Preaching and the Situation of the Listener

The last chapter started with the thesis that, if our preaching is to be *Christian* preaching, it has to be *biblical* preaching: we now add a second thesis. If our preaching is to be truly biblical preaching, it has to take the *listener* and *his situation* seriously. This thesis as such is not new either. The Christian church has always realised that it is not enough to expound a particular passage of Scripture. The message of this passage must also be *applied* to the present-day listener. In nearly all homiletical textbooks we read that preaching always means two things: first, the exposition and second, the application of a passage of Scripture. The books also show that the second task is at least as difficult as the first. In fact, most preachers find it the more demanding part of their sermon preparation.

The question we now face is:Does recent biblical research help us to gain a better understanding of this second focus of the ellipse of preaching?

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For a starting point we return to the view of *Karl Barth* and the reaction to this view by the younger, post-Barthian theologians in Germany. As we have already seen, Barth had a very high view of preaching. To him preaching was no less

than the third form of the Word of God. Accordingly he put all emphasis on the *content* of the message. To him this was so decisive that he could declare: "Good dogmatics – good theology – good preaching."[1] Apparently he was aware of the questions such a statement might evoke, for he immediately added: "The suspicion and the reproach of 'hybris' (= pride) may seem unavoidable". Yet he did maintain it, for he was deeply convinced that the content really determines whether our dogmatics, our theology, and, therefore, our preaching also, are good or bad. And since it is especially the task of dogmatics to reflect on the content of the biblical message, dogmatics was for Barth the real heart of all theology and the determinative factor in all preaching. Furthermore, he was so deeply convinced that God alone can speak his own Word, that he had little or no interest in all our human attempts at communication. At times one even gets the impression that he saw all such attempts as obstacles to the effectiveness of God's Word. What are we to make, for instance, of the following statement: Practical Theology must not become involved in "the idle question of how those who proclaim this Word should 'approach' this or that modern man, or how they should 'bring home' the Word of God to him. Instead the real question is how they have to *serve* this Word by pointing to its coming. This Word has never been 'brought home' to any man except *by its own freedom and power*".[2] Of course, one cannot but agree with the latter part of this statement. Indeed, God always remains the Lord of his own Word. Only his Spirit can bring the message into the heart of the listener. But does this really mean that, therefore, the preacher does not have to do his utmost to bring the message as close to the heart of the listener as he possibly can? Is that really an 'idle' question?

The same problems arise when we examine what Barth says about the place and role of the situation of the listener in preaching. At first glance this may seem strange, because both in his *Church Dogmatics* and in his *Homiletics* he emphatically mentions this aspect. Take, for instance, the following statement from *Church Dogmatics* I 1: "The actual

[1]Karl Barth, *CD*, I, 2, 767.
[2]Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, 1963, 182.

thing to be proclaimed we may not and cannot expect to hear from dogmatics. That must be found again and again in the middle between the particular text of the Bible within the context of the whole Bible and the congregation in its particular situation of the varying present."[3] Or take the short statement from his *Homiletics*: "Be faithful to the text and be faithful to life."[4] Such statements seem to leave no room for any doubt that Barth too wants to take the situation of the listener seriously. And yet the doubt lingers on. For there are too many other statements that rob the words just quoted of their real power and significance. When we take his theory of preaching in its entirety, we cannot avoid the conclusion that the historical situation of the listener does not play any constituent part in the preparation and delivery of the sermon. All the weight remains on the content of the message, and the situation can at most function as a sounding board for the message.

But there is still more to be said here. Barth's lack of real interest in the concrete, historical situation of the listener has a deeper reason. According to him this historical situation is not the *real* situation of man. The real situation is man's situation *before God*, a situation man does not know by himself, but can discover only when it is revealed to him in the proclamation itself! In his *Homiletics* Barth puts it thus: "A preacher is called to lead to God the people whom he sees before him; God desires him to preach to these people here present. But he must approach them as people who are already the object of God's action, for whom Christ died and has risen again. He has to tell them, therefore, that God's mercy avails for them as truly today as at the beginning of time. That is what is meant by adapting preaching to the congregation."[5] Here we are at the real heart of Barth's view of the situation. Compared with this *real* situation the concrete, historical situation is only relative and secondary. And this *real* situation, which is the same for all people of all times, must be announced in the sermon. To all and sundry it must be said: "You are a sinner, but God loves you in

[3]*CD*, I, 1, 89; cf. 64ff.
[4]Karl Barth, *Prayer and Preaching*, 1964, 109; cf. 106ff.
[5]Op. cit., 96.

