

Karl Barth and William H. Willimon. *The Early Preaching of Karl Barth: Fourteen Sermons with Commentary*. Translations by John E. Wilson. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009. 171 Pages. \$18.21.

Though Karl Barth preached over five hundred sermons during his years as a village pastor in Safenwil, Switzerland, only a handful of his sermons have been published in English. This collection adds fourteen to that number, selected from the years 1917 to 1920. John E. Wilson's translations beautifully highlight the crisp, dynamic, and conversational character of Barth's pulpit rhetoric, and Wilson helpfully indicates (in italics) the words and phrases Barth underlined for emphasis in his hand-written manuscripts. William H. Willimon provides a general introduction to the sermons and a commentary after each one.

Although this volume is called *The Early Preaching of Karl Barth*, the sermons collected here already represent a departure from Barth's earliest preaching in Safenwil. In them we find Barth pressing beyond the thematic "modern" preaching he often embraced in his first few years as a pastor, particularly visible in his relentless preaching on the theme of the war. The sermons in the collection document a fitful but unmistakable change of theological and homiletical course.

The seeds of Barth's discontent with his inherited theology and homiletical practice predate the war itself, stirred by his political activism, his reading of socialist texts, and his growing awareness of the radical nature of human evil. When his German teachers gave their blessing to war theology in 1914, Barth began to question "experience" as an adequate source of knowledge of God with new urgency. This questioning famously took the form of a reconsideration of the book of Romans. The first half of the sermons in this volume were written while Barth was working on the first edition of his commentary (completed in August of 1918), the remainder while he worked on the second.

The characteristic images and themes of the successive *Romans* commentaries are everywhere in evidence in these sermons: the contrast between the world of decay, disorder and darkness and the real (hidden) world of God; the way God breaks through the crust of the old world – most dramatically but enigmatically in Jesus Christ – but cannot be possessed or used by human beings; the critique of "religion" as the ultimate idolatry (most particularly Christianity); the invitation to participate in the reconciling work of God in the world rather than practice "ethics"; faith understood as longing, as unrest, as the gift of seeing past the surface of history.

In addition the sermons exemplify Barth's imaginative theological approach to the biblical text and (here I must disagree with Bishop Willimon's assessment that Barth "clearly cares more about Scripture than for his congregation" (xiv)) Barth's efforts to speak to what he considers the deepest needs, longings, hopes, and fears of his Safenwil hearers.

Like the two *Romans* commentaries, many of these sermons function like expressionist works of art. Barth repeatedly tries to demonstrate that everything we think we see and know and possess is an illusion, and points his congregation to the "other deeper reality" (43) that lies beneath, above, and beyond human struggles and schemes.

The many quotable turns of phrase, theological depth, and provocative exegetical insights make this sermon collection a fruitful resource for pastors and teachers as well as theological students. One could imagine reading these sermons in the context of an adult Christian education class or assigning them as a companion text for seminary students reading Barth's *Romans*.

William Willimon's "Introduction" offers the reader some historical and theological background, but he is true to his word that he is primarily interested in reading Barth's sermons "as they stand for themselves" (ix). Readers who want to consider these sermons in the fullness of their historical and theological context will want to consult Bruce McCormack's seminal 1995 study of the period as well as the introductions to the respective sermon volumes in the Karl Barth *Gesamtausgabe*.

Willimon's commentaries on the sermons themselves largely take the form of a lively conversation regarding their merits here and now, and at times we learn more about Willimon's theological and homiletical commitments than we do about Barth's. There are frequent laments, for example, about the state of "most preaching today," with Barth enlisted as the antidote. Nonetheless, Willimon's comments include many insightful observations regarding the features of Barth's sermons and even his more polemical statements may provide an intriguing starting point for further discussion.

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