



THE PRINCETON SEMINARY BULLETIN

VOLUME 32

NEW SERIES 2015

ISSN 1937-8386

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Homiletical Implications of Barth's Doctrine of Election

William H. Willimon

Dr. William H. Willimon is Professor of the Practice of Ministry at Duke Divinity School. He delivered the Donald Macleod/Short Hills Community Congregational Church Preaching Lectures on October 27–28, 2014. This article is excerpted from William H. Willimon, How Odd of God: Karl Barth's Doctrine of Election for Preachers (Westminster John Knox Press, 2015) and appears here by permission of the author.

Preaching's great challenge came into focus for me during a rereading of Barth's doctrine of election. Barth's fourth volume (II/2) has been called by his student, Eberhard Busch, "the highlight of the *Church Dogmatics*."¹ Writing during 1940–1941, the apex of Hitler's power, when the sky turned dark, "Barth believed that all our comfort and all our defiance depends on our understanding anew that ... God bound himself to [humanity], and specifically to sinful [humanity].... God determines himself free for fellowship with this [humanity] and thereby determines [humanity] to be in fellowship with him and with all whom [God] loves."² Barth could have spoken judgment and condemnation of Hitler; he chose instead not to mention Hitler and to speak with unreserved affirmation of the gracious divine determination radiantly revealed in Christ.

God's election of grace is "the sum of Gospel.... [It is] the whole of the Gospel, the Gospel *in nuce* ... the very essence of all good news."³ All we preachers know for sure about God is that in Jesus Christ God is the one who has eternally determined to be for us *and* has elected us to be for God.

The knowledge of God's gracious election has significant implications for preachers:

1. God is the primary agent of preaching.

Election characterizes the work of an interventionist, active, initiating God. Our relationship with God is based upon God's gracious choice to be for us and to speak with us through sermons of preachers. God's eternal decision to elect is not only revelation's substance but also its agent.

Preaching is not established by method or rhetorical technique but by the grace

1 Eberhard Busch, *Barth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 17. Election is at the heart of Barth's "revolution" as Bruce McCormack (our best interpreter of Barth on election) puts it. Bruce McCormack, "Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology," in John Webster, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 93–97. "I am confident that the greatest contribution of Karl Barth to the development of Church doctrine will be located in his doctrine of election." Through his surprising reworking of election, Barth brought about "a revolution in the doctrine of God" (*ibid.*, 223).

2 Busch, *Barth*, 17.

3 *Ibid.*, 13–14.

and mercy of God. Homiletical obsession with rhetoric appears to be waning; the best recent books on preaching are unashamedly theological. Interesting sermons begin in the conviction that God is revealed to be other than we expected. God is Emmanuel, God reiterating God's eternal, gracious choice to be for us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our proclamation is driven, not by our desire to be heard, but rather by God's determination—testified throughout Scripture and fully revealed in Jesus Christ—to be God With Us.

Praise characterizes much of Christian worship because the Christian life is responsive to something good that God has done. One need not be able to report having had the experience of election to be elected. Pietism and liberalism find it tough to beat the rap that their theology is merely a subjective claim about us and only secondarily a claim about God. Election is so against our natural inclination that it is unlikely we could have thought it up ourselves.

Moralism, the bane of homiletics in my church family, is defeated by election as God's act to which we make little contribution. When the gospel is reduced to something that we must think, feel, believe, or do, the gospel is warped beyond recognition. Election is a constant reminder to us preachers that we preach not in order to take our listeners somewhere they aren't but to announce where, by God's gracious election, they are and shall be.

2. Our listeners have been graciously elected by God to be for God.

After Judas, we preachers ought never to be surprised that some obstinately refuse to listen or that others startlingly hear. It's easier to believe in our own election than to believe in that of others. Therefore a great challenge of ministry is indefatigably to believe that those to whom we speak are those whom God has elected to hear. They are not whom *I* would have called to be the Body of Christ were I doing the calling. They are God's idea of a fit kingdom, not mine. Part of the challenge of loving God is to love those whom God loves.

