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What Really is Preaching?

We have seen that today the sermon is under attack from many quarters. Social scientists, communication experts and even theologians—all join the critical choir. Each party has its own kind of criticism, but whatever the critique may be, they all agree that there is something seriously wrong with the present-day sermon. Some even question the whole phenomenon of preaching and go so far as to suggest that in our modern age the church should give up preaching altogether and look for other, more suitable, forms of communication. But the scholars and experts are not the only ones who complain. More serious is the dissatisfaction among those who still attend the church services. The church may claim that its message is the most exciting message that has ever been proclaimed, but what people in reality hear is often little else than – to use the phrase of G. Ebeling – “institutionally assured platitudes”.

It is evident that this kind of criticism touches the very heart of our preaching activity. It is also evident that we cannot ignore it and proceed to the order of the (Sun)day. Nevertheless, it would be no better to give in to it and embark on all kinds of wild experiments. I believe we have to do two things. On the one hand, we have to take these criticisms seriously. On the other hand, we have to submit them to the test of God’s Word. This is the reason why we are now posing the fundamental question: “What really is preaching?” Only when we find the answer to this question can we attain to a true renewal of preaching. Renewal is not

a matter of all kinds of gimmicks. It is not even a matter of better methods, however important they may be. At this point I fully agree with the Roman Catholic theologian, Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, when he writes: "The experience of the lay apostolate and the liturgical movement has shown that a renewal on the level of technique alone is not really a renewal at all, and in practice neither effective nor lasting. True renewal must begin with a profound appreciation of the nature of preaching, a realization of just what preaching is".¹

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To find the answer to our question we have primarily to return to the *New Testament*, for there we find the origin of Christian preaching. We may even go a step further and say: the New Testament itself is both the result of Christian preaching and also a form of Christian preaching. The Gospels, for instance, were not written out of a merely historical and/or biographical interest in the person of the so-called historical Jesus, but the authors, being members of the Christian church, summarized in their Gospel the preaching of their church concerning the Lord who died on the cross and who arose again on the third day. In a detailed study of *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments*,² C.H. Dodd wrote concerning the Gospel of Mark that the evangelist "conceived himself as writing a form of *kerygma*".³ The same is true of Matthew and Luke, even though at times "the emphases are different".⁴ Dodd's own conclusion is that "the fourfold Gospel taken as a whole is an expression of the original apostolic preaching".⁵ He also points out that the early church was aware of this. The Muratorian Canon, probably representing the work of Hippolytus, the dissent-

¹Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul on Preaching*, 1964, XIV, XV. Cf. also Domino Grasso S. J., *Proclaiming God's Message. A Study in the Theology of Preaching*, 1965, XVII.

²C.H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments*, 1st edition 1936.

³*Op. cit.*, 1963, 47.

⁴*Op. cit.*, 52.

⁵*Op. cit.*, 55.

ing bishop of Rome about the end of the second century, clearly states that the four Gospels embody the original apostolic preaching of the "saving facts".⁶

How central preaching was to the life of the early church appears also from the fact that the New Testament has no fewer than thirty different verbs for preaching. G. Friedrich, who mentions them all in his article on 'keryssein' in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*,⁷ rightly points out that our almost exclusive use of 'preaching'⁸ for all of them is a sign not merely of poverty of vocabulary, but also of the loss of something that was a living reality in primitive Christianity. How much of a living reality it was we can read on almost every page of the New Testament. The new movement was from the very beginning a *preaching movement*. It all started with the preaching activity of John the Baptist, the forerunner and herald of the coming Messiah. Jesus' own ministry is basically a preaching ministry too. Mark describes it as follows: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying: 'The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel'" (Mark 1:14,15). To be sure, Jesus' preaching was accompanied by mighty signs and wonders, but these were not an entirely different aspect of his ministry. Rather they underscored his proclamation that the Kingdom was at hand; even more, they showed that in him and in his preaching the Kingdom was already becoming manifest.

When Jesus himself appoints the twelve, he gives them the same task: "to preach and have authority to cast out demons" (Mark 3:14, 15). Later on we read that the twelve

⁶*Op.cit.*, 55. The quotation from the Muratorian Canon reads: "Although various principles are taught in the several Gospel-books, this makes no difference to the faith of believers, since by one governing Spirit in them all, the facts are declared concerning the Nativity, the Passion, the Resurrection, His converse with the disciples, and His two advents, the first which was in humility of aspect, according to the power of His royal Father, and the glorious one which is yet to come."

