

# The Theology of the Preaching Office\*

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THE office of preaching has been captured in our day by "practical theology." As a result it is the problem of method or technique which dominates the homiletical landscape. This approach depends on a very significant assumption, namely that the nature and the purpose of preaching are so well understood that most of our time can be spent on the "practical" question of methodology. But what if one is mistaken about this nature and purpose? Then all methodology will be as highly impractical as the behaviour of the athlete who turned out for the tennis tournament dressed in rugby uniform.

To avoid any such confusion, we shall be well advised to explore the background of homiletics, the doctrine of the preaching office. First let us consider preaching as a form of the Word of God. Then let us examine the nature of communication. Finally, let us turn to some suggestions about the ministerial office.

## I. PREACHING AS A FORM OF THE WORD OF GOD

It was a dictum of the Reformers that "the preaching of the word of God is the word of God."<sup>1</sup> There is a sense in which every Christian, especially every Christian theologian, has to begin again and again with the doctrine of the Word of God. For Christianity is not a religion, something to be approached exclusively in terms of comparative religion or of the philosophy of religion; it is a Gospel, a revelation through the divine Word that became incarnate in Jesus Christ our Lord. This Word was handled by the Apostles. How can you handle a word? That is the stinging question with which the Gospel faces man.

It is Karl Barth who has given us the most searching analysis of the doctrine of the Word, which he treats as prolegomenon to Church Dogmatics. Barth begins with the fact that the Church exists in and through proclamation. "The language about God to be found in the Church is meant to be proclamation, so far as it is directed towards man in the form of preaching and sacrament, with the claim and in an atmosphere of expectation that in accordance with its commission it has to tell him the Word of God to be heard in faith."<sup>2</sup>

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1. *Praedicatio verbi dei est verbum dei*, a dictum found in Luther and in Bullinger.  
2. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, Sect. 3.

Barth analyses the doctrine of the Word according to its three forms, as preached, as written, and as revealed. The first form includes both preaching and sacraments; they are first because this is the actual starting place for sinful man, when he hears the Word of God addressed to him in preaching and sacrament. From there he may be led to the second "form" of the Word, namely, the written Word of holy Scripture, and thence to the third. The last is primary in an ontological sense, the Word as revealed in past and future and therefore in the present too.

It is preaching that constitutes the growing edge of the Church; it is the form in which the Word presses in upon man, convicts him and blesses him, judges him and saves him. Therefore, when we speak about preaching we are speaking about a form of the Word of God, and by implication we are speaking dogmatically, about a datum that must be enlightened by theological reflection and understanding. That is why Barth completes the section heading referred to by adding: "So far as, in spite of this claim and this expectation, it is *man's* word, it becomes the material of dogmatics, *i.e.*, of the investigation into its responsibility, measured by the Word of God which it means to proclaim."

Now the eternal, original, and unique Word of God is the "second person" of the Trinity, whom we know as Jesus Christ. According to the classic Christology of the Church, he is both divine and human, very God and very man. The other forms of the Word must correspond proportionately to him if they are to be valid forms of the Word. Therefore they too will partake of this divine-human relatedness, and will be both truly divine, a Word of God, and truly human, a word of man. One must not transubstantiate preaching into a pure and simple divine Word; neither can one so emphasize the human element that oratorical splendour becomes the measure of the office. A Christological heresy lurks behind both errors; preaching must be understood in the light of Christology. Dogmaticians on several fronts have been reminding us of this truth that God and man are together in Christ as a matter of fact, and that we must consider proclamation under the twin rubric, "The Word of God and the Word of Man in Christian Preaching." As it happens, this formula is the title of another of Barth's subsections, but lest we imagine that it denotes a peculiarly modern approach, let us turn back to Luther.<sup>3</sup>

Luther was nobody's fool. When he said that the preaching of the Word of God *is* the Word of God, he was quite well aware that many sermons are not worthy of such a description. This is why he stressed preaching of the *Word of God*. Let us listen to Luther's typically bold words:

A preacher must not say the Lord's Prayer, nor ask forgiveness of sins, when he has preached (if he is a true preacher), but must confess and exult with Jeremiah: Lord, thou knowest that what has gone forth from my mouth is right and pleasing to thee. He must boldly say with St. Paul and all the apostles and

