

One New Book for the Preacher

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William H. Willimon, *Conversations with Barth on Preaching*. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2006. 324 pages.

William Willimon, formerly Dean of Duke University Chapel, now Bishop of the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church, offers us the fruit of his forty year engagement with the theology of Karl Barth. His aim is “to put Barth in conversation with contemporary homiletics in a ministry of encouragement and empowerment for today’s preachers” (p. 1).

For the book, Willimon has reread Barth’s theology, particularly *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, from the theologian’s 1924 lectures, three years after Barth moved from more than a decade in pastoral ministry to teaching theology. In addition he has done extensive research in the Karl Barth Archive in Basel and translated “scores of sermons.” This book includes extensive small-type notes, a copy of Barth’s own practice. Some of the material in these notes has apparently come from his teaching undergraduates and divinity students, including teaching German students at the Universities of Bonn and Münster, two universities where Barth himself taught. These notes also include considerable dialogue with contemporary writers on homiletics and on secondary literature on Barth. Willimon offers preachers a serious and helpful presentation of Barth’s theology.

After the first chapter on Barth’s preaching biography, every other chapter includes a sermon. Six of them Willimon preached in 2004 on texts from Year C of the Revised Common Lectionary. The other three are: 1) a sermon for Trinity Sunday 1999 (Matthew 28:16-20); 2) “Dear Church,” a topical sermon on the war in Iraq; 3) a sermon “Guess Where You’re Going,” on vocation to ministry preached at the service of celebration for his installation in 2004 as Bishop of North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church. He offers these nine sermons to illustrate how Barth’s theology informs his own preaching. For the rest of this review, I want to comment on these sermons and the way they connect with Willimon’s reading of Barth.

In Chapter 2, “Preaching the Bible with Barth,” his sermon, “Untimely Word,” from the lectionary Pentecost passage of Acts 2:12-18, proclaims that God speaks in unlikely times and places. Willimon preached this sermon in an auditorium at two o’clock in the afternoon in 2004 to pastors and colleagues at a conference gathered to honor him and celebrate his preaching, “the wrong time and in the wrong place,” comparing it to Sunday morning at Duke Chapel, where he had preached thirty-two sermons the previous year. He connects the awkward timing with the untimely character of the original Pentecost message and Peter’s sermon. In situations humorous and painful, easily recognizable by any pastor—a wedding at a yacht club, a funeral for an infant who has tragically died, the Sunday morning after 9/11—Willimon captures the improbability of success in our preaching. Thus he shows how all the more miraculous and gracious that God called Peter and began the transformation of the world through preaching, when three thousand heard the message and were saved.

God chooses the right time. The sermon embodies Willimon's first main theme from Barth's preaching: it comes from the Bible, the source of God's Word for preacher and hearer, and the sermon's success is God's doing, not our timing or rhetorical skill.

In the next two chapters, Willimon shows how Barth criticized philosophy and rhetoric as foundations for faithful preaching. In Chapter 3, the sermon is for Easter on John 20, "Seeing is Believing," interpreting Mary Magdalene's and Thomas's coming to see and believe in the resurrection of Jesus. In the introduction Willimon contrasts seeing what is real in common ordinary experience and learning to see in a new way. The difference provides his lead into the stories of Mary Magdalene and Thomas confronting Jesus risen from the dead. Mary, thinking Jesus was a gardener near the empty tomb, came to faith when she heard him call her name. Thomas could believe only when Jesus offered for his touch the wounds in his hands and side. The sermon poses for Easter the biblical witness to God's raising Jesus from death on the cross. The resurrection of Jesus from death on the cross is a main point of Willimon's interpretation of Barth for preaching. (See especially Chapter 9, "Easter Speech.")

In chapter 4, "How to Say What God Says," Willimon's sermon is on Luke 11:1-13, in which the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray and Jesus gives the Lord's prayer. Willimon focuses on the petition, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth just like it is in heaven." The sermon affirms that "Prayer is not so much what we say as a determined willingness to let God have God's say" (p. 106). The sermon on learning to let God speak to us thus becomes his move into Barth's rhetorical use of expressionism in his Romans commentary, his irony in his crisis theology period, and his realism in his *Church Dogmatics*. Willimon accepts Tom Long's assessment that the "turn to the listener" was the most significant new trend in twentieth century homiletics, but he argues that Barth's theology does not support it. Willimon criticizes this rhetorical turn, offering a summary of western rhetorical thinking and pointing to Barth's objective, realistic claim for God in preaching.

Chapter 5 ("Word Makes World") presents Barth's emphasis on revelation and the church's teaching about the Trinity. Willimon offers a Trinity Sunday sermon on Matthew 28:16-20, "The Extravagance of the Trinitarian Faith." In this sermon, Willimon likens God to a good teacher who is a big talker: God is effusive, loquacious, and commands his followers to go as witnesses and speak on God's behalf. This is the longest sermon in the book and the most technical. It is a doctrinal sermon on the Trinity, less colloquial and with fewer illustrations and contemporary cultural connections than the others, and yet it moves. It makes a strong connection between real claim for the truth of Christian teaching and the obedience God requires of the church.

