

## THE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL

THE PREACHING  
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Karl Barth

*Translated by B. E. Hooke*

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## *Preface*

A number of my writings, hitherto unpublished even in German, have on occasion been privately circulated; among these is a course of lectures — I no longer remember when or where they were delivered — on “Preaching and How to Prepare It.”

It will be apparent that here I have ventured into the field of practical theology, and if this little book should come to the notice of experts in that discipline, they will, I trust, forgive the liberty I have taken and judge it not too severely.

With regard to the dogmatic elements in these lectures, it should be remembered that when they were given I was still a comparatively young man; since that time, with advancing age I have perhaps advanced in wisdom also — at least I hope so. However that may be, so far as dogma is concerned, there is nothing of importance that I wish to retract, nor are there any changes that I wish to make in the text presented here.

The present work is primarily concerned with certain practical rules and suggestions which I still hold to be essential and worth considering — or at least of being read carefully and discussed. Anyone, of course, is free to criticize them.

A well-informed young theologian might find it of interest to compare some of my sermons — for example, those in the series *Deliverance to the Captives*,<sup>1</sup> or simply the three outlines suggested in this book — with the principles expounded here, and see how closely I have adhered to them.

PROF. KARL BARTH

Basel

May, 1961

<sup>1</sup> PUBLISHER'S NOTE: "Saved by Grace," one of the sermons preached by Karl Barth in the Basel prison and published in the book *Deliverance to the Captives*, is reproduced at the end of this volume with the permission of Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., who first published the English translation in the U.S.A. in 1961.

## 1. *Basic Definitions of Preaching*

This study is an expansion of two definitions:

1. Preaching is the Word of God which he himself has spoken; but he makes use, according to his good pleasure, of the ministry of a man who speaks to his fellowmen, in God's name, by means of a passage from Scripture. Such a man fulfills the vocation to which the Church has called him, and through his ministry, the Church is obedient to the mission entrusted to her.

2. Preaching follows from the command given to the Church to serve the Word of God by means of a man called to this task. It is this man's duty to proclaim to his fellowmen what God himself has to say to them, by explaining, in his own words, a passage from Scripture which concerns them personally.

The reason for making these two statements is that preaching has a dual aspect: the Word of God and human speech.

In attempting to describe, in theological terms, what happens when a man preaches, one can only give indications and suggest points of reference. We are carried beyond human thinking to God, who utters the first and the last word. God cannot be enclosed in any human concept; he lives and

acts by his own sovereign power.

The theologian has to move in two directions; his thought must ascend and also descend. And even when this has been done, he fulfills his duty of proclaiming the Word of God only in a partial and imperfect manner. But if he carries out this task aright, he can be certain of doing what has to be done and what he ought to do.

His discourse is his own; it is neither reading nor exegesis. He utters the Word which he has heard in the Scriptures, as he himself has received it. His calling as a preacher is comparable, in a sense, to that of the apostles. He also has, but on another plane, a prophetic function.

The attempt to serve the Word of God and to proclaim it is a duty laid on the Church. The most appropriate word in this connection is *Ankündigung* (announcing what is to come) rather than *Verkündigung* (describing what is). God will make himself heard; he it is who speaks, not man. The preacher has only to announce the fact that God is about to speak. The word *Ankündigung* does not imply that the hearer is called to make a decision. A decision, if it is made, is a matter between the individual and God alone and is not a necessary element in preaching.

This does not mean, however, that preaching is never a call to action. In fact, it is precisely a call addressed to the believing Church. But a decision is the work of divine grace — or rather, of that

mystery which is the direct encounter between man and God. The preacher must recognize that the decision does not depend on him.

It should be added that there is no basis in human experience for the concept of preaching. It is a purely theological concept resting on faith alone. As has been said, it is directed to one end only: to point to divine truth. It cannot pass beyond the bounds of its own nature, to assume another form more easy to grasp.

## 2. *Essential Characteristics of Preaching*

### PREACHING AND REVELATION

The relation of preaching to revelation may be considered first in its negative aspect. It is not the function of the preacher to reveal God or to act as his intermediary. When the Gospel is preached, God speaks: there is no question of the preacher revealing anything or of a revelation being conveyed through him. It is necessary, in all circumstances, to have regard to the fact that God has revealed himself (Epiphany) and will reveal himself (Parousia). Whatever happens by means of preaching — in the interval between the first and the second coming — is due to its divine subject. Revelation is a closed system in which God is the subject, the object, and the middle term.

The practical consequences of this are as follows:

a. Preaching cannot claim to convey the truth of God; neither can its aim be to provide a rational demonstration of the existence of God by expounding briefly or at length certain theoretical propositions. There is no proof that God exists except that which he himself provides. Nor are we required to display the truth of God in an artistic

form by the use of vain images or by presenting Jesus Christ in outpourings of sentimental eloquence. When Paul told the Galatians that he had portrayed before their eyes Jesus Christ crucified, he was not referring to speeches in which he had used every device of artistry to capture the imagination of his hearers. For him, to portray Christ was to show him forth in plain truth without embellishments. We are under orders to "make no image or likeness." Since God wills to utter his own truth, his Word, the preacher must not adulterate that truth by adding his own knowledge or art. From this point of view, the representation of the figure of Christ in art, the crucifix in churches, as well as symbolic images of God, may be of doubtful value.

b. Neither must the preacher seek to establish the reality of God. His task is to build God's Kingdom and he must work toward a decision. His message must be authentic and alive; he must lay bare man's actual situation and confront him with God. But he is going too far if he thinks of this confrontation as "a sickness which leads to death" (Kierkegaard). This phrase no doubt presupposes things which are implicit in preaching, but it concerns the action of God and no man ought to intrude in what is not his province.

If it is maintained that a preacher ought to convert others and cause his hearers to share his own faith, this can only be understood in the sense that

he should be aware of what is happening when he is bearing witness. The preacher who believes in Christ will never present himself to his congregation in such a way that they will suppose him able to bestow on them Christ and the Spirit, or think that the initiative in what is done is his. God is not a *Deus otiosus*; he is the author of what is done. We can act only in obedience to the task given to us; neither our aims nor our methods are of our own devising.

Our preaching does not differ in essence from that of the prophets and apostles who "saw and touched"; the difference is due to the different historical setting in which it takes place. The prophets and apostles lived during that moment of the historical revelation of which Scripture is the record. We, on the other hand, bear witness to the Revelation.

But if God speaks through our words, then in fact that same situation is produced; the prophets and apostles are present even though the words are spoken by an ordinary minister. But we must not think of ourselves as uttering prophecies; if Christ deigns to be present when we are speaking, it is precisely because the action is God's, not ours. Since this is the way things happen, the preacher can make no claims for his own program.

Thus any independent undertaking that is attempted, whether with the intention of developing a theoretical subject or with the practical purpose

of leading one's hearers into a certain frame of mind, can in fact be nothing else but a waiting on God, so that he may do with it what he will. If the preacher sets himself to expound a particular idea, in some form or another — even if the idea is derived from a serious and well-informed exegesis — then the Scripture is not allowed to speak for itself; the preacher is discoursing on it. To put it more positively, preaching should be an explanation 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. No thesis, no purpose derived from his own resources, must be allowed to intervene: God alone must speak. Perhaps, afterward, he will have to ask himself whether he has allowed himself to be influenced by an idea of his own or has attempted to arrive at a unity which only God could create. He must follow the special trend of his text, and keep to it wherever it may lead him, not raising questions about a subject which may, as it seems to him, arise from the text.

In this connection it may be pointed out that the choice of a text may present dangers, in that one may choose a text because it bears on a subject one would like to discuss; one may even turn to the Bible in order to find in it something which fits in with one's own thoughts! To have to speak from a particular text to a particular congregation in an



actual situation is in itself a dangerous undertaking. It may be that in that situation God will speak and work a miracle, but we must not build on that miracle in advance. Otherwise it would be easy for a preacher to become a sort of pope and indoctrinate his congregation with his own ideas by presenting them as the Word of God.

The positive aspect of this matter must now be considered. The starting point is the fact that God wills to reveal himself; he himself bears witness to his Revelation; he has effected it and will effect it. Thus preaching takes place in obedience, by listening to the will of God. This is the process in which the preacher is involved, which constitutes part of his life and controls the content as well as the form of his preaching. Preaching is not a neutral activity, nor yet a joint action by two collaborators. It is the exercise of sovereign power on the part of God and obedience on the part of man.

Only when preaching is controlled by this relationship can it be regarded as "kerygma," that is, as news proclaimed by a herald who thereby fulfills his function. Then the preacher is omnipotent, but only because of the omnipotence of the one who has commissioned him. The kerygma means therefore to start from the Epiphany of Christ in order to move toward the Day of the Lord. Thus New Testament preaching consists in a dual movement: God has revealed himself, God will reveal himself.

From these considerations certain consequences follow:

a. The fixed point from which all preaching starts is the fact that God has revealed himself, and this means that the Word has become flesh; God has assumed human nature; in Christ he has taken on himself fallen man. Man, who is lost, is called back to his home. The death of Christ is the final term of the incarnation. In him our sin and our punishment are put away, they no longer exist; in him man has been redeemed once for all; in him God has been reconciled with us. To believe means to see and know and recognize that this is so.

If then preaching is dominated by this starting point, the preacher can adopt no attitude other than that of a man to whom everything is given. He knows, without any possible doubt, that everything has been restored by God himself. He is, however, constantly beset by the temptation to denounce man's sin or to attack his errors. Certainly it is necessary to speak of human sin and error, but only in order to show that sin is annihilated and error destroyed. For either it is true that man is forgiven or else there is no forgiveness whatever. Sin cannot be spoken of except as borne by the Lamb of God.

At the same time, to separate the Gospel from the Law in preaching is not Christian. How is it possible to proclaim the Gospel without also hearing the Law which says: "Thou shalt fear and love

God"? This danger is particularly noticeable in Calvinism.

Moreover, from its first to its last word, preaching follows a movement. This has nothing to do with the preacher's convictions, or his earnestness, or his zeal. The movement starts from the fact that the Word became flesh, and the preacher must abandon himself to its guidance. If this rule were observed, how many introductory remarks would become quite unnecessary! The movement does not consist so much in going toward men as in coming from Christ to meet them. Preaching therefore proceeds downward; it should never attempt to reach up to a summit. Has not everything been done already?

b. It has already been pointed out that preaching has one single point of departure, which is that God has revealed himself. It should also be recognized that it has one unique end: the fulfillment of the Revelation, the redemption which awaits us.

From beginning to end the New Testament looks toward the achievement of salvation. This, however, is not to deny that all has been accomplished once for all. The Christ who has come is the one who will return. The life of faith is orientated toward the day of the Parousia. The point of departure and the point to which everything tends are summed up in the declaration: "Christ the same yesterday, today, and forever." And assuming that we await the whole Christ, christology and escha-

tology may be said to be one. Revelation, therefore, is before as well as behind us.

