

Immanence and Transcendence in Pastoral Care and Preaching

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When I consider the relation of pastoral care to preaching, my mind goes back to my earliest student days at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. In those years of the late 1950s and early 1960s, when James Lapsley and I were fellow students, the two dominant intellectual influences were the two Carls—one, Karl Barth, who spelled his name with a *K*, and the other, Carl Rogers, who spelled his name with a *C*. One was the towering Swiss theologian of the word, Karl Barth. The other was the American psychologist whose theory of client-centered and nondirective counseling was the single most powerful influence on mainline Protestant pastoral care and counseling from the 1950s to the 1970s and possibly even until today. It never occurred to us students during those days that either of them had anything in common. We totally overlooked the fact that they shared at least the same first name.

At the University of Chicago, the tension between these two figures was felt with particular sharpness. On our faculty at that time as Professor of New Testament was Markus Barth, the son of Karl Barth. At the same time, we also felt the considerable presence of Seward Hiltner, the single most important interpreter of Rogers' psychology to the American religious community. In addition, Hiltner was associated with the Counseling Center of the University of Chicago, which had been founded by Rogers himself. Rogers had left for Wisconsin before I arrived as a student, but his spiritual presence lingered. Almost all students who earned their Ph.D.'s in the field of religion and personality in those days did much of their clinical work in the counseling center that Rogers had founded.

Seward Hiltner and Markus Barth were perceived to present totally different religious worldviews. Markus represented his father to a fault. Hiltner's representation of his symbolic father, Carl Rogers, was more nuanced but still quite forceful. From the two Barths we heard a theology of the transcendent Word of God. It was a theology of proclamation and a theology that appealed to many of us when we thought of preaching. It was a theology which said that God revealed himself (and in this case, the male pronoun was always used) in the figure of Jesus and in Paul's theology of justification. Humans were totally and completely dependent upon the initiative of God—on God's action from the outside—or their salvation. It was completely a matter of God's justifying grace.

God for Barth could not be found in any of the anthropological realms where modernizing theologians and philosophers had tried to locate the Divine.¹ God could not be found in our feelings, as Schleiermacher had believed. God was not an implication or postulate of our moral consciousness, as the Kantians had argued. God was not a postulate or inference of our theoretical reason, as some Catholics and natural theologians had held. To say that God was discoverable in any of these realms was to

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suggest, according to Barth, that humans owned something and had control of something upon which they could stand and perhaps climb as they made their way to God. All such claims, according to Barth, were efforts on the part of humans to justify themselves rather than to submit to the complete justifying determinations of God as revealed through God's Word. In the drama of salvation, God was everything; humans were nothing. Because this was a theology of proclamation—the proclamation of the justifying Word of God—when we thought of preaching, many of us thought of Barth. To preach was to proclaim and to proclaim was to preach Barth, or at least his version of the gospel.

But these were very schizophrenic days. There was another side to our theological and ministerial psyches. This was the part formed by Hiltner and Rogers. For Hiltner, revelation was to be found in experience. Markus Barth could never understand Hiltner's fascination with the verbatim interview and clinical experience. When Hiltner replied that it was because they were sources of revelation, Markus, we were told, was speechless. For him, and for his father, this was locating God in an anthropological realm and the most disresponsible realm at that—the realm of subjective experience. In addition, Hiltner, as did Rogers, believed in the curative power of listening.² In the Rogersian view of counseling, one did not listen first in order to say something or proclaim something later. In the Rogersian method of counseling, listening was an end in itself.³ The counselor listened because it helped troubled persons listen to themselves. In listening to themselves, clients and parishioners came into contact with the curative powers that were within themselves.

It would not be fair to Hiltner to say that he associated God with the inner, recuperative, and self-actualizing powers of each person. But he came close to this. As a Whiteheadian, he believed that God placed before every actual entity's subjective aim the most relevant possibility for that entity's move toward completion. There is little doubt that Hiltner believed that there was a close association between a person's inner press toward self-actualization and the relevant possibility that God placed before that person. The spacial metaphors separating Hiltner from Markus Barth were clear and dramatic. When you were around Hiltner and thought of counseling and care, you looked inward, downward, or at least horizontally. When you were with Markus Barth and thought about preaching, you looked upward, outward, and beyond.

