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A table of contents for *Theological Students Fellowship (TSF) Bulletin (US)* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_tsfbulletin-us.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_tsfbulletin-us.php)

# MINISTRY

*(The application of theology, ethics, and prayer to the life of the church)*

## KARL BARTH AS A PREACHER

By Robert B. Ives, Pastor, The Grantham Church; College Pastor, Messiah College.

Preaching, as anyone who has done it knows, is no easy task. It is made no easier by the array of textbooks on preaching which stresses techniques and forms. Here one finds help about such matters as sermon outlines and voice control, but little help in that crucial part of the sermon where the message of the Bible grips the heart and staggers the mind of the preacher. Likewise the critical approach of seminary courses and the many technical commentaries with their extended discussions of textual and critical problems can be depressing to students.

Even the sermons one hears Sunday by Sunday may disappoint. They may be well delivered and critically accurate, but they come from preachers who, unlike Jacob, have not grappled with God! I want to suggest encouragement for students, from an unexpected source.

Karl Barth is known to twentieth-century people as a theologian whose many volumes of church dogmatics daunt the bravest minds. At first, though, Barth was a preacher, in Geneva and then in the Aargau village of Safenwil, from September, 1909 to October, 1921. Later, from 1956 until the end of his life he was preaching as a kind of assistant chaplain in the Basel prison. In the thirties and forties he also preached on various occasions in churches.

Barth, no less keenly than anyone else, knew the difficulty of preaching: "What an impossible task to preach," he said (cf. Busch, pp. 89f.). Of course, we reply, that should be no surprise. All of life is difficult and pseudo-simplicity helps no one. Yet another and more crucial reason for Barth's struggling was that he was listening for God. "If I understand what I am trying to do in the *Church Dogmatics*," he said on one occasion in words that could equally well apply to his preaching, "it is to listen to what Scripture is saying and tell you what I hear" (Johnson, p. 4).

But it is not easy to hear what God is saying in the Scriptures. Barth won't do that for us; that is, we won't be able to preach his sermons — I tried once to preach a sermon of his on Genesis 28 with the results you might expect. Yet what one can learn from him is what it is like for a great man to struggle to hear God's voice; and we can read in his printed sermons what he tells people he has heard. Surely that is worth something. This is where Barth can be an encouragement for conservative evan-

gelicals struggling to keep their heads above water in critical studies and yet still to preach God's Word: Barth did it and he is by many counts one of the half-dozen greatest theologians the church has known.

We can perhaps best learn from Barth's example by noticing how his preaching changed dramatically during his later years in Safenwil, beginning particularly during the summer of 1914. Behind the change was a series of life-shaking events in his own life. In 1912 his father died. In 1913 he married, and in the same year a significant friend, Edward Thurneysen, became pastor in a neighboring village of Leutwil. Then in 1914 the First World War rolled like the plague over Europe. Barth's sermons changed, and in them we can see a man pushing his way through mists to try to see God.

Our primary source for observing this change consists of the Safenwil sermons. They are currently being published in the *Gesamtausgabe* of Barth, though they have not yet been translated into English. There are about 500 sermons through which we shall be able to look at Barth not only as a preacher but as a pastor preaching.

Also, when Edward Thurneysen came to Leutwil, he and Barth spent many long hours discussing "church, world and Kingdom of God" (RT, p. 11). Here were two village pastors thinking together about their task. A long correspondence ensued in which we catch glimpses of a warfare being fought in their minds. Some of the correspondence has been published as *Revolutionary Theology in the Making*.

### The Bible's Place in Preaching

Barth's earlier Safenwil sermons seem formidable, for they are enormously long and philosophical. They reflect a European style of theology which is in constant dialogue with philosophy. (American theology, on the other hand, arises out of pastoral concerns and has a functional character). They are the sort of treatises that a student just out of school might preach, filled with theological and technical fervor. They ruminate on situations in Safenwil and the rest of the world with psychological cleverness and great awareness of the economic and political situation of the working class. When Barth first preached them, the sermons were undoubtedly heavy going, and one wonders whether the poor workers in Safenwil understood much of what was going on. Here in the sermons one finds Schleiermacher and Kant and Hermann and Ragaz and the whole socialist movement. We can understand why Barth preached frequently to a nearly empty church.

