

THE THREE FORMS OF THE WORD OF GOD

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THIS IS A REFLECTION on the Word of God—or, more exactly, on the ecclesial or liturgical practice of the Word of God. Karl Barth (1886-1968) seems to me to have provided some particularly helpful insights. Called ‘the theologian of the Word of God’, his magisterial *Church Dogmatics* was precisely a return to the Word of God.

We need to note Barth’s place in the evolution of theology in the twentieth century. All theology, all understanding of the faith, is situated between two poles, that of the Gospel message on the one hand and the actual state of the world on the other. Theologies are distinguishable according to which of these poles they most respond to. Thus, reacting to the ‘liberal theology’ which, according to him, had reduced the Gospel to modern culture, to a simple religious dressing up of modernity, Barth sought to re-focus attention on the pole of the Word of God in opposition to the spirit of the world.

Certainly there was in this endeavour the danger of distancing the Gospel from the world. But on the other hand, the firm anchorage that Barth and his companions had in the Word of God enabled them to strongly oppose the Nazi ideology of the ‘German Christians’ and to inspire a parallel Church, the ‘Confessing Church’.

It is no surprise, then, that the first volume of *Church Dogmatics* is consecrated to the doctrine of the Word of God. I shall retain a distinction that was characteristic of Barth’s theology, that of the three forms of the Word of God.

The Preached Word

The Word of God impacts upon us first in the form of the preached Word, in the preaching of the Church. Thus, right from the beginning, the context is ecclesial and liturgical. Here we

recognise Karl Barth the pastor of the village of Safenwil in Switzerland (1911-1921). For him the principal function of the pastor is preaching, the proclamation of the Word of God. That resonates with us Catholics. For us, also, the first part of the Eucharistic celebration is a celebration of the Word which culminates in the preaching of the homily which applies the Word of God for us today.

The question that arises, then, is how preaching, the homily, can be called the Word of God. For preaching is a human word, a thoroughly human word. The preacher is not a loud-speaker, a voice box of the Holy Spirit. The preacher speaks in human language with human reasoning and sentiments. His preaching shows all his qualities and is affected by all his human weaknesses.

But, by the grace of God, through the inspiration of God, this entirely human word is elevated to the dignity of Word of God. In the human word the very Word of God is expressed and heard. Barth wrote:

Hence the preaching is no longer only the effect of a human will with its own character, it is first of all and above all the proper action of God; thus our human words about God are no longer only human, they are also first of all and above all the very Word of God.

[And he concludes:] The preached Word of God is a human word about God in which, and through which, God Himself speaks of Himself.

This means that the hearers of the preaching can hear the Word of God through the human word of the preacher. But we need to add at this point a corollary to Barth’s exposition or, more precisely, we need to clarify something which is only implicit in his teaching. For the hearers to be able to perceive the Word of God

in the preaching which they hear, they must be themselves inspired by the Holy Spirit. It is necessary that their human hearing be elevated to the level of the Word of God. We could say that their ears must be attuned with the Word of God by the Holy Spirit. For only the Spirit of God can truly hear the Word of God.

This leads to another question. If the Spirit is present to all the faithful, not just the clergy, could one legitimately exclude any of them from preaching? Enough here to open a few reflection starters. To be sure no group of faithful (women, for example) can in principle be excluded from the ministry of preaching. Nonetheless, it is appropriate that this ministry be confided to the faithful who are the most able, as is the case for other ecclesial functions. Moreover, in our time when we are discovering the fruits of dialogue, it is more than desirable that we establish places and times for sharing the Word, be it during liturgical celebrations or elsewhere.

The Written Word

One more thing as we follow the thread of Barth's exposition. If the word of the preacher inspired by the Spirit of God becomes Word of God, it is because it is connected with Scripture which itself is Word of God insofar as the Scripture is inspired by the Spirit of God. Here again the progression of the Eucharistic liturgy is very significant. The homily follows the biblical readings and is offered as a commentary and application of these readings from the Old and New Testaments.