However, a joy of the preaching life is delight when someone hears, someone who, by all accounts, should not. It's then that we experience anew election, the inscrutable mystery of God's gracious choice, and exclaim with our ecclesiastical ancestors, "Has God's salvation gone even to the Gentiles?" (Acts 28:28). To be honest, it is frustrating when an untrained layperson is elected for some stunning insight that God has not given me, the preacher who thinks I ought to be the custodian of theological discernment!

Our listeners are a mixed bag, some of whom know the truth that, "God so loved the world that God gave ..." (John 3:16), and others continue to assume that the contest between them and God continues. If God the Father must sacrifice God the Son or make life unpleasant for us preachers through the prodding of God the Holy Spirit, God *will* be their God and they *will* be God's people, because God is determined to get back what by rights belongs to God. Let preachers pray for the courage to take our congregations'

rejection less seriously than we take God's embrace of them in Jesus Christ. Their hostility to the truth who is Jesus Christ is no serious contender.

We preachers often complain that our hearers aren't sincerely listening, or that they are biblically illiterate, or theologically malformed. All of this is true, of course. However, such disparagement of our congregations is beside the point in light of the doctrine that by the sheer grace of God *they are elected*: "Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom 5:6), not for those who are biblically informed and spiritually astute. Thus election disciplines our preaching to rejoice in what God has done and is doing rather than bemoan the inability and ineptitude of our congregations.

By implication, if people do not hear, it may be because God has not (yet) gotten to them or (yet) given them grace to hear. Barth taught that the only difference between the Christian and the non-Christian was noetic. If we believe, it's grace, gift. We have received the news. When faced with rejection, we preachers will want to resist the temptation to lapse into apologetics—taking disbelief too seriously. We cannot manufacture more palatable revelation for those who have not (yet) received the real thing.

Rather than acting as if disbelief is decisive and conclusive, we will want to talk more of God's gracious election than of the disbeliever's rejection, humbly, patiently, expectantly to testify; convincing and converting them is God's self-assignment.

Election is a tremendous shove toward truly evangelical preaching. The sweeping scope of God's election could rescue evangelicals from the suffocating clutches of our culture's subjectivity and conditional salvation. Mark Galli, chiding fellow evangelicals for dismissing Barth because of his alleged "universalism," speaks of the evangelical joy arising from Barth's thought on election:

Jeff McSwain was a Young Life leader for years before being forced to resign because of his Barthian views. But he remains in youth ministry, and continues to preach the gospel of God's universal redemption and the need for a response of repentance and faith.

McSwain began rethinking his approach to ministry as a result of wrestling with the views of Arminians and Five-Point Calvinists.... For Calvinists, to say that it is our *faith* that makes Christ's death effectual is to say that salvation rests on our shoulders. It also smacks of relativism: Salvation is not true until we believe it.

McSwain argues that like Arminians, Barthians believe that Jesus loves everyone he created and that he died on the cross for everyone. Like Calvinists, he says Barthians believe that the atoning work of Christ actually accomplished reconciliation and forgiveness for everyone for whom Christ died. He concludes:

Instead of dismissing Barth, it would behoove evangelicals to consider the possibility that Barth's theology is the most evangelical of all.... With a dynamic theology of the Holy Spirit to go along with his robust theology of the cross, Barth knifes through the Gordian Knot of Arminianism and five-point Calvinism, and encourages evangelists to consider a

third way, a way of making bold and inclusive claims upon the life of every hearer....⁴

3. Talk about the gospel tends to produce conflict.

We preachers like to think of ourselves as reconcilers and peacemakers. Many of our sermons seem designed to lessen the tension that is produced when a biblical text is dropped upon a defensive congregation. Even to stand and say, after an outrageous text has been read, "I have three things I want to say about today's text," is to risk defusing the explosive encounter between God's chosen people and God's chosen word.

Too bad for our self-image as peacemakers; we must preach Jesus Christ and him crucified. The good news of God's gracious election is bad news for our cherished idolatries and self-deceptive ideals. God is not a dim, distant, unknowable, alien force hiding in heaven.⁵ God is a Jew from Nazareth who was tortured to death by a consortium of government and religious leaders, rejected by those whom he came to save, and then went right back to them.

