

William Willimon. *How Odd of God: Chosen for the Curious Vocation of Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015. 193 pages. \$20.

It might come across as a surprise for many to get a glimpse of William Willimon, a former bishop of the United Methodist Church, engaging in theological reflection on election in this new work, *How Odd of God*. After all, election has been conventionally considered as a theological inheritance of St. Augustine and John Calvin: in God's sovereignty, God has already elected who would be saved and condemned. As a post-liberal theologian, Willimon, however, carefully bases his argument on Karl Barth's work in *Church Dogmatics*, and defines election as "God's act whereby our lives are wrenched out of our control and we are commandeered to witness, thereby enabling the joy of talking about something more important than ourselves, our families, or our churches" (ix). He believes that election is not a matter of individual eternal salvation. Rather, it is about the very identity of who God is and what God does (23).

As the title of his work indicates, Willimon argues that God is radically different from all God's creation. While progressive or liberal Christians have also emphasized the "otherness" of God, he holds that they have ignored God's immanence, therefore leading to atheism (7). The God they support is based on a subjectivism that truncates the God whom we can only encounter through the gracious act of revelation through Christ in God so that God makes sense to us. However, God chooses to reveal who God is and what God does through Christ. For Willimon, the scripture is the primary, or the only means through which we can encounter and understand the identity of God through Christ. While secularism creates a god who is non-threatening to the status quo of the world, he believes that God, whom we encounter in the scripture, is the One who speaks, reveals, and elects to be God for us, and us to be for God (31).

For Willimon, being elected by God does not make one a merely passive participant in the history of God. Rather, as Barth argues, it calls one to "respond in gratitude to the gracious God and to become repetitions and representation of the divine glory" (56). Election is the theological basis for our vocation in Chapter 3, mission in Chapter 4, and preaching in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. It is not one's own decision to choose a vocation. It is God who calls us out of our sense of control so that we give ourselves to God in God's gracious election. Election also provides a reason for church to go out the world in mission. As God chose and sent Abraham, God still elects us and sends us out to the world. God chooses one also so that one can faithfully witness to the words of God. While many contemporary preaching seems concerned about making the Christian message relevant to the culture of the listeners, Willimon believes that the best a preacher can do is to witness to the event in which God speaks to God's church directly.

I believe that, in view of Willimon's Barthian definition, many ethnic minority churches that emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit in preaching have practiced preaching as witness. Willimon argues, "Sermon preparation is the practice of various forms of begging; holding out empty hands, praying for the discipline to set no limits on what God can tell us to preach" (118). In other words, preaching begins with listening to the Holy Spirit and ends with letting God continue to speak to the congregation. Many Korean preachers already know what Willimon means as they flock into their churches early in the morning, kneel at the altar, and pray for God to take control of their ministries. Also, "Let go, Let God" is a song cherished in many black churches in the U.S. as they faithfully follow God who goes before them in battle against injustice, racism, and inequality.

Nevertheless, as a United Methodist pastor and Wesleyan homiletician, I find Willimon's work therapeutic. As many churches in the U.S. are declining, it may be true that the minds and

hearts of many preachers seem often occupied with how to please their listeners and maintain the status quo of their denominations. They often try to find ways to make their sermons more entertaining, proverbial, and insightful. However, Willimon reminds us that it is eventually God who has called us to this messy business of preaching. He claims that the gospel produces more conflict than peace because we proclaim the God who is out of control. It is God who sows the seeds and bears fruit. It is encouraging for many preachers to be reminded that it is God who owns us rather than we ourselves.

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