It follows, then, that preaching moves in an atmosphere of expectation. There is no settling down comfortably in faith and the assurance of salvation, as if divine grace manifested in the past allowed us now to take our rest in tranquillity. Without doubt there is a profound and joyful assurance, but there is also the solemn and earnest concern of one who watches because the end is near. Preaching, like all Christian life, grows to its fullness between the first advent and the second.

We walk by faith, not by sight (II Cor. 5:7). If in this present time we were living by sight, we should have nothing to wait for; there would be neither yesterday nor tomorrow. But we live by faith, that is to say, we come from Christ and are going to Christ. Peace and joy abound on either hand, but on this journey we go from riches to destitution and from destitution to new riches. The preacher must show the real nature of this journey in faith; that is to say, he must make it clear that confident assurance is not Christian unless it is shot through with longing for a salvation yet to be realized in its fullness in Christ. Christ has come, Christ will come again and we await the day of his coming: this is the word of command. "The Word was made flesh" has as its response: "Amen, come quickly, Lord Jesus."

The Lutheran tendency is to confine itself to

what is past, and for this reason its preaching is always liable to be biased toward dogmatism and religious experience. But Phil., ch. 3, refers to Phil., ch. 2; having described the Christian vocation, the apostle declares: "Not that I have already attained . . . but I press on." There is movement even in the tranquillity of faith. The preacher must proclaim with conviction that "all has been done" but also that "all must be changed." We look for a new heaven and a new earth. We know, indeed, that we are reconciled with God, but we still await the fulfillment of the promise: "See, I make all things new." That is why preaching rests entirely on hope, for the Christian "now" is simply the passage from yesterday to tomorrow, from Epiphany to Parousia. From this point of view we are a people which walks in darkness, but we see a great light; "the night is far spent, the day is at hand." If the preacher's message is to conform to Revelation, these two fixed points must be kept in mind.

#### PREACHING AND THE CHURCH

Preaching has its place within the context of what is called the Church; it is bound up with the Church's existence and its mission. Precisely for this reason, preaching must conform to Revelation. But it should be noted that Revelation is set in the framework of the Old and New Testaments and is therefore a particular, concrete event taking place

at a specific period in history; it is not an idea of general significance which could arise at any time or in any place. Consequently, preaching is not concerned with aspects of human existence in its natural state or with the progress of its history; it is not inspired by any philosophy or conceptual view of life and the world; its subject is solely that particular event, the gift of God in the context of history.

Again it must be emphasized that preaching is not man's attempt to add something to Revelation; the movement which proceeds from the first to the second advent is not initiated by man but is due simply to the action of God's grace. God draws near to men; men cannot, by their own efforts, rise to win for themselves what God has appointed for them.

The task of the preacher can therefore be summed up thus: to reproduce in thought that one unique event, the gift of God's grace. If once he has recognized the impossibility of doing otherwise, then he will see clearly that no philosophical, political, or aesthetic considerations can influence his choice of a field for his activity. In the nature of things there can be only one — the Church.

There a relationship exists which is prior to anything we know on earth — whether of family, society, nation, or race; and the nature of that relationship is entirely different from that of the created order. In the Church, where the Word of

reconciliation rings out, all other relationships are seen to be stained with impurities, contaminated, submerged in a fallen world and, as such, lying under the stroke of judgment. But that same Word also assures us that our sickness is healed and the whole burden of the consequence of sin is carried away. Moreover, in the Word of reconciliation there is also the message of Creation.

Preaching, when it is true to what God has revealed to us, effects reconciliation; and wherever men receive this Word, there is the Church, the assembly of those who have been called by the Lord. Not general reflections on man and the cosmos but Revelation is the only legitimate ground for preaching. Because this call is sounded and men are able to hear it, the Church exists. Thus the bond which links preaching to the Church results directly from its faithfulness to Revelation.

The foregoing considerations will become clearer if two points are emphasized. The true Church is characterized by the fact that "*Evangelium pure docetur et recta administrantur sacramenta*" (Augsburg Confession, VII). These two concepts, sacraments and preaching the Gospel, throw light on the connection between the Church and conformity to Revelation.

The sacrament, with all its wealth of meaning, may first be considered, for it is impossible to understand what preaching is without understanding what the sacrament is. There is indeed no preach-

ing, in the precise meaning of the term, except when it is accompanied and illuminated by the sacrament. What is the sacrament? Unlike preaching or any other ecclesiastical activity, the sacrament goes back to that action of the Revelation which founded the Church and constitutes her promise, for the sacrament is not merely a word but an action, physically and visibly performed.

Baptism confers on a man the seal of belonging to the Church, for his life begins not with his birth but with his baptism. To be baptized means that a relationship between the Revelation and a man has been established and is made actual in a specific situation. (Rom. 6:3.) If baptism represents the event which is the point of departure, the Lord's Supper, on the other hand, is the sign of the same event but turned toward the future which we all await. (I Cor. 11:26.)

Preaching, then, is given within that Church where the sacrament of grace and the sacrament of hope are operative, but each partakes at once of the character of grace and hope, for neither sacrament nor preaching has significance except within the Church, where each is authenticated by its relation to the other. Preaching, in fact, derives its substance from the sacrament which itself refers to an action in the total event of Revelation. Preaching is a commentary on and an interpretation of the sacrament, having the same meaning but in words. If this fact be recognized, it will be clear that preach-

ing is impossible except within the territory of the Church, in that setting where, in baptism and the Lord's Supper, man is chosen by God himself to belong to the body of Christ, to be nourished and protected during his journey to eternal life. And we should know that all those who hear are baptized and called to partake of grace, and what has been thus begun in them will be fulfilled.

In this way, by reference to baptism and the Lord's Supper, the origin and the aim of preaching, and the course it pursues, are more clearly defined and the place of the messenger of the Word is more plainly seen.

Having discussed these theoretical questions, let us consider what goes on in the evangelical Church. At the outset something appears to be lacking. In those circles which embraced the Reformation, the sacramental Church of Rome was replaced by a *Church of the Word*. Very soon, preaching became the center of worship and the celebration of the sacrament came to occupy a more restricted place, so that today in the Roman Church, the Church of the sacrament, preaching has little significance, while in the Reformed Church the sacrament, while it exists, does not form an integral and necessary element of worship. These two positions are in effect a destruction of the Church. What meaning *can there be in preaching which exalts itself at the expense of the sacrament, and does not look back to the sacrament which it should interpret?* Our

life does not depend on what the minister may be able to say, but on the fact that we are baptized, that God has called us. This lack has indeed been recognized, and attempts have been made to fill it by various means (reform of the liturgy, beautifying worship with music, etc.). But these palliative measures are bound to fail because they do not touch the real issue.

Those who advocate such methods of renewing the forms of worship take their stand — mistakenly — on Luther. But he, seeking to retain all that was of value in the Roman liturgy, gave first place to the Lord's Supper. Calvin, also, constantly emphasized the necessity for a service of Communion at every Sunday worship. And this is precisely what we lack today: the sacrament every Sunday. The order of worship should be as follows: at the beginning of the service, public baptism; at the end, the Lord's Supper; between the two sacraments, the sermon, which in this way would be given its full significance. This would indeed be "*recte administrare sacramentum et pure docere evangelium.*" So long as the true significance of evangelical worship in its totality is not understood, no theological efforts or liturgical movements will be efficacious. Only when worship is rightly ordered, with preaching and sacrament, will the liturgy come into its own, for it is only in this way that it can fulfill its office, which is to lead to the sacrament. The administration of the sacraments must not be sep-

arated from the preaching of the Gospel, because the Church is a physical and historical organism, a real and visible body as well as the invisible, mystical body of Christ, and because she is both these at once.

There is no doubt that we should be better Protestants if we allowed ourselves to be instructed in this matter by Roman Catholicism; not to neglect preaching, as it so often does, but to restore the sacrament to its rightful place. It is open to question whether the motive for our liturgical efforts is anything more than a desire to approach nearer to the "beautiful services" of the Church of Rome. But what is rightly to be sought is not an elaboration of the liturgy but the true significance of the sacrament in the Church. A good Protestant will allow himself to admit this, and at the same time will insist on good preaching.

In preaching, all that is necessary is to recount again what concerns the prior event of Revelation. And in order to distinguish the two actions to which Revelation refers, the preacher may point to the sacrament on the one hand and Holy Scripture on the other; the one looks back to the act of Revelation which God accomplished, the other refers to the nature of the Revelation. It is idle to oppose sacrament to preaching; they cannot be separated, since they are two aspects of the same thing.

The divine act of revelation took place at the

heart of human life and history. The Church, however, cannot hand it on directly. In Holy Scripture the truth and actuality of the Revelation are preserved, for Scripture represents the testimony of chosen intermediaries, the prophets and apostles. The Church rests on the foundation of witnesses individually called to be apostles. When witness is borne to the Revelation, that is to say, when Scripture is read and expounded, the Church should understand that she does not live for herself alone; her life is not her own, nor does it rest on its own foundation; but the Church is founded on the sole and unique action of God accomplished in Israel and in Christ — those two centers of Revelation: a people and a savior. On the one hand, that erring people who, through their inability to keep the Law, so frequently lapsed into sin but were never abandoned by God; on the other, the overflowing of grace, the Savior of the people, the fulfillment of the Law and, in consequence, the Gospel.

It is clear that Revelation is not to be thought of as a general principle regulating the relations between God and the world. On the contrary, it is one unique event. Scripture, therefore, has a concrete quality and is not an intellectual system. The fact of holding closely to Scripture bears witness to the unique character — unique in time and in method — of Revelation.

In her relationship with God the Church represents not human kind in general, but men gathered

together by the work of Revelation; for this reason she is based on the Scriptures. If, then, the Church is constituted by the testimony of the apostles, the mediators of Revelation, what, in this context, is the function of preaching? It is, simply, to make this witness understood.

This leads to a consideration of preaching from a text; the text will always be from the Bible and will relate at once to the sacrament and to the Word of the prophets and apostles. No reasons can be given for preferring the Bible, nor is it necessary to justify the choice. The starting point is the fact that the Church is the place where the Bible is open; there God has spoken and still speaks. There we are given our mission and our orders. By taking our stand on the Bible we dare to do what has to be done. These writings which lie before us are prior to our testimony, and our preaching must take into account what has already been given. We can no more liberate ourselves from the Bible than a child can liberate himself from his father.

In conclusion it may be said that the ecclesiastical character of preaching is guaranteed so long as it is inspired by the sacrament and is faithful to Scripture.

#### PREACHING AND DOCTRINE

It has already been shown that preaching is subject to an order; it is a mission and a command, and therefore has a relation to doctrine.