3. For quotations from Luther, see *Luther's Works* (ed. J. J. Pelikan), vol. 22 (St. Louis, 1957), pp. 370ff.; 482ff. Cf. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1 (Edinburgh, 1949), pp. 101ff.; I/2 (Edinburgh, 1956), p. 746f.

prophets: *Haec dixit dominus*, Thus saith God himself; or again: In this sermon, I am a confessed apostle and prophet of Jesus Christ. It is neither necessary nor good to ask here for forgiveness of sins, as though the teaching were false. For it is not my word but God's, which he neither will nor can forgive me, and for which he must always praise and reward me, saying: You have taught rightly for I have spoken through you and the Word is mine. Whoever cannot boast thus of his preaching repudiates preaching; for he expressly denies and slanders God.

Luther's doctrine of preaching is this: "These two facts are entirely logical: that those who preach the Word of God must necessarily be sent by God; and, conversely, that those who are sent by God cannot proclaim anything but the Word of God." Therefore he can stress the unity of the divine-human event of preaching:

'Tis a right excellent thing, that every honest pastor's and preacher's mouth is Christ's mouth, and his word and forgiveness is Christ's word and forgiveness. . . . Therefore, we do well to call the pastor's and preacher's word which he preacheth, God's Word. For the office is not the pastor's or preacher's, but God's . . . . On the last day God will say to me, Hast thou also preached that? I shall say, Yea, exactly. Then God will say to thee, Hast thou also heard that? And thou shalt answer, Yea. And he saith further, Wherefore hast thou then not believed? And then thou sayest, Oh, I held it for a word of man, since a poor chaplain or village parson uttered it. So shall the same word which sticketh in thine heart accuse thee and be thine accuser and judge at the last day. For it is God's Word, 'tis God himself thou hast heard . . . . See to it, how thou standest.

Luther is an excellent guide in any talk of preaching. Preaching is a form of God's own Word, not men's word *about* God's Word, but the unique kind of human word that is at once human *and* *divine*. A doctrinal problem emerges, of course, parallel to that found in the great eucharistic debates between Lutheran and Reformed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is largely our failure to push back this debate to the more basic problem of the office of preaching considered in relation to Christology that has caused us to continue fruitless discussion about problematic issues. Is not Christ himself present "in, with and under" the preacher's words? This is Luther's question. Are not these words to be judged in terms of their faithfulness to the textual exposition? This is the Reformed concern.

## II. THE PROBLEM AND THE MYSTERY OF COMMUNICATION

Gabriel Marcel has forcefully expressed the important distinction between problem and mystery.<sup>4</sup> The one may be rationally solved, but the other demands personal decision and commitment, for genuine mysteries "remain mysterious even when understood, because, though understood, they exceed our comprehension." The communication of truth between persons is perhaps mystery as well as problem, as Augustine maintained in his dialogue *De Magistro*, which served as textbook for medieval pedagogy. Certainly for Christian truth "mystery" is the proper category; it forms the "proper

4. Cf. M. B. Foster, *Mystery and Philosophy* (London, 1957), pp. 18, 20.

domain" of theology.<sup>5</sup> Linguistic philosophers today tend to miss the distinction; but at least they serve to force theology back upon prior questions of the validity and appropriateness of language about God.

Communication is a problem because it involves a discipline of submission or conformity to the truth one seeks to learn. The mind must be accommodated to the nature of its "object." Christian truth, however, is not simply personal but a person, this person who is also Lord. He has chosen to be identical with his message, he comes to us as "Christ clothed with his Gospel" (as our fathers used to put it). That is to say, Christ gives himself through his word of address, he communicates himself. This is why one cannot really "communicate" this truth as if it were truth "about" Christ, as if a man "knew" this truth apart from his conversion. Beyond the problem of understanding lies the mystery of the Saviour's redeeming encounter with man.

How different must *preaching* be from *oratory*, then! Indeed, oratory may be a major stumbling-block to "good" preaching, a confusion of vocations. It was Kierkegaard who stressed this fact of the personal being of Christian truth. He also stressed its historical factuality; you do not learn this as you do the timeless truths of mathematics. For this Christian truth is nailed to the scheme of history, to Jews, to Church Fathers and Doctors, to teachers in time and space. It addresses us in history, through historical means. This is why some people hear it very badly put to them, and many do not hear it at all. Every church school pupil recognizes this problem, while mature theologians must still argue the point.

