

**The Crisis of Preaching Politics:
Homiletical Insights from the Young Karl Barth**

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Abstract: *Many contemporary preachers and homileticians address what they believe to be a “crisis” of preaching. Without denying these claims, this essay offers theological and homiletical insights from the young Karl Barth on what he believed to be a more fundamental and pervasive homiletical crisis subsuming all others. Just what this crisis was for Barth becomes clearer when we look to the sociopolitical commitments of two of Barth’s pastoral mentors: Friedrich Naumann and Christoph Blumhardt. Drawing from his theologico-political discernment leading up to the Great War, Barth offers us ways to challenge unjust and oppressive policies and systems through our preaching ministries today.*

*The gospel of Christ brings a saving future into the disastrous present,
speaking of God in the face of godlessness, of our brotherhood in the face of enmity,
and of the new creation in the face of a threatened earth.*
– Jürgen Moltmann¹

Óscar Romero, the Salvadoran Archbishop and martyr of the church, once declared, “The church that doesn’t provoke any crisis, a gospel that doesn’t unsettle, a word of God that doesn’t get under anyone’s skin, [and] touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed, what gospel is that? ... Those preachers who avoid every thorny matter so as not to be harassed, so as not to have conflicts and difficulties, do not light up the world they live in.”² The world needs preachers courageous enough to pick a fight. And yet, mere truculence leaves much to be desired. One of the salient crises of our time is that many preachers who go viral on YouTube or blanket the headlines of the *New York Times* pick the *wrong* fight.

Preachers who insist that the gospel of Jesus Christ necessitates Qur’an burning or denigrating the prophet Mohammed have picked the wrong fight. Preachers who promote further persecution of LGBTQ-identifying persons do not light up this world; in fact, they darken it considerably. Preachers who combat epistemological uncertainty with oppressive doctrines like biblical inerrancy have picked the wrong fight. And preachers who barrage congregants with a “name it and claim it” bromides aided by New Thought metaphysics and neo-gnostic ideologies provoke the wrong crisis.

This essay inquires into the so-called crises of contemporary preaching. Especially for preachers aiming to challenge unjust and oppressive policies and systems, proclamation that spans the historic gulf between the pulpit and the polis can be daunting. My hope is that through close attention to a young Swiss preacher seeking a word from God for the people of God amid sociopolitical and economic upheavals, preachers and homileticians today might discern a

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York & London: Harper & Row, 1977), 221.

² Óscar Romero, *The Violence of Love: The Pastoral Wisdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero*, trans. James R. Brockmen (New York: Harper & Row, 1988) 64.

chastening word that orients our work and witness. Along the way, let us see if the “crisis” about which so many homileticians and preachers speak is actually worthy of the name.

The Contemporary Crises of Preaching

The so-called “crisis of preaching” has received much recent attention in mainline, African American, and evangelical expressions of Christianity. Moreover, a spate of recent books have commended a dialogical homiletic as the way through the aporia produced by the contemporary political situation in America.³ As William Brosend puts it: “The [homiletical] challenge is to foster in our preaching and ecclesial life more broadly a place where genuine dialogue might happen, the pulpit as a faithful alternative to the vituperative hysteria of pundits and prognosticators.”⁴ Pastor Ginger Gaines-Cirelli says much the same thing:

I’ve been asked a lot lately how to preach on controversial, politically charged topics. The first response I share is that, if you are a pastor, the relationship with your congregation is the place to begin. If the people trust that you see, know, and love them, that you love God and seek God’s wisdom and way in your speaking and choosing, and that you are on a journey with God and with them in relationship, you have a good foundation to stand upon. From such a place of trusting relationship, preachers can risk taking a stand—or can at least share where they find themselves at a given moment.⁵

This bit of homiletical wisdom bears much in common with Leonora Tubbs Tisdale’s admonition that prophetic preaching requires a pastoral sensitivity.⁶

But it is not only mainline preachers who continue to grapple with preaching amid political crises. In his book *Crisis in the Village*, former Morehouse University president Robert Franklin writes that the “single greatest threat to the historical legacy and core values of the contemporary black church tradition is posed by what is known as the ‘prosperity gospel’ movement.”⁷ He argues that this movement is symptomatic of a larger crisis that he labels a “mission drift,” in which African American congregations have assimilated into cultures that are hostile to marginalized people—such as the poor, the HIV-infected, homosexuals, and immigrants. Preaching is particularly culpable for this crisis because the poetic and prophetic potency of pulpit proclamation has fallen to crude displays of “Simon says” and moral courage has faltered before neoliberal philosophies and materialistic anthropologies. In short, Franklin declares, the Black church is in a state of crisis and preaching is utterly responsible.

³ See, for instance, O. Wesley Allen Jr., *Preaching in an Era of Trump* (Danvers, MA: Chalice Press, 2017); Leah D. Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Blue-Red Divide* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019); and Ronald J. Allen and O. Wesley Allen, Jr. *The Sermon Without End: A Conversational Approach to Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015). In a distinct though overlapping vein, John McClure’s Habermasian inspired praxis of communicative action broadens the scope of conversation into the public square. See John S. McClure, *Speaking Together and with God: Liturgy and Communicative Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Minneapolis: Fortress Academic, 2018).