For most of us, proclamation and counseling were finally matters of either/or. They may have been similarly dichotomized for the entire generation of mainline ministers educated in the late 1950s and early 1960s. For many of us, it seemed impossible to bring these two worlds together. To care and counsel was to listen to the other person, remove your own witness, and indeed protect the counselee from the external pressures of the transcendent gospel. To preach was to open others to that pressure, to proclaim a message that transcended all aspects of human experience, a message that robbed our hearers of any place to stand and that totally determined them from without.

The controversies between Seward Hiltner and Markus Barth were more than polite discussions. Thunderous rumbles sounded forth from the committee rooms and conference tables of the Divinity School during those years. You will not be surprised to hear from those of us who knew Hiltner that he did not only listen and that Barth did not only proclaim.

Mediating Models: Thurneysen and Oden

However, within a few years, models for bridging these two worlds began to appear. The first was from Eduard Thurneysen.⁴ Thurneysen was a Barthian who brought the Barthian theology of proclamation directly into the sphere of pastoral care. Pastoral care, for Thurneysen, was primarily a matter of deepening a troubled Christian's sense of justification. For Thurneysen, behind all human problems was the sin of self-justification. The source of all human spiritual difficulties was the drive to earn one's own salvation, one's own justification—either before other humans, before oneself, or before God. Care and counseling was a relentless process of pronouncing, yes, proclaiming in the intimacy of a caring relationship, that all justification comes from God and must be received in faith. In Thurneysen's formulation, the dichotomy between inner and outer, immanence and transcendence, became more of a dialectic. God's justifying grace came totally from the outside. Rather than hurled like bolts of lightning from some elevated pulpit, however, it was now gently and persistently communicated within the confines of an intimate conversation.

I must admit that at times we questioned whether his theory of counseling was psychologically sound. Those of us with training in psychotherapy knew how a loss of sense of self-worth was central to so many human problems. We knew that such a loss led to a variety of self-justifying measures. We began to wonder whether there was a link between a Barthian theology of proclamation and the requirements of care and counseling. Maybe a persistent and quiet witness to God's justifying grace was precisely what so many people needed who were destroying themselves with their self-justifying maneuvers. If it is true that we know ourselves as we are known by others, maybe a Barthian perspective on pastoral care and counseling, as Thurneysen represented it, was just what was needed. If this were true, the earlier perceived tension between pastoral care and proclamation, some thought, may have been an illusion and a false dichotomy.

Barth, it seemed for a moment, may have been right about both pastoral care and preaching. In both places, we proclaim the justifying grace of God against all efforts at self-justification. In preaching, we do it publicly from the pulpit; in pastoral care, we do it gently but persistently in the intimacy of the one-to-one or small group conversation. In both places the flow is from outside to inside, from the minister's witness to the justifying determinations of God downward to the inner restructuring of a person's selfhood.

Thurneysen's perspective was soon reinforced by the creative early writing of Thomas Oden.⁵ Oden turned the Barth-Rogers discussion upside down. But in doing so, he made Barth, not Rogers, the victor. Oden tented a hidden ontological assumption in the Rogersian perspective. He noticed, quite correctly, that Rogers believed that the counselor's active listening to the client was a way of communicating respect to the client. But the word *respect* was actually too weak for what Rogers had in mind. In his early work, he used the word *acceptance* instead of the tamer word *respect*.⁶ In his later work, he coined the exotic terms *unconditional positive regard and prizing* to communicate what he thought careful and consistent listening conveyed to clients.⁷ Good, careful, and constant listening to all of a person's feelings and verbal communications conveyed, Rogers thought, a sense that the troubled person was a being of unconditional worth and value.

Oden detected a hidden ontological assumption in this therapeutic attitude for

which secular psychology itself could not account. If the counselor was to convey an attitude of unconditional positive regard to the client, Oden believed that the counselor had to assume that the client was indeed of unconditional value, not only to the counselor, but to something beyond both client and counselor. Oden held that the secular counselor's belief in the worth of the client assumed an ultimate structure or framework of valuations structure that Oden believed only God could provide.