⁷*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)*, III, 703.

⁸The Latin verb 'praedicare', from which our word 'to preach' has been derived, has only two meanings: 1) to make publicly known, proclaim, publish; 2) to praise, commend, eulogize, boast. These meanings do not nearly express the richness of the biblical concept of preaching.

are actually sent out on a preaching mission (Mark 6:7–13; Matt. 10:5–42)⁹, while Luke tells us of a similar mission of seventy disciples (Luke 10:1–16). After the resurrection the commission to preach the gospel is repeated. How important this commission was to the primitive church appears from the fact that it is mentioned at the close of all four Gospels (Matt. 28:19, 20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47, 48; John 20:21) and also at the beginning of the Book of Acts (Acts 1:8). In Acts we also see how immediately after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost the new Christian church becomes a preaching church. Peter arises and proclaims the crucified but risen Jesus as both Lord and Messiah (2:36). And so it goes on throughout the whole Book of Acts. At first Peter is the prominent preacher, but we should not forget that there were others as well, e.g. Stephen and Philip. Indeed, when after the martyrdom of Stephen the congregation is scattered by persecution, we read that “those who were scattered went about preaching the word” (8:4). In the second half of Acts Paul replaces Peter as the foremost preacher, but again he is only one of the many. The entire early church is a preaching church. It is therefore not surprising that the documents of this church, in so far as they have been preserved in the New Testament, are full of preaching material. Indeed, it can even be said that all these documents, each in its own way, are themselves preaching material. It is no exaggeration if one says of the whole Christian movement: “In the beginning was the Sermon”.¹⁰

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But there is still more to be said. However much it is true that preaching is a specifically Christian activity, it is not something altogether new. It has its roots in the *Old Testa-*

⁹In Mark 6:12, 13 we again find the combination of preaching and casting out demons.

¹⁰Thus E. Fascher summarized the formcritical approach of Martin Dibelius. Cf. E. Fascher, *Die formgeschichtliche Methode*, 1924, 54.

ment. It may safely be said that the religion of Israel was a *prophetic religion* or, if you wish, a *religion of the word*. At first glance this may seem to be a rather one-sided statement, to say the least. Is it not characteristic of the God of Israel that he is a God who *acts* in the history of his people (and of the whole world)?¹¹ Is it therefore not more apt to speak of his revelation as a revelation in the events of history, rather than as a word-revelation? It cannot be denied, of course, that the Old Testament often speaks of God's acts in the history of his people. And yet we wish to maintain that basically God's self-revelation is a word-revelation.

1. The most common and most fundamental revelatory act Scripture attributes to God is his *speaking*. It is through his sovereign speaking that heaven and earth were created. The author of Genesis 1 says it in majestic simplicity: "And God said: 'Let there be light', and there was light" (Gn. 1:3), and the author of Psalm 33 calls all inhabitants of the earth to stand in awe of him, "for he spoke and it came to be, he commanded, and it came forth" (33:8, 9). In the story of redemption the situation is not different. The story of Israel begins with the call of Abraham by God and with the promises God gives him. The special relationship of Israel as a nation "rests from the first on the word of this God. The basic law of the Sinai covenant, the Decalogue, is given the name 'the ten words'"¹² (cf. Deut. 4:13; 10:4). And "side by side with this divine word in the law, with its validity for all occasions, we find the particular proclamation of the divine will for particular situations, the prophetic word of God".¹³

2. But even when God acts in history, his activity *never* takes place *without the revealing word*. This is not surprising, for all that happens in history shares in the ambiguity of all history and is subject to many, often contradictory interpretations. Therefore God always makes his purpose known before hand, so that his people may know that it is he who acts. When God decides to lead his people out of the house

¹¹Cf. G. Ernest Wright and Reginald H. Fuller, *The Book of the Acts of God. Contemporary scholarship interprets the Bible*, 1960.

¹²Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Vol. II, 1967, 71.