At this point the sermons are not yet biblical, and textual-critical issues have little part in them. Even so, in them we can increasingly see Barth wrestling and struggling to discover what the Bible is saying. As the Bible was becoming more important in his sermons, Barth would say, "If only we were filled and driven,

### FROM THE EDITOR

This fall we have added two new sections to the *TSF Bulletin*. The EDITORIALS section first appeared in the September-October issue, with Princeton student Greg Martin urging us to understand the various ingredients which contribute to our theological pilgrimage. This month, a former Princeton student, Bob Cathey, offers a pointed critique of that school's failure to change its approach to Black Studies. Although students in the past have contributed articles, news, and book reviews, the Editorial columns can now provide further opportunities for students throughout North America to be aware of each other's concerns and learn from each other's actions. Contributions from students, professors, pastors, and laypersons will be considered for publication on the basis of their relevance to our overall readership.

Our other new section, MINISTRY (the application of theology, ethics, and prayer to the life of the church), will appear in *TSF Bulletin* from time to time. In this issue we offer an article by Messiah

College professor Robert Ives, who considers what we can learn from Karl Barth about the work of preaching.

Two other additions to the *Bulletin* deserve comment. Donald Dayton (Northern Baptist Theological Seminary), has accepted the responsibility of arranging for our INTERSECTION section reports and analyses of professional meetings as they occur. He comments in this issue on the recent Finney Festival in Rochester, New York. The center pages of this issue contain a special bibliography on the New Christian Right prepared by Richard Pierard of Indiana State University. We hope to publish other useful "tear-out" items in the future.

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our sermons should appear simpler" (RT, p. 32, letter of Sept. 19, 1915).

The dramatic change came in the summer of 1914. In the sermons of August we begin to see a man being overwhelmed by what God is saying in the Bible. It was later that Barth expressed his regret at not having discovered the Bible sooner:

It seems to me that we come just too late with our bit of insight into the world of the New Testament. . . . If only we had been converted to the Bible *earlier* so that we would now have solid ground under our feet! One broods alternately over the newspaper and the New Testament and actually sees fearfully little of the organic connection between the two worlds concerning which one should now be able to give a clear and powerful witness. (RT, p. 45, Nov. 11, 1918).

Barth touches here on his common theme of the two desks. At one desk there is the newspaper through which one discovers the events of the world people live in. At the other desk is the Bible. The point is that the everyday world of people needs to be understood by way of God's vision in the Bible.

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 (WG, p. 100).

This balance was a fruit of the change in Barth's preaching. His early sermons seem more like philosophical discourses. For example, in the sermon of January 4, 1914, the discourse is on time; in that of August 2, it is on war. But by 1922, we find Barth convinced that the Bible is what gives to a person's questions their first real depth and meaning (WG, p. 117). The Bible does this by pointing on to the larger question, are we asking after God in our questioning?

By 1922 we also discover Barth concluding that when we ask questions about God we hear the answer that the question is the answer, and that the crucified is the one raised from the dead, and that the explanation of the cross is eternal life (WG, p. 119).

Of course we should want to know what Barth means by this, that the question is the answer. He means that the stance of faith, in which one is willing to ask the Bible one's questions, prepares one also to hear the answer the Bible gives. For the Bible to speak its answers we must confess our dependence upon the reality of the living God who speaks in the Bible (WG, pp. 120,121).

This is worlds away from some of the tricks of homiletics where one puts the toe of one's shoe behind the knee of one's leg to increase quaver in the voice and so move people. No, what affects a preacher's sermon and the force of its delivery is being immersed in the world of God in the Bible. Barth was making this discovery in the summer of 1914. It was then that the Bible became important to him.

We can observe the process of discovery by considering several sermons in more detail. At the beginning of 1914, Barth preached on time and chance from a phrase in Psalm 31, "my times are in your hand" (BG, pp. 3-11). At first we find a long reflection on how time flies. Barth raises questions about how a person uses time and whether chance controls one's life. This reflection on time makes up the first two-thirds of the sermon and only then does Barth deal with the text, calling it "a new year's watchword that holds water. If only we could make it our own" (p. 9). He then reflects on the biblical phrase, but the reflections are certainly not exegesis. They are more like random meanderings through the themes of God's perfect power and how God's will may be active in time. Barth has not yet come so far as to hear

the Bible speak.