Jesus Christ. Yes, in Jesus Christ he has already reconciled you to himself. Believe this Gospel and turn to Jesus Christ for your salvation." And so Barth can also say: "From beginning to end the Bible is concerned with one unique theme which is, however, presented in many different ways. As a result of this variety each passage, at every period, speaks to man's needs."[6] On another page he says that the movement of the sermon does "not consist so much in *going towards* men as in *coming from* Christ to meet them",[7] to which the German edition adds: "Then one goes *automatically* to man."[8]

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By its strong emphasis on the content of the message and on the divine promise that God will use our inadequate and powerless words as vehicles of his Word Barth's theory of preaching was a great *encouragement* to many preachers in the period between the two world wars and also for a considerable time after World War II. Walter Fürst, one of his former students, spoke on behalf of many colleagues when in 1963 he declared that Barth had given him and his fellow-students courage and joy to preach.[9]

At the same time, however, we are not surprised either that gradually a *reaction* set in. For Barth's theory may have been a correct and even a beautiful dogmatic theory, but the reality of preaching as it was going on Sunday after Sunday did not tally with it. In the appendix on 'Word of God and language', added to his book *The Nature of the Christian Faith*, Gerhard Ebeling wrote about the experience of many churchgoers that "the event of proclamation is not an event any more today, but largely just talk, in which the claim of the Word of God is no longer heard; it is proclamation in a

[6]*Op. cit.*, 90.
[7]*Op. cit.*, 71.
[8]Karl Barth, *Homiletik: Wesen und Vorbereitung der Predigt*, 1966, 38 (my emphasis, K.R.)
[9]Walter Fürst, 'Die homiletische Bedeutsamkeit Karl Barths', *Theologische Existenz Heute*, No. 104, 1963, 5.

form of language which has become incomprehensible, it is a mere recitation of the traditional Word of God, in which the Word of God does not enter language in the present."[10] Many similar criticisms were voiced by others. Increasingly the theologians, especially the practical theologians, became convinced that Barth's theory, however correct dogmatically, really ignores the specifically homiletic aspect of preaching. A minister is not called to preach the Word of God in general and in abstract, but it is his task to preach it to *a particular congregation in its own particular historical situation.*

In particular, *Ernst Lange,* a young German theologian, took up this homiletical challenge and developed a new theory of preaching in which the situation of the listener plays a constituent and even determinative part. Lange did not reject the Barthian thesis that God is always the Subject of his own Word and that it is never in man's power to speak this Word. In fact, he fully agreed with it. But what he did deny was that the historical situation of the listener is really irrelevant to the message. Lange vigorously maintained that without a clear relation to this historical situation the *message itself remains irrelevant!* The homiletical task of the minister is to show to the people that the Christian tradition, as embodied in the Bible, is relevant for their actual situation. Even though the minister begins with the text (as a Lutheran Lange followed the so-called pericope system), his actual starting point is the situation of the listener. Lange puts it very sharply thus: "He, the listener, is my theme."[11] I speak with him about his life, his experiences, etc. I hold his life, so to speak, in the light of the biblical message in order to show him the real truth of his life. It is obvious that the old distinction of exposition-application is useless for Lange. Preaching based on this distinction proceeds from the text, tries to formulate the message (or the *scopus* or the *kerygma* or whatever other term one wants to use) and only then turns to the situation. In other words, we already know what we have to say before we have even looked at the situation. Our preaching is virtually a one-way communication: from the text to the situation. But according to Lange

[10]Gerhard Ebeling, *op. cit.,* 1961, 184.
[11]Ernst Lange, *Predigen als Beruf,* 1976, 58.

this is not correct. We may not act as if the relevance for today is simply present in the text. We should realize that the situation of the text is a *past* situation. The original listeners are *not* the listeners of today's preacher. The preacher of today has to create the relevance by actualizing the Christian tradition for the present situation. This means that he has to examine the text carefully and select those elements which are potentially relevant for today. In some cases it may even mean that he has to go against the text or certain aspects of the text.[12]