Hence, Oden believed that the Barthian view of God as *Deus pro Nobis* (God for us) provided an explicit clarification of what the Rogersian counselor assumed but could not explicitly articulate. The reason the counselor could assume the unconditional worth of the client was because God in God's *being for us* (*Deus pro Nobis*) had already assigned to all humans this worth.⁸ The counseling process, to Oden, was a long and protracted implementation of this ontologically grounded attitude into the psyche and the experiencing of the client, thereby overcoming the client's own idolatrous conditions of worth—the client's own efforts to justify herself or himself.

Once again, as in the case with Thurneysen, counseling needed Barth and proclamation more than the reverse. The accent was still, as it was for Thurneysen, from the outside in and from above to below. Counseling could indeed free the troubled person, but it was a freedom that was bestowed from the outside and from above. Counseling was a form of proclamation just like preaching. In preaching, the minister declared the gospel of *Deus pro Nobis* explicitly and intentionally. In care and counseling, ministers witnessed to the same message implicitly in their attitudes and in the quality of their relations.

Those readers who know something of this story will remember that Oden and I hit on much the same insight at about the same time—he from a Barthian perspective and I from a process theology and Hartshornian perspective.⁹ Oden believed it required the explicit revelation of God in Jesus Christ to make manifest the hidden assumption behind the basic attitudes of all good counselors. I argued that, in addition, the reality of God's attitude toward humans could be sensed in the thickness of our ongoing experience.

Oden and I knew that behind both Barth and Hartshorne was Anselm and his formulation of the ontological argument for God. Both Barth and Hartshorne held that our particular, concrete judgments about the good and the true are surrounded by larger assumptions about the really good and the truly true. We were both, in different ways, trying to unpack the larger assumptive world implicit in secular formulations of the counseling process. We were both certain that the assumptions that animate the secular psychotherapeutic process do not stand on secular foundations, and we were trying to determine what they in reality did stand on. Neither of us, at that time, investigated more hermeneutical models for uncovering those deeper assumptions undergirding both secular and religious counseling. This is a resource more available today and one to which I will now turn.

Hermeneutics Versus Realism in Religious Epistemology

Barth was an epistemological realist. By this I mean he believed that we humans know something when our minds are completely conformed to the object we are trying to grasp. This is the way we know things in the finite world, he thought, and it is also the way we know God. God is known when our minds are conformed to God's determination of us. To know God is, in many ways, to get rid of ourselves and denude

ourselves of the constructs, hopes, aspirations, and distortions we bring to the rest of experience. Preaching witnesses to God's determination of us. In preaching, ministers should remove their own wants, hopes, and aspirations from the process of proclamation. In hearing the gospel, the listener should do the same.

A Barthian view of care implied the same thing. If Oden and Thurneysen were right, the emphasis in care was so much on God's justifying love coming from the outside it seemed at times that the counselee's experience and selfhood brought only distortion and self-justification and never strengths. Epistemological realism stood behind both a Barthian view of preaching and a Barthian view of care. Solving the split between care and preaching with the Barthian realism of Thurneysen and Oden seemed attractive for a time but soon grew problematic, as James Lapsley pointed out to me in both written and spoken communications.

It took years for some of us to realize that the problem lay with the inadequate epistemologies on both sides—the side of Rogers and the side of Barth. If Barth was an epistemological realist, Rogers was a radical epistemological constructivist; meaning for him came from shaping the world to fit needs and tendencies that come from within. It gradually dawned on some of us that neither epistemology was adequate. We could not be epistemological realists while preaching and radical constructivists while counseling. Nor should we reduce care and counseling to the epistemological realism of Barth. Finally, we certainly should not reduce preaching the gospel to the radical constructivism of Rogers.

Understanding and the Hermeneutical Model

The differences between Rogers and Barth were not just that one was a humanist and the other a Christian. There was that difference, but there was something more. The difference was in their general epistemology—their general theory of understanding. Rogers's constructivism made him more Platonic; knowing the truth was a matter of looking inward and bringing what was inside outward and into the center of the personality. Barth was more like the naive realism of Descartes or Locke; knowing was like constellating the tabula rasa of our consciousness with the impressions of the outside world.