Pastoral care for the congregation through our preaching is not enough. Faithful proclamation can never be merely parochial because God isn't. Christian speech is public heralding rather than insider conversation, missional rather than congregational. Any congregation that is merely a warm-hearted group of caring friends who is not actively, daringly crossing cultural, racial, ideological, national boundaries (mission) is not faithful. Thus Newbigin speaks of the congregation as the "hermeneutic of the gospel," God's means of interpreting to the world the visible, public truth of what the world looks like when the Lamb rules. The congregation is God's self-presentation.⁶ Pastors cannot hunker down with the few faithful handed to us by hard working pastors of a previous generation, those sweet older saints who have enough free time to hang out at church; election is inducement to mission.

My theory is that there is much conflict and quarreling in many congregations because they talk only to themselves. Boredom (and an uneasy sense that church is meant to be more than this cozy club) fosters congregational contentiousness. The conflict that validates a church as Christ's is not that of squabbling, miffed church members but the conflict between Christ and the world.

A church that is not restlessly probing the boundaries between insiders and outsiders, not regularly surprised by the expansive reach of God's saving actions is a church trying to be the elect of God without living the truth of election. God elects the church for the

4 Mark Galli, *Karl Barth: An Introductory Biography for Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

5 Barth states: "We may believe that God can and must only be absolute in contrast to all that is relative, exalted in contrast to all that is lowly, active in contrast to all suffering, inviolable in contrast to all temptation, transcendent in contrast to all immanence.... But such beliefs are shown to be quite untenable, and corrupt and pagan by the fact that God does in fact be and do this in Jesus Christ" (CD IV/1, 186).

6 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1953).

purpose of embodying God's gracious intent beyond the bounds of the church. Others may be enemies of our country or adversaries of the American way of life, but God is not their enemy.

To criminals imprisoned in the Basel jail, Barth preached that the first Christian community was composed on Golgotha:

"They crucified him with the criminals." Which is more amazing, to find Jesus in such bad company, or to find the criminals in such good company? ... Like Jesus, these two criminals had been arrested ... , locked up and sentenced.... And now they hang on their crosses with him and find themselves in solidarity and fellowship with him. They are linked in a common bondage never again to be broken ... a point of no return for them as for him. There remained only the shameful, pain stricken present and the future of their approaching death....

They crucified him with the criminals.... This was the first Christian fellowship, ... To live by this promise is to be a Christian community. The two criminals were the first certain Christian community.⁷

Criminals hanging out with Jesus are the new normal, the first church. God has called us together into a new family that cannot live except as a growing family.

Barth tells Christians that conflict comes with the territory; we cannot avoid the disturbance by "retreat into an island of inwardness."⁸ Better that there be conflict in the congregation because it has been abruptly confronted with truth than for conflict to be in the preacher who is desperate to speak about Jesus without anyone discomforted. The "general religious self-consciousness" alleged by Schleiermacher's apologetics (beware, contemporary "spirituality"⁹) fails to do justice to the contradictions (and conflict) between Christian and worldly thought. Christian preaching is "the aggressor."¹⁰

4. Faithful preachers trust the God who has called us to preach.

"Is there any word from the Lord?" (Jeremiah 37:17) is the only good Sunday morning question, a question that is asked in trust that God speaks. Too much of contemporary preaching is anthropological, homespun wisdom for a purpose-driven life, common sense offered as if it were expert advice. Joel Osteen habitually ends many of his sentences with, "Right?" or "Okay?" thus signifying the hearer's verdict as the final judge on the veracity of his sermons.

The odd doctrine of election is just one of the ways God helps the church not to disappear into the world. Pelagianism comes naturally; we have an innate propensity to try to effect our own salvation. In all its forms, Pelagianism is fed by anxiety about God.

7 Karl Barth, *Deliverance to the Captives* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 76–77.

8 *Ibid.*, 616.

9 The oddity of divine election means that preachers "cannot translate the truth and reality of the divine command into a necessary element of [humanity's] spiritual life" (*ibid.*, 522).

