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"What should we? What can we?" Rereading Karl Barth's self-dialogue on preaching

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Abstract

Over the years there were many small, and even some major shifts of position in the way Karl Barth thought about the sermon. This article shows the internal development in Barth's homiletic thinking. No position as such is representative of his homiletics. Characteristic is the inner self-dialogue that Barth conducted over many years, specifically on these two questions: What should preachers do? What can they do?

Key words

Barth; homiletics; Word of God; human preaching; hermeneutics

1. Introduction

In order to sum up Barth's homiletic position, text books often quote the following statement from 1922 (for example: Müller, 1996, 135 and Grözinger, 2008, 67): "I would like to characterize our situation in the following three propositions: As theologians, we should talk about God. But we are human and as such cannot talk about God. We need to be aware of both, *our duty and our inability*, and so give God the glory. That is our dilemma. By comparison, anything else is child's play."[1] (Barth, (1922b) 1990, 151) I will show that these propositions are not representative of Barth's thinking about preaching – just as no position *as such* is representative of his homiletics. Characteristic is, rather, the inner self-dialogue that Barth conducted over many years. The word pair "sollen" (should) and "können"

1 All Barth-Citations are translated by Elaine Griffith.

(can) plays a major role in this conversation. It is constantly about: What *should* preachers do? What *can* they do?

The word pair "sollen" and "können" surfaces for the first time in the propositions quoted above. Barth spoke these sentences in the address "Das Wort Gottes als Aufgabe der Theologie" (The Word of God as the task of Theologians). A few months before, however, he had displayed some homiletic thoughts in another address. Even though the word pair "sollen" and "können" were not yet used here they can serve to provide the hermeneutic key to the content of this address.

2. Not und Verheißung der christlichen Verkündigung (1922) (The need and promise of Christian preaching)

In this lecture Barth explicitly links up with the situation of the ordained minister. In their sermons, preachers should do justice to the expectations of the congregation and also to the claim of the Bible. "If they did that: respond to what *people ask*, but respond as someone *themselves questioned by God*, then people would probably say that the preachers speak the word of God that people seek from them and that God has entrusted them with." (Barth (1922a); 1990:88) Even though Barth here uses the conditional tense with respect to the activity of preachers, their task is unmistakably worded in the indicative: they have been entrusted with nothing less than speaking God's word.

This is however not only the *task* of proclamation; at the same time it is its *promise*: "That is the *promise* of Christian proclamation: that we *speak God's word*." (1990, 89) Barth distinguishes strictly between the action of God and the action of human beings. Only God can fulfil his promise. That people can speak God's word is something they can only believe, never put into practice. The expectation "that it is God that does it" (1990, 90) focuses solely on God's action.

Preaching itself is a human impossibility. Barth makes that extremely clear: "What are you doing, mortal, with *God's* word on *your* lips?" (1990, 90) Isn't preaching "a nameless arrogance of people" (1990, 91)? The only possible response to this human pride can be God's judgement. Ensuring that the sermon is not a nameless exalting of the human being is something that can only be left to God. After all, the need for judgement of human proclamation

corresponds to the promise of its justification. They both unconditionally belong together. "If God has elected us – the miracle is *possible* with *God* - and wants to justify us *as* pastors and *in* the church situation, then at least only *there*, in the *judgement* of ourselves, in *judgement* of the church, in *judgement* of our pastors." (Barth, (1922) 1990, 92)

This lecture may be summed up as follows: *only* with God is it possible that someone speaks God's word, but with God it *is* possible. Or, to anticipate the word pair "sollen" and "können" from the next lecture: Preachers should and can speak God's word.

3. Das Wort Gottes als Aufgabe der Theologie (1922) (The Word of God as the Task of Theologians)

In the lecture "The Word of God as the Task of Theologians", that Barth gave a few months later, he again links up to a certain situation. This time it is the situation of theologians, whether pastors or lecturers. It is here that Barth pronounced the since oft-quoted words: "I would like to characterize our situation in the following three propositions: as theologians we should speak of God. But we are humans and as such cannot speak of God. We need to be aware of both, *our duty and our inability*, and so give God the glory. That is our dilemma. Anything else is child's play by comparison." (Barth, (1922b) 1990, 151) Here the word pair "sollen" and "können" appears in this powerful sense for the first time. With their assistance we can perceive a certain shift of accent compared to the lecture mentioned before.

According to Barth, the mandate of theologians consists of the following: they are supposed to speak of God. People expect that of them; they come to hear them and expect a reply to the question of all questions, i.e. to the question about God. The only answer that really matches these most ultimate of questions is the word of God itself. 'Talking about God' hence means nothing other than 'speaking God's word'. Theologians are therefore meant to speak God's word. The mission of proclamation remains the same, when compared to the lecture mentioned before.

