

FIVE

Relevant Preaching

When is preaching really relevant? The question follows directly from the two preceding chapters. And the interrogative form is intentional. I know that many people simply *state* that preaching *is* relevant, because it is the preaching of God's Word in Holy Scripture and God's Word is always relevant. The mere statement is not only too easy, even simplistic, but it is also unreal. It does not tally with the experiences of many church people. Too often one hears them complaining that sermons are intensely boring and/or meaningless.

Now a minister can dismiss these complaints by saying that the real problem is not the irrelevance of his preaching, but the unwillingness of his listeners to appreciate its relevance. In other words, it is not his fault, but they themselves are to blame. At worst the minister may even contend that his congregation's unwillingness to listen is fundamentally a matter of unbelief! Such a ministerial reaction, however understandable it may be psychologically, is also too easy and too simplistic. Admittedly, the Bible does speak of the unwillingness of the human heart to accept the gospel of grace. Jesus himself blamed the people of Jerusalem for this very thing when he said: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" (Matt. 23:37; Luke 13:34). In his letters Paul

speaks of the gospel of the cross as a '*skandalon*', a stumbling block (1 Cor. 1:23; Gal. 5:11). The sinful human heart rebels against this message of a crucified Saviour. It refuses to be so humiliated and to accept salvation by pure grace. Every preacher has to make allowance for this negative effect of the gospel. But this does not mean that he has the right to see every negative attitude to his preaching in terms of this biblical '*skandalon*'. There may also be a *skandalon* of quite a different nature, namely, a *skandalon* resulting not from the gospel itself but from the way it is presented. Sadly people do often not even collide with the *real* stumbling block, because they have already been turned aside by the *human* stumbling block which the preacher himself puts in their way; for example, by bringing the message in a dull, boring way, or by being virtually unintelligible, or by merely repeating old, pious phrases, which do not allow people to be really confronted by the gospel in all its sharpness and incisiveness.¹ For all these reasons (and many more could be added) preachers should not withdraw behind the biblical notion of the '*skandalon*' and hide themselves in innocence; instead they need to look into the mirror and ask themselves in all honesty: is it perhaps my fault that the people fail to see the relevance of the message I bring? Do my pseudo-stumbling blocks perhaps prevent my listeners from reaching the point where the decision of faith or unbelief is made?²

If we face these questions honestly we shall be led to recognize that, unfortunately, many such complaints are only too true. Too often we bring the message in such a way

¹Cf. Wilfried Joest, 'Überlegungen zum hermeneutischen Problem der Theologie', in *Praxis Ecclesiae, Festschrift für Kurt Frör* (ed. by D. Stollberg), 1970, 20ff.; Paul Tillich, 'Die Verkündigung des Evangeliums', *Sammelte Werke*, III, 265-275.

²In his sermons Calvin often mentioned the necessity for the preacher to bring the gospel message in such a way that the listener will see the relevance of the message. Cf. Pierre Marcel, *op. cit.*, 70f. I quote a few sentences from the forty-fifth sermon on Job: "What advantage would there be if we were to stay here half a day and I were to expound half a book without considering you or your profit and edification?...We must take into consideration those persons to whom the teaching is addressed....For this reason let us note well that they who have this charge to teach, when they speak to a people, are to decide which teaching will be good and profitable so that they will be able to disseminate it faithfully and with discretion to the usefulness of everyone individually".

that people feel: "It's the same old story again. We've heard it so many, many times!" Frequently the minister presents his own, more or less fixed understanding of the biblical message, offering it to a kind of '*homo homileticus*', a strange, unreal man in the pew whom the preacher himself has invented in the quiet surroundings of his study. Neither the message, nor the person addressed by the message are realities, vibrant with life, but both are familiar abstractions produced in and by the preacher's own mind. Is it any wonder that in such a case the listener fails to see the relevance of such preaching? For – and here we return to territory that has become familiar – the secret of relevant preaching is that the message of the gospel and the situation of the listeners are related to each other in such a way that the listeners discover that this message really concerns their life as it is. *Relevance occurs at the intersection of the unique message of the Bible* (cf. Chapter Three) and the *unique situation of the people in the pew* (cf. Chapter Four). Both aspects deserve our further attention.

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First, we emphasize the *uniqueness of the biblical message*. It is, of course, impossible to summarize this message in a few words. It is so profound and so rich that God himself deemed a whole Bible, consisting of no less than sixty-six books, necessary for his church. Perhaps we shall find as good a summary as possible in some verses from the Epistle to the Hebrews. First, the opening verses: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom he also created the world" (1:1,2). To this we add a few verses from the fifth chapter: "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being

made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (5:7-9). In these few verses we have the whole biblical message in a nutshell. One could say that the rest of the Bible is virtually nothing else than an almost endless series of variations on this basic theme.