¹³*Op. cit.*, 72.

of bondage in Egypt, he first reveals himself to Moses at the burning bush and informs him that he will redeem his people (Ex. 3:7–10). Th.C. Vriezen points out that this is not an exception. On the contrary, over against G. von Rad he maintains that “the Old Testament itself always lets God’s action in history be preceded by the prophetic word. According to the unanimous verdict of all Old Testament witnesses, the prophetic word does not come as an *a posteriori* interpretation, but it always ushers in the event. Both the prophetic word and its realization in history have as their purpose the restoration of the relation of the people to God, who is the God of Israel”.¹⁴

3. Thirdly, we notice in the Old Testament that the story of God’s revealing and redeeming activity in the history of his people has to be *passed on*, by word of mouth, from generation to generation. In the Mosaic law we find several references (e.g., Ex. 13:8, 14; Deut. 6:21). Very clearly and beautifully it is put in the opening verses of Psalm 78:

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
 incline your ears to the words of my mouth!
 I will open my mouth in a parable;
 I will utter dark sayings from of old,
 things that we have heard and known,
 that our fathers have told us.
 We will not hide them from their children,
 but tell to the coming generation
 the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might,
 and the wonders which he has wrought.

(Ps. 78:1–4)

In the prophetic literature an even wider perspective is

¹⁴Th. C. Vriezen, ‘Geloof, Openbaring en Geschiedenis’ (Faith, Revelation and History), two articles in *Kerk en Theologie*, XVI(1965), 97ff. and 210ff. The quotation is taken from p.215 Cf. also the following words on p.216: “It is not true that God reveals Himself in history in a shadowy way, but God is recognized in history in the way He had revealed Himself to the prophets, and history confirms his word”. Cf. also J.I. Packer in the article on ‘Revelation’ in the *New Bible Dictionary*, 1962, 1093: “The thought of God as revealed in His actions is secondary, and depends for its validity on the presupposition of verbal revelation. For men can only ‘know that He is Yahweh’ from seeing His works in history if He speaks to make it clear that they are His works, and to explain what they mean. Equally, men could never have guessed or deduced who and what Jesus of Nazareth was apart from God’s statements about Him in the Old Testament, and Jesus’ own self-testimony.”

opened. There will come a future, in which not only the children of Israel but all nations will share in the redemptive activities of this God (cf. Is. 2:1-4; 25:6-9; 60; Jer. 3:17; Micah 4:1-4; Zech. 8:20ff.; cf. also the sayings about the Servant of the Lord, Is. 42:4; 49:6; 52:13-15).

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This future has been inaugurated on the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit comes and breaks down the barriers between Israel and the 'goyim', the heathen nations. Now it becomes true what Joel already had foretold; "It shall be that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:21; cf. Joel 2:32). "Whoever" – there is no distinction any more. "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord" – be he Jew or Gentile. But this calling upon the name of the Lord presupposes the preaching of this Name. As Paul puts it so clearly in Rom. 10:14, 15: "But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent? As it is written: 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news!'"

Preaching is as necessary for the Christian faith as breathing is for the life of man. Without the preaching of the gospel there is no faith. For this reason the New Testament does not make any difference in principle between missionary and congregational preaching, between preaching *extra muros* and *intra muros*. Today it is generally recognized that the fundamental distinction which C.H. Dodd made between *kerygma* (i.e. missionary preaching) and *didache* (i.e. congregational preaching) is not tenable.¹⁵ In the New Testament the terms are often used together and even interchangeably. What is more, the content of both terms is

¹⁵Cf. C.H. Dodd, *op. cit.*, 7 and *passim*. For an extensive discussion of Dodd's view, see Robert C. Worley, *Preaching and Teaching in the Earliest Church*, 1967, and James I.H. McDonald, *Kerygma and Didache*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series, no. 37.

essentially the same.¹⁶ This is not to deny that there are different emphases. In missionary preaching the *kerygma* will be in the foreground, but it will always naturally issue in *didache*, for the outsider who accepts the message of the *kerygma* will also need instruction about its meaning and consequences. In congregational preaching the emphasis will be upon the *unfolding* of the message of the *kerygma*, showing all its implications for faith and life. But the congregation also constantly needs to hear the *kerygma* itself. The message of salvation is not like a film one has to see only once or a novel one has to read only once, and from then onwards one knows the 'plot'. No, the Christian congregation too has to hear the message again and again. There is no Sunday in our life on which we need not hear the joyful message of the Father who is waiting for his wandering son or daughter.