10 *Ibid.*, 521.

An anxious church morphs into a poorly funded welfare agency, a gregarious club to remedy American loneliness, a handmaid for politicians of the right or the left rather than stick to its primary vocation—to be a people who show God’s decision to be God for us and for us to be for God.

To preachers who rely on their subjective experiences rather than attaching themselves to the objectivity of revelation, Barth said, “Against boredom the only defense is ... being biblical.”¹¹ Scripture stokes, funds, and fuels our imaginations with thoughts we could not have come up with on our own. “For what we preach is not ourselves, but the Jesus Christ as Lord” (2 Corinthians 4:5).

5. Our challenge, as preachers, is not to be true to ourselves, but true to the Elector, Jesus Christ.

News is not self-generated. Even as the Reformers used predestination as a bulwark against human contribution to our salvation, so Barth’s take on election is a wonderfully objective corrective to our rampant subjectivity.

Though we preachers naturally bring presuppositions to our reading of Scripture, the text also brings something to us, resists easy accommodation, and refuses to be completely malleable. In preparing to preach, the text unmasks us, stands against us, comes to us, and embraces us when we think we are simply reading inert words on a page. We have the joy of being able to deliver an odd word we did not come up with ourselves to congregations who did not ask for this message. Thus, the objectivity of the biblical text becomes an everyday demonstration of the objective reality of the election of God.

Philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt notes the way we moved, in public discourse, from concern for “correctness” to a demand for “sincerity.” We no longer demand that speakers accurately represent the truth of our world; we ask them candidly to present themselves. Don’t talk facts, talk about you, revelation restricted to self-revelation.

Frankfurt says it is “preposterous” to believe that you know more truth about you than truth of the world. Nothing supports “the extraordinary judgment that it is the truth about himself that is the easiest for a person to know.”¹² The truth about ourselves is elusive, “sincerity is bullshit.”

I am concerned that when many young adults say they value a preacher’s “authenticity” (sincerity), self-revelation trumps orthodox teaching, correct doctrine, or biblical fidelity. The sermon becomes a report on the preacher’s interiority, an autobiographical exposé delivered while fighting back tears.

In an article on preaching, Paul Tillich called for heartfelt expression of things

11 Karl Barth, *Homiletics* (trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 80.

12 Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 64–67.

“transcendent” and “unconditional” in the pulpit. Barth responded that to think of preaching this way “can end only with its dissolution” and that “[p]roclamation as self-exposition must in the long run turn out to be a superfluous and impossible undertaking.”¹³

The church is better served not by “sharing what’s on your heart,” or attempting to be “authentic” but rather by preachers praying for the courage to preach what we have heard God, through the Scriptures, tell us to preach, letting the chips fall where they may.¹⁴

Sin, on the other hand, “great or small, conscious or unconscious, flagrant or refined, consists in the fact that we don’t believe, that we ignore in practice where we have our origin and what God has done in us and for us.”¹⁵ While unbelief is serious and sinful, because of the objective reality of God, unbelief never attains a higher status than “impotent action.”¹⁶

“Conversion” (rarely mentioned by Barth) is discussed before he ends *CD II/2* as that movement whereby “we confirm and accept the fact that we are placed before the divine *fait accompli*.”¹⁷ Preachers find comfort in this “objectivity.” Knowing that we preach, not in hopeful expectation of some potentially saving act, we can preach in confidence of a decisive, accomplished work. We “preach not ourselves”; we preach Christ, what God has done and what God is doing and will do in Christ. As Kierkegaard said, the Truth who is Jesus Christ “does not arise in any human heart.”¹⁸

Change *missionary to preacher* in the passage below (in which Barth speaks of mission as arising from the peculiar truth who is Jesus Christ) and you will have a Barthian basis for proclamation:

The apostle of Jesus Christ not only can but must be a missionary.... It is not merely the formal necessity of proclaiming the Word of God, nor the humanitarian love which would rather not withhold this Word from others.... The determining factor is the concrete content of the Word itself. The truth ... about Jesus Christ and human life compels ... almost as if it were automatically to speak wherever it is not yet known. It is like air rushing into a vacuum, or water downhill, or fire to more fuel. [Human life] stands under the sign of God’s judgment. This is not just a religious opinion. It is a universal truth. It applies to all.... It leaps all frontiers. It is more urgent and binding than any human insight, however clear and

13 Barth, *CD I/1*, 64.

14 Barth says that the truth of the gospel is not dependent upon “whether we know and receive it or not.... The preaching of the Gospel can only proclaim and show that this is how things stand objectively ... that our existence as characterized and modified and established by the judgment of God can be lived only in faith” (*CD II/2*, 766).