Both parts of this last sentence must be emphasized. There is *one basic theme*, which has to be present in every sermon. Eduard Thurneysen, the close friend of Karl Barth, once put it thus, in opposition to the older liberal theology and preaching of the first decades of this century: "There should be no variety in the sermon. Every Sunday we must say everything and, therefore, every Sunday we must say the same thing The church should be the place where Sunday after Sunday the one necessary thing happens, namely that every mouth be stopped, and the whole world be held accountable to God" (Rom. 3:19) ... Sunday after Sunday we should lead all people, including ourselves, into the desert ..., in order that the really last refuge, the only certainty may become visible, in order that God's last and greatest words: forgiveness of sins, the Holy Spirit, mercy, redemption, resurrection, may come from our lips in an authentic way".³

Indeed, this is the basic theme of the Bible, but this one basic theme is brought out in almost endless *variations*. Every passage of scripture is a new variation, with its own specific arrangement of the notes and with its own specific tone and timbre. In every passage of Scripture the one great truth of the gospel comes out as a brand-new truth for this particular situation. Admittedly, it is not easy to discover the particularity of the message in every passage. It requires hard and painstaking work. We have to delve into the passage with all the means at our disposal in order to hear the unique variation hidden in the passage.

Unfortunately, it is at this very point that we find one of the great shortcomings of many of us who are preachers. Too often we come to a passage without expecting a new melody at all. We treat the passage almost matter-of-factly, proceed-

³Eduard Thurneysen, 'Die Aufgabe der Predigt', in *Die Aufgabe der Predigt* (ed. by Gert Hummel), 1971, 116. The article was originally published in *Pastoral-Blätter für Predigt, Seelsorge und kirchliche Unterweisung*, 63 (1921), 209-219.

ing on the assumption that we already know what it has to say. For we know our Bible, don't we? The natural result of this attitude is that many of our sermons, though based on quite different texts, look as much like each other as leaves from the same tree. Whether our sermon deals with Abraham or Job, Moses or David, it does not really make much difference, for they all have more or less the same face. (Or should we say: they all have become faceless men?) Likewise, it does not make any real difference whether we preach on a text from one of the Synoptic Gospels or from the Gospel according to St. John, whether we preach the message of Paul or of Peter. In all cases the result virtually amounts to the same, timeless message, or as Barth puts it: our preaching becomes "an inarticulate mumbling of pious words".⁴

But let us face it, in this case the fault lies not with the biblical message, but with what we do with it. We turn the message into a timeless truth which is always the same, in whatever time and under whatever circumstances it was revealed. Is it any wonder that our message does not grip our listeners but utterly bores them? Yet the biblical message is *not* a general truth: it is a very particular truth that always appears to be at right angles with our own natural thinking and feeling. It is the strange truth of a God who hates and judges and condemns all sin, and yet loves the sinner and desires him "to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). This truth is ever new again in every new situation. It is like a gemstone with myriads of facets. Even the slightest turn brings out a new and different facet. And because it is a facet of *this* gemstone it is relevant for all men and women of all times. In this respect we can agree with Paul M. Van Buren when he says: "God's Word is life itself. For a world that lies in death, the Word is the resurrection and the life. There can be no question of our making the Word relevant to the world; He did so when He created this world and reconciled it to Himself."⁵

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⁴Karl Barth, CD, IV, 3, 814.

⁵Paul M. Van Buren, 'The Word of God in the Church', *Anglican Theological Review*, October 1957, 348.

Does this mean that all the preacher need do is to exegete the passage and expound the particular message it contains? As we have seen, the *Barthian tradition* answers this question in the affirmative. Barth himself said it repeatedly in his *Homiletics*. "Preaching should be an exposition of Scripture; the preacher does not have to speak 'on' but 'from' (*ex*), drawing from the Scriptures whatever he says. He does not have to invent but rather to repeat something."⁶ Or: "There is, therefore, nothing to be said which is not already to be found in Scripture ... The preacher must accept the necessity of expounding the Book and nothing else."⁷ We find the same ideas in the excellent book of Dietrich Ritschl, *A Theology of Proclamation*. As a true Barthian he rejects every suggestion that it belongs to the task of the preacher to relate the message of the text to the situation of the listener. Emphatically he declares that the preacher does not stand as a kind of mediator between the text and the people. He is not the one who has to "get something across". All he has to do is "to observe ... the... movement ... within the text which is directed to the hearers",⁸ for "the sermon text has the self-will to cause the embodiment of God in the assembled congregation."⁹

I believe that this approach is an oversimplification. Certainly the basic idea is sound: the message we have to preach is to be found in the Scriptures. Here we listen to the voice of God's prophets and apostles as they witness to God's self-revelation in the history of Israel and in the

⁶Karl Barth, *Prayer and Preaching*, 69.

⁷*Op. cit.*, 89.

⁸Dietrich Ritschl, *op. cit.*, 148.

⁹*Op. cit.*, 147. In his article, 'Der Theologe zwischen Text und Predigt' (republished in *Die Aufgabe der Predigt*, 278-294), Hermann Diem also puts all emphasis on the exegesis of the text. This is so important, even decisive, to him that he dares to say: when the exegete has succeeded in finding the kerygma of the text, he has the 'critical point' of all his endeavours behind him! To illustrate it he uses the picture of a man who wants to learn how to swim and thinks that he has to keep himself afloat by his own movements. But soon he discovers that he can swim only when he allows himself to be carried by the water. So the preacher should allow himself to be carried by the witness of the text (286f.) He has not to worry about the situation of the listener either, or to be concerned with the question whether he is able to 'translate' the message for modern man. He may leave all this safely to the text itself. By its kerygma the text will create the situation in which hearing is really possible (289f.)

history of Jesus Christ. With the church of all ages I believe that these Scriptures are the Word of God, "which contains all things necessary for salvation"^{9a} and which, therefore, is relevant for all times. But we may never forget that even in the Bible the Word of God always occurs in a historical situation and context. Although the Word is meant for all times, it never takes the form of a timeless truth. Therefore, our preaching today, in order to be the Word of God for people of today, must be addressed to these people in their concrete historical situation. At this point it is obvious that our twentieth century is vastly different from the first century in which Paul wrote his letters and the evangelists wrote their Gospels, or from the eighth century B.C. in which Amos and Hosea spoke to the people of Israel. Preaching that does not take this *time-gap* into account becomes timeless and may easily "miss the mark".