In setting out to educate men, it is possible to follow a scheme and determine one's aim. This method could be applied by the preacher also if it were the Church's task to educate humanity and make human beings into real men. But if the true function of the Church be understood, it cannot proceed thus. The Church is not an institution intended to keep the world on the right path, nor is it dedicated to the service of progress. It is not an ambulance on the battlefields of life. On the other hand, it must not seek to establish an ideal community, whether of souls, hearts, or spirits. No doubt all these things have their value and should engage one's attention. They can, moreover, be accessories to preaching and can play a part in it, as they do in ordinary life. The preacher, like other Christians, lives in the world and cannot avoid these things. But the moment he makes them his chief object, the preacher ceases to have any justification for preaching. This is becoming more and more obvious today when all the various civilizing agencies have been taken over by organizations other than the Church. If the Church were to disappear—a point of view expressed by Richard Rothe, for example, who advocated the progressive fusion of Church and State—the press, the radio, social welfare schemes, psychology, and politics would suffice to care for the life of the family and of the soul. As regards public morals and similar preoccupations, the children of this world know

more about them than the Church does and have access to more efficient methods. In these circumstances the Church is merely the fifth wheel of the carriage — and not even a spare wheel!

It is necessary, therefore, to consider seriously the mission laid upon the Church. What is needed are men who are obedient to an order given to them from outside themselves, to a necessity prior to everything which determines our earthly existence, such as birth or death. The Church is obliged to recognize precisely that an order has been given which must be carried out. The Church can justify her existence only insofar as she understands that *she is founded on a call. Therefore, she has no plan — for the plan is God's — but only a task to fulfill.* Preaching, set within the frame of worship, should be the proclamation of the Church's obedience to the task committed to her by Christ.

From all this the following considerations emerge:

1. Preaching must faithfully adhere to doctrine, that is, to the Confession of our faith, which is not a summary of the religious ideas drawn from our own inner consciousness but a statement of what we believe and confess because we have received it and have heard the Word of Revelation. The Confession is man's response to what God has said, and every sermon is a response for which the preacher is responsible.

Preaching, therefore, has nothing to do with any scheme or notion which the preacher has wrought out in his own mind. Here only obedience is required; in other words, having heard the Word of God he responds in accordance with the Confession of faith. Naturally one is not required to preach confessions of faith, but to have as the purpose and limit of one's message the Confession of one's Church, taking one's stand where the Church stands.

2. A second, practical consequence concerns the element of edification: What is to be built up? Clearly, the Church itself. But building up the Church is not to be understood in the sense given to it in the "Shepherd of Hermas," where it means "to go on building," "to build upon an edifice in course of construction." To build up the Church means to rebuild each time from foundation to roof. The Church has to be remaking itself continually; continually the orders given have to be accepted, obedience has constantly to be learned again. "By obedience to obedience" is the journey of the Christian. The Church is a community placed under Revelation and built up by hearing the Word of God, built up by the grace of God in order that it may live. In this context then, but only there, can one speak of educating men, of giving moral and spiritual help to humanity; there is a place for such secondary structures in the shadow



of the main building. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness"; "one thing is needful."

#### PREACHING AND THE EXAMPLE OF THE APOSTLES

At the heart of the Church which is commissioned to proclaim the good news, an individual emerges from the midst of the community to bear witness before it to man's redemption and salvation in Christ. In connection with the question of doctrinal fidelity already discussed, there arises the problem of the legitimacy of this individual action. Apart from the responsibility of the apostolate, there is no special emphasis in the New Testament on the function of the preacher. From the indications given concerning those appointed to this duty by the apostles and recognized as such by the community, no doctrine of the function of preaching can be elicited.

The apostolic function is always linked with the foundation and the existence of the Church. In Matt. 16:18-19 (cf. Matt. 18:15-20), the Church is represented as established according to a specific order. Peter represents the apostles, and the community is distinct from the apostolate.

In the period after the apostolic age, the Church is described as *ecclesia una sancta*, one, that is, insofar as it is at once *ecclesia docens* and *ecclesia audiens*, and wherever the Church is, the same situation

exists. The conditions of its origin are not repeated because the apostolate was constituted only once. But those men who, following in the footsteps of the apostles, are called to that mission, must continue to do as the apostles did. Insofar as the Church is the Body of Christ, the preacher is, in a sense, *successor apostolorum, vicarius Christi*. The *predicatio verbi divini* and the Church are one, for "there can be no Word of God apart from the People of God" (Luther).

Following the apostles, the preacher, as a minister of lower rank, does in one particular community what the apostles did for the whole Church. When God himself invests a man with the office of *vicarius Christi*, the question of the particular individual who receives this charge is of secondary importance. What is important is to be sure that the Church is indeed the Church of Jesus Christ; that when someone speaks the Word and others hear it, it is indeed the Word of God that is heard and received by the action of the Holy Spirit. "*Hoc Evangelium ubicumque sincere predicatur, ibi est regnum Christi. Ubique verbum est, ibi est Spiritus Sanctus, sive in auditore, sive in doctore.*" (Luther, W.A. XXV, p. 97.)

All those marks of an authentic ministry which can be enumerated *in concreto* are relative because they can only be human criteria. Nevertheless four of these criteria may be retained, because on them may be said to depend, from the human point of

view, the legitimacy of the preacher's function.

1. The preacher must be conscious of an interior call. He must experience the imperative pressure of a vocation and accept it with all his heart. But this "I cannot do otherwise" raises all kinds of questions. For example, the alleged interior necessity could perhaps be the satisfaction of a personal desire. It may be noted that the interior call which we think we recognize is not decisive unless it derives not from our own knowledge or feeling but from that commanding voice which is God's.

2. The passages in the Pastoral Epistles (I Tim. 3:1-7, 8-13; Titus 1:5-9) concerning bishops and deacons contain lists of Hellenic virtues and rules relating to the man who assumes the function of a preacher. "He must be above reproach"; he must not compromise his function by a way of life which runs counter to contemporary morals and customs. He must not, by any eccentricity of behavior, draw attention to himself and thereby divert it from the Gospel. These ethical precepts are evidently intended as a reminder that the minister of the Word is responsible before God. But if it is recognized that these orders proceed from the Law of God the preacher must realize that he is constantly at fault. He is able to stand before God only because he is justified in Christ by faith.

3. On the other hand, in the Pastoral Epistles again, the preacher is required to be skilled (I Tim. 3:2; II Tim. 2:24). The Church has been accus-

tomed to understand by this a systematic training in theology. The preacher has no right to rely on the Holy Spirit in matters for which he is responsible, without making any effort himself. With all modesty and earnestness he must labor and strive to present the Word aright, even though he is fully aware that only the Holy Spirit can in fact *recte docere*. The Church, therefore, if it is conscious of its responsibilities, cannot admit that anyone, whoever he may be, has the right to preach the Word without theological training. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that true preaching is learned from the Holy Spirit, theological training being subordinated to him.

4. It has already been pointed out that the office of the preacher is different from that of the apostles; he is placed in the position he holds by the will of the community. The function he exercises belongs to the Church; it derives from the community and is exercised within it. But the fact of being appointed by the community does not make it less necessary for him to have been called to this duty by God.

We have already noted four characteristic marks of God's calling, but it is not for us to fix the limits of that call. God has founded the Church, and has instituted the ministry; he chooses the man who is to exercise it, acting in this matter where and how he wills. Nevertheless, such a man must always answer to the four qualifications which are the marks

of God's calling, which itself remains the ultimate question for him. The divine call gives to these human criteria whatever weight they have, while at the same time emphasizing their merely relative character. On this point there can be no dispute; we can hear the call and give effect to it only by going forward, accepting the ministry with all the demands which it entails. Thus, through our obedience, the Revelation and the Church, whose responsibility it is to preach the Word, are made visible.

When the preacher regards his ministry in this light, he will not seek the satisfaction of his own interests or inclinations, of his convictions or of his own desires. But even if considerations of this sort do enter in, one reality must be apparent in his every action: God has spoken and he speaks. Wherever human will and action are brought into subjection to the will and action of God, there legitimate Christian preaching is found.

How is the preacher to be faithful to the example of the apostles? The hearer earnestly hopes to learn something of the great work to which the preacher to whom he listens is dedicated, though he is only a man limited by his human nature and condition. But the activity in which he engages is problematical and even, in a sense, impossible. It is a fact, however, that it has pleased God to intervene on the human plane by means of a man, in spite of the inherent weaknesses of human nature. The preacher who strives to be faithful to the example

of the apostles is aware of the inevitable imperfections in what he does, but he will not allow himself to be paralyzed by his weakness; he finds his strength in the reality of God's revelation of himself. He knows that the divine will, which has made itself known and which is active on the human level, will clothe his feebleness and his wretchedness and will endue his action with a quality which he himself cannot give it.

Drawing life from God's forgiveness, he will carry out his task simply in obedience, without letting himself be intimidated, because he knows that God has commanded it.

It is important to note that this faithfulness to the apostolic example cannot be characterized by any single psychological quality either in the preacher or his hearers. Simplicity or objectivity may give a clue; or perhaps effectiveness, for example, an awakening in the community. But such things cannot be regarded as valid criteria. The only thing that counts is to make the Word of God heard. And it is not possible to know what happens at that point, because the effect produced by the Word depends on God. So we leave it in his hands, trusting in him and in what he has done.

It was pointed out above that the Church needs to be constantly renewed; it is always being created by the preaching and hearing of the Word. Thus the organized Church is the expectant Church; it is moving along the road where the event which cre-

ates the Church takes place.

The same point of view applies to the man who is singled out from the rest of the community in order to exercise in it a particular ministry. This act is efficacious by virtue of the vocation bestowed by God. Ordination, therefore, is not an act of ecclesiastical jurisdiction but a recognition of the divine call. Naturally, the man who is ordained must receive the Word of God which is expressed in ordination, a Word which he must constantly receive afresh in his ministry.

The appointment of a man to the ministry is a question, not of theology, but of ecclesiastical practice. It is obvious that behind this calling, in the narrower sense, there must always be the total vocation of God.

Thus, as regards the government and order of the Church, the four criteria which we have discussed must be taken into account. The Church cannot allow anyone to arrogate to himself a function unless he meets the requirements of these criteria. At the same time, in addition to the *vocatio ordinaria* there may always be the possibility of a *vocatio extraordinaria*. God is not limited by the Church's ordinance; he may be pleased to call a man from outside the ecclesiastical organization to preach his Word. But the vocation of such a man will have to be examined and tested by the Church in relation to its faithfulness to Scripture.

In considering the constituent elements of

preaching, it will be well to define a term already used above. Mention has been made of "an attempt" which the Church has been commanded to make. The question suggested by the word "attempt" invites consideration of the provisional nature of preaching.

