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## The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching

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*Our second article on Karl Barth is by the Professor of Systematic Theology in Whitley College, a Baptist seminary associated with the University of Melbourne.*

Seventy years ago, in July 1922, Karl Barth delivered a lecture to a conference of pastors at Schulpforta, Saxony on the theme 'The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching'.<sup>1</sup> Barth had recently taken up the position of Professor of Reformed Theology at Göttingen (a chair newly-created with funding from American Presbyterians) and the second edition of his *Römerbrief* had created such a sensation the pastors gathered in large numbers for an introduction to his theology.

Many things have changed since 1922 but pastors and priests experience still the same sense of demand and perplexity which Barth described then, as we open the scriptures and attempt to speak of God. Many of us would readily agree with Barth's friend Thurneysen that the pulpit is 'a place that is full of ambiguity and distress'.<sup>2</sup> If anything there is a deeper sense of uncertainty in the churches today about the value of preaching. Why we preach and what we should preach are deeply troubling questions. But we know also the imperative that calls us to attempt to preach. There is something about congregational ministry in all its forms which drives us towards some attempt to articulate the meaning of God's presence, whether as comfort or challenge, as gift or goad, and in so doing to say who God is and who we are. I want therefore to reaffirm the importance and value of Christian preaching by trying to

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth 'The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching', in Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, Translated by Douglas Horton; London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1928, 97-135.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Eduard Thurneysen to Karl Barth, April 24, 1922, published in *Revolutionary Theology in the Making*, Barth-Thurneysen Correspondence, 1914-1925, Translated by James D. Smart, Richmond, Virginia, John Knox Press, 1964, 97-98.

clarify the nature and role of preaching as part of the life of the church.

In this essay I hope to draw on some of the basic insights of Barth's lecture, while the structure and emphases are my own. I do not pretend that my argument is fully consistent with Barth's own theological approach, either in that early lecture or in his later works. What follows is, rather, an attempt to focus, as Barth tried to focus, on the fundamentals of preaching, to re-state from our own context and for our own situation some things that are foundational to the very idea of preaching today. Amid the diversity of demands upon pastors and preachers it is important to have a clear understanding of what preaching actually is. My contention is not that with a sharper idea of these fundamentals the perplexity or ambiguity of the task will be reduced (Barth thought that impossible). Rather, with an awareness of these factors we may at least be more available to the need and the possibility of preaching.

I have, then, six things to say about preaching, about what it is or might be and how it might be understood theologically.

### **Preaching is about communication and the potential of communication to change relationships**

This is not a point Barth makes. It is, rather, an assumption of all he says about preaching. I prefer to make this assumption explicit and to argue for it in its own right as one of the fundamentals of preaching.

The purpose of preaching is communication of a particular form: it is communication between human beings about human being, yet it purports and hopes also to be communication about God and even by God. The context of preaching is not merely a meeting or gathering of people. Generally preaching takes place within a service of worship. This context and the intention of those who have so gathered is important in determining the character of the communication that is possible in preaching. Preaching takes place within the relationships of the preacher and hearers and of the community of faith and the God they seek to worship.

Preaching, then, is not just about a people who hear and a preacher who speaks. It is fundamentally based on the idea of a God who speaks and a people who relate to that God. The significance of communication for the establishment of such personal and communal relationships is well illustrated in an episode in Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The story, in brief, is about the inmates in a large mental hospital and is essentially about what happens in a few short weeks to two in particular. One of these

patients is simply called 'The Chief' and narrates the story. While he joins in many of the activities, the thing we quickly learn about The Chief is that he never speaks. The others all believe him to be both deaf and dumb. The other man is McMurphy.

One incident is the turning point of the story, yet it seems so incidental. It happens when McMurphy offers The Chief a piece of chewing gum. It's expressed in just one line, where The Chief recounts, 'And before I realized what I was doing, I told him Thank you.'<sup>3</sup> McMurphy stayed awake till all the others in the dorm were asleep—and in that time The Chief explains to us all how and when he decided to stop communicating and how hard it was to learn to respond as if he didn't hear, despite all they were doing to him. And then The Chief and McMurphy talk all night, and what develops then is a totally new dimension of their relationship.