Consequently there is continuity between the written Word and the preached Word. All the more is this so since Scripture is itself a written preaching, that of the prophets and apostles:

The origin of this resemblance [the continuity between Scripture and preaching] comes from the fact that Scripture is itself only secondarily something written; it is primarily the account of a preaching pronounced by human lips.

[It follows that:] Jeremiah and Paul are at the beginning, the present-day preacher of the



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Gospel is at the end of one and the same line.

The continuity between the apostolic preaching and the preaching of the Church presupposes that this latter be faithful to the former;

The reality [*i.e.* the authenticity and effectiveness] of the preaching is clearly determined by the link to Scripture, which is its foundation.

This is precisely the meaning that Barth attributes to 'apostolic succession'. There is apostolic succession when the successor is submitted to the predecessor:

Apostolic succession can have for the Church only one meaning: its submission to the Canon [of Scripture], that is, the effective recognition of the word of the prophets and apostles as the rule for every word in the Church.

We can see here Barth making a point against the Catholic conception of apostolic succession, understood as a papal succession down the centuries. This is criticised as being a somewhat legalistic conception, rather difficult to verify historically. Barth is right to insist on the spiritual aspect of such an apostolic succession as being a succession according to the Spirit of the Scriptures. But thereby we recognise another aspect of the catholic conception. It is the bishop, as successor of the apostles, who is the first to receive the mission of announcing the Word of God in the Church; all others exercise this ministry as his collaborators.

The authority of the preached Word depends, therefore, on its continuity with the written Word. But in what consists the authority of Scripture? Why should the preaching of the Church rely

upon it in order to become itself Word of God? It is because Scripture, as apostolic preaching, is testimony concerning Jesus Christ who is himself the Word of God: 'The prophetic and apostolic word is word, testimony, proclamation and preaching of Jesus Christ'.

However, we must carefully understand the meaning of our faith in Christ as incarnation of the Word of God. It is not only a revelation of the nature of God Father, Son and Spirit. It is above all the revelation of the action of God in the world, for the world. Thus it is not solely the mystery of God that is revealed but also and above all the mystery of the salvation of the world. We can see then that Word of God coincides ultimately with the action of God, God's creative and redemptive action. As Barth wrote:

The promise made to the Church by this Word [prophetic and apostolic] is the promise of the mercy of God expressed in the person of the One who is truly God and truly man; mercy that takes hold of us in our total inability to help ourselves on account of our hostility towards God. The promise of that word is called 'Emmanuel', God with us! Yes, with us who plunge ourselves repeatedly into the same distress, which consists of not being able to be with God. Sacred Scripture is the word of men who have called upon, waited for and hoped for this Emmanuel, and who have at last seen, heard and touched him in Jesus Christ. This word speaks, attests to and preaches this fact.

The Revealed Word

Thus there is anteriority of Scripture to preaching. In the same way we must now say that there is anteriority of revelation, of the revealed Word, to Scripture. Barth explains:

The revelation that the biblical witnesses contemplate and which they indicate beyond themselves is distinct from the word of these witnesses in a purely formal manner, just as any action is always distinct from the most exact account that one gives of it. But this distinction is negligible in relation to this fact which overturns every analogy, namely that, in revelation it is Jesus Christ who had been foretold and who came in the fulness of time—namely the authentic Word of God, literally, really and directly

pronounced by God. But the Bible never offers us more than human attempts to express this Word of God by limited human words, thoughts and situations.

Thus, just as Scripture engenders preaching, Barth can say that the revealed Word engenders the written Word: 'Revelation engenders Scripture which testifies to it'. (110) Thus revelation remains the norm of Scripture, just as Scripture constitutes the origin and the norm of preaching. But revelation, the very Word of God, is the absolute norm, while the human expressions of this Word are relative:

Certainly, this word 'revelation' can give the impression of something relative; but the Bible means only an absolute; it is in the knowledge of this absolute that the Church, assisted by the Bible, remembers [in preaching] the revelation that has occurred.