But how can a theologian speak God's word as a human being? He or she *cannot*. Barth again strongly emphasises the impossibility of preaching. However, this time the severely apodictic propositions about the necessary failure of human preaching allow less hope for a last possibility with God.

In his lecture Barth discusses three ways in which theologians do try to give the only response to the ultimate question about God: the dogmatic way, the mystical way and the dialectic way. All three ways end with the insight that we cannot supply this answer. Also the third way, that of the new dialectic method initiated by Barth, ultimately provides no real advantage. That is because God's word sounds only when Godself is the speaker and "this possibility, the possibility that God*self* speaks where God is spoken of, does not occur on the dialectical path as such, but where this path also *stops*". (1990, 171)

We are meant to speak God's word, but we cannot. We should realise both these things and thereby give God the glory. What does it mean to 'give God the glory'? Is there any way out of the aporia? Will we with God's help, finally be able to speak God's word? No, Barth underlines that only God can speak of God. Hence we should not be surprised "if everywhere at the end of our journeying, and however well we have done our work, then, most of all, our mouth is *closed*". (1990, 174)

In this lecture there is no ultimate possibility with God to lead us out of this aporia. Barth puts it this way: "The word of God is the both necessary and impossible task of the ministry. That is my conclusion and this conclusion is the whole thing that I have to say on this topic." (1990, 172) Preacher should speak God's word but they cannot speak God's word.

4. Menschenwort und Gotteswort in der christlichen Predigt (1924) (Human Words and God's Word in Christian Preaching)

The key phrase in this lecture is the following claim: "The honest, genuine, earthly humanity of our ministry in preaching must not be denied, just as little as the human nature of Christ in revelation." (Barth, (1924) 1990, 442) This reference to the human nature of Jesus Christ achieves two things.

First, it makes it possible to identify human words and God's word in preaching. Between our talk of God and God's own talk there is, according to Barth, "a highly indirect but highly true, highly necessary *identity*". (Barth, (1924) 1990, 433) Barth therefore approvingly quotes the famous words *praedicatio verbi dei est verbum dei* from the Second Helvetic Confession.

Second, the reference to the Christological two-nature doctrine also allows a clear distinction between the human share in the sermon and God's own action.

In this context Barth stresses that it pleases God to be "the subject in the appearance of objectivity" (1990, 438). The word 'subject' [actor] is important. Even if God's word is only existent hidden in the human word, *God remains the subject of God's own world*. Human beings cannot speak God's word: "We can only speak *human* words, and that is according to the order. We are supposed to speak human words as such, words that have heard God's word and know that God will speak divine words again and again." (1990, 442) God's word does not pass from human lips; as God's own word it always only goes "directly from God's mouth". Preachers can only point to God's word. Proclamation is an announcement in the spirit of John the Baptist: Behold the Lamb of God. "That is what these human words can, and should, say. It should not want to say more. More would be less." (1990, 445)

Preaching is God's word. But people cannot speak God's word and people should not speak God's word. Barth's homiletical lecture of 1924 can be summed up in these two propositions.

5. Church Dogmatics I/1. Die Lehre vom Wort Gottes (1932) (The Doctrine of the Word of God)

With regard to the identification of God's word and human words in preaching, Barth says nothing new in the first volume of his *Church Dogmatics*. Certainly, there was a crucial new point with respect to the wording of the human task of proclamation. In the lecture of 1924 he still says that, while the human word of preaching is God's word, the human being should not speak the word of God. This strange statement is removed in *CD I/1* when Barth states: "The talk about God that takes place in the church seeks to be proclamation to the extent that it is directed to people as preaching and sacrament with the claim, and surrounded by the expectation, that it is mandated to speak the word of God to be heard in faith." (Barth, 1932, 47) Thus the church has the mandate of the proclamation of the word of God. The real sense of proclamation is therefore "the desire to speak the word of God oneself" (1932, 52).

However, Barth immediately gives a more precise definition of this desire to speak God's word. He recalls the decisive insight of all prophecy that human beings as such have no possibility of speaking the word of God. The only desire relevant here is that of taking on the church's mandate to *serve* the word of God. This ministry consists in pointing to God's word (cf. Barth, 1932, 53) in the hope that God will take up this indication and make its words God's own.