15 *Ibid.*, 766.

16 *Ibid.*, 767.

17 *Ibid.*, 781.

18 Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* (trans. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 109.

compelling, or any convictions, however enthusiastically embraced. This truth is the driving power behind the Christian mission ...it bursts all barriers.¹⁹

6. Preachers need not worry much about being relevant to our listeners, but ought to concern ourselves with being true to the Elector, Jesus Christ.

Barth's theology was called "kerygmatic"—theology as restating, repeating, and proclaiming the gospel. Paul Tillich, in contrast, devised a "method of correlation" in which the message being proclaimed was shaped in response to the preacher's assessment of the existential situation of the listeners, correlating "the questions implied in the situation with the answers implied in the message. [Correlational preaching] does not derive the answers from the questions as a self-defying apologetic theology does. Nor does it elaborate answers without relating them to the questions as a self-defying kerygmatic [Barthian?] theology does. It correlates questions and answers, situations and message, human existence and divine manifestation."²⁰

Among the dangers of this "method of correlation" are exaggerated confidence in the theologian's ability to define the questions and the actual situation of human existence and the pitfall that the theologian allows the questions subtly to determine the answers, thereby controlling and limiting what is revealed in the "divine manifestation."

North American mainline preachers seem to feel that the "human situation" is plagued by anxiety, stress, and personal concern. Sermons are full of reassuring, comforting words whereby Jesus helps us find more "balance" and less "stress" in life. (In my experience, people with big mortgages and inadequate governance on their acquisitiveness always feel stress. Jesus Christ may be more interested in relieving their sin than in ameliorating their anxiety.)

How do the sermons that I preach correlate with and take their cues from the median age, income, and social location of the aging "cultured despisers" of faith in my congregation rather than from the message of Jesus Christ?

"That preachers pay attention to the needs, interests, situation, and capacity of the public is no guarantee that they are really addressing [people].... [The modern person] is arcane. Secret. Hidden. Sermons which should stir and edify and move ... will probably leave this [person] empty, cold and untouched. By the high-angle fire of the heavy artillery directed above the head of the public, to the more distant entrenched position, this [listener] is perhaps better served in truth than by the all-too jealous pounding of the forward trenches, which [modern people have] long since derisively evacuated."²¹ Having

19 Barth, *CD III/2*, 607.

20 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 8. See David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 112–19.

21 Karl Barth, *Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion* vol. I (ed. Hannelotte Reiffen, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 7.

been conditioned to conceive of *God* as “Arcane. Secret. Hidden,” Barth challenges us to think of God as fully revealed in Christ and of modern humanity as obscure, baffling, and slyly concealed.

Against the rage for “culturally sensitive preaching,” Barth says, “Christian preaching ... has met every culture, however supposedly rich and mature, with ultimate sharp skepticism.”²² The gospel need not be trimmed to the present cultural moment.

In 1933, as part of the Church Struggle, Barth founded a journal, *Theological Existence Today*,²³ for “preachers and teachers of the church” in which he defined “theological existence” as life bound to Scripture. In the church, “God is nowhere present for us, nowhere present in the world, nowhere present in our realm and in our time as in [God’s] word; that this word has no other name and content than Jesus Christ and that Jesus Christ [is] for us nowhere in the world to be found as new every day except in the holy scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.”²⁴

Barth says he began *CD* in reaction to the scandal of German preachers who had discovered “deep religious significance in the intoxication of Nordic blood and their political *Führer*.”²⁵ Preachers today throw our voices into a culture that is extensively militarized, incarcerated, and consumptive. We ought to be cautious of demands to tailor the gospel to the desires of our listeners. The gospel does more than speak to people’s felt needs; the gospel is often judgment upon and rearrangement of needs. Election by God gives us needs we would never have had if not for election—obediently to *testify*, to *witness*.