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But we have to delve still deeper into the New Testament. It not only shows us that Christian preaching is indispensable for both the congregation and the world, but it also tells us what the deepest *nature* of preaching is. Admittedly, the New Testament does not contain a special treatise on the essence of preaching. The reason why the early church did not feel the need for such a treatise may simply have been that they all were far too busy doing it and saw so very clearly that the Lord blessed their efforts. Yet there are enough indications in the New Testament to discover what it regards as the essential nature of preaching.

1. First, there are the many *terms* used for preaching. This is not the place for an extended discussion. The interested reader may refer to the 1978 *Tyndale Bulletin*, where I discuss six key terms.¹⁷ I quote from my summary of results.¹⁸ First of

¹⁶Cf. my article, 'What is preaching according to the New Testament?', in *Tyndale Bulletin*, 29(1978), 14ff.

¹⁷*Op. cit.*, 7-19.

¹⁸*Op. cit.*, 18,19.

all, it appears from the use of the term *keryssein* (=to proclaim) that preaching is not only the proclamation of a saving event that once took place, some twenty centuries ago, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but that the proclamation of this event also inaugurates the new state of affairs for the believing listener. When he believes in Jesus Christ as the Saviour, he at the very same time participates in the salvation brought about by him. The verb *euangelizesthai*, which is virtually synonymous with *keryssein*, underscores that the message about Jesus Christ is a joyful message. The verb *martyrein* (= to witness), in so far as it is applicable to present-day preaching, indicates that all true preaching has to adhere to the apostolic tradition. *Didaskein* (= to teach) emphasizes that the preacher also has to unfold the message as to its meaning and consequences, both dogmatically and ethically. Finally, *propheteuein* (= to prophesy) and *parakalein* (= to comfort, admonish) tell us that the message may not remain an abstraction but has to be applied to the concrete situation of the listeners.

To sum it all up, the various terms used in the New Testament show that Christian preaching is more than just recounting the story *about* the Word of God spoken in Jesus Christ. In Christian preaching *this Word itself* comes to the listeners. Indeed, we must go even further and say that Christian preaching *is* the Word of God coming to men. As G. Friedrich says: "The Word proclaimed is a divine Word, and as such it is an effective force which creates what it proclaims. Hence preaching is no mere impartation of facts. It is an event. What is proclaimed takes place."¹⁹

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2. This conclusion is confirmed by a second line of investigation. The New Testament may not contain an explicit exposition of what preaching is, yet there are many scattered references that throw light on the question under discussion.

¹⁹TDNT, III, 709.

As far as the *Gospels* are concerned, it must suffice to point out two things. First of all, we notice that *Jesus identifies himself with the "messenger of good news" in Second-Isaiah*. This gives a very special quality to his preaching. He does not preach the Gospel of the Kingdom as referring to a merely eschatological entity, but he preaches it as an existent reality. In his preaching the salvation of the Kingdom is already present. Herman Ridderbos puts it thus: "His preaching is not only characterized as prophecy and announcement, but also as proclamation and promulgation".²⁰ His words are a manifestation of the creative Word of God that does not return empty but accomplishes that which he purposes and prospers in the thing for which he sends it (Is. 55:11). Secondly, we notice that *Jesus also identifies himself with the apostles in their mission*. They are his representatives, in whose preaching he himself comes to the people. Yes, Jesus even includes God in this identification, which can only mean that the words of the apostles also share in the creativity of the divine Word. In Luke 10:16 Jesus says it quite openly and plainly to the seventy who are sent on a special preaching mission: "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me" (cf. also Matt. 10:40). After the resurrection this promise of identification is repeated in several ways. When in Matthew 28 Jesus issues the Great Commission, he adds the promise that he will be with them "always, to the close of the age" (28:20). In the Gospel of John it is stated even more explicitly. "As the Father sent me, even so I send you" (20:21). Then Jesus breathes on them and says: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (20:22). Here the identification is complete. In the apostolic preaching of the gospel the keys of the Kingdom function: the Kingdom is opened to believers and shut against unbelievers.²¹

²⁰Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 1962, 73.

