

Further still, I think we must have the charity and the clarity of mind to see that in un-categorically resisting his latest work, or in even trying to reject it, we may be resisting and rejecting a valuable contribution to extend the theological discourse. As I have tried to suggest, there is in these pages an inchoate, even delightful gesture to make a learned post-liberal scholarship accessible to the Church. He seems to be suggesting that if we are to understand the deep moral failings and injustices of our society, we have to consider the readiness of people to be implicated in companionships that make real and uncomfortable demands upon our ways of living. His way of telling a story is not to escape reality but to represent it, to signify it, and to ultimately – with the help of companions who discover each other – reorder it.

And this – this quiet passion to write *for* the Church and not merely *to* other academics – is something which we have to take serious account of, and respect for what it is: the sign of a deep spiritual and intellectual commitment and an involvement in the very great matters of our salvation. It is not a coincidence that Wells' commitment becomes apparent whenever he speaks of the commonplace, the common people, and the community which should almost always be the desired object of living out our Christian faith. We certainly cannot speak of Wells without some degree of respect. He has brought to this latest book a strong if limited theological intelligence, notable powers of pastoral analysis, and a genuine desire to connect academic theology to an actually *peopled* Church. And if only for this reason, he remains one of our cherished companions.

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*Conversations with Barth on Preaching*, William H. Willimon, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2006, pp. 266, ISBN 978-0687341610. £12.99.

In the spring of 1971 Professor Alec Cheyne of New College, Edinburgh concluded the first year course on the highlights of 2000

years of church history. He entitled the last lecture ‘Some trends in contemporary Christian thought’. When he came to Barthianism he hesitated and asked his students a question: ‘How shall I lead you to the heart of Barthianism?’ Then he answered his own question: ‘Just breathe deeply in New College.’ The class howled with laughter, recognising that Professor Cheyne was aiming a sly dart at New College’s department of Christian Dogmatics, which at that time was totally dominated by the theology of Karl Barth.

Of the students who were privileged to go through New College in those days when there were giants in Scotland, some did breathe deeply and eagerly made their own the theology of the Word of God advocated by the great Swiss theologian. However, some students, like this reviewer, refused to inhale this heady atmosphere, preferring the more critical and less dogmatic theology offered by our Biblical Studies lecturers. Nevertheless all of us acknowledged Barth as the greatest theologian of the twentieth century. Some even shelled out hard-earned cash in order to place the thirteen volumes of his *Church Dogmatics* in serried ranks on their study shelves.

Those of us who preferred the style of our Biblical Studies lecturers would perhaps be surprised by the persistent and growing interest in Barth studies today. Barth has become fashionable again and William Willimon’s lively conversations with him in this book bring him into intriguing dialogue with the world of the twenty-first century and show how he can still contribute insights and wisdom to those who would communicate Christ to a post-modern world.

Willimon is an unashamed fan of Barth at his best. Those of us who find the *Church Dogmatics* heavy going will be delighted with Willimon’s focus on what he considers the heart of Barth’s thinking on the preaching task. He writes:

As a preacher I cannot help but enjoy the imaginative range of Barth’s engagement with scripture, and all my criticisms pale before Barth’s great exposition. Barth’s exegetical passages and his metaphors and images, may

be the strongest and most imaginative and invigorating aspects of his theology. I dearly love his portrayal of Christ as the prodigal son. I also find wonderfully suggestive his discussions on Judas and election. Barth's exegesis shows the fruitfulness of reading scripture from a strictly theological point of view and, by comparison with much contemporary academic exposition, the fruitlessness of reading scripture without any acknowledged theological commitments.

Barth once remarked, 'The true exegete will face the text like an astonished child in a wonderful garden, not like an advocate of God who has seen all his files.' Throughout this book Willimon joins his great teacher in awestruck wonder at the grace of God. Barth offers three gifts to today's preacher: a rediscovery of the importance of proclaiming God's Word; a recovery of nerve in a world which downgrades the pulpit; and a renewed zeal for the struggle that all true preaching entails. Moreover Barth must be appreciated in his entirety. Willimon likens Barth's theology to listening to Bach's 'St. Matthew Passion', for the work has to be appreciated as a whole, not taken apart and mined for certain abstract themes. It needs to be experienced and encountered in such a way that we are changed by it.