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It is evident that we are faced here with a very complex problem that has to be handled carefully. *Two dangers* in particular are to be avoided studiously. The first danger is that of *exaggerating* this time-gap. We find this, for instance, in the writings of *Ernst Lange*. According to him the preacher has to exegete his text very carefully, but then he adds: "What he finds in his exegesis is by no means what he has to preach, not even in this way that he tries to find 'new words' for this historical event (described in the text), words that are intelligible for people of today. For the situations, which in his text are becoming full of promise through the gospel, *belong to the past*. The listeners who in the text are exposed to the effect of the proclaimed gospel, are *not* his listeners".¹⁰ Elsewhere he writes: "The text, as historical text, is a witness to the fact that the Christian tradition becomes relevant in a very definite, *past* situation and as such the text is *fully*

^{9a}Thirty-Nine Articles, Art. 6.

¹⁰Ernst Lange, *Predigen als Beruf*, 1976, 64.

relevant for the situation *Hic et Nunc* (here and now)."¹¹ Now we should not misunderstand Lange. He does not say that the biblical message (or as he likes to call it: the Christian tradition) is not relevant at all. On the contrary, he believes that *every text* speaks of the relevance of this tradition. To him the whole Bible is one long process of this becoming relevant of the biblical tradition in certain historical situations. On this point I think he is right. In the Bible we do find this movement of the revelation becoming relevant in ever new situations. But I cannot agree with his conclusion, namely, that because the texts speak of relevance in past situations the text is consequently "fully irrelevant for the situation *Hic et Nunc*".

This strikes me as an extreme position, which completely ignores that history displays not only discontinuity but also *continuity*. Undoubtedly, there is an element of discontinuity. We see this in particular in the so-called historical texts. But there are also many texts in which the *common* situation of man, before God and in relation to his fellow-man, stands to the fore. In this connection, we could cite many passages from the psalms and the prophets, the Gospels and the Epistles. In them we should find a great deal of direct relevance, enabling the believer of today to recognize himself and his own needs immediately. But even in passages where the discontinuity predominates, there is usually also an element of continuity present in the deeper layers of the text. In his *Biblical Hermeneutics* Karl Frör says concerning the New Testament that there are many analogies between the congregation then and now.¹² Quite often we discover that we face the same needs, temptations, dangers and difficulties. Of course, even then we still have to actualize the message for our present situation, which has its own uniqueness. Frör offers the following poignant formulation: "The situation in which we find ourselves today is unique (German: *einmalig*), inexchangeable, but it is not occurring

¹¹*Op. cit.*, 42 (my emphasis K.R.) Cf. also what he writes on page 28: "What the preacher has to say about the relevance of the tradition for the present (*Hic et Nunc*) is not found in the text".

¹²Kurt Frör, *op. cit.*, 252ff.

for the first time (German: *erstmalig*)."¹³ "Despite all the changes that take place the spiritual situation of the pilgrim church remains the same. The same gifts nourish her and the same temptations threaten her. What happened to her on her way through the ages and what will happen to her in the future has been announced paradigmatically in the 'preaching book' of the Old and New Testaments. Because of this deep simultaneity in all change it is possible to bridge the gap between the preaching of the text and the preaching of today. And the congregation of today has an immediate understanding of what was said to the congregation of the past, because it is addressed by the same Lord and stands in the same battle of faith."¹⁴

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This basic continuity, however, should not cause us to fall into the other danger, namely, that of *underestimating the discontinuity*! Frör's formulation is also true when we reverse it! Although our situation may not be occurring for the first time (*erstmalig*), nevertheless it still is unique (*einmalig*) and inexchangeable. Every age has its own questions and problems which in this specific form did *not* occur before. We do *not* live in the eighth century B.C. or in the first century A.D. We live now, in this twentieth century and in our preaching we have to take this fact entirely seriously. It will not do to regard the basic problem as a matter of 'language' only. This is suggested by D. Ritschl, when he says that we should "go right ahead in our modern way of expression",¹⁵ to which he

¹³*Op. cit.*, 252. Cf. also John Dryden's saying: "For mankind is ever the same and nothing is lost out of nature, though everything is altered", in 'On the Characters in the Canterbury Tales', in Preface to *Fables, Ancient and Modern*. I have borrowed this quotation from Barbara W. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, 1978, where it occurs on the page after the title page. Her Foreword includes other interesting quotations. From Voltaire: "History never repeats itself, man always does." From the French medievalist Edouard Perroy: "Certain ways of behaviour, certain reactions against fate throw mutual light upon each other." Mrs. Tuchmann herself says: "Qualities of conduct that we recognize as familiar amid these alien (medieval) surroundings are revealed as permanent in human nature" (*op. cit.*, XIV).

¹⁴Kurt Frör, *op. cit.*, 252/3.