#### THE PROVISIONAL CHARACTER OF PREACHING

The word "provisional" (*vorläufig*) is used here in a wider sense than it ordinarily has. It signifies also "that which has not yet attained its end." By "provisional" or "antecedent" character should be understood the fact that preaching precedes something of which it is the harbinger, as the herald (*vorläufig*) precedes (*vorauslaufen*) a king.

Here we approach the point where justification leads to sanctification. Preaching is a human activity and thus stained with sin, but it is also both commanded and blessed by God and therefore a promise is attached to it. The following sections will deal with preaching in relation to ethics and the law and will involve the dogmatic concepts of justification and sanctification.

If preaching is considered as a human activity, immediately man's incapacity and unworthiness in relation to God are clearly seen. And yet this activity is of the greatest import — not indeed in itself, because the fact that the preacher has performed his task does not confer on him any sort of title. His

title derives from the concepts of Revelation, the Church, faithfulness in doctrine, faithfulness to the apostolic example, discussed above. This means that the preacher, precisely because he, a sinner, has performed his task, is driven back to Christ, the Lord of the Church, by whom he is justified. He, most of all, is confronted by the necessity of living by that divine action which justifies him, by the faith which is summed up in the words: "Fear not, only believe."

Nevertheless, it is not to be supposed that thereby a transformation is effected in him; or that he is infused with a new nature deriving from a superior being and enriching him. By no means: justification is the light of God's countenance shed on a man who still remains a man. In this context, new life means contemplating that light and living by it. Salvation, in the eschatological sense, abolishes the opposition between the old and the new; salvation is to be understood as the fulfillment in the future of what we now have and are by the promise. Preaching is an attempt undertaken with human means, which are, in all respects, inadequate. Here a man cannot rely on his own resources. But, in the eyes of God, who raises the dead and brings to life that which is not, this attempt is a "good work" to which his promise and his blessing are attached. But only insofar as it is in fact undertaken by his command.

Another aspect of the question presents itself:

How can a man's action be good and holy? What is the situation of a sinner who, having been forgiven, is called to preach the Word? There is no question here of virtue, but only of obedience in face of the goodness of God. The basis of preaching — a human action sanctified by God — is a demand made by God. The preacher has a part in the new life because God wills to take him to himself; God claims him for himself. Anyone who attempts to set limits of any kind to that demand clearly has not understood what has happened; a man has been summoned by God, he has been taken prisoner, he hears his Word. This is the sanctification of the messenger of Jesus Christ.

The preacher, like every Christian indeed, is not an isolated individual. Even though, after his call, he is the same man that he was before, he is set in an entirely new situation. Nothing that we can say about the revivifying power of the Word of God can adequately describe the perturbation and the peace which possess a man who has been laid hold of by the call of Jesus Christ. When God thus turns toward man, all things inevitably become new!

But then a man's mind turns to his own conduct and way of life. What will this new thing, this new life, become in his own life? At all events his life is no longer at the mercy of chance; he is no longer in command, no longer his own master; he is the servant of a Lord. He no longer goes through life heedlessly exposed to all kinds of danger; he is

called to walk in obedience to the commands of his Lord.

This emphasis on its provisional nature brings us to the central problem of all preaching. The Church is the handmaid of Christ on earth. Our situation is described in a passage of the Bible which is of particular importance for the preacher — Psalm 119. In its 176 verses one theme is discussed in all its aspects: a man is summoned, is justified, and rejoices because there is a commandment, a law, and a way.

This “provisional character” becomes precisely the field of battle and of labor. How is it to be done? An answer to this question will now be attempted.

#### PREACHING AND THE SCRIPTURES

The purpose of preaching is to explain the Scriptures. What ought to be set forth in this human discourse? Since the only reason for preaching is to show God’s work of justification, the preacher is not required to develop a system of his own, to enlarge on what he thinks about his own life and that of his neighbor, his reflections on society or the world. If he lives by justification, he cannot take account of human ideologies. Men do not live by the intrinsic values of things. If we ask what we are justified by, we are always recalled to the four keynotes of Holy Scriptures, which bear witness to

Revelation, establish the Church, hand on the mission (the power to bear witness), and create vocations. There is, therefore, nothing to be said which is not already to be found in the Scriptures. No doubt the preacher will be conscious of the weight of his own ideas which he drags after him; but ultimately he must decide whether he will allow himself to compromise or whether, in spite of all the notions at the back of his mind, he will accept the necessity of expounding the Book and nothing else.

In order to avoid being submerged in general considerations, we shall discuss, under five heads, the behavior and the qualities proper to a Christian preacher.

1. First, quite simply, to put his trust in Scripture. All that is required of a preacher is to keep to the text and confine his discourse to expounding it. If he feels that the Bible does not provide everything necessary for living and that he must add some practical instruction, then his trust is not complete.

2. To explain Scripture means to respect it, in the sense of *respicere* (to have regard for something to which one looks for help). All discourse must issue from such respect. The preacher is concerned with something other than himself, and he has no thought for anything besides. He may be compared to a man who is reading something with great difficulty and is astonished by the discoveries he makes:

his lips move, he spells out rather than reads, he is all eyes, he is possessed by a deep conviction: "This is not the work of men."

3. Close and detailed attention to the text is indispensable. Perhaps "zeal" rather than "attention" would better describe the effort of concentration which he must apply to getting at the meaning of the passage he is studying. This will require scientific exegetical methods, involving accurate historical and linguistic study, for the Bible is a historical document which came into being in the context of human society.

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 of time, speaks to man's needs. Thus, not only is linguistic study needed, but it is also necessary to search in the Scriptures for God's message for society.

No preaching is acceptable if this preparatory work has obviously not been thoroughly done. Moreover, a respectful regard for the text, constantly renewed, is also necessary. This is where the minister who is absorbed in practical activities has to struggle against intellectual laziness. In the pulpit on Sunday this negligence becomes apparent, for at that moment all the zeal that he may display cannot make up for indolence. In this connection, the congregation ought to allow the preacher more leisure to prepare his discourse, for adequate prep-

aration demands plenty of time. On the other hand, the Church should see to it that only properly prepared sermons are delivered from the pulpit.

4. The duty of avoiding pretentiousness. The Scriptures provide the answer to man's questions, and he should be content with that. There is no need for him to put himself forward by displaying his own aptitudes, however good. If the preacher is attentive, he will always find an answer in the Scriptures; he is driven to the limits of his own thinking, he is brought face to face with the prophets and apostles. Then he, and his own views and spiritual insight, must retreat.

However alert his mind, man always tends to tread in the well-worn paths. For this reason, even after the most fruitful study and in spite of all the efforts of imagination, one still does not know what one has to say; one is at most prepared for the situation in which the Word of God has to be spoken. In fact, in that situation, a man is already filled, although he has not yet realized it. It is possible to speak, for example, of the exalted morality, the power of the language and thought of the Bible, and many other topics. But this is not the Gospel, for the Gospel is not to be found in our thoughts or in our hearts, but in the Scriptures. The most cherished habits, the purest intentions, must all be renounced in order that one may be able to hear; nothing must be allowed to stifle those living things which spring from the Bible. Again and again one

must submit to being thwarted, must yield oneself to be made use of, must abandon everything which stands in the way.

The danger of pretentiousness is a reason for exercising some caution in regard to the sermons of Luther, for example. Modesty was not always his strong point. After his great discovery, he felt impelled to dwell on the unique idea which inspired him. He neglected whole pages in the Bible — for example, those concerned with the Law and rewards — because he was in a sense bewitched by the revelation of justification by faith.

Ideas which occupy the mind must be subject to correction by the text of Scripture; one must not adopt the demeanor of one who knows in advance what the truth is. What sort of modesty is that?

5. The preacher must yield himself to the movement of the Word of God. It is easy to say, or to have read somewhere, that the Bible is the Word of God without knowing what this really means. It is in fact not true in the sense that the Civil Code embodies the thought of the State. A more precise statement of the truth would be to say that the Bible *becomes* God's Word, and when it becomes this for us, then it is so.

The preacher is called to share an experience with the Bible; a perpetual exchange takes place between himself and the Word of God; the preacher must be submissive to the movement of

that Word, allowing himself to be led through the Scriptures.

The canon is indeed a guarantee, but it means merely that the Church takes these writings to be the place where the Word of God is to be heard. Finally, as regards the doctrine of inspiration, it is not enough to believe in it; one must ask oneself: Am I expecting it? Will God speak to me in this Scripture? This expectation must be active; it means giving oneself to the Scriptures, seeking in order that one may be found.

The five points which have been considered, and which characterize the Biblical quality of preaching, do not represent simply a theological point of view which may or may not be taken account of. Rather, they describe a discipline to be submitted to. It is not possible to avoid it without at the same time relinquishing one's profession.

It remains to draw attention to three very serious consequences which may result from neglecting the requirements described above.

a. The preacher should never be so puffed up by the consciousness of his mission and his function or his theology as to feel himself inspired by the Holy Spirit to represent God's interests to the world. There is no antidote to this disease except the strength which springs from a true understanding of Scripture. Where Holy Scripture reigns supreme, no seed of sacerdotalism can grow. But the



preacher can never rest in a false security or cherish self-satisfaction.

b. The preacher must not be a visionary, soaring into an unreal world, though his mind may be, no doubt, full of good intentions and noble ideas. Faithful preaching is not visionary, for Holy Scripture was shaped in a very real world. He may at times feel himself to be a solitary, but he should never let himself be carried away by dreams and raptures.

c. The preacher must not be tedious. For long enough the words "minister" and "boredom" have been regarded as practically synonymous. Congregations often believe that they have known for years everything which is said from the pulpit, and this is not entirely their fault. Here again, the remedy is to preach the authentic truth of Scripture. If preaching is faithful to the Bible, it cannot be tedious. Scripture is in fact so interesting, it has so many new and startling things to tell us, that those who listen cannot possibly be overcome with sleep.

There is still a question which requires an answer: How should the preacher deal with the Old Testament? The Old Testament mainly concerns us through its relation to the New Testament. If the Church is represented as the successor of the synagogue, then the Old Testament witnesses to Christ before Christ (but not apart from Christ). The Old and New Testaments are related to one

another as prophecy to its fulfillment, and the Old Testament should always be regarded in this light.

Historical exegesis should not be neglected, but it is always necessary to consider whether an interpretation based on the historical situation takes account of the unity of the two Testaments. Even in a sermon on Judg. 6:36, for example, it will be possible to adhere to the literal meaning of the text, and at the same time to point toward Jesus Christ. The Old Testament, though a completely Jewish book, nonetheless refers to Christ.

In considering how far the use of allegory is legitimate, the relation between the Old and New Testaments provides guidance. In order to avoid the temptation to give to a passage a meaning which is not there, it is wise to keep to what is actually said in that passage, while bearing in mind that the Church adopted the Old Testament because of Christ. At the same time, historical and Christian interpretations should not be opposed to one another. The Old Testament looks forward, the New Testament speaks of the future while looking back, and both look to Christ.