That is what preaching is about. Something very simple, perhaps, sometimes entirely insignificant and incidental, can create a new dimension of human relationship and can transform human being. Preaching seeks to enable people to hear God speak to them in a such a way that they know themselves to exist in relationship with God.

Communication by its very nature is social. Every language implies a community of at least two. But more than that, in the very logical structure of a language, it is not just that there are at least two persons. These persons are alive and responsive. They are able to respond, even if they do not respond at particular times or as we might intend, nonetheless they can respond. Language exists only where there are persons able to change, able to act, able to form intentions, receive ideas, and respond.

So let us consider very briefly what this means if we apply this idea to the task of preaching. If we speak of communication not merely about God but with God and indeed by God, this implies not only our personhood but the personal nature of God, and it implies relationship. It also implies that the being of God is not static. If communication is real, then God is *related*, and God is in some ways affected by what happens in communication. God can change, at least in terms of how we are related to God and God to us. The God who speaks, who reveals, who relates to us is a God who is also able to hear us, able to respond to us, wants to relate to us and act with us. Some such conception of God is at the very heart of Barth's idea of preaching and is, I suggest, essential to the ministry of preaching. Precisely here lies the difficulty, though, as for many the idea of God as living and active in direct relationship with us, speaking to us, is

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<sup>3</sup> Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, London, Methuen, 1962; Pan books, 1973, 179.

problematical. The question is whether we can conceive of God as being present and active in our words and our relationships, including in our preaching. This I suggest is the way the biblical writers spoke of God. Seminal for this idea of God is that passage we find in Exodus chapter three where God calls Moses, where Moses learns who God is and from this story on the Exodus and the creation of the nation proceeds. Notice the very basis of this whole movement: that God hears, God sees, God knows what the people are going through and God responds: 'I mean to deliver them' (v.8). So Moses is drawn into this purpose and mission of God. Moses' actions, and presumably his speaking of God, his preaching, are founded upon the idea of a God who speaks and thus is related to the people.

This then is the first and most fundamental theological basis on which we might develop a ministry of preaching. God is affected by what we say and what happens to us and God responds. Through the word of preaching, as well as in other ways, God responds; and like the incident with The Chief, one word of such communication can transform a situation. Preaching is about communication and the potential of divine-human communication to change relationships.

Whether we are able to conceive of God in these terms is, then, a quite fundamental challenge, of which I think Barth was acutely aware. We now turn to see how he handled this question.

### **Preaching seeks an openness in its hearers: a questioning congregation**

Barth's lecture provides us with a helpful framework here. He begins by suggesting that the critical factor in our worship and our preaching is the conviction that God is present and the expectancy that consequently something will *happen*.<sup>4</sup> If we accept that God is present, what does that mean for our attempts to preach and all we do in gathering to worship?

Barth analyses this question by describing the situation of the preacher. It is a drama, as he sees it, in which three parties are present, and a dialectic is also present. He described this dialectic in terms of question and answer.

First, the people face the preacher with their question. They have been told that God is with them, and they have known something of God, he suggests, in a blossoming cherry tree or a Beethoven symphony. (Yes, here is a Barthian theology of nature.) But as they come to church, Barth argues, it is as if these senses of God's

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<sup>4</sup> 'The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching', *op cit*, 104.

presence have been exhausted for them or they have now 'become the great riddle of existence'.<sup>5</sup> Their knowledge of God in daily life at some point or other wears thin and calls out for something at once more immediate and more profound.

All manner of things raise the question: the 'impenetrable muteness' of nature, what he calls 'the chance and shadowy existence' of things in time, the misfortunes of individuals and nations, evil and death itself. From all these the issue arises, Is it true?

Is it true, this talk of a loving and good God, who is more than one of the friendly idols whose rise is so easy to account for, and whose dominion is so brief? What the people want to find out and thoroughly understand is, *Is it true?*<sup>6</sup>

So for Barth the one side of the dialectic is the question, Is there really a God, *such* a God, a God who is with us?