¹⁵Dietrich Ritschl, *op. cit.*, 139.

adds: "Thus we avoid the intellectual complications which arise when the gap of the famous 'two thousand years' between the Bible and the 'modern man' dominates the sermon." To be honest, I wish that it were only a matter of language! In actual fact it goes much deeper.

In the twenty centuries that have passed since the birth of Christ, there have been tremendous changes in our whole culture. Indeed it is a commonplace to say that we in our century are witnessing changes that far surpass the changes of the previous nineteen centuries. Suddenly the old cultural pattern of a society dominated by agriculture and craftsmanship has been replaced by that of an industrialized, urbanized society. The consequences are staggering. Instead of being static our culture has become dynamic-functional. Uniformity has given place to plurality, and old-fashioned, patriarchal patterns of authority are rapidly disappearing under the impact of a continuing process of democratization that affects all areas of life. All this suggests that we have arrived at a decisive juncture in our Western civilization; so that every serious preacher must needs take account of the impact produced by all these changes upon the lives of his listeners. He cannot and may not proclaim the biblical message as if we are still living in a cultural climate that is basically similar to that of the New Testament, or even to that of the sixteenth century.

Preachers should perhaps listen more carefully to modern historians. In the preface of her fascinating book on the fourteenth century, *A Distant Mirror*, Barbara W. Tuchman observes: "People of the Middle Ages existed under mental, moral, and physical circumstances so different from our own as to constitute almost a foreign civilization."¹⁶ A little further on she describes the difference between that time and ours in the following way: "The insistent principle (of the Christian religion) that the life of the spirit and of the afterworld was superior to the here and now, to material life on earth, is one that the modern world does not share, no matter how devout some present-day Christians may be. The rupture of this principle and its replacement by belief in

¹⁶Barbara W. Tuchman, *op. cit.*, XIV.

the worth of the individual and of an active life not necessarily focussed on God is, in fact, what created the modern world and ended the Middle Ages."¹⁷ I suppose that what Mrs. Tuchman says about the Middle Ages applies, to a large extent, also to the century of the Reformation. In that century too (and also for quite some time afterwards) the Christian religion (with the "insistent principle" mentioned by Mrs. Tuchman) was still "the matrix and law of ...life, omnipresent, compulsory".¹⁸ But all this emphatically belongs to the past. The cultural climate has changed completely, and every preacher should realize that his listeners have been deeply affected by this change. Therefore he should try to speak the biblical message in such a way that his listeners discover that it is of utmost relevance for them in their actual situation in this last quarter of the twentieth century.

Naturally, this does not mean that the biblical message must be *adapted* to this situation. Adaptation implies that the situation lords it over the message and determines what is relevant and what is not. This always leads to a *reduction* of the message, robbing it of its critical power and changing it into a sop that does no more than satisfy the jaded palate of the listener. P.T. Forsyth rightly warned his audience (which mainly consisted of theological students): "We must all preach *to* our age, but woe to us if it is our age we preach, and only hold up the mirror to our time."¹⁹ No, it is not adaptation that we need, but rather what Calvin called '*accommodation*'. Calvin used this term again and again in his doctrines of revelation and scripture and meant by it that God in his revelation condescends to our level, in order that we may understand him.²⁰ R. Bohren has taken up this expression in his homiletics and applied it to our problem. He calls it "the accommodation of the Holy Spirit".²¹ Just as in the Incarnation "the Son of God stooped so low as to take upon Himself our flesh, subject to so many miseries",²² so in

¹⁷*Op. cit.*, XIX.

¹⁸*Op. cit.*, XIX.

¹⁹P.T. Forsyth, *op. cit.*, 5.

²⁰Cf. my book *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture*, 1962, 69ff.; Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, 1957, 2ff.; Werner Krusche, *Das Wirken des Heiligen Geistes nach Calvin*, 1957, 174.

²¹Rudolf Bohren, *Predigtlehre*, 1971, 462.

²²John Calvin, in his *Commentary on John's Gospel*, Vol. I, 45.

the preaching of the Word the Holy Spirit lets the gospel enter into all kinds of different situations. On each occasion the gospel "accommodates itself" to the hearer in his particular situation, without losing its power or its character of 'skandalon'.²³ On the contrary, exactly in this accommodation it appears to be the living voice of God, penetrating into the actual life of the listener, yes, into his very heart, the centre of his being.

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All this is not just a neat theological theory; we see it happening time and again *in the Bible itself*. On pages 66f. we used the examples of Ezekiel and Isaiah. Both used the same tradition, but they used it in quite different ways, and these ways were determined by the situation of their listeners. The truth and, therefore, the relevance of the biblical message is always co-determined by the situation. Exactly in this way God's Word proves to be a word-in-action. It is never static but always dynamic. It is never just 'old-time religion'. On the contrary, it is a Word that is constantly 'on the move'. In fact, the whole Bible is one long record of how God's truth is constantly being *interpreted* and *actualized* in ever new situations. What is even more, the Bible shows us that new situations may cause the 'old' truth to be *re-interpreted* and *re-actualized*, in order to be relevant again for a new, as yet unknown situation. Here are a few examples of this intricate process, taken from both the Old and New Testament.

As far as the *Old Testament* is concerned, we find evidence of this process in all its parts.²⁴ In the laws of the Pentateuch the most outstanding example is the difference between the two versions of the Decalogue in Exodus 20 and Deuter-

²³Rudolf Bohren, *op. cit.*, 463.