We cannot go further into Lange's interesting theory. But it will already be obvious that he has introduced a very important issue, which had been unduly neglected in the Barthian theology. On the other hand, we may ask whether Lange's own theory does not perhaps go to the other extreme and virtually make the situation *the* determinative factor in the preaching event. In many ways his view reminds one of the so-called correlation method, which Paul Tillich introduced into systematic theology. He described it as follows: In using this method systematic theology "makes an analysis of the human situation out of which the existential questions arise, and it demonstrates that the symbols used in the Christian message are the answers to these questions".[13] The great problem of this method (and the same holds true of Lange's theory) is that to a large extent the answers are determined by the questions. It is not God's Word that puts the questions to man, so that man may discover his true situation, but the analysis of man's situation brings out the questions of man's existence, which then are answered by God's Word. To be honest, both Tillich and Lange do not deny that God's Word also supplements and corrects man's questions, but this does not really solve the problem. The basic starting point lies in the situation of man and the big question remains whether this method does not

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[12]*Op. cit.*, 66.
[13]Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, 1951, 62; cf. the whole section, pp. 59–66. Cf. also his article 'Die Verkündigung des Evangeliums', in Paul Tillich, *Sammelte Werke*, Vol. III, 265–275.

unavoidably lead to a reduction of the message of Scripture.[14]

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Nevertheless, Lange has re-introduced a very important issue which every homiletical theory has to take into account. A Reformed theory of preaching, too, has to face this issue and must try to determine which part the situation of the listener has to play in the preaching event.

In point of fact, the *Bible* itself sheds much light on this issue. We have already noted an important characteristic of all the writings of the New Testament: that they were addressed to particular communities of believers and that they always tried to give a response to concrete issues in the life of these communities. The New Testament writings were not religious tracts in which the doctrine of God's salvation in Jesus Christ was expounded in a purely objective way, but occasional writings, prompted by a particular situation in the community and seeking to evaluate this situation in the light of God's saving action in Jesus Christ.

This is quite obvious in the case of Paul's letters. Every letter is an occasional writing prompted by the situation of the congregation concerned. In each case the apostle deals explicitly with this situation and expounds the gospel of Jesus Christ in such a way that the situation is really illuminated by the gospel, either positively or negatively. Thus in the letter to the Galatians the gospel is expounded within the framework of the controversy about circumcision, and the apostle uses the opportunity to deal with the whole problem of the Mosaic law in relation to Jesus Christ. In the letters to the Thessalonians the situation prompts Paul

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[14]Cf. e.g., Alexander J. McKelway, *The Systematic Theology of Paul Tillich*, 1964, passim. In his Introductory Report to this volume Karl Barth asks some pertinent questions: "Is man with his philosophical questions, for Tillich, not more than simply the beginning point of the development of this whole method of correlation? Is he not, in that he himself knows which questions to ask, anticipating their correctness, and therefore already in possession of the answers and their consequences?", *op. cit.*, 13.

to deal extensively with the Second Coming of the Lord. The letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians deal with the relation of Christ to the church and with the so-called 'Haustafel', the codes of household duties, in which the apostle gives guidelines to special groups in the congregation. Of particular interest are the two letters to the congregation at Corinth. Paul had a very close relationship with this congregation, as it had been established by his own preaching during a stay of about eighteen months in this city. Both letters, but in particular the first, deal with a host of problems that are present in the congregation.[15] At the same time they also give us a clear idea of *how Paul would have preached* in the congregation. He would not have given a general address of a rather objectivizing nature on the Christ-event, but taking his point of departure in this event he would have tackled the concrete problems of the congregation in the light of this event. This is not just my own hypothesis, but it is clearly proved by the letters themselves. It is scarcely going too far to say that they are nothing else than the written form of what Paul would have said to the congregation had he been on the scene.[16] Indeed, even in their written form they functioned in a way as sermonic material, because they were read aloud during the worship service of the congregation (cf. Col. 4:16).

The same is true of the non-Pauline Epistles in the New Testament. Every introduction to the New Testament tells us that in the case of each letter we can deduce from its content which problems were present in the congregation concerned. We usually speak of "general" epistles, but in actual fact they are not so general at all. Most of them clearly deal with particular problems of the communities addressed. It is further generally believed that the Epistle to the Hebrews is an expanded sermon. But the Gospels too, although they have a more objective nature, clearly show that they were written for certain communities of believers in their particu-

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[15]Such as: divisions within the congregation; a case of incest; going to law with each other; sexual impurity; questions about marriage and celibacy; questions about food offered to idols; abuses in connection with the Lord's Supper; denial of the final resurrection; confusion concerning the spiritual gifts; etc.