²¹Cf. Heidelberg Catechism (1563), Lord's Day XXXI, where we read in Question and Answer 84: "How is the kingdom of heaven opened and shut by the preaching of the holy gospel? In this way: The kingdom of heaven is opened when it is proclaimed and openly testified to believers, one and all, according to the command of Christ, that as often as they accept the promise of the gospel with true

We find the same identification between the preached word and the Word of God in the *letters of St. Paul*. Time and again he describes the message he brings as "the Word of God", or "the Word of the Lord", or simply "the Word" (1 Thess. 1:6, 8; 2 Thess. 3:1; Col. 1:25; 4:3; cf. also 2 Tim. 2:9; 4:1; 1 Pet. 1:23f.; Heb. 4:12f.). These expressions are not just figures of speech that should not be taken too literally. On the contrary, Paul uses the term "Word" or "Word of God" also for the written word of the Old Testament (cf. Rom. 6:6, 9; 1 Cor. 15:54; Gal. 5:14), and there can be no doubt that in all these passages "God Himself is firmly regarded as the One who speaks in Scripture".²² By using the same terminology for his own preaching the apostle obviously claims that God is also the real Subject of this preaching and that it carries the same authority as the Old Testament Scriptures. How much Paul is in earnest about this becomes abundantly clear when he writes to the Thessalonians: "We also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the Word of God, which you heard from us [= the preached word!], you accepted it not as the word of men, but as what it really is, the Word of God, which is at work in you believers" (1 Thess. 2:13). It could not be more emphatically stated that the apostolic preaching is not of man's devising, but has its origin in God and, therefore, is in very truth God's own Word. It is not partly human and partly divine, whereby it is left to the Thessalonians to determine which parts are human and which divine (the liberal view); nor is it a human word that, where and when it pleases God, may *become* the Word of God (the Barthian view). No, its real essence is that God himself speaks in and through the words of his servants.²³

This also explains why the Word preached by Paul and his fellow-workers is *effective*. This efficacy is not due to the

faith all their sins are truly forgiven them by God for the sake of Christ's gracious work. On the contrary, the wrath of God and eternal condemnation fall upon all unbelievers and hypocrites as long as they do not repent. It is according to this witness of the gospel that God will judge the one and the other in this life and in the life to come." Cf. *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. by Arthur Cochrane, 1966, 321.

²²TDNT, IV, 111.

²³For more details, see my *Tyndale Bulletin* article cited in n.16 above, 25ff.

qualities of the preacher, however important such qualities may be (cf. 1 Thess. 2:10 and the first chapter of 2 Corinthians). The efficacy is wholly due to him whose Word it is. The secret lies in the genitive: it is the Word of *God*. This is not a genitive of object (= it is a word *about* God), but of subject: God is the real Speaker. Therefore the author of Hebrews can write: "The Word of God is living and active (full of energy!), sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (4:12). Or as Paul himself puts it: "The gospel is a *power of God* [again the genitive of subject] for salvation to every one who has faith" (Rom. 1:16; cf. 1 Cor. 1:18). All these passages reveal the same basic idea: that of identification. The word preached by the apostles and the Word of God cannot be separated.

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But – and this is a very essential question – does this also apply to *our preaching today*? Is not Paul's position (and the same applies to the other apostles) so *unique* that we cannot possibly equate ourselves and our preaching with the apostle and his preaching? Dare we say of our own preaching: it is really the Word of God? And even apart from daring, may we make this claim on behalf of our preaching today?

We must begin with acknowledging the *uniqueness of the apostolate*. These men, who were the witnesses of the resurrection, were commissioned by the risen Lord himself. Already before his death he had given them the special promise of the Holy Spirit as the Paraclete, the Helper and Counsellor, and after the resurrection this promise was fulfilled (cf. John 20:21–23; Acts 2:1ff. compared with 1:8). This is also the reason why these men have a very special, even unique position in the early church. They, with their preaching, are not an accidental appendage to the divine revelation in Jesus Christ, but as Herman Ridderbos puts it: their "preaching of redemption, as apostolic preaching, belongs to the actuality of revelation and as such it has its

own unique character".²⁴ These men are instruments of revelation and as such they are the foundation of the church. In all subsequent ages the church is bound to their preaching as the final norm of faith.²⁵