Willimon's hope in writing this book is that preachers will have renewed courage as they mount the pulpit steps. He recalls how he once interviewed dozens of former preachers in the process of writing a book on ministerial burnout. 'I found that the fragile unrepeatable quality of preaching was a major reason why many preachers call it quits.' He writes, 'It is demanding to give one's life to such a fragile medium, to work on a sermon with no guarantee of results, to preach in all sincerity and skill but without any noticeable effects, to have nothing to show for three decades of preaching but a room of dead words.' This experience reminded Willimon of how much preachers are forced to live by faith and how the task of proclaiming Christ week after week is a risky business.

Exploring Barth's strong theology of the Word can counteract such negative thoughts. Willimon waxes lyrical about those sermons that take wing:

By the grace of God we preachers also experience our words miraculously being raised from the dead, enlisted, elected to mean more than they could, by our efforts, mean. Barth can make such sweeping claims for the utter meaninglessness and ineffectiveness of our speech about God, because Barth is so utterly convinced of the effusive, irresistible triumph of the grace of God.

Barth's lectures on homiletics are famous or infamous for rejecting all verbal pyrotechnics, all use of rhetorical tricks to get the message across. The emphasis is on utter simplicity. 'I listen to scripture,' the great theologian once said, 'and then I tell what I hear.' However, Willimon has read all Barth's published sermons and has even listened to the few sermons that were recorded as preached to the prisoners in Basel jail. The great man did not follow his own advice, but used words that were 'lively, pastoral and energetic'.

The lectures on homiletics must be understood in context. In the summer semester of 1933 at the height of the conflict between the church and Hitler's regime, Barth was being watched by the Nazis as he lectured in theology at Bonn. The Professor of Homiletics had just declared his allegiance to the pro-Nazi German Christians. In this crisis Barth delivered a series of lectures on preaching in which he insisted on the unadorned and unornamented proclamation of Jesus Christ as the sole Lord of the universe. In 1935 Barth refused to take an oath of unconditional allegiance to the Führer and was deprived of his chair. Barth's depiction of the preacher as a mere earthen vessel into which God's Word will be poured was political dynamite in those dark times. Willimon explains:

When I first read Barth in a college religion class, I was not the least moved by what he had to say. That next summer a pastor in Germany told me of how he,

as a young pastor in the 1930s in Westphalia, would excitedly hurry home from the post office, clutching in his eager hands the newest volume of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, how he would read all night long until dawn, too excited and encouraged to stop reading. 'Barth gave me the strength to go on when the sky was so dark,' he said. I reread Barth with a new ear, having contextualised him.

To demonstrate that Barthians do not feel compelled to avoid all verbal fireworks Willimon underlines the theme of each of his ten chapters by including a sermon of his own. Here is twenty-first century preaching at its very best. Willimon's words sparkle on the page. The book is worth the price for these sermons alone.

But Barth was a controversial figure and so is Willimon. While applauding the great Swiss theologian's strong emphasis on God's Word, one must express concern that biblical criticism is disregarded with cavalier abandon. In shoring up Barthian theology Willimon feels compelled to fire broadsides at the historical work of the Jesus Seminar, implying that Christians do not need history and can pour scorn on those who seek to unveil it.

He is equally dismissive of those who seek to investigate the history of St Paul:

How much effort has been expended among scholars in their futile attempts to reconstruct a life of the "historical Paul"? That which is interesting about this man is not his precedents, his antecedents, nor his autobiography. The thing that is interesting is that Paul has seen something. He has been encountered, and he has been a witness to the Resurrection.

Here Willimon is drifting towards a naïve fundamentalism. A recent study places Paul in the context of the emperor cult that flourished after the victory of Augustus at Actium and argues that such views

as Willimon's could not be more mistaken (see Crossan and Reed's 2004 book, *In Search of Paul*). Of course the heart of Paul's theology is his encounter with the Risen Christ, but we cannot appreciate the Apostle to the Gentiles apart from his precedents, his antecedents, and his autobiography. Crossan and Reed conclude that, like Karl Barth centuries later, Paul shaped his message in a way that would challenge the evil empire that was dominating society according to standards far removed from those of Jesus Christ. It is ironic that Willimon, who is delighted to contextualise Barth, refuses to do the same for the author of Romans.

In 1971 I turned my back on Barth and Dogmatics in search of a more critical Christianity. Today having had my eyes opened by Willimon's achievement in this book, I would urge all who seek to proclaim the gospel of Christ to take seriously Barth's massive contribution to the preaching task.

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