[16]Leander E. Keck, *op. cit.*, 84.

lar situation. K. Weiss may overaccentuate this point when he says concerning the Gospel of Mark that "the centre of gravity does not lie in the christological instruction but in the ecclesiological admonition", but he is certainly right when he observes that "from the literary point of view the borderline between the genres of Gospel and Epistle becomes somewhat vague".[17]

Finally, with regard to the Old Testament we discover the same process. It may be more complex, but it is not basically different. "The complexity is greater partly because the books were produced across a much longer time span, and partly because some of the Wisdom materials and the Song of Songs may have been generated primarily out of the creative impulses of gifted individuals instead of being produced for community use at the outset. Still, when all this is taken into account, the tapestry is richer and more varied, but the broad design is the same: the books of this part of the Bible too were generated by particular occasions in the life of the community."[18]

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What does all this mean for *our present-day preaching?* I think that our preaching should happen along the same lines. We too should realize that the living Word of God always occurs *at the point of intersection* of the message of the text with the concrete situation of those who hear the message. Today too, the message of Scripture becomes fruitful for preaching only when the minister, in solidarity with his congregation, tries to accomplish this intersecting. How he has to do this he does not know beforehand. He can find this out only by reflecting carefully on both his text and his congregation. What the result of this reflection will be he does not know beforehand either. In some cases he will

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[17]K. Weiss, in *Der historische Jesus under der kerygmatische Christus. Beiträge sum Christusverständnis in Forschung und Verkündigung* (ed. by H. Ristow and K. Matthiae), 1962, 425f.

[18]Leander E. Keck, *op. cit.,* 85; cf. 114f.

discover that the text contains a truly comforting message
for the congregation, namely, when the situation of the
congregation really calls for comfort. But quite often he will
discover that the message of the text challenges prevailing
understandings and loyalties in the congregation, because
these understandings and loyalties do not have their origin in
the Gospel but in purely worldly conceptions and attitudes.
Obviously, such a challenging preaching may easily lead to
irritation or even hostility on the side of the congregation.
But the faithful preacher must not try to avoid this – even
though he should constantly be alert to the possibility that it
is not the Gospel that challenges the congregation but his
own pet theological, social or political ideas!

It would be hard to over-emphasize how decisive the
situation is in actualizing the message of the text. A different
situation will lead to an entirely different actualization. Willi
Marxsen once made this clear by the simple example of two
hypothetical letters written by a father to his son. The first
starts as follows: "I am rather amazed to hear that you want
to get married. I think you haven't thought enough about it
… etc," The second begins with the words: "I was very
happy to receive the invitation to your wedding … etc." Are
these two letters contradictory? That need not be so when,
for instance, the one son is eighteen years old and the other
twenty-six, or when a period of about eight years separates
the two letters to the same son. Marxsen rightly concludes
from this that the correctness of a statement does not simply
lie in the statement itself. The correctness is co-determined
by the situation for which the statement is made.[19]

This point can easily be proved by examples from Scrip-
ture itself. Consider, for instance, Isaiah 51:2, 3 compared
with Ezek. 33:24. In both texts the same argument is used,
but it is used quite differently and the difference is deter-
mined by the situation! In Ezekiel 33 the exiles in Babylon
hear of the fall of Jerusalem. Instead of seeing it as God's
judgment they console themselves by quoting an old tradi-
tion about Abraham: "Abraham was only one man; yet he
got possession of the land; but we are many; the land is
surely given us to possess." In the name of the Lord Ezekiel

[19]Willi Marxsen, op. cit., 63.

rejects this appeal to the old promise. Without repentance on the side of the people the promise will not only not come true but every appeal to it is a lie. But when we turn to Isaiah 51, we find quite a different picture. The descendants of the same exiles of Ezekiel's days have become despondent and have lost all courage and faith. And then we notice the remarkable fact that Isaiah appeals to the very same tradition and uses it as a new promise of comfort: "Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for when he was but one I called him, and I blessed him and made him many. For the Lord will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song."[20]

It is clear from this example that the use of a message is co-determined by the situation of the congregation. Indeed, the difference is so important that it can determine whether a preacher is a true or a false prophet! An example of this is found in Jeremiah 28, where we read of the dispute between Hananiah of Gibeon and Jeremiah. Both belonged to the prophetic order. In the first verses of the chapter Hananiah promises the people that within two years all the vessels of the temple and also the exiles themselves will be returned to Jerusalem. Undoubtedly Hananiah based this prophecy on the promises about the land and the temple which God had given in the past. Jeremiah, however, opposes him. Certainly he also would like Hananiah's words to be fulfilled. But seeing the unrepentant attitude of the people he knows that the promises of God (which he does not dispute) cannot apply in this situation. J.N. Sanders, who mentions this example, rightly quotes the words of Eva Oswald: "The true prophet must be able to distinguish whether a historical hour stands under the wrath or the love of God."[21] The same applies to the true preacher of today.