It is quite obvious that in *this* respect our preaching can never be equated with that of the apostles. We are not in the same way instruments of revelation. We did not, like Paul, receive the Gospel by special revelation (cf. Gal. 1:11, 12, 15, 16). We received the Gospel from those who came before us. Our knowledge of God is never first-hand but always second-hand. These are essential differences between the apostles and present-day preachers. However, that does not mean that therefore our preaching is only a human word and not God's Word. It is striking that at *this* point Paul never differentiates between his own preaching and that of his fellow-workers. When he writes to his congregations about Timothy (1 Thess. 3:2, 3; 1 Cor. 16:10) or when he writes to Timothy himself (2 Tim. 2:2; 4:2), he uses the same terms which he used for his own preaching. What is more, in 2 Tim. 2:2 Timothy is charged to commit to others what he has heard. They must be "faithful men, who shall be able to teach [*didaskhein!*] others also". In other words, they are teachers (and preachers) at third hand! But it does not make any real difference, as long as they preach the gospel they heard from Timothy, who in turn had heard it from Paul. It is one chain of tradition and every "faithful" link has the same divine power as the first and basic link (cf. also 2 Tim. 1:14 and 1 Tim. 5:17; 6:20).

On the basis of all these data we can only conclude that in the New Testament preaching is much more than the communication of facts. To be true, preaching has a factual content (cf. Rom. 1:1, 3; 1 Cor. 15:1ff.; etc.). But preaching itself is much more than a cognitive communication. In the act of preaching the saving power of these facts becomes a present reality for the hearer. True preaching is an event. Paul calls the gospel a "*power unto salvation*" (Rom. 1:16). When the gospel is preached, something *happens*. In the next verse Paul describes this 'something' as follows: "In it

²⁴H.N. Ridderbos, *The Authority of the New Testament Scriptures*, 1963, 17.

²⁵Cf. H.N. Ridderbos, *op. cit.*, 14, 15.

(= the gospel) the righteousness of God is being revealed through faith for faith" (1:17). We should note that Paul uses the verb 'to reveal' and that he uses it in the present tense. The righteousness of God is not just *described* in the preached Gospel, it is not even primarily *offered*, but it is *revealed*. It is un-veiled as a present reality. Or as John Murray puts it: "In the Gospel the righteousness of God is actively and dynamically brought to bear upon man's sinful situation ... It is redemptively active in the sphere of human sin and ruin."²⁶ Preaching this Gospel, therefore, is a very dynamic happening. It is not to be compared with a prospectus that is sent through the mail, after which one can order the items offered, but it is rather like a love-letter, in which love itself shines through in such a way that the reader feels it as a present reality. In the letter the writer himself, as it were, comes along. But in the preaching of the Gospel it is still deeper and richer, for here we have to do with the risen Lord who not only sends a message, but who, in the *modus* of the Holy Spirit, personally comes along with the message. Heinrich Schlier rightly says: "Christ is present in the Word and meets the hearer. And the same is true of all those realities which are indicated by genitives ... The cross arises before my eyes in the 'word of the cross'; reconciliation happens in the 'word of reconciliation'; glory shines forth in the 'word of glory'; life and immortality make their appearance, etc. And this, too, happens in the power of the Holy Spirit, who acts as the Revealer in this word".²⁷

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When we now go beyond the New Testament and immediately move on to the *theology of the Reformers*, we do not mean to say that there has not been any proper view of preaching between the New Testament and the Reformation. Many church fathers had a very high view of preaching. We need only to mention the names of Chryso-

²⁶John Murray, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, Vol. I, 1960, 29, 30.

²⁷Heinrich Schlier, *Het Woord Gods*, 1959, 68. Original German title: *Wort Gottes*.

tom and Augustine. The reason why we immediately proceed to the Reformers is rather that in their theology of preaching they rediscovered the teaching of the New Testament itself. Again preaching became the means of grace *par excellence*.

When *Luther* rediscovered that the Pauline doctrine of justification means a declaratory act of God, by which he justifies the sinner "by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith"²⁸, the sermon was bound to become the very centre of the worship service. For it is in the preaching of the gospel that this declaration is made. For Luther preaching was a very *dynamic* event. Indeed, it was an *apocalyptic* event,²⁹ in which the battle with the great adversary was fought once again. "Every sermon for him was a struggle for souls. Eternal issues were being settled in the moment of preaching – the issues of life and death, light and darkness, sin and grace, the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of Satan."³⁰ But above all it was a *saving* event. In the preaching of the gospel Jesus Christ himself comes to us with all his salvation. Every one who listens to this Gospel in faith is being saved at that very moment. No wonder that Luther has no difficulty whatever in calling the preacher himself the "mouth-piece of God". "God", he declares, "the Creator of heaven and earth, speaks with you through his preachers, baptizes, catechizes, absolves you through the ministry of his own sacraments. These are the words of God, not of Plato or Aristotle. It is God Himself who speaks".³¹

Calvin had an equally high view of preaching. For him, too, the preachers are mouthpieces of God.³² He, too, regards preaching itself as a living, apocalyptic, saving event. He

²⁸*Confession of Augsburg* (1930), Art. IV.