²⁴For this section on the Old Testament I have made extensive use of an article by B.J. Oosterhoff, Professor of Old Testament in the Seminary of the Christian Reformed Church in the Netherlands: 'Herinterpretatie in het Oude Testament' (Re-interpretation within the Old Testament), *Rondom het Woord*, XV (1973), 95-117.

onomy 5. Although Exodus 20 explicitly states that God himself spoke these 'ten words', we observe in Deuteronomy 5 that, when they are re-issued before Israel's entrance into Canaan, Moses does not hesitate to make small changes in order to make them fit the new situation of Israel as a settled nation.²⁵ The same happens in the book of Deuteronomy to the laws of the so-called Book of the Covenant, originally published in Ex. 20:22–23:19.²⁶ Apparently at a later stage of Israel's history it was felt that these old laws, the principles of which were retained, had to be updated in order to be suitable for a different set of circumstances. Something similar can be observed in some of the psalms, Psalm 51, for instance, undoubtedly was originally a song of individual confession of sin, but by the addition of the verses 18 and 19 the whole psalm became a confession of sin for the whole nation during the exile.²⁷

In the prophets too we find examples of re-interpretation and re-actualization of older material for a new situation. Is. 14:1–3 clearly is a later insertion referring to the return from the exile, which means that thus an older prophecy (Is. 13:2–14:23), which had its setting in the prophet's own time, has been re-actualized for a new situation. B.J. Oosterhoff even suggests that the idea of re-interpretation and re-actualization may provide the key to the baffling problem of Deutero-Isaiah. He asks: Could the second half of the book be a re-interpretation of old words of Isaiah himself? Could

²⁵Cf. J.A. Thompson, who in the Introduction to his commentary on *Deuteronomy* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries), 1974, writes: "On the view that Moses was responsible for both forms of the decalogue it is not inconceivable that after nearly forty years he would restate some of his principles to suit a new set of circumstances. Alternatively, it has been argued that Mosaic principles set out in the Exodus decalogue were re-expressed at some undefined time after his death in slightly different terms" (*op. cit.*, 29). Likewise M.G. Kline writes: "In covenant renewal documents, modification of the stipulations, and particularly modernization, was customary. That explains the various differences between the Ex. XX and Dt. V forms of the Decalogue. For example, Dt. V. 21 adds 'his field' because of the relevance of land ownership to Israel's now imminent inheritance of Canaan" (article on 'Ten Commandments', in *The New Bible Dictionary*, 1962, 1251).

²⁶For a list of parallels, see J.A. Thompson, *op. cit.*, 27.

²⁷The same principle applies to the psalms 22 (addition of the verses 27–31), 69 (addition of the verses 30–36), 102 (addition of the verses 12–23), 107 (addition of the verses 2 and 3). It is also very likely that some of the so-called royal psalms received their messianic interpretation after the exile, when Israel no longer had kings (cf. B.J. Oosterhoff, *art. cit.*, 110).

it be a collection of sermons on texts of Isaiah by a prophet during the exile?²⁸

Finally, we observe the same process also in the so-called historical books. There can be no doubt that the author of Chronicles made use of the books of Samuel and Kings. Yet he gives a new interpretation. He interprets Israel's history as a theocratic history with two centres: the temple cult and the Davidic dynasty. This view not only serves as the criterion of selection for the material he uses, but it also gives him the opportunity to write in such a way that the history of the past becomes a message for his own day.²⁹

When we turn to the *New Testament* we first of all see that the New Testament writers deal in the same way with the Old Testament, their Bible! In a new christological re-interpretation and re-actualization Matthew applies Hosea 11:1, originally referring to the Exodus, to the return of the child Jesus from Egypt. In the Songs of Mary and of Zechariah much old material is applied to the new redemptive situation created by the coming of the Messiah. Likewise in Eph. 4:8ff. Paul re-interprets Ps. 68:18 and applies it to the exalted Christ, who, when he ascended on high, gave gifts to men. While in Acts 4:25 and 26, Psalm 2 is interpreted as referring to Herod and Pilate, who with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel were gathered against God's holy Servant Jesus.

But this is only one aspect of New Testament re-interpretation and re-actualization. What is even more important is the fact that *within the New Testament itself* we again observe the same process. Take, for example, the Gospels. Each in their own way, the evangelists want to tell the story of Jesus, who is the Christ, or as John puts it quite frankly at the end of his Gospel: "These (things) are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, you may have life in his name" (20:31). Obviously these men are not writing as historians or biographers, but as Christian preachers. As such they are natur-

²⁸Art. cit., 116.

²⁹Cf. art. cit., 102ff. Cf. also Edward J. Young, An Introduction to the Old Testament, 1956, 393; P.R. Ackroyd, article on 'Chronicles, I and II', in *IDB, Suppl. Vol.*, 156-158.

ally deeply concerned about the content of their message: it must be a faithful account of the life, death and resurrection of their Lord. But they are no less concerned about the needs of their congregations, who live some forty or more years after the resurrection and ascension of the Lord. In these forty or more years all kinds of developments have taken place and therefore the message about Jesus Christ has to be told in a way that is relevant for the present situation of the congregations. And so in the Gospels themselves we clearly see the beginnings of a new process of re-interpretation and re-actualization.