For Barth this question is one of the constitutive elements in the dialectic of preaching and cannot be ignored. Preaching seeks a people who are prepared to ask such questions. Preaching does not presuppose a passive audience, a people relaxed and unquestioning in their faith. Rather preaching seeks a people who are concerned, engaged with the religious questions of the meaning of their lives, prepared to ask and face these questions.

Then Barth turns to the other side of the dialectic. The issue raised by the questioning and doubting congregation is itself confronted by what he calls the biblical riddle. The Bible, he says, brings an answer and seeks a question corresponding to this answer: 'It seeks questioning people who are eager to find and understand that its seeking of them is the very answer to their question'.<sup>7</sup>

What this means is that the Bible is seeking a people who are prepared to have their question answered by another question, a question which questions them. Are they, are we, really and seriously asking after God?

For Barth, then, the dialectic takes place when the questioning people discover that they themselves and their questions of God are indeed brought into question by God. In this process, their world and all their ways of seeing themselves, each other, and even seeing God are tested, challenged, judged. Preaching seeks an openness in its hearers to this questioning and transformation of their questions.

Barth's thesis is that the *miracle* of preaching (his term) takes place when God uses the words of a man or woman so to question, to

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

challenge, and thus to answer a questioning people. And this, he explains in the last section of the lecture, can only take place when preachers first allow themselves to be so questioned, challenged and judged. The task is not so much to ask a question of the people as to show them that we, together, are so questioned.

Preaching then requires in preacher and hearers a mutual openness to the burning issues, the 'riddle of existence'. Where there is no such sense of mystery and indeed perplexity, or no willingness to plumb the depths of those concerns, preaching is unlikely to be effective, if it is possible at all. Barth's conviction was, though, that life itself creates this situation. Everyday experience forces the question.

But now we must ask: What question? This leads to my third assertion about the fundamentals of preaching.

### **Preaching requires an articulation of the questions of the day**

In his book *Preaching* Fred Craddock writes of the preacher's need not only to exegete the text but also to exegete the congregation, to interpret the situation into which we are preaching.

Having an understanding of the currents of a community's life, its ways of relating to itself and to the world, its values, and the images of its fears and hopes, enables a minister to interpret the listeners to themselves and hold their lives under the judgment and blessing of the gospel.<sup>8</sup>

The task of exploring for and with a faith community the life questions confronting them is the task of the preacher as theologian. Crucial to this aspect of ministry is the need not only to address questions people are actually articulating, though these should not be ignored, but to articulate those issues the community may not yet recognize.

An incident in David Ireland's novel *Bloodfather* may serve as an illustration of what I mean here. The Blood family, around whom the novel is set, adopt a dog. The dog's name was Kellick. His owners were two boys and their dad, all of whom were killed in a car crash. The Blood family took Kellick in and cared for him, but it was some time before the boy Davis Blood discovered that Kellick could do tricks. In fact he loved to do tricks: at one time he went with Davis to church, and sat in a chair and nodded in time with the hymn. But the problem emerged that while the family knew he could do tricks, they didn't know the commands. They experimented, and found he could sit up and watch television, he'd pretend to read a book, he'd

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<sup>8</sup> Fred Craddock, *Preaching*, Nashville, Abingdon, 1985, 95.

dig a grave then lie down in it, and so on. When he'd done all those things, he'd whine and whine, because he wanted to do lots more, he knew lots more, but the commands weren't forthcoming. After a time he'd resume his hang-dog air.<sup>9</sup>

I wonder if the human race is not 'whining' its way through existence, hoping that someone will articulate the commands, or as I would rather put it, pose the right questions to which we might meaningfully respond. It is, it seems to me, a proper function of the church in its priestly role to articulate the issues and lead the worshipful living of life. To do this, preaching and liturgy must interpret not only the biblical text but the congregation and their world.

There is here an interesting similarity between the role of the preacher as theologian and what Wittgenstein saw as the role of philosophy.<sup>10</sup> Wittgenstein suggested that much confusion develops in philosophy and life in general because we ask the wrong questions, or do not ask enough questions, or operate, as he put it, on too limited a diet of examples. The task of philosophy was to 'let the fly out of the fly-bottle'. Preaching can be seen as inviting people to see their questions in new ways, to explore a broader range of examples or possibilities and thus to see their lives in a different, a divine, perspective.