By August the world situation had changed and Barth was beginning to change himself. On August 1, the Swiss army was mobilized for the first time since 1798 when they had been drawn into the war against Napoleon. The next day was Sunday and Barth, with the World War in his mind, preached from Mark 13:7 (BG, pp. 395-408). We read in his sermon, "Now we know what it means: 'if you hear of war and the rumor of war. . . . ' We will not soon forget these days of tension, of constant unrest, calm and then new unrest. What sort of magic power lies in this little word *war!*" Then, as in earlier sermons, Barth begins to run off into philosophical musings. But this time he comes much sooner into the text, one-third of the way into the sermon, rather than two-thirds (p. 399): "Now let us hear from the mouth of Jesus what are the thoughts of God about war." He then proceeds to the words of the text, not as an addendum to a philosophical thesis, but as a way to gain insight into the thoughts of God: "And now we call on God: 'Lord, have mercy on us and save us. Give us peace. . . .'; but whether he hears us, whether he does what we want — we cannot know that, that rests entirely in his hands. And he does not say to us: 'I will spare you, there will be no war,' but he says to us. . . . 'fear not.'" There is still in this sermon a kind of dissertation about war in the old philosophical manner. What is war and how does one overcome the fear of war? Yet beyond this we can notice Barth's struggle to know what God is like for people enmeshed in war and to know what comfort God can give to people out of the words of the Bible.

In his sermon for the following Sunday, August 9, as if the dread of war were pushing Barth to depend more on the voice of the Bible, Barth asks if it would not be an encouragement if one of the old prophets were to stand among them (BG, p. 409). No, he concludes, for we have the sure prophetic word which shines in our hearts: "We have our Bible and there is something grand about this old book." And, perhaps reflecting his own conscience about the matter, he adds, "perhaps, though, we have not made a right use of it this year. We read there only occasionally and then more from a sense of duty than out of an inner compulsion" (p. 409). It is true, admits Barth, that the Bible enlightens people, yet they listen more carefully to the newspaper; but, says the two-desk man, "we need to learn . . . to go to the source and drink, for we do not find comfort in the newspaper but in the Bible" (p. 410).

At this stage Barth was still not yet exegeting the passage, but he was reflecting on the basic situation of the world and of the people of Safenwil with the words of the text in mind. He had not yet come so far as he would in the prison sermons of the fifties and sixties, or as far as he would in 1916-17, but we do see a noticeable movement toward the Bible.

For Sunday, August 23, the topic of Barth's sermon is still the war, this time based on the apocalyptic picture of the red horse in Rev. 6:4. Now Barth is angry that there has been no resistance to the war by the Christians in Europe. Instead they have prayed for war. There is only one voice raised against the war, like that of a child's voice calling out in a thunderstorm, and it is the voice of Pius X, the pope. There is also Barth's voice saying, like an eighteenth-century New England preacher, that the war is God's

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judgment on self-seeking people (cf. also his comment in a letter to Thurneysen of Sept. 4, 1914, RT, p. 27). It is war against those who are already at war in their inner self: the solution to war is to call on God to have mercy on us, and so Barth appeals to the congregation to have a deep, abiding confidence in God and his wisdom, rather than to philosophize. This marks a distinct change from the earlier sermons and is one of the clues that Barth is beginning to spend more time wrestling with the text.

In these Safenwil days Barth spent a lot of time preparing his sermons; two whole days would be given over to a single sermon and he might begin five times and only finally finish Sunday morning or late Saturday night "fortified with strong coffee" (RT, pp. 12,41). At first, as we have seen, his topic would come from the events of the times rather than from the Bible. In 1912, for instance, he allowed the sinking of the Titanic to inspire "a monstrous sermon on the same scale" (Busch, p. 63, from Homiletik, 1966, p. 98). But later the topics themselves came from the Bible and the sermons had more a theological bent than a social or political one.