Gradually, another model of understanding began to gain the attention of scholars in a number of fields. It was called a hermeneutic model of knowing or understanding. It had implications for how people go about understanding the Christian gospel. It had implications for how understanding and transformation take place in all forms of care and counseling, including Christian care and counseling. Although several of us saw the potential of this model of understanding in both theology and care, Charles Gerkin saw its potential in counseling more profoundly than most.¹⁰

The word *hermeneutics* is a frightening word. It seems to be an un-American word—foreign to our intellectual traditions and familiar terminologies. In many ways it is foreign. It is a word used in European intellectual circles more than it is used in the United States, although we have our own rich American traditions of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is the theory of how humans come to understand or interpret the gesture, words, and meanings of other humans, especially when these words and gestures are written in texts. More specifically, it has to do with how we understand human gestures and words in contrast to comprehending things and objects in the natural world.

In recent decades, thanks to the work of Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer,

Paul Ricoeur, and many others, this process of understanding has more and more been seen as a kind of dialogue or conversation.¹¹ The words *dialogue and conversation* most likely make us feel much more comfortable than does the word *hermeneutics*. The theory of understanding—the theory of hermeneutics that I am describing—makes the simple yet very profound point that all attempts to understand another human communication are like having a conversation. It is possible to go another step and say that reading a biblical text is like having a conversation. One can go further and say that counseling and caring for another person is like having a conversation. If I say, “Preaching is like having a conversation,” the reader may respond, “Certainly not, at least not when my minister preaches—it is anything but a conversation. It is more like a monologue.” In spite of your initial incredulity, I think that I can make my point. When they are done well, all of these examples are like conversations even though they are slightly different kinds of conversations.

To understand a human message, spoken or written, is to have a conversation. Because this is true, when understanding is profound and honest it leads to transformation. According to Heidegger and Gadamer, understanding a human communication is not like holding a scientific experiment or making an empirical observation. That is the most common misconception of understanding that Gadamer would have us set aside. Furthermore, understanding is not a long and extended act of empathy, like Dilthey thought it was in historical understanding and, indeed, Carl Rogers thought it was in counseling. It is not, as they believed, just a matter of getting as far as possible into the meanings and feelings of another person and removing, as nearly as possible, our own meanings and feelings. Rather, in contrast to these models, understanding another is like having a conversation.

According to Gadamer, good conversations have the following elements. First, people who converse are located in particular social and historical locations. They have particular concerns and unique experiences and questions. They bring these situated experiences and questions into the conversation. Second, people in conversations generally share something in common; it may be their common humanity, but it is also likely to be some shared historical experience to which they both can make reference. Third, conversations have a give-and-take quality to them; they are in this respect almost like play. Fourth, people in conversations also have to listen to the other in openness and be willing to take the risk that the other may have something important—possibly even transforming—to say. Being open to this transformation does not mean we suppress our own experiences, questions, and concerns. In fact, it is likely that the truth the other speaks will be understood as meaningful, real, relevant, and indeed revelatory only in light of our concerns and questions.

Gadamer uses this analogy of the conversation to describe what it means to understand a classic text, be it a philosophical text or a religious text such as those that contain the gospel message. Interpreting these texts is also like a conversation. It is a very practical conversation, as all genuine conversation really is. It is a conversation in which a concern for practical application dominates the conversation from the beginning. When we attempt to understand our Christian texts, we must be open to the practical concerns that bring us to the texts, and we must be willing repeatedly and seriously to take the risk of letting the text address these concerns. Understanding these texts is always a fusion between the questions we bring and the manifestations of truth in these texts that address our questions.

Both preaching and pastoral care are conversations with all of these features, but the mix of these elements in the two classes of acts is different. In addition, preaching and care in a Christian context always entail a third element—indeed, a third party. This third party is Jesus the Christ, who is thought to be most decisively revealed in a text that we call the New Testament, but who is also thought to be alive as Spirit in the life of the church.