This historicity is not a defect of Christianity; on the contrary, it is one of those peculiar problems that are signs of its mysterious character. When the Word became incarnate, he submitted himself to all that history means: limitation, dependence on historical communication, the contingency of space and time. God has entered time, has become human, has exchanged heaven for earth—or rather for hell. This unsettling fact means that our preaching ought to proclaim:

God's in his *hell*,  
All's right with the world!

Such a reversal of rôles is the heart of the Gospel. It prevents Christianity from becoming a religion of a heavenly deity known by spiritual attainments. If God is to be known in his humanity, then the decisive thing is the Word in its forms, the proclamation of Christian preaching and sacraments. And this involves the other aspect of the scandalous Gospel, namely, that God acts like this because he is reconciling the world unto himself, so that man cannot "know" this truth without being caught in its reconciling power. This communication "solves" the problem of knowing by the mystery of being.

The unity of knowing and being is seen in the strange and wonderful Hebrew usage according to which the same verb is used for God's knowl-

5. Cf. M. J. Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity* (St. Louis, 1946), p. 18.

edge of his people and for the sexual union of a married couple. It is seen also in the fact that church proclamation demands both preaching and sacrament. The liturgical revival has helped us here. In Britain, for instance, it used to be said that in Scotland one always knew what the preacher would say in his sermon but never in his prayer, while in England a clergyman's prayers could be fully anticipated, but certainly not his sermon. Today the two emphases are held together in creative tension, so that although the balance of the two is no easy problem, yet there is a growing recognition that the sermon belongs in a proper liturgical setting, while the liturgy involves the preaching office. (Incidentally, it needs to be stressed that there is no such thing as "non-liturgical" worship. *Leitourgia* means "service," and any order of worship is liturgical. It may be bad liturgy but it cannot be non-liturgical.)

In reality, therefore, preaching has not only an outward sacramental relationship, but an inner sacramental structure. Ronald Ward's book, *Royal Sacrament*, describes preaching as "the sacramental offering of a Person. . . . The ultimate aim of preaching is to give Christ. He is offered in words; He may be received in Person. Thus preaching is a sacrament."<sup>6</sup> We may say then that there is memory, anamnesis, and re-presentation, not only in the Eucharist, but in preaching as well. In its turn, eucharistic prayer includes the tremendous proclamation of the kerygma. This sacramental prayer is a kind of preaching, just as preaching is a kind of sacrament.

If oratory may obscure the preaching office, so may the misuse of odds and ends of liturgical cosmetics, so to speak, which hide and distort the true face of divine worship. The old term "diet of worship" signified something deeper—the balanced meal of orderly progression both in the liturgical year and in expository preaching from week to week.

What we are recovering today is the dimension of dramatic encounter in both preaching and sacrament. In these two forms of proclamation, Christ himself confronts man. Just because he was and is the Word incarnate, he confronts man in the flesh, with words that seek to be deeds. That is why we may use the term *drama* with some degree of correctness and fruitfulness. Drama, after all, began in religious liturgy. Two and a half millennia ago, in the cultic worship of Dionysos, the classic form of the dramatic art, Greek tragedy, was born.

This was a mystery religion; its theme was death and resurrection; its liturgy involved ritual singing and dancing, entrance and exit, light and darkness, pantomime and commentary. And one day—so legend has it—a chorister named Thespis turned from his part in the liturgy to address the worshippers in the name of the god. Even the developed art did not lose this elemental conviction that drama is a liturgical act in which the power of the god himself is present. The drama is a peculiar sort of dialogue in which players and spectators, through pathetic and empathetic encounter, re-

6. R. A. Ward, *Royal Sacrament* (London, 1958), pp. 14, 22.

present the basic facts of life. Together they enter the dimension of suffering and fate, in order to win through to hope and immortality. The drama is a meeting of lives in a ritual of contest and struggle, in the crucible of death.

How much of all this can we or should we apply to preaching? Is there a parallel to Greek experience in the wholeness of worship restored in preaching and sacraments, in word and deed, in things said (*kerygma*) and things acted (*drama*)? Are we perhaps dealing with a pagan grasp of that parabolic "sign" which is so central to the biblical understanding of communication? The *mysterion* of the Kingdom of God is mirrored in the mystery of parable and miracle by which Christ brought it in. These were "signs" of the divine-human sign himself.<sup>7</sup> Communication involves a unique kind of human language and human work, so that the office of preaching involves a unique kind of function.