Articulating the critical life questions is not, however, something preachers can do alone. This is why it has always been seen as important for preachers also to be pastors: the people tell us, directly and indirectly, what their questions are. In one sense then articulating the questions is a joint task. In another sense, though, it is the preacher's specific responsibility not to let the people's questions be the only agenda but to raise other questions, even questions which question their questions, sometimes to comfort the doubting and disturb the comfortable, but always to do so as one who is under those same questions.

### Preaching has a worship-ful goal

In those early lectures on preaching, as in his commentary on Romans, Barth was very much influenced by the thought of Søren Kierkegaard, and this provided a quite distinctive idea of what a sermon seeks to do. This view of preaching implies at least something of the 'event' character of faith which was so crucial for

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<sup>9</sup> David Ireland, *Bloodfather*, Ringwood, Penguin Australia, 1989, 315-317.

<sup>10</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, English Translation by G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford, Blackwell, 1958. See especially sections 38f., 90f., 309.

Barth's theology. For this reason it is worth considering the fundamentals of Kierkegaard's approach as one of the influences on Barth's approach to preaching.

Kierkegaard developed quite original, some might say peculiar, ideas about faith, God, Christ, revelation, and what preachers ought to do—and these are highly relevant here. In his *Philosophical Fragments* Kierkegaard sees the coming of Christ as the posing to humanity of a paradox.<sup>11</sup> Indeed he calls the whole Christ event 'The Paradox'. It is a challenge to human pride and human reason in its self-containment. The Paradox seeks to be our teacher, to lead us to life: but the critical question for Kierkegaard is 'But how does the learner come to realize an understanding with this Paradox?'<sup>12</sup> His answer is faith, where faith means we enter into a state of 'subjectivity', in which we ourselves are engaged, involved existentially. In this subjectivity, we know ourselves to be addressed by the paradox: it is challenging us. We are not standing outside it, questioning how it can be and what it can mean, (that is what reason does, according to Kierkegaard's scheme). In contrast to reason, when we have 'become subjective' we have taken the leap of faith which accepts that The Paradox is the primary reality and it stands there questioning us and asking us what we intend to do about it.

So for Kierkegaard, since this is the nature of faith, to be subjective, knowing that you have no firm foundation of your own, no vantage point from which you can question or judge God, the practical question is then how we can come to this point and how can we bring others to this point.

The major thrust of his argument is that this will not be by reason and especially not by historical knowledge, learning about the life of Christ. Indeed he argued that the first disciples have no advantage over would-be disciples today.<sup>13</sup> Faith has no firm foundation in human knowledge. Faith is the creation and gift of God and for Kierkegaard, then, the task of preaching and Christian training, as he called it, is to bring people into a position where they are confronted by The Paradox. Kierkegaard's particular term for this situation is *being contemporaneous*: It is not a matter of going back to history past, it is a matter of entering into the continuing history of

<sup>11</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, English Translation by David F. Swenson, revised by Howard V. Hong, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1936, 1962. See especially chapters 3 & 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.



The Paradox, allowing one's own life and time to be drawn into its presence, so that we as hearers are in no way distant from those first hearers.

This is a rather unusual, but perhaps illuminating, way of saying what a sermon seeks to do. To preach a text we must try to enable our hearers to be contemporaneous, to enable them to hear it as if they are hearing it from Christ or from the apostles, indeed from God, *for the very first time*.

This of course implies major hermeneutical issues about what the text intends us to hear, its meaning and import, not just its content, but these issues are far beyond the scope of this paper. They are not, however, questions which the preacher as biblical exegete can ignore.

To return to the central point in this section, the task of the sermon is to enable a congregation to know that it is addressed by God in the present.