#### ORIGINALITY IN PREACHING

At the beginning of this study, among certain basic definitions, it was stated that a man is concerned "to proclaim to his fellowmen what God himself has to say to them by explaining, in his own

words, a passage from Scripture which concerns them personally." The phrase "in his own words" leads to a consideration of what may be called originality in preaching. The preacher, a sinful creature, is called to expound a text faithfully; but fidelity to his text is not a screen behind which he disappears. His words do not express ready-made ideas which he has swallowed whole — somewhat in the manner of *gratia infusa*. The man who speaks is a real man of flesh and blood, with a personality and a history and a background of his own, whom God has laid hold of in the actual situation in which he is placed.

The minister must not pose as a Luther or a Calvin or a prophet; when he is explaining his text, let him be simply himself. His sermon is the message of a man of his own time, and he is responsible for it. One who has heard the Word is called upon to repeat what he has heard, and it is important that he should be himself, as he is, especially when he bears an apostolic responsibility. It is not fitting that he should act a part, dress up his ideas in a spectacular fashion, deck his discourse with ornaments. A mission is entrusted to him, not as minister or theologian, nor as a man who enjoys special privileges, but as a servant. He should then fulfill his task simply and naturally.

In this connection, however, a warning is called for; the word "originality" has dubious and even dangerous associations. It does not apply to one who

imagines himself to possess, by virtue of some sort of religious experience, a certain independence in relation to God. It can be applied to a man who lives continually in the consciousness that his sins are forgiven. It does not refer to a so-called "existential attitude," for this fantasy of existentialism is simply the old Satan, who has disguised himself under a new mask to deceive humanity.

The following practical directions bear on the subject of this chapter.

a. The preacher, having thoroughly prepared himself, comes before his congregation, first and foremost, as a man who has been pierced by the Word of God and has been led to repentance in the face of divine judgment, but also as a man who has received with thankfulness the Gospel of forgiveness and is able to rejoice in it. Only in this progression through judgment and grace can preaching become genuinely original.

b. Then he must have the courage to tell others what this experience means for him; the testimony he offers to his hearers will be the fruit of his own study and meditation. He is called on to speak of what he lives by and this he will do within an authentic Biblical setting, but not in the form of an exegetical discourse. His very first sentence must be a challenge addressed to the individual hearer, but also an integral part of his text.

c. His preaching must be personal. A preacher may, perhaps, draw his inspiration from a model,

but once in the pulpit he should be simply himself. He is the one who has been called, he it is who must speak; the finest thoughts, once they have been borrowed and transformed on the lips of another, are no longer what they were. Let there be no posturing in borrowed plumes!

d. Let him speak in the way that is natural to him, rather than assuming in the pulpit the cloak of an alien speech. Even the language of the Bible or of poetry, as also the ringing tones of an impressive peroration, are unsuited to the task he has in hand.

e. Let him be simple. Those who are engaged in this enterprise should follow the path on which the Bible leads them, should see things as they are and as they unfold in actual experience. This will preserve them from displays of doctrinal erudition which are of no great importance. Christian truth is always new when it is set in the context of daily life.

#### ADAPTING PREACHING TO THE CONGREGATION

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 objects 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, from which it follows that:

1. The preacher will love his congregation and feel that he is one with them. His constant thought will be: "These are my people and I long to share with them what God has given to me." To speak in the most eloquent language, even with the tongues of angels, will avail nothing if love is lacking.

2. Because he loves them, the preacher will live the life of his congregation, placing himself on their level. He does not have to be the wise man of the people, the village diviner who lays bare the innermost thoughts of men's hearts, but the question of what their thoughts really are is always in his mind.

3. Preaching is not intended to be simply a clearer and more adequate explanation of life than can be arrived at by other means. Certainly this aspect must be taken into account, but it should be kept in the background. The congregation is waiting for the meaning of life to be illumined by the light of God, and not to be offered high-sounding speeches.

No doubt the preacher will give heed to all these things, and no one will surpass him in heartfelt sympathy, but the faithfulness of his preaching will most clearly be seen in the way he lives.

4. Tact — knowing what is permissible to say

to each individual — is indispensable. Frequently it seems that something ought to be said, and that the Bible provides justification for doing so, whereas, in fact, the motive is pride. Then good relations become needlessly embittered.

In this connection, it may be pointed out again that, in a sermon, Biblical criticism should take a subordinate place and be exercised only in a humble and reverent spirit; there is no need to make an idol of truth.

5. Here Tillich's phrase "awareness of the present moment" is important, if given its right place. What demands does the contemporary situation make on the preacher and his congregation? Together they are sharing a historical experience; the words of the preacher must be relevant to immediate preoccupations of his hearers. If this were understood, preachers would be on their guard against continuing to discourse on topics which have long ceased to be important.

These notes on how to adapt one's preaching to one's congregation should suffice to show that preaching is not a service performed for clients. Neither is the preacher a dictator nor an orator nor yet a hermit dwelling apart from his congregation.

#### THE INSPIRATION OF PREACHING

Preaching is "God's own Word." That is to say, through the activity of preaching, God himself

speaks. If it were not so, the preacher who acted on what has been said so far would have labored in vain and would be but an unprofitable servant. This ministry of the Word depends entirely on what God wills to make of it. Therefore it follows that the preacher must be clothed with humility; that, because of his function as a human mouth-piece, he will be discreet and sober; that, since preaching is by definition concerned solely with God, it is not possible to preach without praying that the words spoken may become the call of God to men, and, moreover, that the whole congregation should join in this prayer.

The present discussion has now reached the limit of what human speech can express, the point where the Holy Spirit himself must intercede for us "with groanings that cannot be uttered."

God's disposal, that obedience will guide one's choice.

There can be no thought of arbitrarily laying hold of Scripture in order to find in it a text which will suit oneself, which seems appropriate to what one wishes to say. The sacred text is not to be treated according to our own desires; it must be in command; it is above us and we are its servants. In order to avoid going astray in this way, the following points should be kept in mind:

1. Do not choose too short a text, for the danger just described will be greater than if a whole section of a book is being dealt with. For example, it is not advisable to detach from their contexts the first Beatitude or I John 4:16; such texts may tempt the preacher to use them as material on which to exercise his own eloquence. If preaching is essentially exposition of the Bible, it will be well to avoid short texts.

2. Beware of passages which are considered easy and are frequently quoted. Thus, when commemorating the Reformation, do not arbitrarily distort the meaning of Gal. 5:1; on All Souls' Day, do not give to John 11:3 and 16 a different significance from that which the context requires. The illuminating power of a Biblical phrase is always greater in the context in which God has placed it than in discourses, however beautiful and arresting, which do violence to the Word of God.

3. Do not indulge in allegory; exercising one's

### 3. *Preparing a Sermon*

Sometimes a minister, when preparing his sermon, feels impelled to say everything he has in the depths of his heart; at other times he may feel embarrassed because he is not very sure what special message he has to give. Neither of these situations need be taken too seriously; he ought to know that what he has to say will be given to him. He should therefore try to control, to some extent, what comes into his mind and to listen, or rather allow himself to be comforted by Him who gives what he demands. Are there not also the Old and New Testaments which still have something to say?

#### CHOICE OF A TEXT

The preacher, then, has the Scriptures before him, and two things have to be considered: what has to be done and what he has no right to do. Whenever one chooses a text, a decision has to be made: whether to obey or to disobey the Word, that is, God himself. Disobedience consists in imagining that it is possible to approach Scripture with full freedom to exercise one's own unfettered powers. If, on the other hand, one puts oneself at

talents on the Word hinders it from sounding out clearly. One should also beware of intruding one's own individuality or enlarging on one's personal experience by using illustrations or parables drawn from events in one's own life.

4. Preaching should not be directed to a utilitarian purpose; do not use Psalm 96 to encourage better singing or as a eulogy of music!

5. In order that the same passages of Scripture should not recur too frequently in his sermons, a preacher would do well to keep to a plan based on the Church's year, or deliver a course of sermons on one book. It may happen, as a result of his repeated contacts with the Scriptures, that certain passages impress the preacher with the force of a command. It goes without saying that a minister consults his Bible on other occasions as well as when he is preparing a sermon.

6. It is not possible, in one sermon, to discourse on a particular subject (thematic preaching) and to expound a passage of Scripture (homiletic). Within the Church the preacher is not required to discuss Christian principles or similar topics; what needs to be heard is what God has to say to the Church, which constitutes its foundation and its building up. If an evangelistic mission is planned in order to draw into the Church those who are still outside, we should not begin by evading the special service which has been laid upon us.

7. Avoid drawing special attention to particular

events or commemorations. Anything which the congregation could profitably take note of will find an echo in the sermon; otherwise the matter can be passed over in silence. But the decision does not rest with the preacher; it will depend on what the Word of God requires of him. The Scriptures must occupy a clearly defined place in the preacher's mind and to ensure this he must submit himself to a rigorous discipline; he must be attentive only to the Word, not to what the public or the congregation or his own heart desires to hear.

## THE ACTUAL PREPARATION

### A. The Receptive Attitude

The term "receptive" is the opposite of "spontaneous"; in other words, it signifies passive, or being acted on as object, as opposed to active, or acting as subject. These last two terms should, however, always be used with caution. The point is to hear what the text has to say. One may begin quite simply by reading it and pondering it word by word; here lies the content of the sermon. But the text must be read in the original, for any translation is a secondary source and, in fact, a commentary.

At the outset, therefore, we are confronted with the important question of language. It is not suggested that Hebrew and Greek possess some special

quality which made them fit to be used by the Holy Spirit as the vehicle of the Word of God. Nevertheless, Revelation is conveyed in these languages and it is necessary, therefore, to work with these documents. From listening to a sermon it is possible to tell whether or not the preacher has used the original text, for in the original, certain relations and connections are to be found which are not apparent in a translation.

After this, different versions may be consulted. The preacher should not read his own translation to the congregation, but in the course of his sermon he might well draw attention to corrections and shades of meaning.

After a careful reading of the passage, the question of its content has to be considered. First the context in which it occurs must be given its full weight, for no Biblical passage is an isolated and detached piece of writing; it is set in a specific context, it is part of a whole. Many sermons would have quite a different bearing if what precedes and follows the particular passage had been duly taken into account.

Next comes the business of analysis. Certain points are to be noticed: the intention of the passage, its separate parts, the order in which the ideas occur, also the direction of its development. Only at this point should commentaries be consulted. A commentary differs from a translation in that the several sections of the passage are subjected to de-

tailed study. There are, generally speaking, two types of commentary: those dating from the end of the eighteenth century to the present day and those going back to an earlier date.

