

What Are They Asking

In the heat of the summer of 1922, a thirty-six-year-old part-time professor of theology by the name of Karl Barth delivered one of the most remarkable speeches about preaching ever given.

Though he was just beginning his teaching career, Barth was, at the time, already something of a controversial celebrity, an *enfant terrible* among European theologians. His maverick new commentary on Romans, in which he had sharply diverged from his own teachers and had issued deep and provocative challenges to the estab-

lished liberal theology of the day, hit the European theological scene like a bombshell. Even though Barth was a relatively young man and a new face on the theological scene, people wanted to know what the fuss was all about, and he was inundated with invitations to meet with his academic seniors to explain “his theology.”

One of the invitations he accepted, however, was not from fellow professors or systematic theologians but from pastors. He agreed to address a small gathering of pastors in the little Saxon village of Schulpforta, and knowing that he was speaking to people who were trying to walk faithfully as pastors in a bewildering

and changing world, Barth brought the full force of his innovative theological mind to bear on a topic that would be close to the heart of their ministry: preaching.

Barth began his talk modestly, confessing that he was embarrassed by the request to talk about “my theology.”¹ He said that he would rather speak as a fellow pastor. “For twelve years I was a minister,” he said, “as all of you.” Like many other pastors, he began his pastorate trying to wear the ill-fitting theological armor of his theological professors. “I had my theology,” he told them, but it was a second-hand theology, a theology borrowed from his teachers. Gradually, though, he began to find his own theological voice, and this happened not by taking another course or by hearing another lecture, but by having to face a reality all pastors know well: the demands of Sunday morning. Specifically, it was the problem of the sermon, Barth said, the weekly crisis of being caught between the “problem of human life on the one hand and the content of the Bible on the other,” that changed his theological outlook forever.

One can imagine that Barth’s audience was pleasantly caught off guard by this; surprised, perhaps even delighted by his words. These pastors had come to hear this eminent new theological mind lay out his program only to discover that he wanted to talk to them about preaching. He was not presenting a theological methodology or a new dogmatic system but speaking refreshingly and candidly about the Sunday sermon. “The need and promise of Christian preaching, this,” said Barth, “is the subject upon which I wish to speak to you today.”

SUNDAY MORNING SUSPENSE

To describe how the task of preaching had shaken up his safe and settled theological world, Barth reminded the gathered pastors in Schulpforta of the sometimes hidden suspense of a typical Sunday morning. “On Sunday morning when the bells ring to call the congregation and minister to church,” said Barth, “there is in the air an expectancy that something great, crucial, and even momentous is about to happen.” Sunday morning has its own routines, its expected patterns. The pastor prays, leads the congregation in song, opens the Bible,

reads the text. A typical Sunday service, but even so, the congregation moves through it with a mounting sense of expectation. “Something great, crucial, and even momentous is about to happen.” But what?

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The rising expectations of worship come to a white-hot focus in the sermon. “Here is daring!” said Barth. “The minister will preach.” The sermon discloses what all the mounting suspense has been about. In the event of preaching, that which has been expected has now occurred. And what has been expected? “God is present!” Barth told the pastors. “God is present! The whole situation witnesses, cries, simply shouts of it.”

Barth was jolting these pastors with the claim that people finally come to church not to hear religious “talk” or practical wisdom about how to be happy or how to get along better in their jobs or relationships, not ultimately for the music or the fellowship or the coffee, but for something far more dramatic, an encounter with the living God. “People want to hear the *word*,” Barth exclaimed. Sunday worship is not about surfaces and nice pious thoughts. It is, claimed Barth, about “the end of history . . . the ultimate desire . . . the desire for an ultimate event.”

This is strong stuff, and we can see here how radically Barth had broken from his teachers. All of the old, liberal theology, he claimed, was just so much talk *about* religion. It was not the speech of God; it was at best second-hand speech. What people crave is not talk *about* God; they want *God*. They don’t hunger for spiritual musings and reflection; they want the event itself, God’s immediate and direct word. Preachers

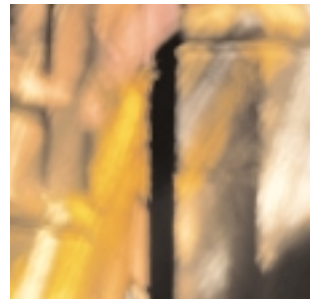
and theologians are not supposed to be sages who wag their heads wisely and spin out reasonable and pragmatic thoughts about how to be religious; they are instead servants of this wild, dramatic, and untamable event of God’s speech. What is Christian preaching? “Speaking the Word of God,” said Barth. Nothing less, nothing other.