In 1916 Barth was finally talking about how crucial the Bible was. "I began to read it as though I had never read it before. I wrote down carefully what I discovered, point by point . . . I read and read and wrote and wrote" (Busch, p. 98). What Barth was reading was the Bible and he was reading it with a greater expectancy (WG, p. 121). "And so when this preacher climbs up into the pulpit he comes to speak to the needs of people as one who has himself been questioned by God — and who thus speaks the word of God" (p. 123).

### Preaching as a Continuing Struggle

There were times when Barth was dissatisfied with his preaching, for there is nothing automatic in sermon preparation. In a letter to Thurneysen he wrote, "I preached today with the clear impression that this cannot as yet get through to our people . . . because it is still far from getting through to me myself" (RT, p. 32, Sept. 19, 1915). With a letter of September 4, 1914, he enclosed for Thurneysen the sermons of the last two Sundays in August:

You will look at them not as though they were finished products but only as experiments. We are really all of us experimenting now, each in his own way and every Sunday in a different way, in order to become to some degree masters of the limitless problem . . . the providence of God and the confusion of man . . . I want more and more to hold them both together. Sometimes I have more success, sometimes less (RT, pp. 26f).

It was in these years that Barth wrestled with the Bible on another level as he struggled to interpret Romans. This struggle drove Barth to re-read Scripture and earlier theologians so that he could learn theology all over again. Contrary to the critiques made by some reviewers, this constant probing into the Bible was not making Barth more dogmatic. He maintained a strange openness toward the Bible. God spoke in it but was not boxed in by it. Preachers preached but didn't always grasp what God was up to.

At Pentecost [1915] I preached on Jeremiah 31:31-34 — middling! You, too, are most certainly aware of these depressing ups and downs, but actually there is a great wisdom in it and above all it is a necessity in our whole situation of which we cannot wish to rid ourselves. Why should not the congregation notice that we stand under this necessity and that our production of sermons is not a mechanical process? How is there wisdom in it! — I mean that one does not so easily think highly of himself if every three or four weeks he is able to produce only some such weak little sermon . . . (RT, pp. 29f, May 25, 1915).

Now here we see Barth willing to admit a weakness in his struggle to preach, and to recognize that sermon production is not mechanical. Out of his struggles in preaching grew those con-

cerns which gave rise to his theology, in some after some of which he sought to understand the ways of God like in a rather long sermon.

It is not often that one who preaches reflects so carefully on the task. However successful Barth's sermons were — and the low attendance at the Safenwil church might argue that they were not popular — the principles about preaching that he derived are useful. We are reminded that good preaching is rightly a struggle, and that it must reflect the preacher's own attempts to hear God speak in the Bible. These principles came out of the Safenwil experience. In Barth's sermons of 1914 we discover a lesson in homiletics one does not often find in homiletics books.

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## INQUIRY

*(Questions, proposals, discussions, and research reports on theological and biblical issues)*

### WOMAN SHALL BE SAVED: A CLOSER LOOK AT 1 TIMOTHY 2:15

**By Mark D. Roberts, Ph.D. Candidate in New Testament, Harvard University.**

*Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet woman will be saved through childbearing, if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.*

1 Timothy 2:11-15

In the past decade, few biblical passages have attracted as many and diverse interpretations as 1 Timothy 2:11-15. Those who espouse traditional roles for women in the church wield these verses as a coup de grâce of an argument prohibiting female teachers. Conversely, those with egalitarian tendencies fret about the exclusionary implications of this passage and about the apparent contradictions between it and others of the Pauline corpus (notably Gal. 3:28 and 1 Cor. 11:5). "Biblical feminists" attempt to relativize these verses, seeing them as conditioned by and limited to a first-century historical situation. Others dismiss these verses as not written by Paul, thus tending to ignore them. (Even if Paul did not write 1 Timothy, the letter still reflects Pauline tradition and forms a part of our New Testament canon. We must, therefore, consider its teaching as authoritative. For the sake of this essay I assume Pauline authorship.)

Since most recent interpretations focus on the prohibition against women teachers (2:12) and the supporting reasons (2:13-14), they usually ignore the concluding verse 15: "Yet