I have preached dozens of sermons when thousands of Americans are quietly deserting the church because they can hear worldly wisdom elsewhere. I preached in an age when our government pursued expensive, fruitless wars while defending the use of torture and deadly drones, with millions of Americans imprisoned and thousands of children shot to death in the streets around our churches and child refugees pursued and deported from our borders. Why did I not practice a more urgent “emergency homiletic”?

I have heard it said that the challenge is for pastors to “love your people.” A greater test (after all, my people pay my salary and look a great deal like me) is to love the truth about God in Jesus Christ.

Biblical narratives give scant attention to the historical, cultural, or geographical context where biblical characters are addressed. Why should we? The cultural context is the space in which we find ourselves addressed, but hypothesized context has less significance for our hearing than divine address.

22 Karl Barth, “Church and Culture,” in *Theology and Church* (trans. L. P. Smith; London: SCM, 1962), 339.

23 Karl Barth, “Theologische Existenz heute!” in *Theologische Existenz heute* vol. 1 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1933), 4–5.

24 Quoted in Dean G. Stroud, *Preaching in Hitler’s Shadow: Sermons of Resistance in the Third Reich* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 33.

25 Barth, *CD* I/1, xiv.

The current rage for “Contextual Theology” is suspect. “Theologizing from experience,” even from the illuminating experience of the poor and the oppressed, is not revelation. When even the great Calvin tried to talk about election on the basis of human standards of justice, the God revealed resembled “far too closely the electing, and more particularly the rejecting theologian!”²⁶ Election teaches that in whatever situation we find ourselves, culture is significant mainly as “the place of responsibility.”²⁷

7. Preaching is witnessing to the graciously electing God.

“It is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” (Matt 10:20). Bonhoeffer said there is only one preacher, Jesus Christ. The best we can hope in our sermons is that God may graciously use them. Early on, Barth noted a definite “one sidedness” in regard to God’s Word.²⁸ Any “control” is in God’s hands, not ours: “To have experience of God’s word is to yield to its supremacy.”²⁹ Sermon preparation is practice of the arts of submission, of taking God more seriously and ourselves (as well as our congregations) less so.

“Jesus Christ is the one and only Word of God.... He alone is the light of God and the revelation of God. [He] ... delimits all other words, lights, revelations, prophecies and apostolates, whether of the Bible, the Church or the world, ... biblical prophets and apostles are his servants, ambassadors and witnesses, so that even in their humanity the words spoken by them cannot fail to be words of great seriousness, profound comfort and supreme wisdom. And if the Church follows the biblical prophets and apostles, similar words are surely to be expected of it.”³⁰ “So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making [God’s] appeal through us” (2 Corinthians 5:20).

Witness is not judged by social utility; the only Judge is Christ. There is no need to translate the biblical text into abstract terms, such as we once saw in the theology and preaching of Tillich and Bultmann and now in “Power Point Preachers” who render the gospel into principles for better living, timeless ideals, and helpful hints for homemakers. Witnesses require election; God’s impersonating choice of certain words and phrases as God’s revelation.

The metaphors for God in Scripture are self-depictions by a relentlessly self-revealing agent who elects to speak to us in ways that draw us more closely to the Elector. Much of modern theology stresses the dissimilarity of our words for God from the divine referent; for Barth, biblically given words for God are reliable depictions of the God to whom they refer because God elects to use these metaphors as self-offering. “God’s true revelation comes to meet us by taking our human words and electing them to be revelation

26 Barth, *CD II/2*, 41.

27 Barth, *CD III/4*, 607.

28 Barth, *CD I/1*, 181.

29 *Ibid.*, 206.