So what does this model of understanding as conversation have to say about preaching? How can preaching be thought to be a conversation when in almost all cases it is done by a single person talking to a congregation? First, let me remind the reader that when I use the word *conversation*, I mean a hermeneutically conceived conversation in the strict sense that I have just proposed. In this sense, preaching is at least three conversations. First, it is a conversation that the minister conducts between the congregation and the text that is being preached. Second, it is a conversation between the preacher and the text. And third, it is a conversation between the preacher and the congregation. I am assuming that insofar as the sermon is a Christian sermon, the text in some way witnesses to the meaning of Jesus the Christ.

The first conversation is the preacher's principal task. To conduct this conversation, the minister must perform a twofold act of representation. The minister must represent the deepest, most human, and most pervasive concerns and questions of the congregation. At the same time, the preacher must attempt to represent the most authentic and most truthful response that the text makes to those questions. Here is the first point of intersection between preaching and counseling. To represent the questions of the congregation, the minister must be deeply involved with the life of the congregation and the individuals who make up this life. A ministry of care and counseling facilitates this involvement. In most good sermons, after the subject of the sermon is stated and the general direction of the sermon is announced, the minister attempts a careful description of the life experiences of the congregation and the wider society that have gone into the formulation of the question the sermon addresses. If this description of the question is not rich, nuanced, and differentiated, if the individuals in the congregation do not in some way recognize themselves in this description, the preacher probably will never carry them to the text, let alone help them to hear it. Yet I am amazed at how many sermons never describe the human experience behind the question.

I equally am amazed at how many sermons never get beyond that question, never really return to the text, never really listen to it, and never really take the risk of hearing from the text a Word that will transform. After the question is described in all its richness, the Barthian moment of the sermon begins. The otherness of the text must be allowed to shine forth. This otherness of the text must be permitted to go as far as it will—even so far as to reveal the inadequacies of the very question that was first posed to the text. For this exposure to be effective and to be heard, it must be aimed at the original question—the question that these people, this congregation, originally asked. Even to recognize that the question asked was the wrong question, the congregation must recognize it as *their* original question.

The sermon as conversation should be conceived also as a conversation between the minister's own questions and the text and, finally, a conversation between the preacher and the congregation. The individuality of the preacher can come forth only after the representative nature of the sermon has been duly satisfied. Here the

minister's experiences and questions can emerge as a variation of the experiences that the congregation recognizes. The minister's response to the text becomes a possible illustration of a response that the congregation may have as well.

Finally, in really great sermons, the conversation between question and text is a critical conversation. Not all sermons achieve this, and not all preachers have the skill to do this honestly and openly. In hermeneutic theory, there is a debate between those who see understanding as primarily a fusion between the question and the response of the text and those who believe that the response of the text should in some way be tested and further defended.¹² Sermons are not systematic theological treatises; but some great sermons, after staging the initial encounter between question and response, permit new questions, new doubts, and genuine skepticisms to come back into play. A critical conversation emerges. The scriptural text does not get the last word so easily. A struggle ensues. Additional appeals are brought into play—appeals from experience, from reason, from other parts of the tradition. Although definitive closure may not be achieved, good reasons are further advanced that support the plausibility and truth of the scriptural response. Such a sermon goes beyond the constructivism of Rogers but still attends to the experience of the congregation in forming the question. Such a sermon tempers the epistemological realism of Barth, acknowledging that the meaning of the gospel is only a meaning in light of the questions and human experiences that are brought to it.

Care and Counseling

Pastoral care and pastoral counseling are conversations as well, but the various components of the conversation are weighted differently than in preaching. Here, too, the conversation is a three-way conversation between text, counselor, and the troubled person. In all forms of care and in more structured counseling, however, concern with the questions and experiences of the troubled person are of even deeper interest. The preacher describes the questions of a congregation, the questions of the larger society, or the general questions of human existence. The counselor and caregiver, on the other hand, try to describe the questions and experiences of this concrete person. Not only does the counselor describe this person, but the counselor tries to communicate this understanding back to the troubled person.