Behind proclamation is therefore the desire to speak the very word of God in obedience to the preacher's ordination to serve the word of God. But can humans do that? Just as Christ is truly God and truly human, real proclamation is the true word of God and true human word. Barth also emphasised this in the lecture of 1924, but in *CD I/1* he goes further. He thinks that the question about the parallel and cooperative working of the two factors, God and human beings, is utterly beside the point: "God and the human element are not two adjacent and interactive factors. The human is created by God. Only in the state of disobedience is it a factor confronting God. In the state of obedience, it is *serving* God." (1932, 96) Proclamation therefore takes place without the loss of the human element, indeed, even "with full essential presence and efficacy of the human in all its humanity" (1932, 96). The subject [actor] of the preaching event is God, Lord and Creator of humankind. Therefore, the human subject is not extinguished during the preaching event but suspended: "Without taking from the human its freedom, its earthly substance, its humanity, without extinguishing the human subject or turning its action into a mechanical event, God is then the subject from which human action must receive its new, true name". (1932, 96, 97)

The emphasis on the human presence and efficacy in the preaching event is made tangible in Barth's talk of the mouth of the preacher. In 1922, he said very metaphorically that wherever God speaks God's word, the human mouth is closed. Two years later, in 1924, Barth said, that God's word only comes out of God's own mouth: the human mouth is disempowered. By contrast, eight years later, in *CD I/1*, proclamation means "human speaking, in which and through which Godself speaks, like a king through the mouth of his herald" (1932, 52). Barth also approvingly quotes Martin Luther, who remarked of the preacher "that his mouth is Christ's mouth" (Luther according to Barth, 1932, 98).

Despite all reservations and with all caution, Barth in 1932 demands that the preacher desires to speak God's word. Even if this task only needs to be taken on with respect to hope, a person will not *per definitionem* fail in carrying it out. If the word of God happens in a sermon (always: when and where it pleases God), it happens through the mouth of a person. Here we can sum up the matter, albeit in greatly simplified form, as: People should and can speak God's word.

6. Homiletics. The Nature of a Preparation for Preaching (1932/33) (Homiletics seminar at Bonn University)

Hardly had the first volume of the *Church Dogmatics* appeared when his definition of preaching was no longer adequate. In his homiletics seminar at Bonn University Barth (1932/33) states that we cannot answer the question about preaching with one statement. Now two are necessary. Barth points out that these propositions contain the same elements; only each of them has its own viewpoint, one from God's and the other from the human point of view.

The unity of God's word and human word is presupposed but must by no means be confused with each other. For that reason, Barth has to add a second sentence to the first one: God lays claim to human words but they are, in turn, always only a pointer to God's word. Barth: "God speaks, not human beings; they will only announce what God wants to say." (Barth, (1932/33)1986, 32)

Barth firmly rejects a synthesis of the two statements. "We have to stress both: God is the one who effectively works and human beings have to try to point to what Scripture says. There is no third proposition." (1986, 31) The fact that Barth can only speak of preaching in two propositions shows that in winter 1932/33 he was more than ever wrestling with the question about the relation between God's word and human word. The difficult political situation in Germany at that time certainly plays a role here (cf. Dienhart Hancock, 2013)

God is the one who has an effect, says Barth, and there is no more talk of the human *full substantial efficacy* still found in *CD I/1*. Barth describes revelation now as a closed circle "where God is the subject and the object

and the mediation between the two of them" (1986, 33). *CD I/1* said, albeit extremely cautiously, that humans are to preach God's word in their sermons. In his homiletics seminar Barth now strictly warns against wanting to create the reality of God in sermons - by trying to convert people, for example, or to build the kingdom of God, or confronting them with God. He writes: "Yes, all that can happen in a sermon, but these are acts that Godself wants to perform and that can therefore never be a human task." (1986, 33) So the task of preaching is not to speak the word of God but merely to point to God's word. Hence the outcome of the Bonn homiletics may be summed up as follows. Preaching is God's word but people should not and cannot speak God's word. The peculiarity of 1924 turns up again.

7. Church Dogmatics I/2. Die Lehre vom Wort Gottes (1938) (The Doctrine of the Word of God)

The second volume of *CD*, which appeared in 1938, continues the word-of-God doctrine that Barth had started in 1932 with the first volume of *CD*. It continues apparently seamlessly from where Barth stopped in 1932. The tone is again positive about the preaching mandate of the church and its potential for fulfilling this mandate. The intermezzo of the homiletics seminar of Winter 1932/1933 seems to have turned without a trace into the doctrine of the word of God. However, an enormous change in *CD* I/2 as compared to *CD* I/1 is the moving away from the doctrine of the two natures of Christ as an explanatory homiletic figure. The doctrine of the unity of the two natures of Jesus Christ no longer play a role in *CD* I/2 in the attempt to define the relationship between God's word and human word in preaching. In the section about the incarnation of the Word that precedes this attempt, Barth had related this doctrine exclusively to Jesus Christ.

In the section about the word of God and the human word in Christian preaching, Barth defines the relationship between them facing it against the background of the turning point that took place on Easter morning. In Jesus Christ the miracle happened that had to happen for humans to be able to proclaim the word of God. Through his resurrection, the whole human impossibility of speaking God's word became "the new *possibility* for humankind" (Barth 1938, 837). How could church proclamation

actually be any different, if the church is the church of Christ's body? The mere fact that Jesus Christ is the ground and beginning of the churches makes people as baptised members "to bearers, to speakers of the word of God" (1938, 832).