Now perhaps at this point the pastors at Schulpforta were feeling good about themselves and about what they were hearing, maybe even exhilarated. This young theologian Barth was affirming their call to preach in the highest terms possible. One can see them nodding with approval. But then Barth pulled the rug out from under them.

If preaching is the Word of God on human lips, he said, then preaching is impossible. That’s right. Impossible. “It does not happen,” said Barth. “No one will ever accomplish it or see it accomplished.” What was he saying? Preaching was urgent but impossible? Essential but unattainable? The pastors may have begun to stir uneasily. Barth pressed the case. “What are you doing,” he asked, his voice shaking with thunder, “you man, with the word of God upon your lips? . . . Did one ever hear of such overweening presumption . . . such brazenness!”

Barth was chopping away with a machete at all pulpit presumption. He was blowing away the notion of one strutting across the chancel clutching a big Bible and smugly proclaiming, “Listen to me, men and women; I have God’s word for you today.” Barth was headed toward the claim that preaching is not finally a human activity at all; it is completely in God’s hands. Preachers who do not realize that the pulpit is a place of peril have simply lost sight of the fact that preaching is a high-wire act performed without a net. “God may pluck us as a brand out of the fire,” warned Barth.

So, preachers who dare to enter the pulpit and attempt to speak God’s word should tremble before the task, should pray for forgiveness, should speak only with a deep sense of their unworthiness to do so. Human beings preaching the Word of God is impossible, but what is impossible for humans is possible with



God. The living and burning Word of God on human lips? Preaching is God's possible impossibility.

THE BIG QUESTION: IS IT TRUE?

So, if authentic preachers come to worship trembling before the task of speaking God's Word, then congregations come, Barth said, with one question on their minds: Is it true? They have many little questions, but underneath is the single profound wonder: Is it true that God is present and speaking to them? They have left behind the everyday world, a world complex, rich in meaning, perhaps even full of pleasure, but a world ultimately unsatisfying, and they have come to worship seeking to know this one thing: Is it true?

"When people come to church," Barth asked, is it not the case that "they consciously or unconsciously leave behind them cherry tree, symphony, state, daily work, and other things, as possibilities somehow exhausted?" They turn in expectation toward this new and infinitely greater possibility, that God is indeed present. On Sunday in worship, claimed Barth, the people want an answer to this one question, Is it true?—"and not some other answer which beats around the bush."

Thus Barth began his speech to the company of pastors on that July day long ago. Reading his words nearly eighty years later, one still feels the tingle of excitement, the sudden shift in the weather as the gathering winds of a theological storm begin to rustle dead leaves, stir up new possibilities, and breathe life into the dry bones of a moribund church. Surely the pastors who heard him that day left humbled by the awesome task of preaching but also ready to enter the pulpit with a restored bounce in their step and a confidence in their eyes. They left that place on a mission of ultimate truth.

"IS IT TRUE?" OR "WILL IT WORK?"

What would happen, though, if we could fast-forward Barth into our own time? What if, by some miracle of time travel, Barth were to attend a typical

North American church next Sunday? Would he sense the same air of expectancy, would he still hear the people asking that urgent "Is it true?" question he heard so long ago? Is today's church still asking that ultimate question, a church desperately anxious about the decline in membership, experimenting with seeker services and praise music and sermons on "stress management" and "restoring the zest to your marriage"?

At first blush, it would appear that the answer is "no." The world has changed, the church has changed, the times have shifted, and Barth was speaking to a completely different reality than ours today. He imagined people coming to church on Sunday with the Mount Everest of questions on their minds, "Is it true that God is real and present?" But today most observers of church life would find it hard to imagine people streaming from the church parking lot tugged along toward the sanctuary by the Big Theological Question. Indeed, some observers of church life say that people

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do not seem to have theological questions of any kind in their heads. The collapse of working biblical and theological knowledge and even the loss of curiosity about such things among the laity is big news in church growth and renewal circles. The argument is that people do not know theology or Bible and they don't much want to know. Is Ephesians in the Old Testament or the New? Who knows? Worse, who cares?

More telling, though, is the observation that people in our culture already believe in their hearts that God is present, but they just don't expect to find God in church, in worship, in preaching.

God is present, they say, but not in there, not in that heavy and lumbering institutional church, not in that staid and plodding service of worship, and not in that endlessly boring and impertinent sermon. God is present in butterflies and



flowing brooks and sunsets, but not in church. Yes, God is present—people today are fully persuaded this is true—but God is present in meditation and in the inner life of spirituality, present in times of inward ecstasy and wonder, present in moments of holy encounter scattered across the landscape of personal experience. God is present, but not in hymn or sermon or Bible or creed or congregation. Funny how culture changes. Barth thought that people had left behind the cherry tree, the symphony, and everyday life to come to worship in order to encounter God, but today ironically it seems that the reverse is true; people have left worship to find God in the cherry tree, the symphony, and everyday life.