We can now state positively what it means to say that preaching has a worshipful goal. A sermon serves the whole liturgy of a worship service, assisting the community of faith to express its life in the context of God's presence, as it hears God's word in the present, whether that be, to use Craddock's words, judgment or blessing. A sermon therefore seeks to lead the congregation to genuine prayer, to evoke prayer, to inform that prayer and to ensure that what is said and felt in prayer does not end there but becomes the life-agenda of the people as they go from the place of worship.

All this, however, presupposes that something more than human speech happens in the activity of preaching, and this leads us back to Barth's original idea that preaching is a 'miracle' in which human words and human listening are transformed into the 'event' of The Word. This Word is the initiative and self-revelation of God, by which God makes known to us who God is and who we are, and as we hear this word as Word we are, in Barth's terminology, 'awakened' to faith and know ourselves to be 'determined', that is we know ourselves to be people who have been addressed by God. This idea of faith is very similar in its epistemological character and implications to Kierkegaard's notion of faith as subjectivity. In each instance, the implication is that the goal of preaching is to evoke a worshipful stance before God, a recognition of God as God and ourselves as being called into relationship with God as a result of this divine approach.

By now it will be clear that Barth expected a lot from preaching. Indeed on one occasion in another of those early lectures to pastors he spoke of the virtual impossibility of preaching. Considering 'the task of the ministry' he said:

*We ought therefore to recognize both that we should speak of God and yet cannot, and by that very recognition give God the glory.*<sup>14</sup>

This sentence is filled with all the paradox and puzzling ambiguity which pervades Barth's theology and has had many of us trained in linguistic analysis frustrated ever since. It points to the very basis of his theology, the conviction that we must speak of God and indeed for God, yet only God can speak of God. So for Barth if in fact we do in our preaching succeed in speaking of God, if our words become The Word, this is an act of God, the 'miracle' of preaching.

I want now to explore two theological implications of the approach to preaching described above. The first concerns the pneumatological basis of preaching, with the suggestion that it is the presence of God as Holy Spirit who makes this Word possible. In essence, it is the Holy Spirit who preaches. While Barth himself does not pursue this theme, it seems to me a logical implication of his theology of preaching.

### **Preaching is an activity of God the Holy Spirit**

Preaching is the work of God the Holy Spirit. Paul makes some intimations towards this idea in several places for example, 1 Corinthians 12. 3, 'No-one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit.' and Romans 8. 15&16, 'When we cry "Abba! Father!" it is the very Spirit bearing witness with our own spirit that we are children of God.' While these verses are not immediately about preaching, their broad implication is that the Holy Spirit joins with our spirits so that we are able to know God. This is what the Spirit does: it is the Spirit who enables us to know and recognize and relate to God, including to hear the word as Word. On this basis I suggest we may say that it is the Spirit who makes our preaching to be preaching.

Only the Holy Spirit can achieve what preaching attempts. In the liturgy of the eucharist there is a straight-forward recognition that only the Spirit can make this bread and wine to be for us the body and blood of Christ. The same straightforward recognition is needed in preaching: only the Spirit can make this speaking and hearing to be for us the Word of God.

What then is it that we pray the Spirit will do in and with our preaching? To answer this question I want to refer very briefly to the argument of John Taylor's still outstanding book on the Spirit, *The GoBetween God*.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Karl Barth, 'The Word of God and the Task of the Ministry' in Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 212. Emphasis is Barth's.

<sup>15</sup> John V. Taylor *The GoBetween God*, London, SCM, 1972. See especially 29-35.

In the opening chapters, Taylor describes three aspects of the Spirit's activity, and these become the basis for his analysis of the Spirit's life in Jesus, in the church, and in mission today. Taylor argues that the three characteristic dimensions of the activity of the Spirit are awareness, choice and sacrifice. We will consider these in turn and then explore the significance of this schema for the pneumatological basis of preaching.

**Awareness:** Fundamental to the activity of the Spirit is the category of insight, that is, seeing what is there but is not normally seen. This awareness has to do with the capacity to relate to what is about us, not as things but as selves, as living beings. Such awareness implies and creates this capacity for response. The argument is that the Spirit creates and continually gives this awareness.

**Choice:** The Spirit who gives and is awareness creates the possibility of community, but it does so through the creation of choices.

