis original), 58.

¹¹ *Deliverance to the Captives*, 9 (from J. Marsh's 'Preface'), 37.

stand before our eternal Judge, and all that we have done and achieved will be no more than a molehill'.

The message is far more important than the messenger. This emphasis comes through strongly in a remark made by Barth to the prisoners at Basel: ' "My grace is sufficient for thee"... I have written many books, some large. I will freely and frankly and gladly admit that these six words say much more and much better things than all the heaps of paper with which I have surrounded myself. They are enough—which cannot be said even remotely of my books. What may be good in books can be at most that from afar they point to what these six words say. And when my books are long since outdated and forgotten, and every book in the world with them, these words will shine with everlasting fullness: "My grace is sufficient for thee" ". Our attention is to be focused not on the preacher, but on the message which is preached.¹²

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As we turn our attention to the preacher's message, we should note both the content of the preaching and the context in which the message is preached. We look first at the content of the preaching. Early in his sermon, entitled 'Saved by Grace', Barth refers to a conversation with someone who neither went to church nor read the Bible: 'Someone once said to me: "I need not go to church. I need not read the Bible. I know already what the Church teaches and what the Bible says: "Do what is right and fear no one!" ". Barth dissociates himself from the suggestion that the church's teaching may be summed up in an idea for which 'neither prophets nor apostles, neither Bible, Jesus Christ nor God are needed'. Barth says, 'If this were the message at stake, I would most certainly not have come here'. What, then, is this message? It is a message which is found in the Bible: 'Let us hear... what the Bible says'. It is a message which 'can only be said by God to each one of us'. Concerning this message—*By grace you have been saved!*—Barth insists that it 'takes Jesus Christ to make this saying true'. Barth stresses that to be 'saved by grace' is to be saved by no other than Jesus Christ'.

In emphasizing that we are saved by grace, Barth stresses that we do 'not deserve to be saved'. He insists that '(w)e cannot secure salvation for ourselves'. If the good news of God's grace is to be truly heard, the bad news concerning man's sin must be preached. If the 'Yes' of God's grace is to be truly heard, God's 'No' to sin must be proclaimed. Yes! There is salvation in Jesus Christ. Through Jesus Christ, God has provided salvation for sinful man. For sinners to truly understand and receive this gospel of grace, the divine 'No' must be preached. There is no salvation which begins with man. Man cannot save himself. He can only be saved by Jesus Christ. The divine 'No' must be heard. Salvation does not begin with man —'we cannot produce our salvation'. Salvation is not man's own achievement—'No one can be proud of being saved'. What is our natural reaction to the divine 'No'?—'we dislike hearing that we are saved by grace and by grace alone... we do not like it at all to look away from ourselves'. Look away from ourselves this is precisely what we are called to do.

In his sermon, 'Saved by Grace', Barth calls upon us 'to look away from ourselves to God and to the man on the cross': 'Look at our Saviour and at our salvation! Look at Jesus Christ on the cross, accused, sentenced and punished instead of us... Look once again to Jesus Christ in his death upon the cross. Look and try to understand that what he did and suffered he did and suffered for you, for me, for us all'. As Barth calls upon his hearers to look to Christ, he

¹² *A Karl Barth Reader*, 112, 113, 3-4.

pleads with them: 'Why do we not open our clenched fists? Why do we obstruct our ears? Why are we blindfolded? Honestly,

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why?'. He calls upon us 'to believe... not only with our minds and with our lips, but also with our hearts and with all our life'. To have such faith 'is to be the concern of our prayers'. Urging his hearers to pray for such faith, he assures them: 'No human being ever prayed for this in vain. If anyone asks for this, the answer is, already being given and faith begins'.¹³

What are we to say about Barth the preacher? Surely, J. S. Stewart has described him well in these words of commendation:

this Colossus of a theologian is basically concerned with simple things... no one reading Barth can have any doubt... (about his) single-hearted devotion to Christ.¹⁴

The simplicity of Barth's faith is beautifully illustrated in an incident described by J. M. Boice:

Several years before his death the Swiss theologian Karl Barth came to the United States for a series of lectures. At one of these, after a very impressive lecture, a student asked a typically American question. He said, "Dr. Barth, what is the greatest thought that has ever passed through your mind?" The aging professor paused for a long time as he obviously thought about his answer. Then he said with great simplicity:

'Jesus loves me! This I know
For the Bible tells me so'.¹⁵

From the content of preaching, we now turn to the context in which preaching takes place. Barth places a strong emphasis on our gathering together as the church: 'We are gathered here this Sunday morning to hear this word: *By grace you have been saved!*'. Here, Barth places emphasis on 'this word spoken to us by God himself. He also stresses our gathering together to hear this word: 'In order to hear this word we need what is called the Church—the company of Christians, of human beings called and willing to listen together to the Bible and through it to the word of God. This is the word of God: *By grace you have been saved!*'¹⁶

How does Barth view this gathering together to hear God's Word? He gives a vivid description: 'On Sunday morning when the bells ring to call the congregation and minister to church, there is in the air an expectancy that something great, crucial, and even momentous is to happen'. He is not here enquiring about '(h)ow strong this expectancy is in the people who are interested, or even whether there

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are any people who consciously cherish it'.¹⁷ He is seeking to emphasize that '(e)xpectancy is inherent in the whole situation'. In this situation, inherent with expectancy, there is a vital connection between the Bible and the church: 'Where the Scriptures speak... and where man

¹³ *Deliverance to the Captives*, 36-41 (emphases original).

¹⁴ *Prayer and Preaching*, 7 (from 'Preface' by J. S. Stewart).

¹⁵ *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, (Downers Grove/London, 1986), 331.

¹⁶ *Deliverance to the Captives*, 36 (emphases original).

¹⁷ *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, (New York, 1928), 104 (emphasis original).

hears... there the Church comes into existence and exists'. Describing the relationship between the Bible and the church, Barth stresses that 'the testimony of the prophets and apostles... stands always sovereign, above the Church and its teachers and preachers... The Scriptures govern the Church, and not the Church the Scriptures'. Emphasizing that the Bible is 'a tool in God's hands', Barth insists that 'faithfulness to God means for the Church, simply and concretely, faithfulness to this book'. He goes on to stress that '(i)n this faithfulness, the Church's faithfulness to the world is rooted'. What does this faithfulness entail? Faithfulness to God and to Scripture is described thus by Barth: 'The Church possesses no independent knowledge. It lives from what it has been told... The Church has, therefore, no plans and programs of its own. It is ever alert to hear commands. The Church does not have above it a theme but a Lord, and messengers who inform it of His will'.¹⁸

This faithfulness to God and to Scripture always carries within it the wider dimension of the church's faithfulness to the world: 'The community of Jesus Christ is for the world... In this way, it also exists for God, for the Creator and Lord of the world'.¹⁹ When Barth uses the word 'Church', he has in mind this idea of the community of Jesus Christ, 'the society of men called to believe in, and simultaneously to testify to, the Word in the world'.²⁰ He stresses that there is always the question of 'how far that which is called the Church, and claims, and seems to be the Church, is really the true Church'.²¹ Recognizing that the word 'Church' is an 'overburdened word', he stresses that 'it should be immediately and consistently interpreted by the word "community", the community of Jesus Christ, the community which is called to both hear and speak the Word of God'.²²

To appreciate Barth's description of the church as the community of Jesus Christ, we must understand his important distinction between religion and revelation. He stresses that '(t)he Church is the

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locus of true religion, so far as through grace it lives by grace'. Nevertheless, he is acutely aware that there is a form of religion which is man-centred and does not live by grace. He emphasizes that 'man's religion... is an activity which contradicts revelation'. Barth describes man's religion in this way: 'If man tries to grasp at truth of himself... he does not do what he has to do when the truth comes to him. He does not believe. If he did, he would listen; but in religion he talks. If he did, he would accept a gift; but in religion he takes something for himself... in religion he ventures to grasp at God. Because it is a grasping, religion is the contradiction of revelation... In religion man bolts and bars himself against revelation by providing a substitute'. In contrast to man-centred religion, Barth stresses that true religion is based on revelation, 'the act by which in grace He (God) reconciles man to Himself by grace'.²³

Barth stresses that, in the life of the true church, there will be both the preaching of the gospel and the celebration of the sacraments.²⁴ Following most of his sermons, preached in Basel

¹⁸ *God in Action*, (Edinburgh, 1937), 29, 30, 31, 37-8 (emphases original).