The church has received a mission through the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. Barth insists on this order; the law of proclamation seeks to be understood only as the law fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He says: "that equation exists and applies first: church proclamation is God's word – then, and as such, it becomes the law and a task for the people in church." (1938, 837) The reality of the task therefore lies in its possibility. In other words: we can speak God's word in proclamation and so we should. In so doing, Barth judged the human contribution to proclamation at this stage much more positively than in the Bonn homiletics. Here Barth still strongly stressed that only God is efficacious in the preaching event; six years later he encourages people when preaching "to get to work unpretentiously but also uninhibitedly" (1938, 846). Speaking from human mouths turns up here as well: in the judgement on human sin God closes our mouths; we can under no circumstances open them ourselves. The only possibility is "that Godself lays God's word in our mouths" (1938, 843; cf. 252). This is precisely what happens in the church: human beings share in the new reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

8. Church Dogmatics IV/3. Jesus Christus, der wahrhaftige Zeuge (1959) (Jesus Christ the True Witness)

In this volume Barth describes Jesus as the true witness of himself who also calls people to be his witnesses. Important is: By Christ calling people to be his witnesses they are placed in very close fellowship with him. Barth characterizes this fellowship as a community of action. When Christ is involved in his work as a witness so are those human beings in perfect fellowship with him; when humans work, they do so in fellowship with Christ. In tangible terms that means the free, responsible involvement of Christians in the action of Jesus Christ. Barth writes:

> If Christ lives in them and they in Christ, this common life is not only Christ's but also their action. Then Christians are in no sense the authors of the salvific story occurring in the action of Jesus Christ and therefore not themselves reconcilers or even only co-reconcilers. They are in no sense involved as independent promoters of the kingdom of God, but they are subjects participating in that story, each in their place in their way, not only apparently but really, not pointlessly and superfluously but significantly and effectively. (Barth, 1959, 687)

The Christian does not work in the spirit of synergy, but in the spirit of an assisting participation. Barth characterises this assisting participation as 'service', since this term in his view is suited to expressing the cooperation of two different subjects operating in different ways. One is the master and the other is the servant. The master is superior to the servant in all aspects and placed above him. However the servant is not merely a spectator of his master or a dead instrument in his hands; instead, he acts as a living and therefore active subject by assisting his master.

It is precisely in this intimate service community that Christian service of the word takes place. New is: Christians cannot speak the word of God themselves; but they can reflect the light of this word. Their words are permitted to accompany and be a symbol of the self-witness of Christ. By this symbol accompanying and confirming Christ's self-revelation it contributes to the work of Christ. By this symbol making audible the self-witness of Christ as its echo in the world it shares in the history of salvation.

If in the Christian witness the echo of the one word of God is really audible, it is solely due to Christ's own strength. Here a miracle always occurs. But the miracle takes place in human witness. Regarding the human task Barth concludes: "More than our human witness is not required of us. The service of our human witness is required of us, however, without asking too much. We can well perform this service as those who are called and placed in the community of the life and actions of Christ." (1959, 698) The human mouth comes up in this context too: "God places God's word in the mouth of human beings [...], i.e. God gives their mouth, their human cognition and confession, and their human voice the power to testify themselves to the word of God." (1959, 843) Hence we can sum up the yield of this last

turning-point in Barth's homiletics as follows: preaching is human witness to the one word of God; humans can and should do this.

9. Conclusion

Over the years, there were many positional shifts in Karl Barth's thinking about preaching. I searched for explanations for the many different positions (cf. Nierop, 2008) and found out that an underlying Christological paradigm (from 1922b until 1932/33) caused a restrictive sight on human possibilities speaking the word of God. So long as the doctrine of the two natures of Christ functions as an explanatory homiletic figure, human possibilities are seen negative – due to the patristic idea of the anhypostasis of Christ's human nature (Barth loved it!) and the reformed doctrine of the "Extra Calvinisticum". (*CD I/1* is an exception. Here the doctrine of people as divine creations with special abilities functions as an auxiliary construction.) It is striking that once the Christological paradigm is abandoned for a pneumatological one (from 1938 on), human possibilities are seen much more positive.

In *Homiletics. The Nature of and Preparation for Preaching* (1932/33), Barth's homiletics seminar at Bonn University, not only the underlying Christological paradigm, but also the political situation in Germany at that time played a role.

No position as such is representative of Barth's homiletics. Characteristic is, rather, the inner self-dialogue that Barth conducted, deliberating intensely over these two questions "What should preachers? What can they?" and answering them differently again and again. This is what good theology should look like: never stopping thinking, always staying curious, self-critical and principally open to new ideas.

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