The former are characterized by their use of the results of historicocritical research, and these ought to be read. Historical criticism has led to a better understanding of the Scriptures than was possible in the past, for those situations which show the historical and secular aspects of the Bible have also something to teach us. Naturally this method raises certain problems which did not trouble the earlier commentators. However, in course of time, historical criticism has assumed exaggerated importance, so that there is a tendency to identify the real meaning of Scripture with its historical significance. This attitude has in fact become a dogma, mainly held outside the Church, according to which man is the only maker of his world and of everything in it, including religion. Obviously, such a dogma provides no basis for a sermon. If it were valid, the canonical rule binding us to the Bible would have no meaning, for outside the Bible there is a vast literature on this aspect of existence. But Holy Scripture is the only witness to God's revelation, the unique channel for the communication of the Word of God.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to take account of those commentaries which derive from historical research. The fact that, in recent times, attention

has been focused more particularly on the human side of the Bible is no reason for ignoring that aspect; it should be remembered that Revelation is the Word made flesh and, by that token, it has become an event in history.

But then, how far does the human speech represent the Word of God? To what extent do the words of the Bible lead us, beyond their human authors, to "Emmanuel"? No critical problem can absolve the student from asking himself this question and considering it seriously. The Word was indeed made flesh, but it is still the Word: this is the Christological dogma of the Bible. The Bible represents men as constrained and subjugated by a truth which has laid hold of them; they speak of the Revelation they have received, and turn their eyes toward the Revelation which is to come. This is something which modern commentaries do not and cannot explain. Recourse must then be had to the earlier commentators (to whom the moderns often show themselves inferior in many ways), to the exegetical studies of Calvin and Luther, and — with some reserve on account of platonic influence — to those of Saint Augustine. Certain collections of sermons also, those of Calvin for example, are excellent expositions of Scripture.

Finally, some practical points may be mentioned. If, in exceptional circumstances, there is not sufficient time for such thorough preparation, the preacher should at least study the text in the orig-

inal and in a good version; but this will certainly be a very rare occurrence. For those who possess this treasure — the Word — the preparation of his sermon will be the minister's prime duty.

If a discourse tends toward a too-personal interpretation, the use of a commentary becomes absolutely necessary. Salutary warnings against a similar error are to be found in Scripture itself.

What should be the preacher's attitude toward a doubtful text? In the Church he is called to hear the Word of God; the judgment of the historian, therefore, does not in itself forbid the use of a text.

## B. Spontaneous Action

Two elements have now to be considered: the direction followed by the testimony in the text and the application of this text.

### I

When all the preliminary work already described has been done, the Bible is seen to be at once a historical book and the book of the Church. As a historical book it is a monument (*monumentum* — that which recalls the past) revealing something of the history of man's religious experience. This is, in fact, the aspect which modern commentators have thrown into relief. But there is much more in this book. For the preacher — as for



everyone who reads the Bible as it ought to be read — it is, besides a monument referring to the past, a document which has a meaning for the present day. It tells of a decisive action performed once for all in the past but still relevant to us in *our times*; that is why the Bible is read today.

The Bible is the only record of Revelation, but the record is sufficient, and for this reason it is called Holy Scripture, the Word of God given to men. If it is recognized that this book is indeed the testimony of the Word of God, it may seem otiose to discuss subjects and theses in connection with preaching; there can be no subject or thesis other than the Revelation of God, Jesus Christ.

It should, however, be remembered that what is presented in the Biblical writings is not the Revelation itself but the witness to the Revelation, and this is expressed in human terms; it is given by prophets and apostles who spoke, not on their own authority but because they were constrained to do so (as Paul says), because they could not do otherwise (as the prophets say). They uttered their testimony as well as they could, conscious of their responsibility to the men to whom they spoke. The nature of the testimony is clearly shown in John 1:7-8. John the Baptist is not that light but he bears witness to it: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

The preacher's task is to cause the testimony presented in the text to be heard; his preaching is

good if it brings to life in this present age the testimony of the prophets and apostles. He is not required to discourse about well-known truths such as the excellence of faith, God and one's country, or other subjects of that sort; he is required to recall that divine truth, constantly disregarded by men, and to do so with hope and prayer. In preaching he must always have in mind the thought that the truth which lies behind the words of the Bible is unknown to men; but that truth wills to be manifested, it must absolutely be known. But the preacher must not torture himself; he only has to strive, as the prophets and apostles strove, to say as best he may what they heard.

Three observations must be made on following the direction of the text:

1. It has been pointed out that the Bible is both a monument and a document. The document may have to be reconstituted, but it is not always necessary to restore the monument. Purely historical material is relevant only insofar as it forms part of the testimony. In preaching, it is necessary to follow the direction of the text and to relate it to our own times; the text shows where the road leads, but we have to walk on it at the present day.

2. The preacher should be on his guard against always falling back on the same sort of plan, for instance, repeating in every sermon: "Man is a sinner but Christ intervenes; man must mend his ways." Scripture abounds in riches and offers an

infinite variety of approaches. Bear this in mind and there will be something new to say every Sunday; and this will be a sign of the new beginning which we are undertaking with God, since he has been pleased to begin with us.

3. It is necessary once again to issue a warning against an arbitrary and too-individual interpretation of Scripture. The best means of avoiding this is to keep constantly and closely in touch with the dogmatic teaching of the Church. Dogmas are like beacons and signposts marking the right direction. It is not the preacher's task to offer an exposition of dogmas and display his theological knowledge, but rather to use them as his guides.

To illustrate what has been said above, we may consider three outlines of sermons: <sup>1</sup>

#### Example 1: Psalm 121

1. I lift up my eyes to the hills.  
From whence does my help come?
2. My help comes from the Lord,  
who made heaven and earth.
3. He will not let your foot be moved,  
he who keeps you will not slumber.
4. Behold, he who keeps Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep.

<sup>1</sup> These three examples have appeared in the *Bulletin du Centre protestant d'études*, Geneva, June, 1954.

5. The Lord is your keeper;  
the Lord is your shade  
on your right hand.
6. The sun shall not smite you by day,  
nor the moon by night.
7. The Lord will keep you from all evil;  
he will keep your life.
8. The Lord will keep your going out  
and your coming in  
from this time forth and for evermore.

This psalm comprises four parts:

a. Verses 1-2 represent a pilgrims' hymn and tell of the help God gives to one who is weak and distressed. Such a one knows that there is help for him, and, furthermore, he knows whence it comes. He turns his eyes in that direction, that is to say, toward Jerusalem, where dwells the Lord God, the Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. That is the place from which help comes. So for us also there is a place whence we may await deliverance.

b. Verses 3-4. This assurance is ours because God — our help — is active, he works; he never sleeps, he is never inaccessible to the man who has need of him. He is never far away, existing impassively in spheres far removed from contact with this world. On the contrary, the Lord is present and close at hand and we can always find him.

c. Verses 5-6. God protects us precisely when the danger is greatest and threatens to overwhelm us.

Here the historical element plays no part. Local extremes of weather, caused by sun or moon, are quite secondary and have no importance for our interpretation.

d. Verses 7-8. The Old Testament community was in the habit of praying for each of its members and found strength and consolation in this mutual intercession. We also, today, know that there is someone who prays for us, but how much more effectively than was then the case. Christ himself intercedes for us with God, the Almighty. His prayer is our hope and our strength.

A sermon on Psalm 121 might follow this scheme; there is no question here of any particular theme.

#### Example 2: John 13:33-35

33. Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going you cannot come."

34. A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

These three verses are very suitable for a sermon in Passiontide. They are, of course, closely linked to what goes before them. Verse 30 marks the last

and final phase of the Passion of the Son of man. At that moment, in that night, the incarnation of God is accomplished: one last and supreme glorifying is assured him in his very humiliation (verse 31). At the same time he is glorified in his approaching elevation. The step which Jesus is about to take toward the profoundest depths of suffering already proclaims his transfiguration, his passing into glory.

At verse 33 a new element is introduced. "Little children, . . . I say to you. . . ." These words are addressed in the first place to the little group of disciples who are present, but this group already embraces the whole believing world: the entire community of believers exists in these few apostles. Jesus communicates to them and to all his last thoughts. They have to learn and understand that they cannot follow Christ along this path; neither the world nor the Church will be able to imitate what has been given to Christ alone to do. He alone is able to tread the road marked out for him by the Father, and he will follow it for the sake of the world.

But at verse 34 there appears, surprisingly, a new commandment. This command does not enjoin imitation: it requires mutual love. Obedience responds to a direct order: "Love one another," for love has become the new nature of those who have seen Jesus. But the world has to hear the words of Jesus through the mediation of the Church and its members, and this will be carried out only "if you

have love for one another." We are not told that the whole world will be won by these words of Jesus, but that the behavior of the disciples will show whether they are with Jesus. This behavior is the characteristic mark of the Church in the world.

This outline is only a suggestion, meant to give some help in discerning the main themes in the text; it is not intended as a model to be copied. The preacher's task is to put into common speech for the man of today what is to be found in the text. But these few verses are a mine of inexhaustible riches.

Lastly: Ephesians 2:1-10

Verses 1-2. And you he made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. 3. Among these we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. 4. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, 5. even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us live together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6. and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7. that in the coming ages he might

show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. 8. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God — 9. not because of works, lest any man should boast. 10. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

This passage raises in an acute form the problem of preaching about sin. At the outset it establishes the fact that those whom the apostle is addressing were men of this world and consequently sunk in sin, living in that condition as rebellious beings, cut off from God. This situation is not life at all; these men were dead in the true meaning of the word, under the wrath of God. At verse 3, in which the concrete and terrible reality of sin is brought into sharp relief, a startling reversal breaks in: "you" is abruptly followed by "we" as Paul confesses himself also, like these others, to be lost in sin.

But immediately we are shown an amazing thing: sin in its totality is cast away into the past. This in no way implies any weakening of the consciousness of sin; on the contrary, its hateful character is all the more clearly revealed. The shocking reality and abiding presence of sin remain even though it has been relegated to a time which lies behind us. Sin is there at all times, but it has been repulsed and

vanquished; its power to dominate and to destroy has been taken from it.

Verses 4-7 point to the Victor who has conquered all that bears the mark of sin. The good news rings out: all you who lay dead under the yoke of sin are raised to life in Christ. This resurrection of the dead is the work of God and of God only, accomplished in Christ and in his lifting up. The fight against sin is far behind, the battle has been won though it is not yet at an end. Victory is assured. In this fashion Paul attacks evil. There is no system of morality, no plan of campaign, no ethical precepts; only a turning to him who once for all has stripped sin of its power. This reference to Christ is developed in verse 7. Christians, as Paul sees them, are the objects of God's goodness; in his immeasurable riches God has prepared for us an incorruptible heritage.

Verses 8-10 relate to the time between the resurrection of Christ and his return. What we are in this intermediate period owes nothing to ourselves. We have, therefore, no reason and no right to glorify ourselves. It is not our own works which make us what we are, but the grace of God which has saved us through faith, which itself is God's gift. Where, then, shall we find any cause for boasting? And, moreover, we are created for the doing of good works. It is important to note that Paul uses the indicative and avoids the imperative in order to rule out the slightest doubt on this point: all is the

work of God, nothing is due to man's initiative.