### III. MINISTERIAL MIDWIFERY AND MOTHERHOOD

The old method of catechetical instruction by question and answer has recently been investigated by T. F. Torrance, who defends it on the ground that theology is bound to be *dialogical*: "It is concerned throughout with the address of the Word of God and the obedient response of faith."<sup>8</sup> Preaching is part of the dialogue between God and man; but this dialogue has already received a definite completion in Jesus Christ, the one true God who loves man and calls him in grace, and the one true Man who loves God and follows him in faith.

The preacher witnesses to this event named Jesus Christ, but he is also part of the event. This involvement is inherent in the mystery of communication, but it reaches a peculiar intensity in Christian communication. An excellent analogy to assist us here is that of the virgin birth of our Lord—or of Mary's office of handmaiden, if we wish to by-pass the problem of the place of the Birth in the Gospel records. I am convinced that the Protestant failure to appreciate the significance of mystical theology for its doctrine of faith (despite the clear emphasis of Luther and Calvin, for example) is reflected in its suspicion of the person of Mary. (This suspicion, of course, is not quieted by the expansion of Mariological errors in Romanism.)

Mary is a picture of humanity dedicated to the doing of the Spirit of power, whose visitation engendered the Word like seed within her. He comes and he goes, this Spirit; such is his freedom. But his coming and going are according to the Word, for he is the Spirit of Jesus Christ. The office of preaching cannot be spoken of fruitfully or realistically except in

7. It is a pity that Paul Tillich has redefined "sign" and "symbol" to the confusion of the biblical concept of *semeion*. Cf. *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II (Chicago, 1957), p. 9. For Tillich, sign is "only a sign," whereas symbol "participates in the reality which is symbolized." Although this has some weight in view of the traditional understanding of theological symbolics, nevertheless the classic scholastic and renaissance discussions of *signum* and *res* presupposed the participation of the "sign" in the "reality" signified; this was decisive in the eucharistic controversies, at least. Cf. T. F. Torrance, "A Study in New Testament Communication" (*Scottish Journal of Theology*, September, 1950), for the concepts of *lalia* and *logos* in Christ's parabolic teaching.

8. T. F. Torrance, *The School of Faith* (London, 1959), p. xliii.

terms of the office of the Holy Spirit. There is much talk these days about our neglect of the doctrine of the Spirit. It is true that the Church has never articulated a consistent doctrine of the third person of the Trinity as it has of the first and second—but does not one reason for this omission lie in the very nature of the Spirit? He is not “objective” in the same sense as Father and Son (I speak improperly); no one witnesses to him for his own sake. His work consists in witnessing to our Lord, in bringing him to birth in men, and in bringing men to birth in him. This is why the doctrine of the Spirit is a kind of postscript to the doctrine of Christ, rendering it vital and relevant. Pneumatology is applied Christology.

In such a context, the ministerial office is seen as a kind of midwifery. It was Socrates who described himself as a species of midwife, a maieutic philosopher assisting at the birth of ideas. Just a century ago, Kierkegaard compared the Socratic method with theology. Because of human sinfulness there are not “true ideas” within, already conceived. We can act as midwives only to the point at which our dialogue is no longer effective, when we must become direct witnesses to the truth that is outside man, in Jesus Christ. By this means Kierkegaard advanced one step beyond Socrates.

Let us advance one step beyond Kierkegaard. We should take with the utmost seriousness Paul’s words to the Galatians, “My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you,” and to the Corinthians, “I became your father in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.”<sup>9</sup> And we must also consider how Paul says, time and again, that by faith a man is “in Christ,” and Christ is “in us.”

This is nothing less than a definition of faith as *union with Christ*. I submit that this is the classic and normative definition, enunciated by our Lord himself, by St. Paul, by the Fathers, by mystical theologians, and by the Reformers. Without this definition, faith becomes a human work, a subjective distortion matched by a false kind of preaching.