As the Lord sets before the people the choice—between life and death, between Yahweh and Baal, and as Jesus calls to follow, creating choices: Will you also leave me?—and so on, in every day life we too have choices. Supremely we have the choice for or against community, and with it the risk of knowing and being known. These choices involve risk, as does all loving.

The Spirit both creates these choices and enables us to make them, but not in such a way as to remove our freedom and responsibility for being ourselves.

**Sacrifice:** To follow the Spirit, to respond in awareness and choice and to live in the Spirit is a way of some suffering, some self-giving, some cost. This, Taylor observes, is what the Cross of Jesus tells us about the way of God. The way of the Spirit has its cost. And only thus does it give its new life.

I would like now to relate these three central ideas to our preaching and to ourselves as preachers. But before doing that there is one further point Taylor makes which will help us to make those applications to our preaching. This concerns the Spirit in Jesus.

One implication of the Spirit's presence with and in Jesus, Taylor says, was Jesus' uncanny capacity for what he calls **bi-sociation**.<sup>16</sup> By this he means Jesus' capacity to see two things which to others have nothing to do with one another as inherently and integrally related. He saw connections where no-one else saw any relationship. This was something characteristic of the prophets: they saw that the movements of armies and the manipulations of economies had a

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 81, 89–96.

spiritual meaning, and they addressed that meaning. They saw meanings in what others called chaos.

This is the way of the Spirit in Jesus. Supremely he made a connection between the love of God and the love of neighbour, between worship and lifestyle, and between his own ministry and death and the coming of God's kingdom.

How then do these ideas of the Spirit's activity apply to our preaching?

Preaching requires many forms and levels of awareness. In exegeting a text, we need the Spirit's freedom to hear what the writer heard and see what they saw. This awareness has an existential and a personal quality. It is not just a matter of understanding a text of words. It is a capacity of feeling and response. But that is not enough. We need a similar awareness of our own situation. This calls then for the 'inspiring' not only of the text but of our reading and our reflection and later on of our speaking and the hearing and the reflection. This calls for what earlier we called 'bi-sociation', or what we might call the hermeneutic of the Spirit. It is the Spirit who will enable us to make the connections between then and now, between text and situation, between faith and life, and between what is and what might be.

Preaching, then, seeks to create an awareness and a response, —awareness of self, of others, of situation, and of God, and the interpenetration of the divine reality in all the others. Preaching also seeks to enable choices, not merely to indicate that there are choices but to enable those choices to be made, and in that to evoke the chosen and willing self-sacrifice of the people, as followers of Jesus.

This leads to the last observation I want to suggest about preaching, which is implicit in so much of what has been said before.

### **Preaching is a sacrament; preacher and congregation are sacramentals**

For the purposes of this discussion, a sacrament may be loosely defined as an element within earthly time and space reality through which God acts towards human beings, and thus for human beings. Sacraments are means by which God's grace becomes effective in our world and in our lives. Sacramentals are those specific acts or mediums through which this grace is mediated. My contention is that preaching is a sacrament and that both the preacher and the congregation are elements in this sacrament.

A sermon is an activity of God, at least that is what it hopes to be. Through the preaching and the listening, God speaks. Barth in fact

goes further, to say 'God is present'. The sermon may be a sacrament of God's real presence just as much as is the Lord's Supper. The sacrament of preaching is an activity of God, and one of the other things we can say about God is that when and as God acts, our reality changes, or at least our perception of our reality changes.

One way of understanding what this means is suggested in the opening section of David Buttrick's excellent book on preaching, *Homiletic, Moves and Structures*. Buttrick speaks of the task of preaching as re-naming the world.