This passage is typical of the apostolic witness, which is never concerned to discuss a particular theme, but submits itself solely to the one great theme of the Bible. This message must be given clearly to the Christian congregation.

## II

Having considered the direction followed by the witness of the Biblical authors, let us now turn our attention to the way in which this path may be trodden in our day, in the situation in which the congregation is now placed. These are the people to whom the preacher's words must be addressed and who need continually to hear the Word afresh. They are baptized into the Church and an appeal must be made to the faith which is grounded in baptism. Those to whom the preacher speaks have this in common: nothing is more certain than the fact that they will die.

But in order that the preacher may speak to them in a way that they will understand, he must know them as individuals; he must be acquainted with the conditions which shape their lives, with their capacities, and their potentialities for good and evil. Only so will he find the means to touch their hearts so that the Word may have significance for *them*.

It is useless to worry oneself about the question

of how a man can ever speak to another in such a way that his words evoke faith in the hearer. One should, rather, make every effort to ensure that one's sermon is not simply a monologue, magnificent perhaps, but not necessarily helpful to the congregation. Those to whom he is going to speak must constantly be present in the mind of the preacher while he is preparing his sermon. What he knows about them will suggest unexpected ideas and associations which will be with him as he studies his text and will provide the element of actuality, the application of his text to the contemporary situation. The results of his theological studies provide a solid foundation; the element of actuality will enable him to construct a Christian discourse.

In order to make this somewhat clearer, let us consider the following proposition: in preaching, *explicatio* is related to *applicatio* as subject to predicate. The direction or guiding principle of a sermon is determined by and in the Church as it is at this present moment. It is addressed, therefore, not to humanity in the abstract but to the living, breathing man of today, whether within the Church or still outside it. In speaking of the man of today who is there to hear the Word, the preacher as well as the hearer is included. Thus preaching cannot be a monologue which a speaker delivers concerning himself and his own sin, for then it would no longer be possible to speak of the

Church as the *communio sanctorum*.

There is, however, another danger which perhaps is more to be feared because it is easier to fall into: the preacher may address the congregation from a standpoint outside it instead of making himself one with it. He ought to know what his real position is; undoubtedly he has a special function, but that function is entrusted to the Church, not to him personally. He has no right to regard himself as set on high because of his knowledge of theology, so that he may stoop down to the level of his poor people. He must realize that he himself continually needs to hear the Word afresh. The recognition of this situation is the necessary condition for achieving a sound *applicatio* which will also be an *explicatio*.

When, in preparing a sermon, an effort is made to follow faithfully the direction of the text, a serious difficulty presents itself in regard to the *applicatio*: how to be faithful to the text and also true to life in this present age. Woe to the minister who does not see that the Word has a real significance for the men of today. But that man is even more to blame who recognizes what the Bible has to say to modern man, but is afraid of causing scandal and thereby betrays his calling.

The Word confronts modern man, to disturb and attack him in order to lead him into the peace of God. This Word must never be distorted or obstructed by laziness or disobedience. The preacher,

therefore, must have the courage to preach as he ought, courage that does not flinch from a direct attack and is unmoved by the consequences which may result from his obedience. If this courage is his, the Word of the whole of Scripture will bear the responsibility.

To keep close to life and remain close to the text — this difficulty, for which there is no solution, should be a warning to all. In thematic preaching, where it is so easy to make a casual idea the center of one's discourse, the preacher is specially prone to do violence to the text in attempting to get closer to actual life. It is only too easy to mistake those beautiful thoughts so dear to our self-esteem for the thoughts of the text, which are generally much less comfortable and less suited to the fashion of the day. It is therefore necessary to test most thoroughly the ideas about the contemporary situation which crowd into our minds, and to sift them by reference to our text. This may force us to discard some of our finest thoughts because the tenor of the text demands it. There is no need to be distressed because a sermon may have to go forward with some broken limbs; it will not necessarily be slipshod or inadequate. This is where real courage is displayed before men and, at the same time, humility before the Word — that true humility which is fitting where Holy Scripture is concerned, and which alone is able to produce a discourse which can receive God's blessing. Let us then apply

ourselves to our text; the true exegete will always find in it fresh depths and new mysteries; like a child in a marvelous garden, he will be filled with wonder. But let him not pose as God's advocate!

Be faithful to the text and faithful to life. It is always better to keep too close to the text than to adhere too closely to one subject or dwell too long on it. Be bold and yet humble; great courage is always needed, and also great humility, but let the accent be on humility so that love of God may be fulfilled in love of one's neighbor.

### C. Composition, Introduction, Unity, and Conclusion of a Sermon

There are a number of rules which should be observed in composing a sermon. First, a sermon should be *written*; this is so important that it is necessary to give reasons for it. Certainly the preacher will be giving an address, but whether or not he has the necessary capacity for doing so, he should not simply wait for the Holy Spirit, or any other spirit, to inspire him at the moment of speaking. A sermon must be prepared and drafted word by word. It is certainly true in this instance that an account will have to be given for every idle word. Preaching is not an art in which some are able to improvise while others have to write everything out; it is the central action of evangelical worship, in close association with the sacrament.

Only a sermon in which every word can be justified may be said to be a sacramental action. The responsibility which attaches to every word he utters is a part of the sanctification of the minister. This rule holds for every preacher and not only for the young. Some ministers have acquired such facility in preaching that they feel able to dispense with this discipline, but their sermons are not Christian discourses. A sermon should not be merely a chatty talk, obviously delivered without preparation.

Is an introduction necessary? Not unless it is a Biblical introduction; any other kind is to be ruled out for several reasons, two of which may be noted:

1. Why do we go to church? To hear the Word of God: thus the successive acts of worship are sufficient introduction to the sermon — which is their culmination. A few opening words will suffice: any other sort of introduction is waste of time — and a sermon should not be too long. But some sermons are too short, and in their defense it is urged that brevity is a virtue. This may be true for any other sort of discourse, but not for preaching, which must make room for the Word of God, and that Word will regulate the length of the sermon. Obviously mere length is not a sign of faithfulness; nevertheless, it must not be forgotten that the sermon is included in the worship offered to God, and that worship is the most important part of Sunday. One does not give glory to God with an eye on the clock.

2. Only too often an introduction diverts the

thoughts from the Word of God. People come to church with all kinds of preoccupations in their minds, and then the minister wastes words on what is not the real subject of his discourse. From the outset he misses his mark, for the first ten minutes are of prime importance in indicating what the sermon is to be.

If, however, there must be an introduction, how is it to be done?

- a. A favorite point of departure is to speak about the contemporary situation, toward which the minister may take a favorable or a negative attitude. But the audience probably knows more about this than the speaker, and it has no bearing on the sermon.

- b. Or perhaps one may begin by quoting a great man; but what significance has this man's name in the context of prayer and reading? The only result is to turn the congregation's thinking into another direction. The Word of the Bible cannot gain credit from that of a man, however notable. This is unworthy.

- c. The introduction may be negative, but this procedure is bad. An account of the sins and the errors of the world is not a good way to begin a sermon. It may offer a wide horizon but it is not legitimate to deluge a Christian community, or one on the way to becoming Christian, with such an outburst of bitterness at the very start. Of the same sort is the scheme which begins by abusing



the old Adam which persists in man in order to counter it with a resounding "But God. . . ." To begin by describing man's corruption may easily lead to thematic preaching and the Bible will remain in the background.

d. Sometimes a preacher will make use, by way of opening remarks, of a piece of Biblical theology or an introduction to the Old or the New Testament. This is out of place as a separate section of the sermon, but may well fit into the exposition of the text.

An attempt is sometimes made to justify an introductory section on theological grounds. The starting point is the notion that there is in man's nature something that responds to the Word of God and disposes him to hear it. This might indeed have been true of Adam in Paradise! Such a point of view would be conceivable in the structure of Roman theology in the sense of *gratia preveniens* or *analogia entis*. But according to the Reformers' understanding of the Bible, there are no such human potentialities; the relationship between man and God is effected from on high by a divine miracle. Man is not naturally disposed to hear the Word of God: we are children of wrath (Eph. 2:3).

We appeal to men on the grounds that they are called to baptism in Christ. They possess nothing except the promise; but, because of the promise, human nature need not be regarded from a purely

negative point of view; here is the real significance of John 3:16. We believe in the miracle wrought by God in us, and by which a relationship between ourselves and God is brought into being. It is unthinkable that a man should attempt to speak of this; nevertheless this is what he is called to do. But he has only to play the part of a messenger who has a message to deliver; he must not try to build a stair up which to climb; he does not have to ascend the heights, for, in truth, what happens is that something comes down from on high to us, but only if, from the start, it is the Bible that speaks.

A sermon is not made up of separate parts arbitrarily arranged in relation to the text; it is a whole. If it is considered as a corpus, then necessarily any premeditated arrangement is excluded. In a thematic discourse it is logical to distinguish the several parts, but this is not how the preacher of the Gospel proceeds. He is guided by the text, not by a topic. Thus the Law will not be separated from the Gospel; neither will faith be discussed first from a theoretical and then from a practical point of view. Unity arises from the text itself if its own rhythm be followed and its proportions observed. Thus, it is necessary to proceed verse by verse, though it may be that not all the verses are of the same quality and that there are variations of emphasis in the text. However that may be, the essential content of the text must govern the development. For example, in John 1:43-52 the discourse will turn on

verses 47-48: Christ recognizes the predestined Nathanael; all the rest is directed toward this central point.

There is, therefore, no need to consider what has to be said firstly, secondly, and thirdly. Take note of what is said, for it is unique: it is the Word of God and it owes nothing to man's ingenuity; he can only bear witness to it.

A sermon does not require a set conclusion; it comes to an end when it reaches the end of its text. If a conclusion is necessary to sum up what has been said, then the preacher has missed the mark. Neither should the *applicatio* form the conclusion, for then the challenge will have been made too late. Quoting parts of the canticles in conclusion or interpolating them arbitrarily in the body of the discourse should be avoided. It is tempting, and dangerous, to conclude with a great "Alleluia" in the guise of a final exhortation. This may happen, but it cannot be a habitual method.

Finally the last word: *amen* is a consolation to us in our weakness. Because we believe that the Word of God is truth, we have tried to bear witness to it. This *amen* gives us peace and calls us to work, with confidence, on our next sermon.