In Christ man becomes a new creation. But the other side of this miracle and mystery of the new birth—Christ’s side as it were—is the fact that our Lord himself still condescends to us in the humility of his revelation, still comes into a man’s life in the form of an infant, is “born again” whenever the event of faith occurs. What the Holy Spirit conceives and the Church mothers is a new man in Christ and Christ in that man. It is at this birth that we are called to assist in our maieutic office of communicating the Word through preaching. Here too is the *risk* of our ministry. The complex nature of the union of faith, especially the mystery of its motherhood, means that our midwifery passes over into parenthood, that our ministry is convulsed with the travail of birth itself. To deliver—yea, to be parent to—babes in Christ; to share Christ’s own ministry as he communicates himself to men through his ordained ministry of word and sacrament; this labour involves great hazard. For what if, by false teaching, or by true teaching at wrong times, we deliver an abortion, or stifle an infant heartbeat?

9. Gal. 4:19; 1 Cor. 4:15.

That wise teacher of the early Church, Origen, expressed the risk when he said:

I often think of the maxim, "It is dangerous to talk about God, even if what you say about him is true". The man who wrote that must, I am sure, have been a shrewd and dependable character. There is danger, you see, not only in saying what is untrue about God but even in telling the truth about him if you do it at the wrong time.<sup>10</sup>

According to this view, preaching requires both identification and non-identification with those to whom we preach. In writing of "the gift of ministry," Daniel Jenkins has described the true preacher:

All the doubts and difficulties and terrors which confront mortal men as they face the temptations and hazards and ambiguities of existence should be his familiar ground. Life at its grimmest and harshest should have an almost morbid fascination for him. Wherever there is trouble he should be found. He is the one man among all men who cannot be permitted the luxury of a sheltered life. . . . Of all men, he has to be the freest thinker, allowing the most dangerous of facts to lead him wherever they will, without regard to personal safety or comfort or professional prestige, offering himself on the altar of God's truth, that God's glory might be made manifest in his weakness.

Such identification is the secret of genuine dialogue, in which the preacher does not confront his fellowmen as a religious man addressing sinners, but simply as *man to man*. Both stand in the common humanity that Christ seeks and saves. At the same time, the preacher must recognize that his message is not identifiable with the standards and the assumptions of his hearers. Surely it is a prime responsibility of homiletics teachers today to stress this non-identity, this radical break, this disturbing two-edged sword of preaching. There is too much conformity today; there are too many domesticated parsons, too many preachers who have made themselves "homiletical eunuchs" for the sake of a heavenly kingdom. This will not do; only real manhood will do in the pulpit. Otherwise we fail to let the genuine *scandalon* of the Gospel confront our hearers. Bultmann is trying to make this clear, when he insists that "Christ meets us in the preaching as one crucified and risen. He meets us in the word of preaching and nowhere else. The faith of Easter is just this—faith in the word of preaching."<sup>11</sup> And Paul Tillich also speaks of overcoming the wrong stumbling blocks ("our inability to communicate") in order "to bring people face to face with the right stumbling block and enable them to make a genuine decision."<sup>12</sup>

Once again the problem and the mystery of communication emerge to challenge us. The problem is complex: to revive biblical preaching as something more than mere "concordance preaching" which strings together thematic texts and thinks this is exposition; to find ways of using the Christian year and the lectionary as practical guides for a diet of preaching; to define

10. Quoted by J. Daniélou, *Origen* (London, 1955), p. 25.

11. R. Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in H. W. Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth* (London, 1953), p. 41.

12. P. Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York, 1959), p. 213.



methods of evangelism and teaching within the preaching office; to venture into new forms of dialogue and conversation, lest we define preaching too narrowly in terms of a pulpit message once a week, thus missing that "holy worldliness" to which Christ is calling us outside.

But too much concentration on the problems creates pessimists, experts of despair, ecclesiastical beatniks. We must cultivate humour. The maieutic task of Socrates involved the concept of irony; ours involves theological humour, the effect of justifying grace. When Abraham and Sarah received the promise of a son they laughed quite rudely, for they knew the facts of life, and so realized that this promise was humanly impossible. Then a son was born. Once again Sarah laughed; indeed she named her son "Laughter," Isaac. Surely it is in the Church alone that we can find such hearty humour at the good news of what God has done and continues to do in his overruling kindness. This is the secret of faith, and pre-eminently of the preachers caught up in the dynamics of its actuality. Bonhoeffer, a few days before his execution by the Gestapo, put it like this:

This is the decisive difference between Christianity and all religions. Man's religiosity makes him look in his distress for the *power* of God in the world; he uses God as a *Deus ex machina*. The Bible, however, directs him to the powerlessness and suffering of God; only a suffering God can help.