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[20]Cf. J.A. Sanders, article on 'Hermeneutics', in *IDB, Suppl. Vol.*, 404.
[21]*Art. cit.*, 405.

All this leads me to still another point. Taking careful account of the situation of the congregation may also be an important means *to avoid moralizing in our preaching*. Moralizing usually has two sources. The one is an anthropocentric approach to the biblical texts; instead of approaching the text from the perspective of its place in the history of redemption, the preacher concentrates entirely on the words and actions of the people in the text, the result being that these people themselves become models for morality, either positively or negatively. The congregation is called to act like them, or when their actions are sinful, not to act like them. Joseph, for instance, becomes the great example of faith, of honesty, of moral purity, etc. But the preacher ignores completely the fact that the author of the book of Genesis puts the story of Joseph within the framework of the history of salvation and that every part of this story must be preached within this very framework. The key to the whole story is found in the words of Joseph himself, spoken to his brothers prior to his death: "As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Gen. 50:20).

The second source of moralizing is the use of the old exposition-application scheme. The preacher starts with the exegesis of his text, tries to formulate the message of the text, and then tries to apply this very same message to his own congregation. Since the message has already been fixed before the application, the latter can be little else than a seeking for parallels or analogies in the present situation of the congregation. The most obvious way of doing this is to identify the congregation with the character(s) in the text. Usually it will not be difficult to find some kind of moral parallel.

Now it is not necessarily wrong to identify the people mentioned in the text with the believers of today. As a matter of fact, the Bible itself clearly indicates that the old stories were *also* meant as 'mirrors of identity'. Paul writes about the events of the Exodus and the journey through the desert that "these things are warnings for us, not to desire evil as they did" (1 Cor. 10:6). And concerning God's

judgments during the journey through the desert he writes: "Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come" (10:11). In fact we may safely assume that many stories were retained in the oral tradition, because people somehow recognized themselves in these stories. Do we not still have the same experience in our own personal reading of the Bible? Yet we should avoid the mistake of confusing identity with morality. The real point of identity is usually not in the moral aspect of the story but in the aspect of faith and/or unbelief. And the first question we should ask is not: should I act like so and so?, but: how do I, in my situation, respond to God's promises and challenges? May I, in my situation, really accept this promise or does it actually judge and condemn me? Really, our decision about what the message of a specific text is for us depends on a careful analysis of our own situation. It may well be that we, like the exiles in the days of Ezekiel, would love to identify ourselves with the promise of God to Abraham. But have we really the right to do this? Perhaps we should like to identify ourselves with the publican in Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. But do we, pious and well-to-do believers of today, have the right to do this? Should we not rather heed the warning of Søren Kierkegaard who once wrote that, from the time that Jesus told this parable, every Pharisee likes to dress as a publican? Again we see how decisive the situation is.

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There is one more point to be made. This taking into account of the situation as a constituent aspect of the sermon also may be the real answer to the critique of the *monological structure* of the sermon. As we saw in the first chapter, this is one of the main contemporary criticisms of the sermon, which, with its monological structure, is said to be out of keeping with modern dialogical patterns of communication.

In fact, communication theorists believe that communication by its very nature *is* a two-way process. The fifties and sixties witnessed many attempts to find new dialogical forms of preaching. One way is for members of the congregation to share in the preparation of the sermon. During the week a small group meets with the minister to share with him their ideas about and reactions to the text, which he then, one way or another, can incorporate into the sermon.[22] Undoubtedly this can be very effective, when properly handled, but it does not really change the monological structure of the sermon itself. Others, therefore, have tried to incorporate the dialogical element into the worship service itself, by providing the congregation with the opportunity to ask questions after the delivery of the sermon.[23] This too can be very effective, but the sermon itself remains monological in structure.

It was therefore to be expected that others would go a step further and introduce the dialogue into the sermon itself.[24] This has been tried in different ways. One can achieve it by putting two pulpits in the church and arranging a dialogue by two preachers. Or one can allow the members of the congregation to interrupt the preacher by making comments or asking questions. From the various published reports it appears that these experiments generally have been accepted favourably by the congregations. Baumann[25] mentions several values of this kind of preaching. *1*. It produces a high interest level on the part of the congregation. *2*. It helps to clarify issues. *3*. It forces people to face issues that they might otherwise have tuned out. *4*. It deepens faith.