²⁹Cf. A. Niebergall, 'Die Geschichte der christlichen Predigt', in *Leitourgia*, II, 261f.

³⁰A. Skevington Wood, *Captive to the Word. Martin Luther, Doctor of Sacred Scripture*, 1969, 91.

³¹W.A., *Tischreden*, 4. 531. No. 4812. Cf. Skevington Wood, *op. cit.*, 93.

³²J. Calvin, Homilies on I Sam. 42, CR, XXXIX, 705. Dealing with the jurisdiction of the church, he writes in his *Institutes* "that the word of the Gospel, whatever man may preach it, is the very sentence of God, published at the supreme judgment seat, written in the book of life, ratified firm and fixed, in heaven" (IV, xi, 1). Cf. for a whole series of quotations from Calvin's works, T.H.L. Parker, *The Oracles of God. An Introduction to the Preaching of John Calvin*, 1947, 54ff.

does not hesitate to say that "when the Gospel is preached, Christ's blood distils together with the voice."³³

How much the Reformation was in earnest about all this appears from the fact that they inserted statements about preaching in their *confessions*. Immediately after the article on Justification (art. IV) the *Augsburg Confession* (1530) speaks of The office of the Ministry (art. V). "To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these as through means, He gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith where and when He pleases, in those who hear the Gospel." The most important confessional statement is found in the first chapter of the *Second Helvetic Confession* (*Confessio Helvetica Posterior*) (1566), written by Heinrich Bullinger, the successor of Zwingli. The chapter opens with the confession that the canonical Scriptures are the "true Word of God". "God Himself spoke to the fathers, prophets and apostles, and still speaks to us through the Holy Scriptures". Further on in the same chapter Bullinger also speaks of preaching and states very succinctly but also very incisively: "The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God" (*Praedicationis verbi Dei est verbum Dei*).³⁴ The copula 'is' (*est*) clearly indicates identity. That this was indeed Bullinger's intention appears from what immediately follows: "Wherefore, when this Word of God (= Scripture) is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the *very Word of God* is proclaimed and received by the faithful." Here we have the high view of preaching, as it is held by the whole Reformation, in a nutshell. Of course, we should bear in mind that such statements are not meant as definitions, based on a careful, empirical analysis of a great number of sermons. The Reformers never meant by such statements that every sermon is *de facto* the Word of God. Such statements are *confessions of faith*! They issue from the firm belief, based on Scripture itself, that wherever the gospel is faithfully preached, God himself is involved and present with his saving grace. We should never forget that in the Helvetic Confession Bullinger's phrase: "The preaching of

³³John Calvin, *Commentary* on Heb. 9:21 and 10:19.

³⁴Cf. Arthur Cochrane, *op. cit.*, 224.

the Word of God is the Word of God", is preceded by Jesus' own promise: "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me (Matt. 10:40; Luke 10:16; John 13:20)."³⁵ This is the deepest secret of all true preaching.

* * *

In the orthodox Reformation tradition this same high view has always been retained. In nearly all homiletical and also many dogmatical works, representing this tradition, the famous statement of Bullinger is mentioned with approval and concurrence. In our century this high view of the Reformation has been vigorously defended again by *Karl Barth*.³⁶ In strong reaction against the older liberal theology, which had virtually lost every idea of revelation as the self-revelation of God by God himself and had replaced it by man's discovery of God, Barth maintained that from beginning to end revelation is God's own work. Yes, revelation is a fully trinitarian activity: the Father reveals himself in the Son through the Holy Spirit. The triune God is Revealer, Revelation and Revealedness. In all eternity God decided to reveal himself to man in his Son Jesus Christ. In time God the Son executed this revelation in his own person and work in that he assumed human nature and became man as Jesus of Nazareth. God the Holy Spirit consummates this revelation by opening man's heart, so that man is capable of receiving the revelation and actually does receive it.³⁷ From this it follows that for Barth Jesus Christ is the Word of God *par excellence*. In him there is a *direct identity* with the Word of God. But he is not the only Word of God. In line with the whole Reformation tradition Barth distinguishes a threefold Word of God: Jesus Christ as the incarnate Son of God is the

³⁵*Op. cit.*, 224/5.