Here are a few examples from the Gospel of Matthew, the most 'congregational' of all four Gospels. Comparing it with Mark we notice, for instance, that the story of the storm on the sea underwent some remarkable changes. In Mark 4:36-41 the story is little more than a literal account of what happened, with the purpose of proclaiming Jesus as the Lord of nature. The account of Matthew in ch. 8:23-28 has the same purpose, but now it is simultaneously applied to the congregation of Matthew's own day. We see this in the emphasis on the disciples as "following Jesus" (v. 23; cf. 18-22) and addressing him as "Lord" (v. 25) and in the way that the rebuke is changed from "Have you no faith?" (Mark 4:40) into: "O men of little faith" (Matt. 8:26). The original story about Jesus and his disciples has now also become a story about Jesus and the contemporary church. J.C. Fenton's comment on the passage in Matthew makes the point well: "The Church, like the disciples in the boat, is not to fear the persecution of the world; it will not be destroyed. The Lord is present with his Church, and it must believe in him".³⁰ Very remarkable is also the different use Matthew makes of the parable of the lost sheep, when compared with Luke. In Luke 15 the parable is used as a warning against the Pharisees and scribes (v.2), who criticize Jesus for associating with tax-collectors and sinners. Matthew records the very same parable in ch. 18, a chapter that deals with relations within the Christian congregation. It now becomes a warning against Pharisaism within the congregation itself. Consequently, the point is no longer the conversion of the

³⁰J.C. Fenton, *Saint Matthew* (the Pelican Gospel Commentaries), 1963, 130.

one sinner, which causes rejoicing in heaven (Luke 15:7), but the will of the heavenly Father that none of the little ones in the congregation should perish (Matt. 18:14). In the new situation, that of the Christian congregation, the old truth (= the original parable) is being re-actualized. It is now used "to teach care for one another, and particularly for those who have *gone astray* in sin".³¹ We find a similar change of setting in the parable of the workers in the vineyard, in Matt. 20:1-16). Without a doubt, this parable too referred originally to Jesus' controversy with the Pharisees over his association with tax collectors and sinners. But by inserting it into a conversation of Jesus with his disciples Matthew now reactualizes it as a message about relationships within the congregation. Very interesting is also the Matthean version of the parable of the great banquet. In Luke 14:15-24 the parable is meant as a warning for the Pharisees (cf. v. 1). In Matt. 22:1-10 we find a slightly different version (e.g. the Kingdom of God is here represented as a marriage feast), but it is clearly the same story and it is still aimed at the Pharisees (cf. 21:45, 46). Matthew, however, adds a new ending about the man who does not have a wedding garment. This may originally have been another parable of Jesus himself,³² but even so, by adding this part, Matthew re-actualizes the original story with a view to the Christian congregation. Its members may have heeded the call to come to the marriage feast, but this does not yet mean that therefore they are automatically on the safe side. They are asked a new question: Do you really wear the wedding garment? Are you really clothed with the robe of righteousness, i.e. the new life which characterizes those who belong to the Kingdom?

Joachim Jeremias has made an extensive study of the ways in which the parables have been re-interpreted and re-actualized during the process of transmission, cf. *The Parables of Jesus*, 1963. At the close of his discussion of this process he formulates ten "laws of transformation" (113ff.). The intention of his study is to recover the original forms of

³¹J. C. Fenton, *op. cit.*, 296.

³²So, e.g., R.V.G. Tasker, *The Gospel according to St Matthew* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries), 1961, 207.

Jesus' sayings. In other words, his work is part of the search for the so-called historical Jesus. "Our task is a return to the actual living voice of Jesus. How great the gain if we succeed in rediscovering here and there behind the veil the features of the Son of Man! To meet with him can alone give power to our preaching" (*op.cit.*, 114).

Personally I am rather sceptical of this search for the historical Jesus. It not only separates the so-called historical Jesus (Jesus as he really was) from the Christ of faith (Jesus as preached by the Early Church), but it also proceeds on the assumption that the real message lies behind our present texts. But we have no other message than the one contained in these texts! *This* is the message the Holy Spirit has given to the church.

Yet the discoveries Jeremias has made about the process of transformation are of great importance for every preacher, because they can really help him to get a better insight into what the *present texts* want to say. Of course, one must always remain cautious, realizing that there is a strongly hypothetical element in this kind of research. Many New Testament scholars, for instance, believe that there is no clear borderline between the words of Jesus and those of the prophets of the Early Church. They believe that quite often words were put into Jesus' mouth, which in actual fact were utterances of these prophets. In our opinion, such a hypothesis has no foundation in the facts. Cf. William Barclay, *The First Three Gospels*, 1966, 101ff. I agree with Barclay's conclusion "that the Form Critics have done an immeasurable service in enabling us to understand the formation, the genesis and the aim of the gospels, but that their one mistake is their failure to see that the gospel writers sought to awaken faith *by showing Jesus as he was*. This is not to say that they have the standards and the methods and the accuracy of a modern scientific historian, but it is to say that their aim was to *show Jesus as he was in the days of his flesh in order that men might by faith find the Risen Lord*" (*op.cit.*, 115 – my emphasis, K.R.).