In the first chapter he outlines very briefly a concept of language as naming our world.<sup>17</sup> As a philosophical view of language this has long been considered inadequate, but it has nonetheless an element of truth in it, that in learning language we learn to name things, and as we name them we define how we relate to them and they relate to us. This idea has some currency in biblical thought. The power to name things is in fact not just a linguistic power, it's also the power to set things in place, to define where they belong, even to define who they are. This power of naming is given to human beings in the Genesis 1 creation story, for example. We name our world and when we name it, it is *our* world. But a sermon can change this: 'Preaching can re-name the world "God's world" with metaphorical power, and can change identity by incorporating all our stories into "God's story"'.<sup>18</sup>

In this sense, then, a sermon is an activity of God, not just about God, and not just words. It is an activity in which God changes our world. It is an act of re-interpretation and re-constitution. Reality, the reality we experience, changes as our relationship to things and to God is transformed. The whole shape of things is changed by the sermon as sacrament.

But if a sermon is to have this sacramental power, it can do so only if the preacher is also capable of being a sacramental element. This may be more difficult for many of us to accept. We may agree that God the Holy Spirit is in some sense active and present in our preaching, or as I said earlier that the Holy Spirit makes the preaching effective. To pursue the theological implications of these ideas, though, we must consider the possibility that we as preachers and hearers are elements in the sacrament of preaching.

God acts through human actions and God speaks through human speech.

Potentially, then, it is not just the words that are the means of

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<sup>17</sup> David Buttrick, *Homiletic, Moves and Structures*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1987. Chapter 1, especially 11f.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

grace: it is the speaker and that person in relationship with the hearers. For our speech is us: we are our words and we relate in them and through them. When we speak, it is an event in our lives and in our relationships. Even more, the meaning of our words is not unrelated to who speaks them: the *significance* they have can very much depend on who says them—as well as on how and when they are said. A word of grace spoken by a hard and unforgiving person has quite a different meaning from the same words spoken by a person who maybe at times is angry and hard, but is also at times broken and wistful—in short a fellow human being. This word of grace will be more effectively mediated by that broken and sometimes confused preacher: *and that will be the preacher in whom the grace is more likely to be present or mediated.*

These, then, are six things which may help to define what preaching is and what it may hope to achieve. The lecture of Barth's from which we took our departure had a number of other concerns as well. His initial concern was to announce a shift in the focus of theological reflection onto the priority of the self-revealing God. If we follow this line it makes clear that preaching must be, as for Barth theology itself must be, an activity of faith. Preaching is possible only if one believes there is such a God who is so related to us, a God who reveals and speaks. As such the preacher must be one who is open, in the sense described in section 2 above. We must be open to the presence of a questioning God and open to the possibility that through this process, as we share not so much our 'answers' as the awareness of an ultimate questioning, others too will become aware of the presence of that same God.

The terms of Barth's title are, therefore, quite significant. The *need* of preaching has two aspects to it. Clearly Barth was convinced, as am I, that people need to hear God speak to them and to know that God is with us. But the other aspect of this need is the sense of *necessity* or inadequacy felt by the preacher. The preacher is needy: to preach, in the sense that we have spoken of it here, is not something we can achieve. We need the Spirit of God to make our words into preaching.

Therein lies what Barth called the *promise* of preaching. This is promise in the sense of potential. As we have seen, for Barth preaching depends on the 'miracle' of God's presence. But it can so rely on God, for God is present and does speak. To preach then requires the conviction not only of the need but also of the promise of preaching.

Finally we note that Barth spoke of *Christian* preaching. This too reflected part of his theological agenda, his concern for a Christocentric focus. Rather than pursue that, though, I will conclude by

saying that Jesus Christ is a criterion for preaching, not simply in the sense of the content of what is to be preached but also in terms of the character of preaching. Preaching in its form and its impact, as well as its words, must be consistent with the nature of the God made known in Jesus Christ. This is the need and promise of Christian preaching.

### **Abstract**

This article takes its title from a 1922 lecture by Karl Barth and explores the contemporary relevance of some of Barth's ideas towards a re-affirmation of the nature and importance of preaching within the church. Fundamental to preaching is the potential of such communication to change relationships, but this in turn requires a dialectic involving a questioning congregation and a theological articulation of the questions of the day. This aspect of Barth's thinking expresses his understanding of worship as the goal of preaching, derived from Kierkegaard's idea of contemporaneity. The theological foundations of such communication require that we see preaching as a work of the Holy Spirit and thus as a *sacrament* of the divine presence, with preacher and congregation as sacramentals.