³⁶Cf. my article on 'Barth's View of Preaching', in *Vox Reformata* (published by the Faculty of the Reformed Theological College, Geelong, Vic., Australia), No. 33 (1979), 12-21.

³⁷Cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics (CD)*, I, 1, 339ff.; I, 2, 203ff. Cf. also Herbert Hartwell, *The Theology of Karl Barth: an Introduction*, 1964, 67ff.

first form of the Word of God; the revealed Word; Scripture as the witness to Jesus Christ by prophets and apostles is the second form of the Word of God: the written Word; finally, preaching, which is the church's proclamation of the prophetic and apostolic witness to Jesus Christ, is the third form: the preached Word.³⁸ To be true, the second form (Scripture) is not on a par with the first (God's Word in Jesus Christ), and the third (preaching) is not on a par with the second. In the case of both the second and the third form we may not speak of direct identity with the Word of God, but only of an *indirect identity*. Both Scripture and preaching, by themselves, are no more than fallible human witnesses to the Word of God in Jesus Christ. Yet, *where and when it pleases God*, they may *become* the Word of God and at that very moment they *are* the Word of God for the reader or listener.³⁹

From these few remarks it is clear that Barth too has a very high view of preaching. In this view there is also place for the 'est' of the Second Helvetic Confession. As a matter of fact, Barth himself quotes the famous statement: "*Praedicatio verbi Dei est verbum Dei*", with approval,⁴⁰ and to my mind rightly so. Both Bullinger and Barth agree that God *has* revealed himself in Jesus Christ and that both the Old and the New Testament bear witness to this revelation. They also agree that true preaching is the proclamation of this witness of Scripture. But at this very point their ways part. Bullinger – in full agreement with all the other Reformers – believes that Scripture *is* the Word of God and that preaching, when it is the faithful proclamation of Scripture, *is* also the Word of God. For Barth they must first *become* the Word of God, through an act of God, before they can *be* the Word of God. But even so, compared with the older liberal and also many neo-liberal views, Barth's view is very high indeed. It is a view of preaching in which Scripture occupies the central place. In fact, Barth never tired of reiterating that the only task of the preacher is to witness to Jesus Christ as the revealing and reconciling Word of God, and to do this by

³⁸Cf. CD, I, 1, 98ff.

³⁹Cf. my book *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture*, 1962, 116ff.

⁴⁰CD, I, 1, 56.

interpreting the prophetic and apostolic witness to this Word. That's all there is to it. The preacher need not worry about the question of whether his preaching will bring the message 'home' to the listeners. He may leave that safely to God. All the preacher himself has to do is to *repeat* (German: *nachsagen*) the biblical witness in his own words. That, in a nutshell, is Barth's whole theory of preaching. I think we must say that in many ways it is a beautiful theory. Its beauty lies not only in the fact that it gives all glory to God alone, but also in its simplicity. All the preacher has to do is to repeat the message of Scripture in his own words.

But – is this really all? After World War II many *young theologians in Germany* were of the opinion that Barth's theory was one-sided. To be sure, they would agree with him that revelation is always an act of God, also in preaching. They would also agree with him that the message to be proclaimed is found in Scripture, which is the witness to God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Dogmatically this is entirely true. But, they asked, is it also homiletically true? Is preaching not more than just repeating the message of Scripture in one's own words? Does the preacher not have to deal with two 'factors': the message of Scripture, on the one hand, and the life of his listeners, on the other? Is preaching not like an *ellipse* instead of a circle? A circle has only one centre, an ellipse has two foci. Are there not two foci in preaching: Scripture and the listener? I think this critique was basically justified (even though, as I hope to show in Chapter Four, I do not agree with the solution offered by the critics). Preaching is not a simple one-way movement from Scripture to the listener. I believe it is more complex than that. Preaching is a meeting, an encounter of the Word of God in Scripture with the people in their concrete, historical situation. And preparing and delivering a sermon means that these two foci have to be interrelated in a process of continual reciprocity. I believe that this interrelating of Scripture and the situation of the listener may also be the answer to many of the criticisms which I mentioned in the first chapter. In fact, the remaining chapters will gravitate around this problem.