¹⁹ *Church Dogmatics*, IV.3, (Edinburgh, 1962), 762.

²⁰ *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, 37.

²¹ *Church Dogmatics*, IV.2, (Edinburgh, 1958), 641.

²² *Evangelical Theology: An introduction*, 37.

²³ *Church Dogmatics*, I.2, 280 (emphasis original), 302, 302-3, 307.

²⁴ *Prayer and Preaching*, 74.

Prison and contained in *Deliverance to the Captives*, there was 'the joyful celebration of the Lord's Supper'. In his sermon, entitled 'Saved by Grace', Barth uses the imagery of the Lord's Supper as he preaches the gospel: 'The bread of life is *offered* to us, even though we are inclined to clench our fists instead of opening our hands to take the bread and eat it'.²⁵ Barth maintains that 'it is impossible to understand what preaching is without understanding what the sacrament is'. He describes the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper in this way: 'baptism represents the event which is the point of departure, the Lord's Supper... is the sign of the same event but turned towards the future which we all await (1 Cor. 11:26)'. He then relates preaching to the sacraments: 'Preaching... is given within that Church where the sacrament of grace and the sacrament of hope are operative'. He describes preaching as 'a commentary on and an interpretation of the sacrament'. Barth emphasizes the importance of both preaching and the sacraments. Observing that 'what we lack today' is 'the sacrament every Sunday', he continues: 'The order of worship should be as follows: at the beginning of the service, public baptism; at the end, the Lord's Supper; between the sacraments, the sermon, which in this way would be given its full significance. This would indeed be preaching the pure Word and duly ministering the sacraments!'.²⁶

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Prior to his 'forty years as a professor', Barth spent 'twelve years as a preacher'.²⁷ As a theologian, he never lost sight of the importance of preaching. Although he worked for so many years in the university, he always saw his theological work as part of the church's work: 'I said to myself. "If I am a theologian, I must try to work out broadly what I think I have perceived as God's revelation. What I think I have perceived. Yet not I as an individual but I as a member of the Christian church". This is why I call my book *Church Dogmatics*. "Church" here does not mean that the church is responsible for all that I say, but that I as one member of the church have reflected on what may be perceived in revelation and tried to present it to the best of my conscience and understanding'.²⁸

Barth's theological work was a part of the church's work. Ultimately, however, it was a part of God's work. At the heart of his work lay his relationship with God, a relationship which involved him in listening to God and speaking to God. Concerning the importance of listening to God, he writes: 'The object of theological work is not some thing but some one... The task of theological work consists in listening to Him'. Stressing the importance of speaking to God in prayer, Barth insists that 'without prayer there can be no theological work'. He stresses that this 'rule... is valid under all circumstances—pray and work!' This does not mean that we begin with prayer and then regard prayer as incidental to the work which is done "theological work does not merely begin with prayer and is not merely accompanied by it'. Barth stresses that 'prayer... is work... very hard work'. He insists that the work itself is essentially a prayer: 'every act of theological work must have the character of an offering in which everything is placed before the living God'.²⁹

As we hear Barth speaking of the importance of prayer, we come to the very heart of the man—not simply the theologian before his students, not merely the preacher before his

²⁵ *Deliverance to the Captives*, 12, 40 (emphasis original).

²⁶ *Prayer and Preaching*, 74-77.

²⁷ *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (from the Foreword to the German Edition).

²⁸ *A Karl Barth Reader*, 113 (emphasis original).

²⁹ *Evangelical Theology: An introduction*, 163 (emphasis original), 160.

congregation, but the man before his God, the man listening to God and speaking to God, the man who says to us, 'Keep before your eyes our Lord Jesus Christ'.³⁰

ABSTRACT

The article analyses Karl Barth's sermon on Ephesians 2:5 in order to lay bare his understanding of the nature of preaching, stressing its simplicity of content and its context in the life of the church.

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Prepared for the Web in September 2007 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

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³⁰ *A Karl Barth Reader*, 104.