30 Barth, *CD IV/3.1*, 97.

when we attach ourselves obediently to these words."³¹ Biblical preachers can preach confidently because in the Incarnation God took definite form, located, and became concretely accessible though Israel and Church in a way that genuinely, accurately describes God.³²

Just as we are bound to receive our salvation through Israel and the Church, so witnesses are bound to the metaphors God has selected for us. Paul says that he forsook the lofty, pretty language of imperial rhetoric and instead said only "Cross" to the Corinthians. What Paul was compelled to preach could be said in no less scandalous and offensive way than the way the crucified God took toward us. When Barth says God is Wholly Other, he means that God is wholly incomprehensible in any way unfit to the God who is in Jesus Christ. The only way to God is provided by God, through the scandalous means of bread, wine, water, and the pitiful words of preachers.

The search for a way to translate Christian good news into more acceptable, easier to hear speech dead ends with the preacher saying other than the gospel, oftentimes what the world can hear without the inconvenience of sitting through a sermon. We have not said "salvation" when we say "transformation," or "discipleship" when we say "purpose-driven life." There is no adequate human analogical relation between human words and the divine referent; witnesses can only point to the mystery, speak as Scripture speaks, and enjoy revelation when it is given. "Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me" (Luke 10:16). It's a miracle.

Our sermons can't be bolstered apart from the revelation they seek to articulate. Barth says that when preaching rests on God-given analogies, "It will then have something definite to say, and that with a good conscience, with the promise of relevance, i.e. of standing in a real relationship to the reality proclaimed by it, and with the justified claim and well grounded prospect of obtaining a hearing."³³

Our authority comes not from ourselves or even from our ordination by the church. We preach because of our odd, even embarrassing conviction that we have been elected by God to do so. Yet subservience to the Word can be liberating. When we encounter resistance, hostility, or zombie-like stares from our congregation, it is powerful freedom to know that our congregations are not the source of our authorization.

Election implies that, from the first, God has determined to be heard. As Kierkegaard said, "God did not assume the form of a servant to make a mockery of us," so it cannot be God's "intention to pass through the world in such a manner that no single human being becomes aware of [God's] presence."³⁴ Election gives confidence that God's word will not

31 Barth, *CD II/1*, 227.

32 See George Hunsinger, "Beyond Literalism and Expressivism: Karl Barth's Hermeneutical Realism," in *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 210–25.

33 *CD II/1*, 233.

34 Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* (trans. David Swenson; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 69.

return empty (Isaiah 55:11) and that our faith in God's faith in our preaching is not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:14).

8. God weaves even our sermons into God's elective work.

The significance of our sermons is out of our control. All we know is that our future is determined by God's eternal decision to be God for us and for us to be for God, forever. A sermon is a supremely contemporaneous form of communication, an event in the present that can never be redone or reclaimed, a fragile art that is either taken up by the Holy Spirit or else sinks into silent oblivion.

It's up to God either to make a sermon "work" in the power of the Holy Spirit, or the sermon is stillborn. "[Preaching's] sheer impossibility," says Barth, "will always remain, but it has now pleased God to present himself in and in spite of this human action."³⁵

Of course, our testimony to the truth who is Jesus Christ is partial, in process, incomplete, and sometimes wrong. We are sinners. And since the news we bear is not self-concocted but rather a gift, we never fully possess that of which we speak, nor are we fully possessed by it.

Barth's "herald" image, his notion that the sermon should be just a polished pane of glass through which we see Christ, is not quite right. The witness is no disinterested courier. The truth preached is personal and personified. We are under a commission that we did not seek. Thus we witness with a tense mix of self-confidence and self-negation.

Why am I ambivalent about the significance of my own preaching? I doubt my difficulty is due to my humility. More than likely I am reluctant to take responsibility for the power of God working in me, in spite of me. It is scary that my sermons do more than I intend, unnerving to know that while I can construct a sermon, I cannot control or delimit the disruptive fecundity of the Word. Homiletical failure is easier to manage than success.

To be singled out for a message, when the news is meant not only for everyone but also aimed at you, a word that is death-dealing, life-giving, out of control gospel, well, that odd vocation elicits joy in the preacher and sometimes wrath. God only knows what good it does.

Ah, but what a wonderful vocation.