So, as a result, the church fiddles with the rheostats in the sanctuary, plays around with skits and small groups and blue jeans services and PowerPoint presentations anxiously trying to find the formula of what people—who seem already to know God is present—really want from churchy worship anyway. Barth thought people come to worship praying the words of the psalmist, "I wait for the LORD, my soul waits" (Ps. 130:5), but nowadays people seem to prefer the prayer of Jabez, "Bless me and enlarge my border" (1 Chron. 4:10 KJV). Barth thought the question on people's hearts

was the ultimate one, "Is it true?" But maybe now people are asking a smaller, more pragmatic "Is it fun? Will it work?"

UPSTAIRS, DOWNSTAIRS

Clues are out there, though, that maybe Barth is still on to something. There are hints around that perhaps we have underestimated the church. Maybe people are not as preoccupied as we think with the lesser questions, not as impatient with the deep theological issues, not as caught up in spiritual trivia. There are signs that people are tiring of the superficial in preaching and worship, growing weary of skits on "Making Your Faith Work in Your Career," running out of patience with silly and self-centered sermons on "Peace of Mind: How Can I Get It Now?"

Some of these clues can be found, interestingly, in adult church-school classes. To be sure, attendance in such classes is not what it once was, but the level of conversation and questioning that goes on in many of these classes is surprisingly sophisticated and profound. People are doing serious Bible study, asking questions about theodicy and eschatology, exploring the implications of the Jesus seminar and the Dead Sea Scrolls, and generally showing a willingness, even a hunger, to tackle the big issues in faith.

One of my colleagues, a theologian who regularly gets invited to serve as a visiting lecturer in adult classes, recently remarked, "I am amazed at how seriously many of these groups take their faith and am impressed by the level of the questions they ask. *In fact, what goes on downstairs in Sunday school is often more profound than what goes on upstairs in worship.*"

If that is so, if indeed the Sunday school "downstairs" is more theologically demanding than the sermon "upstairs," then this constitutes a major challenge to preaching. One Sunday a few years back I was a guest preacher at a church. After the service, I was greeting people at the door, and I noticed a woman heading in my direction whose determined expression communicated that she clearly had something on her mind. When she reached me, she exchanged no pleasantries but went straight to the point.

"You teach preaching in the seminary."

It was more a declaration than a question.

"Yes. Yes, I do," I replied.

"Well I have something I want you to tell your students," she said.

"All right," I responded, wondering where this was going.

"Tell them to take me seriously." Without another word she turned and exited into the morning mist.

"Tell them to take me seriously." What did she mean? I think she meant that she was tired of cotton candy sermons, tired of not being taken seriously as a thinking,

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questing, intellectually alive, ethically sentient Christian. She was tired of coming to church with Mount Everest on her mind only to be treated condescendingly by preachers who spend all their time playing around on pious molehills. I think if someone had told her that Barth said to those pastors, "It is ours to take upon ourselves the great question of God," she would have known what he was talking about.

THE QUESTIONS THEY BRING

In this issue of *Circuit Rider*, several pastors and teachers of preaching wonder about the theological questions people today bring to church. They seek to listen to the questions on people's lips and also to the unspoken questions on their hearts. Barth told the pastors at Schulpforta that people bring many questions about life

with them to worship, and that preachers should pay attention to them all. But Barth also told the pastors that we should listen to the real, more profound question beneath the presenting questions. This is not simply because people do not know how to put the deepest question into words, but because God, speaking through the scriptures, transforms our questions into what they really are. "The Bible takes these questions," Barth said, "translating them into the inescapable question about God."

Maybe this is too hopeful a view of the church. Maybe the idea that some serious theological stew is cooking in Sunday school is naïve and idealistic. Maybe the notion that people come to church with a thousand questions all pointing, like iron filings, to the great magnetic north of God is wishful thinking. Maybe they really are content with spiritual fast food, helps and hints for successful living, and church lite.

But then I remember the last thing that Barth said to those pastors that day. "When the church fails to shine forth," he told them, "we conclude too quickly that her light has died utterly away. But the church in the world is so preserved that she rises suddenly from the dead."

If the Word of God gives life, and if it is true that the church is hungry for that Word and can respond to that Word and be raised suddenly from the dead, then I think, come Sunday, I will climb again into the pulpit and this time I will take those people seriously. □

¹ The talk was given on July 25, 1922, and the text has been published as "The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching," chapter 4 in *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York: Harper, 1957), 97-135.

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