Barth, then, presents the relativisation of preaching and of Scripture in relation to the absolute of the Word of God. And this relativisation at the same time signifies liberation for faith. The text of Scripture should not be interpreted literally as if the absolute of God resided in the very letter of Scripture. It is only the Word of God incarnate in Jesus Christ that constitutes the absolute Word of God 'literally, really and directly pronounced by God'.

Catholics are certainly quite in agreement with this rejection of biblical fundamentalism. But this same principle of the absolute transcendence of the Word of God entails another consequence that could disturb the religious sensibility of some Catholics. If we must deny absolute validity to each affirmation of the Bible, all the more so must we deny it for the preaching of the Church, including all the dogmatic and ethical teachings of the Church *Magisterium*. These teachings are quite authoritative; they are even invested with the dignity of the Word of God insofar as one can hear its echo in the words of the Church. But they remain human words which refer to the Word of God which transcends them and judges them.

Barth's doctrine of the Word of God thus liberates us from biblical fundamentalism; it also liberates us from ecclesiastical absolut-

ism. But it in no wise liberates us from the absolute of the Word of God. On the contrary, it is by adhering absolutely in faith to the Word of God by way of Church preaching and Sacred Scripture that we will be liberated from the unsupportable burden of biblical and ecclesial legalism.

We must admit that this is not a comfortable situation, one of utter repose. We understand that some people prefer the servitude of the Law to the freedom of the Spirit. For this freedom entails an undeniable risk, that of relying on our own human spirit rather than on the Spirit of God. The liberty of the children of God thus relies upon the discernment of spirits, which is itself a gift of God, a gift of the Holy Spirit. The Christian who relies with complete confidence and submission on this Spirit of God can then know the joy of hearing the Word of God in the human words of Scripture and the preaching of the Church.

Conclusion

I have presented what seems to me to be the essentials of Karl Barth's theology of the Word of God. We might describe it as an appreciation and at the same time a relativisation of the written Word and the preached Word. Scripture and Church preaching are appreciated as being Word of God: they give witness to Christ the Word of God; it is through them that the Word of God comes to us. But these two expressions of the Word of God are relativised in relation to the revealed Word, the absolute that is the divine Word itself.

However, the theology of Barth is also significant and instructive in what it leaves out and what it does not say. The transcendence of the Word of God is so emphasised in his theology that the whole immanent dimension of this same divine reality is left aside. This is so with both religion and culture. In religion the immanence of the Word of God (through the Holy Spirit, in the hearts of the faithful) is

obliterated. Barth places so much emphasis on the transcendence of the Word of God in relation to every human word that one is given to understand the coming of the Word as only from on high: from divine revelation to Sacred Scripture to Church preaching. No account is taken of the inverse procession, originating in the word of the 'interior master' as Augustine referred to it.

The same is true, and even moreso, with respect to culture, which is entirely an expression of the human spirit and word. Is there not in this something sacred and divine to explore and to express in a kind of 'theology of culture'? Barth tends in the opposite direction, to the point of describing as 'cultural protestantism' the efforts of liberal theologians to find Christian elements in modern culture. He himself accepts only the judgment of the Word of God on the spirit of the world.

The polarity of transcendence and immanence also pertains to the relationship of Word and Spirit. We place much store today on 'spirituality', which is the life of the Spirit, interior religion. By his insistence on the Word as external, transcendent, the preached Word, Barth puts the emphasis on 'faith' as in St Paul's statement: 'Faith comes from preaching and preaching comes from the word of Christ' (Rom.10.17).

This provides a criterion for distinguishing different religions. All authentic religions must unite transcendence and immanence. Some, however, (some oriental religions) are characterised by the immanence of their spirituality, while others (*e.g.* Judaism, Christianity and Islam) emphasise faith in the Word. And each religion in the course of its evolution can pass from one pole to the other. Thus many Christians today seek in oriental spirituality a counter to the legalistic and authoritarian hardening of the external word. A return to the life-giving faith in the Word of God could therefore be just as salutary today as it was in the time of Karl Barth.

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