Increasingly, pastoral counselors use two interpretive perspectives to understand the experience of a person. One is a genetic perspective that uses psychological developmental categories to see experience in terms of its origins and developmental history. Insofar as the caregiver is a Christian, the other more dominant interpretive perspective is the Christian message itself and what it reveals about the past and present as well as for the possible future of the person.

Most counseling theory concentrates so much on hearing the questions the troubled person is asking that it fails adequately to attend to the pastoral responses that make care a conversation. The reverse, as we saw, is true of preaching. Sometimes preaching so concentrates on the response of the gospel that we cannot discern the question that makes it a conversation.

In counseling and care, the person of the counselor plays a slightly different role than in preaching. In preaching, the preacher tries mostly to stand aside and conduct a genuine confrontation between congregation and text. In counseling and care, the actual person of the counselor plays a greater role as a metaphorical representative of

the Christian texts. The texts themselves may or may not play a direct role in counseling and care. This depends on the troubled person, the context of care, and the permissions that both troubled person and institutional context give for the introduction of the scriptural text. Whether the text is present or absent, the person of the counselor must be a metaphor of the gospel message disclosed in the text. The interaction between counselor and troubled person is still very much a conversation between the questions and the old answers of the troubled person and the answers and new questions disclosed by the gospel, sometimes through the person of the counselor as metaphor. Now the gospel must be embodied in the attitudes of constancy, affirmation, acceptance, forgiveness, and grace reflected, and yet never fully captured, in the person of the counselor.

The counselor is not Christ, but a metaphor for Christ. I use the word *metaphor* because even more than symbol, it communicates the broken and fragmented way in which the pastoral counselor represents the love of God in Christ, for there are many ways in which Christian counselors are broken themselves. For this reason, their own love, acceptance, and constancy are flawed. The genius of Christian counselors is their capacity to communicate a love, constancy, and acceptance that is not their own. Their love and constancy assumes a text, a story, and a structure of meaning that transcends and yet grounds their own love and constancy. Because in Christian care the person of the caregiver is simultaneously so important yet so limited, the conversation in this context must be allowed to have a critical moment. Doubts must be allowed to surface. Rebuttals from the client must be heard. Negativities and new questions must be allowed to express themselves. The finitude and brokenness of the counselor must be acknowledged. The explicit or implicit witnesses of the gospel must be permitted to be tested. The subtle testimonies of reason and experience must be allowed into play. If the truth of the gospel is to prevail, all enemies to it must be allowed to register their complaints, even in the counseling relationship.

The constructivism of Rogers and the realism of Barth are both transcended. The experiences and questions of the client are permitted into the conversation, but they do not produce their own answers in the way Rogers envisioned. The answers of the gospel are permitted to come forth, but never quite in the monological way Barth envisioned. In the end, in many ways every preacher is, in the act of preaching, a counselor just as is every Christian counselor a witness and proclaimer of the gospel.

Notes

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, pt. 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936).

² Seward Hiltner *Pastoral Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1959), 28-33.

³ Carl Rogers, *Counseling and Psychotherapy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1942); and *Client-Centered Therapy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1951).

⁴ Eduard Thurneysen, *A Theology of Pastoral Care*, trans. Jack A. Worthington and Thomas Weiser (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1962).

⁵ Thomas Oden, *Kerygma and Counseling* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966); and *Contemporary Theology and Psychotherapy* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967).

⁶ Rogers, *Counseling and Psychotherapy*, 113.

⁷ Carl Rogers, "A Theory of Therapy, Personality, and Interpersonal Relationships," in *Psychology: A Study of a Science*, vol. 3, ed. Sigmund Koch (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), 196-230.

⁸ Oden, *Kerygma and Counseling*, 115-45.

⁹ See the similarities and differences between Oden's *Kerygma and Counseling* and my *Atonement and*

Psychotherapy (Philadelphia Westminster Press, 1966)

¹⁰ Charles V. Gerkin, *The Living Human Document: Revisioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode* (Nashville Abingdon Press, 1984)

¹¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (London SCM Press, 1962), Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York Crossroad, 1982), Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 1981)

¹² For a revised correlational (sometimes called “critical” correlational model of hermeneutics), see David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (Minneapolis Seabury Press, 1975) and my *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis Fortress Press, 1991)