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It would not be difficult to give many more examples both from the Gospels and also from the Epistles,³³ but it is time to draw some *conclusions for our preaching*. The main conclusion seems to be that the Bible not only warrants but even urges us, when new, as yet unknown situations arise, to preach the biblical message in such a way that our sermon is a re-interpretation and re-actualization of the original message. This statement could, of course, be misunderstood and misused. Some people might find it perilously near the so-called '*life-situation preaching*' advocated by such liberal theologians as Harry Emerson Fosdick.³⁴ They took their starting point in the needs of their listeners or the issues of the hour, the result being, as Robert J. McCracken, Fosdick's successor acknowledged, that "what is said in church on Sunday frequently has the character of an editorial comment with a mild religious flavour. It lacks any distinctive Christian insight and emphasis".³⁵ What I mean is quite different from this. I firmly believe that the message the minister has to preach is to be found in his *text*. There, and nowhere else, does he find the '*kerygma*' for his sermon. As the *Second Helvetic Confession* puts it so clearly: "this Word of God", i.e., the Word which we find in Scripture, has to be preached. But – and this is my point – preaching is not just a repetition of the message of the text. The Word that the preacher hears in his text has to be said *anew*. Every sermon should be a *new claim of God* upon the listener of today in his concrete, historical situation. But then, of course, the listener himself, with his experiences and questions, with his faith and his doubts, should also be present in the sermon! For how otherwise will he be able really to hear God's claim on his life?

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³³E. G., Paul on divorce, cf. Leander E. Keck, *op. cit.*, 122ff.

³⁴Cf. Craig Skinner, *The teaching ministry of the pulpit. Its history, theology, psychology, and practice for today*, 1973, 55ff.

³⁵Robert J. McCracken, *The Making of the Sermon*, 1956, 62.

This view of preaching also entails a specific *method of sermon preparation*. Both the traditional method of explication and application, which we still find in many textbooks, and the method advocated by Lange and his friends fall short here. The *traditional* method is virtually a matter of one-way traffic. The preacher's first task is to make a careful exegesis of his text in order to find the content of his message. Having found this he sits down and tries to find ways of applying this message to his listeners. He draws, as it were, lines from the '*kerygma*' of the text to the lives of the listeners. Or to put it in a less kind but perhaps clearer way: he puts the *kerygma* into the wheelbarrow of his sermon and dumps it off at the pews. The method of *Lange* and his friends is virtually the opposite. Taking his starting point in the situation of his listeners, the preacher goes to the biblical tradition as exemplified in the chosen text in order to look there for some meaningful and relevant answers to the questions of the listeners. But the problem of this method is that the function of the Bible is easily limited to answering our questions, while the questions the Bible itself wants to put to us are scarcely heard. The following method should avoid the shortcomings of both other methods. It consists of the following steps.

1. Since the text has the primacy – this is the strong point of the traditional method – we should always *start with the text*. We should read it carefully and do this several times in order to get, so to speak, the 'feel' of the text. We should also try to formulate its message. Naturally, this is only a preliminary formulation, but at this stage we must have some idea of the message.

2. As soon as we think we have succeeded in this, we should reverse the poles and try to look at the text *through the eyes of our listeners*. We should ask ourselves some of the following questions: How will they react to this text and to the message it contains? Will they immediately understand it? Or will they only think that they understand it, while in actual fact they misunderstand it? (Especially in the case of a well-known text the listeners often have their own pre-understanding which may well be a hindrance to a proper understanding.) Will the message please them? Or will it

evoke feelings of resistance or annoyance? And if so, why? The preacher should ask these questions and many more at this early stage of sermon preparation, and he should jot down all the ideas that come to him, even though he may have to discard most of them later on. This second stage may well be the most 'original' and most 'creative' stage in the whole process.

3. Having collected all these ideas the preacher should *turn to the text again*. Now he has to apply himself to the 'hard labour' of careful and painstaking exegesis. Having a general 'feel' of the text is not enough. He has to seek for the special variation on the basic theme that is hidden in this text. But after stage two he does not do it 'tabula rasa' (with a blank slate) any more. Searching for the *original kerygma*, i.e., the message the writer of the text wanted to convey to his original readers, he cannot help remembering the reactions of his own listeners.

4. Once he has found the original *kerygma* he now explicitly *relates* it to these reactions. In some cases it may be that the original *kerygma* gives the direct answer to these reactions. In other cases it may well be that the original *kerygma* is at right angles with these reactions and is severely critical of them. The biblical message is not just a pleasing and comforting message, but often it criticizes and judges us. And to a large extent this is determined by the situation. If Ezekiel had used the Abraham tradition as a comforting message for the unrepentant Jews, he would have strengthened their unbelief and would himself have been a false prophet. It may also be that the original *kerygma* has no direct bearing on the situation of the listeners. Then the preacher may have to do what Matthew did with the parable of the great banquet: go beyond it and carry its movement on until it really intersects with the new situation. No one can say beforehand what has to be done. The preacher has to find it for himself in the process of fulfilling his double task of being representative for both his text and his people.

5. Having discovered what he has to do in this particular instance the preacher should sit down and carefully formulate the *aim of his sermon*. He should try to formulate this aim in one simple sentence: "In this sermon I want to tell the

congregation so and so or I aim to motivate them to do this or that" Naturally this aim should be in line with the original *kerygma*. To put it in a simple formula: the aim is the *kerygma-in-motion*, namely, moving towards and into the situation, in order to shed the light of God's Word on the situation and/or to challenge and change it, when necessary.