In Chapter 6 ("The Talkative God") Willimon continues his emphasis on Barth's theology of the Word of God as cure for an undue homiletical preoccupation with the listener, reminding us that Barth wrote his theology for practicing ministers. The sermon here is on Luke's account of John's baptism of Jesus (Luke 3:21-22) and it emphasizes in a vivid way, with humor and self-deprecation, that in spite of the impossible demands of preaching for the understanding of the people and the impossible task of really hearing a sermon, the Word is proclaimed and people do get it, by the grace of God.

Chapter 7 ("Heralds of God") considers the image of the herald, announcing the message of God as a primary emphasis in Barth's theology of preaching. Willimon sides with Tom Long in preferring the more encompassing metaphor of witness, a

more active metaphor, and one that encourages critical awareness of the kind of speech that helps proclamation. The witness of the sermon should bear rhetorical similarity to the scriptural and literary form of the biblical witness. In this chapter Willimon faults Barth's preaching for being too prosaic. In contrast, his theological writing is full of rhetorical flourish, including irony, narrative, and surprise. Barth's theology serves the preacher by the critique of preaching it offers, not so much by his example in his sermons. In this connection Willimon offers his sermon, "Dear Church," in the rhetorical form of a letter like 2 Corinthians, on reconciliation and new creation. He is preaching directly in response to the United States invasion of Iraq.

In Chapter 8 ("Troubled Preaching") Willimon shows how the voice of the church arises in our time of conflict. His sermon "Sabbath Unrest" is a brief, pointed application of Jesus' sermon at Nazareth (Luke 4:21-30). He shows the counter-cultural, counter-religious disturbance Jesus' sermon caused and claims it for a counter-cultural ministry of the people of God today.

Particularly in this emphasis, Willimon shows his debt to his Yale teachers Hans Frei and George Lindbeck and to Charles Campbell. Frei's *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1974) offered a history of and theological commentary on theories of biblical interpretation, primarily from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His work was one main inspiration for George Lindbeck's, *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984), which proposed viewing Christian language like some cultural anthropologists describe religion, as the adoption of the language, symbols, and rituals of their culture. Charles Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Post-Liberal Theology* (1997), drew out implications of Frei's ideas and his appropriation of Karl Barth's focus on biblical narrative for preaching. Willimon owns his indebtedness to these proposals for thinking about theology for preaching.

Chapter 9 ("Easter Speech") returns to the Easter message (See "Seeing is Believing" in Chapter 3), and the sermon interprets Luke's call to the fishers from fishing to make disciples. The sermon keys on the transformation of Simon Peter, from his defiant complaint to Jesus, "We have fished all night and have nothing" (Luke 5:5), to the awestruck, "Get out of here; I'm a sinner." (Willimon's Revised Version of Luke 5:8). Paired with I Corinthians 15, this text reflects the resurrection from death to new life in the lives of Jesus' followers. Willimon uses this theme for a renewal in the life of the church and interpreting success in its program of stewardship.

In Chapter 10 ("Called to Preach") Willimon's theme is vocation. In the sermon "Guess Where You're Going," preached at the Service of Celebration and Installation as the Bishop of the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church, November 14, 2004, Willimon reflects on his own vocation, commenting on the calls of Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, and the followers of Jesus. He speaks to the occasion in his characteristically pungent way, even including a reference to his daughter Harriet, who might have been in the congregation. He turns the personal dimensions of his call and placement into a fine reflection on vocation to ministry, specified in the Methodist itinerant context. You serve where Jesus calls and the bishops place you. Different means of placement, whether congregational or presbyterian, won't prevent non-Methodists from gaining insight from Willimon about serving where you are called and calling for the ministry of the people where you serve.

Willimon's sermons as printed in this book follow Barth's theology to the degree that Willimon is unapologetically enthusiastic in making real biblical claims, for

example in the Easter proclamation of resurrection, the demanding call of Jesus to vocation, and the doctrine of the Trinity. Willimon draws from his close colleague, Stanley Hauerwas, and emphasizes Christian moral and ecclesial separation, and, particularly in the case of the present war in Iraq, opposition to American culture and policy. In the critique of American culture, he argues from the standpoint of Karl Barth's politically critical and progressive stance. He is also like Barth, even as a devoted Methodist pastor and recently appointed bishop, in not sparing the contemporary protestant church's temptation to become captive to the prevailing culture.

On the other hand, these sermons differ from both Barth's teaching about the writing of sermons and Barth's actual practice of preaching. He criticizes Barth's homiletical theory and practice: "Barth's emphasis against homiletical rhetoric and style is, in the end, an exaggerated overemphasis" (p. 249). Barth's sermons do not show us the artistic imagination and poetic style that went into the writing of his *Church Dogmatics*. Willimon asks, "Even in a Sunday congregation, is there not some need for entertainment, illustration, and attempts to retain our hearers?" (p. 252).

We can be glad that William Willimon has shared his long-term study of Karl Barth's theology and its resource for preaching. The best use of this book is as a guide to our own reading and application of Barth's theology to the weekly work of preaching.