## *Appendix*

## Saved by Grace

### *A Sermon by Karl Barth*

*O Lord, our God! Through thy Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, thou hast made us thy children. We have heard thy voice and have gathered here to give thee praise, to listen to thy Word, to call upon thee and to entrust to thy care our burdens and our needs. Be thou in our midst and be our teacher — that all anxiety and despair, all vanity and defiance within us, all our unbelief and superstition, may diminish and thy greatness and goodness may show forth;*

*— that our hearts may be open to one another, that we may understand each other, and help one another;*

*— that this hour may be an hour of light wherein we may catch sight of the open sky and thus of the dawn on this dark earth.*

*The old has passed away, behold, the new has come. This is true, and it is true for us, as certainly as thou art in Jesus Christ the Savior of us all. But only thou canst truly tell us and show us that this is so. Speak and show then the truth to us and to all those who pray with us this Sunday morning. They pray for us. And we are praying for them. Grant their requests and ours! Amen.*

MY DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS, I now read a passage from the Letter of the Apostle Paul to the Ephesians (2:5): *By grace have you been saved.* This, I think, is brief enough for it to be remembered by all, for it to impress itself upon you, and, if it be God's will, to be understood.

We are gathered here this Sunday morning to hear this Word: *By grace you have been saved!* Whatever else we do, praying and singing, is but an answer to this Word spoken to us by God himself. The prophets and apostles wrote a strange book, called the Bible, for the very purpose of testifying to this fact before mankind. The Bible alone contains this sentence. We do not read it in Kant or in Schopenhauer, or in any book of natural or secular history, and certainly not in any novel, but in the Bible alone. In order to hear this Word we need what is called the Church — the company of Christians, of human beings called and willing to listen together to the Bible and through it to the Word of God. This is the Word of God: *By grace you have been saved!*

Someone once said to me: "I need not go to church. I need not read the Bible. I know already what the Church teaches and what the Bible says: 'Do what is right and fear no one!'" Let me say this at this point: If this were the message at stake, I would most certainly not have come here. My time is too precious and so is yours. To say that, neither prophets nor apostles, neither Bible, Jesus

Christ, nor God are needed. Anybody is at liberty to say this to himself. By the same token this saying is void of any new, of any very special and exciting, message. It does not help anyone. I have never seen a smile on the face of a person reassuring himself with this kind of talk. As a rule, those who use it are a sad-looking lot, revealing all too easily that this word does not help them, does not comfort them, does not bring them joy.

Let us hear therefore what the Bible says and what we as Christians are called to hear together: *By grace you have been saved!* No man can say this to himself. Neither can he say it to someone else. This can only be said by God to each one of us. It takes Jesus Christ to make this saying true. It takes the apostles to communicate it. And our gathering here as Christians is needed to spread it among us. This is why it is truly news, and very special news, the most exciting news of all, the most helpful thing also, indeed the only helpful thing.

"By grace you have been saved!" How strange to have this message addressed to us! Who are we, anyway? Let me tell you quite frankly: we are all together great sinners. Please understand me: I include myself. I stand ready to confess being the greatest sinner among you all; yet you may then not exclude yourself from the group! Sinners are people who in the judgment of God, and perhaps of their own consciences, missed and lost their way, who are not just a little, but totally, guilty, hope-

lessly indebted and lost not only in time but in eternity. We are such sinners. And we are prisoners. Believe me, there is a captivity much worse than the captivity in this house. There are walls much thicker and doors much heavier than those closed upon you. All of us, the people without and you within, are prisoners of our own obstinacy, of our many greeds, of our various anxieties, of our mistrust, and, in the last analysis, of our unbelief. We are all sufferers. Most of all, we suffer from ourselves. We each make life difficult for ourselves and in so doing for our fellowmen. We suffer from life's lack of meaning. We suffer in the shadow of death and of eternal judgment toward which we are moving. We spend our life in the midst of a whole world of sin and captivity and suffering.

But now listen. Into the depth of our predicament the Word is spoken from on high: *By grace you have been saved!* To be saved does not just mean to be a little encouraged, a little comforted, a little relieved. It means to be pulled out like a log from a burning fire. You have been saved! We are not told: you may be saved sometimes, or a little bit. No, you *have been* saved, totally and for all times. You? Yes, we! Not just any other people, more pious and better than we are, no, we, each one of us.

This is so because Jesus Christ is our brother and, through his life and death, has become our

Savior who has wrought our salvation. He is the Word of God for us. And this Word is: *By grace you have been saved!*

You probably all know the legend of the rider who crossed the frozen Lake of Constance by night without knowing it. When he reached the opposite shore and was told whence he came, he broke down, horrified. This is the human situation when the sky opens and the earth is bright, when we may hear: *By grace you have been saved!* In such a moment we are like that terrified rider. When we hear this word we involuntarily look back, do we not, asking ourselves: Where have I been? Over an abyss, in mortal danger! What did I do? The most foolish thing I ever attempted! What happened? I was doomed and miraculously escaped and now I am safe! You ask: "Do we really live in such danger?" Yes, we live on the brink of death. But we have been saved. Look at our Savior and at our salvation! Look at Jesus Christ on the cross, accused, sentenced, and punished instead of us! Do you know for whose sake he is hanging there? For *our* sake — because of *our* sin — sharing *our* captivity — burdened with *our* suffering! He nails *our* life to the cross. This is how God had to deal with *us*. From this darkness he has saved *us*. He who is not shattered after hearing this news may not yet have grasped the Word of God: *By grace you have been saved!*

But more important than the fear of sudden

death is the knowledge of life imparted to us: "By grace you have been *saved!*" Therefore, we have reached the shore, the Lake of Constance is behind us, we may breathe freely, even though we still are in the grip of panic, and rightly so. This panic is but an aftermath. By virtue of the good news the sky truly opens and the earth is bright. What a glorious relief to be told that there I was, in that darkness, over that abyss, on the brink of death, but there I am no longer. Through this folly I lived, but I cannot and I will not do it again, never again. This happened, but it must not and it will not happen again. My sin, my captivity, my suffering are yesterday's reality, not today's. They are things of my past, not of the present nor of the future. I have been *saved!* Is this really so, is this the truth? Look once again to Jesus Christ in his death upon the cross. Look and try to understand that what he did and suffered he did and suffered for you, for me, for us all. He carried our sin, our captivity, and our suffering, and did not carry it in vain. *He carried it away.* He acted as the captain of us all. He broke through the ranks of our enemies. He has already won the battle, our battle. All we have to do is to follow him, to be victorious with him. Through him, in him, we are saved. Our sin has no longer any power over us. Our prison door is open. Our suffering has come to an end. This is a great word indeed. The Word of God *is* indeed a great word. And we would deny him, we would deny the

Lord Jesus Christ, were we to deny the greatness of this word: he sets us free. When he, the Son of God, sets us free, we are *truly* free.

Because we are saved by no other than Jesus Christ, we are saved *by grace*. This means that we did not deserve to be saved. What we deserved would be quite different. We cannot secure salvation for ourselves. Did you read in the newspapers the other day that man will soon be able to produce an artificial moon? But we cannot produce our salvation. No one can be proud of being saved. Each one can only fold his hands in great lowliness of heart and be thankful like a child. Consequently, we shall never possess salvation as our property. We may only receive it as a gift over and over again, with hands outstretched. "*By grace* you have been saved!" This means constantly to look away from ourselves to God and to the man on the cross where this truth is revealed. This truth is ever anew to be believed and to be grasped by faith. To believe means to look to Jesus Christ and to God and to trust that there is the truth for us, for our lives, for the life of all men.

Is it not a pity that we rebel against this very truth in the depth of our hearts? Indeed, we dislike hearing that we are saved by grace, and by grace alone. We do not appreciate that God does not owe us anything, that we are bound to live from his goodness alone, that we are left with nothing but the great humility, the thankfulness of a child pre-

sented with many gifts. For we do not like at all to look away from ourselves. We would much prefer to withdraw into our own inner circle, not unlike the snail into its shell, and to be with ourselves. To put it bluntly: we do not like to believe. And yet grace and therefore faith as I just described it is the beginning of the true life of freedom, of a care-free heart, of joy deep within, of love of God and neighbor, of great and assured hope! And yet grace and faith would make things so very simple in our lives!

Dear brothers and sisters, where do we stand now? One thing is certain: the bright day *has dawned*, the sun of God *does shine* into our dark lives, even though we may close our eyes to its radiance. His voice *does call* us from heaven, even though we may obstruct our ears. The bread of life *is offered* to us, even though we are inclined to clench our fists instead of opening our hands to take the bread and eat it. The door of our prison *is open*, even though, strangely enough, we prefer to remain within. God has put the house in order, even though we like to mess it up all over again. *By grace you have been saved!* — this is true, even though we may not believe it, may not accept it as valid for ourselves and unfortunately in so doing may forgo its benefits. *Why* should we want to forgo the benefits? *Why* should we not want to believe? *Why* do we not go out through the open door? *Why* do we not open our clenched fists? *Why*

do we obstruct our ears? *Why* are we blindfolded? Honestly, *why?*

One remark in reply must suffice. All this is so because perhaps we failed to pray fervently enough for a change within ourselves, on our part. That God is God, not only almighty, but merciful and good, that he wills and does what is best for us, that Jesus Christ died for us to set us free, that by grace, in him, we have been saved — all this need *not* be a concern of our prayers. All these things are true apart from our own deeds and prayers. But to believe, to accept, to let it be true for us, to begin to live with this truth, to believe it not only with our minds and with our lips but also with our hearts and with all our lives, so that our fellowmen may sense it, and finally to let our total existence be immersed in the great divine truth, *by grace you have been saved*, this is to be the concern of our prayers. No human being has ever prayed for this in vain. If anyone asks for this, the answer is already being given and faith begins. And because no one has ever asked for this in vain, no one may omit praying like a little child for the assurance that God's truth, this terrible, this glorious truth, is shining even today, a small, yet increasingly bright light. *By grace you have been saved*. Ask that you may believe this and it will be given you; seek this, and you will find it; knock on this door, and it will be opened to you.

This, my dear friends, is what I have been priv-

ileged and empowered to tell you of the good news as the Word of God today. Amen.

*O Lord, our God! Thou seest and hearest us. Thou knowest each one of us far better than we know ourselves. Thou lovest us without our deserving it. Thou hast helped us and dost help us still, although we are ever again inclined to spoil thy work by wanting to help ourselves. Thou art the Judge, but thou art also the Savior of the poor and perplexed human race. For this we give thee thanks. For this we praise thee. We rejoice in the prospect of seeing with our own eyes on thy great day what we already now may believe if thou makest us free to do so.*

*Make us free to believe! Give us the true, honest, and active faith in thee and in thy truth! Give it to many! Give it to all men! Give it to the peoples and their governments, to the rich and to the poor, to the healthy and to the sick, to the prisoners and to those who think they are free, to the old and to the young, to the joyful and to the sorrowful, to the heavy-laden and to the light-minded! There is no one who does not stand in need of faith, no one to whom the promise of faith is denied. Tell all our people, ourselves included, that thou art their merciful God and Father and ours! This we ask thee in the name of Jesus Christ, who commanded us to pray: "Our Father . . ."*