6. When the aim has been clearly defined, the preacher is ready to prepare the *outline* of his sermon and, if necessary, to write the complete sermon.

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It will be obvious that this method does not make the task of sermon preparation any easier. On the contrary, it becomes more difficult. It means that the preacher must not only be a good *exegete of the Bible* (it is to be hoped that he has learned this in his seminary or college), but he should no less be a careful *exegete of his congregation*. He really has to know his listeners. He has to know who they are and where they are, he has to know what they think and how they are experiencing and coping with all the changes that are taking place, not only around them but also within them. This second kind of 'exegesis' is quite a demanding task. It is really not enough that a preacher regularly reads his newspaper and looks at the T.V. news. He should also be acquainted with contemporary literature and art and with the findings of the social scientists and the psychologists. But above all he should be a faithful pastor who knows his people, who knows what they think and feel. He should know and share their joys and their sorrows, their ambitions and their frustrations, their doubts and their temptations. And in his sermon he should relate the *kerygma* of his text to these actual people. Or to put it in another way: in his sermon he should try to build a *new bridge* between the text and the people. How he has to do this no one can tell him beforehand. No one can give him the exact specifications of the bridge. No method will guarantee sure and quick results. Every sermon is an entirely new venture that re-

quires much creativity on the part of the preacher.³⁶ He has, one could say, to start building from both banks of the river, and the sermon will be a real bridge only when the two parts meet in the middle.

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At this point the reader may be inclined to ask: But does it lie *within the power of the preacher* to make the Word of God effective? Does this method of preaching, when successful, perhaps guarantee that the Word of God will do its work? The answer must be a loud and strong No! At this point we must take up again the major concern of Karl Barth. Indeed, every preacher should always remember that God is and remains the Subject of his own Word. Man can never and nowhere dispose of the Word of God. However true it may be that preachers of the Gospel are co-workers of God, through whom, as the *First Helvetic Confession* (*Confessio Helvetica Prior*) puts it, God "imparts and offers to those who believe in Him the knowledge of Himself and the forgiveness of sins, converts, strengthens and comforts men, but also threatens and judges them", we must at the same time affirm with this same confession" that in all things we ascribe all efficacy and power to God the Lord alone, and alone the imparting to the minister. For it is certain that this power and efficacy never should or can be attributed to a creature, but God dispenses it to those He chooses according to his free will"(art. 15).³⁷ We can also put it in this way: preaching can be properly discussed only within the framework of the *doctrine of the Holy Spirit*. As John Knox says: "True preaching from start to finish is the work of the Spirit."³⁸ Every preacher should be aware of this and constantly realize that without the Spirit all his efforts amount to nothing.³⁹ At the same time he should also realize that he

³⁶Cf. Heribert Arens, Franz Richardt, Josef Schulte, *Kreativität und Predigtarbeit*, 1975.

³⁷Arthur Cochrane, *op. cit.*, 105. Karl Barth quotes this article in *CD*, I, 1, 80.

³⁸John Knox, *The Integrity of Preaching*, 1957, 89.

³⁹Cf. William Barclay, *The Promise of the Spirit*, 1960, 106: "The preacher may be a scholar, a pastor, an administrator, an ecclesiastical statesman, a scintillating orator, a social reformer. He is nothing unless he is a man of the Spirit".

may not reverse this statement and neglect his own responsibilities. It belongs to the essence of the Spirit's work that he takes man into his service.⁴⁰ This is also the reason why it is so important that we find the right method of preaching. Even though it is true that the Spirit can still do his mysterious work by means of poor preaching, we on our part should do our utmost to find a method that is in conformity with the Spirit's own wish. We believe that the Bible, the Spirit's own book, shows us such a method.

Following the lead given by God himself in his self-revelation as recorded in the Bible, the preacher is called to *relate* the biblical message to the actual life of his hearers. He has to show its relevance in a continuous process of interpretation and re-interpretation, of actualization and re-actualization. He has to build the bridge across which the living Word may come and do its wondrous work. Whether the Word will cross the bridge and do its work, whether the listener will *experience* the relevance of the message is beyond the power of the preacher. And let him be thankful for that ! His task is difficult enough as it is! It is a great comfort for every preacher to know that the final decisions are not in his hands, but in those of God himself, who is the sovereign Lord of his own Word and will take care of it.

Preaching is a task given to men who, according to Calvin's well-known saying, are nothing more than "puny men risen from the dust".⁴¹ But these puny men have a promise, which extends even to our twentieth century with all its tremendous changes. It is this promise: "For as the rain and snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout,

⁴⁰Cf. what the *Second Helvetic Confession* says in Ch. I: "For although 'no one can come to Christ unless he be drawn by the Father' (John 6:44), and unless the Holy Spirit inwardly illuminates him, yet we know that it is surely the will of God that his Word should be preached outwardly also. God could indeed, by his Holy Spirit, or by the ministry of an angel, without the ministry of St. Peter, have taught Cornelius in the Acts; but, nevertheless, he refers him to Peter, of whom the angel speaking says, 'He shall tell you what you ought to do'" (Arthur Cochrane, *op. cit.*, 225). Here lies one of the basic differences between the work of Christ and that of the Spirit. Christ did his work for us, but without us. The Holy Spirit does his work also for us, but at the same time employs us in his service.

⁴¹John Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, iii, 1.

giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it" (Is. 55:10, 11).