In spite of these benefits, however, the experiments have

[22]Cf. Dietrich Ritschl, *A Theology of Proclamation*, 1960, 123ff., 133ff., 153ff.; Wolfgang Bartholomäus, *op. cit.*, 140ff.
[23]Cf. Gottesdienst im Gespräch (ed. by Gerhard Wacker and Paul-Gerhard Seiz), 1969.
[24]Cf. J. Daniel Baumann, *op. cit.*, 259–273; Reuel L. Howe, *Partners in Preaching*, 1967; William D. Thompson and Gordon C. Bennett, *Dialogue Preaching: The Shared Sermon*, 1969; John Thompson, 'When Preaching is Dialogue', *Preaching*, II (1967), 4–13; Hans-Wolfgang Heidland, *Das Verkündigungsgespräch*, 1969; Gottfried Forck, 'Predigt und Gespräch. Zur Homiletik Dietrich Bonhoeffers', in *Brüderliche Kirche – menschliche Welt, Festschrift* for Albrecht Schönherr, 1971, 55–77; M.H. Bolkestein, 'Dialogische Prediking', in *Kerk en Theologie* XII (1961), 1–19.
[25]J. Daniel Baumann, *op. cit.*, 263.

not led to a general replacement of the customary sermon by dialogue preaching. In fact, one hears little about it any more. There are several possible reasons for this. *a.* It is far too time-consuming. *b.* Not every minister can do it. It requires a specific disposition and attitude. *c.* It is questionable whether it is a real solution. Especially when two preachers converse with each other, the people in the church do not get the feeling that they are really engaged in the dialogue. In fact, it is a spectacle rather than a true dialogue. *d.* The interruption of the sermon by comments or questions is not easy either. In large congregations it is virtually impossible, but even in smaller groups it often creates all kinds of psychological problems and tensions.

It is, therefore, not surprising to see that in recent years all these experiments have faded out. As a matter of fact, the question must be asked whether this so-called dialogue preaching touches the heart of the problem. The impression is given that the real problem is the monological *form* of the sermon. Admittedly, this form aggravates the problem. But does not the real problem lie in the *content* of the sermon? This view is supported by an analysis of the complaints of the listeners. Usually they say: "I did not like the sermon today, for what the minister said had nothing to do with my own life, with my worries and frustrations, my questions and doubts, my joys and expectations. What he said may all be very true, but it did not touch me." In other words, the real problem of the sermon as monologue arises when the minister does not succeed in bringing about a real dialogue between the message of the text and the life of the listeners.

Scripture itself teaches us that God's speaking to his people is always dialogical in its very nature. God's revelation to his people is never a proclamation of some abstract, purely objective truth, but God always reveals himself into their active situation. Thus the Old Testament prophets always addressed the people in their concrete historical circumstances. So too, Paul always expounded the significance of the cross and the resurrection of Christ in direct relation to the actual needs of his congregations. Hence the various christological emphases in his letters. Even in the form of his letters we can see the dialogical nature of his

approach. He often used the so-called *diatribe* style, a style of discourse which was quite customary among the Stoic street preachers of his day.[26] In it the questions and comments of the listeners were not only anticipated but also clearly formulated and answered by the speaker. A good example of this style in Paul is to be found in Rom. 3: 1–10a. As a matter of fact, the whole letter shows many traces of this style, especially in chapters 9–11, where the apostle deals with the extremely difficult problem of the election of Israel. Keck rightly comments: "By articulating the objections, garnered from experience and formulated trenchantly, Paul took seriously the readers' anticipated responses and acknowledged them openly. More than that, he used them to lead his thinking deeper into his own understanding of the matter." He adds: "In a similar way, today's preacher can articulate openly, and as trenchantly as possible, the anticipated (and known) responses of the people to the text and its theme. This will involve the congregation in the preaching act, and give the sermon a dynamic character as well – a dialogical quality without the artificiality that sometimes attends a 'dialogue sermon'."[27] Of course, one should not fall into the trap of always using the *diatribe* style explicitly. That would be artificial too. Let us remember, it is not the form that is decisive but the content. A sermon, whatever its form, will be really dialogical when it takes the congregation with its joys and sorrows, its questions and doubts, its aspirations and frustrations seriously, by letting the light of God's redemptive Word shine upon them. Preaching that takes account of both the message of the text and the reactions of the congregation and that tries to incorporate these reactions into the exposition of the text will be *truly biblical* preaching and therefore also *relevant* preaching.

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[26]Leander E. Keck, *op. cit.,* 64f.
[27]*Op. cit.,* 66.