⁴ William Brosend, *Preaching Truth in the Age of Alternative Facts* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), xiv.

⁵ Ginger Gaines-Cirelli, *Sacred Resistance: A Practical Guide to Christian Witness and Dissent* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), 90.

⁶ See Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

⁷ Robert M. Franklin, *Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 112. See also Debra J. Mumford’s eye-opening book, *Exploring Prosperity Preaching: Biblical Health, Wealth, & Wisdom* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2012).

Albert Mohler, the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY, would agree with Franklin's homiletical indictment, but for completely different reasons. Mohler writes, "One of the hallmarks of our time is that we face a crisis of preaching. ...Much of what happens in pulpits across America today is not preaching, even though the preacher—and probably his congregation along with him—would claim that it is."⁸ The "crisis" Mohler identifies has nothing to do with the needs of the marginalized, unbridled capitalism, or even environmental degradation. For Mohler, the crisis of preaching is that preachers are no longer preaching expository sermons. He rails against the turn to narrative or topical preaching for blunting the declarative force of scripture. Mohler argues that if preachers will but preach expository sermons—by which they *explain* the meaning and truthfulness of scripture—then the Bible itself will overcome its contemporary preaching crisis. Perhaps.

Barbara Brown Taylor views the crisis of preaching in a different light. For Taylor, the issue is neither sociological nor homiletical, but a *theological* misunderstanding that has led to the attenuated power of preaching. She laments that preaching is increasingly viewed as a "solo performance," wherein the preacher delivers some transcendent message lassoed on the plains of homiletical speculation.⁹ Instead, she urges preachers and congregants to discover the work of God in their midst *through* the event of preaching. Ownership of the sermon belongs to the many—the gathered community of faith—and not the preacher, Taylor argues, one that is more interested in life than religion.¹⁰

I could go on and on with such examples. Homileticians and preachers alike are unified in their assessment that something is the matter with preaching in contemporary North American Christian contexts, but the truth is that there never has been a golden age of preaching. Homiletician Clyde Fant observed long ago that each generation of preachers tends to think they are the first to have been "chained to the rock of the pulpit and have their livers torn out by the giant birds of criticism, only to have them grow back before the next Sunday."¹¹ No generation of preachers is spared from certain challenges and concomitant criticism—especially when speaking out on issues that are politically divisive. It is our duty, Fant contends, to make sure preaching is in trouble for the right reasons.

I believe the crisis of preaching is endemic to the very nature of preaching, and I am not alone in this assessment. In his Lyman Beecher Lectures on Preaching delivered at Yale Divinity School in 1976, famed Baptist preacher Gardner Taylor confessed to "a gnawing uncertainty about the value and worth of preaching." His dubiousness was exacerbated by the fact that he was headed to preach in South Africa at the height of apartheid. Coming face-to-face with the beast of racial segregation and economic oppression, preaching seemed like such a "clumsy and unclear form of communication" to Taylor.¹² He arrived at the conclusion that preaching's crisis arises from the feebleness of the proclaimed Word: "How strange of God to make the uttered word so fragile and so tenuous, the principal carrier of so precious a cargo as that incalculable

⁸ R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *He is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 50.

⁹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Weekly Wrestling Match," in *What's the Matter with Preaching Today?* ed. Mike Graves (Louisville & London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 172.

¹⁰ Taylor, "The Weekly Wrestling Match," 173.

¹¹ Clyde E. Fant, *Preaching for Today*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 24. Fant argues that "no age seems so golden as in the afterglow of its sunset" and that preaching has suffered from a pervasive shortsightedness that tends toward a "cave mentality," which often produces nostalgia or untempered optimism (26–7).

¹² Gardner C. Taylor, *How Shall They Preach* (Elgin, IL: Progressive Baptist Publishing House, 1977), 42.

love which God has intemporated [*sic*] and incarnated in Jesus Christ our Lord.”¹³ To this, many contemporary homileticians would shout a hearty *Amen*!¹⁴

Jürgen Moltmann mirrors Taylor’s assessment: “As long as there is a prevailing impression that the sign is not the thing it stands for, [that] the name is not the thing, [that] the idea is not the deed, [and that] the dream is not the action, [that] ‘the true word (is) unattainable, unprovable, unpromisable,’ [then] Christian proclamation and liberating narration [are] impossible.”¹⁵ It is this feebleness, this impossibility of preaching that I wish to reflect upon for the remainder of this essay. For when we approach the preaching task in light of its radical impossibility, we see that the political preaching crises articulated by so many are symptomatic assessments that bear witness to a deeper crisis piercing the very heart of Christian proclamation. In my conclusion, we will circle back to these contemporary crises, where we will be in a position to see them with fresh eyes. But for now, let us take a close look at the reflections of a renegade Swiss preacher who ministered in a situation very much like that facing twenty-first century America. This preacher’s name was Karl Barth, and his revolutionary reflections on the task of preaching and the role of the church in society offer a fresh perspective on the crisis of preaching politics.

The True Crisis of Preaching

The young Karl Barth received his theological training at some of the premier European universities of his day, where he was deeply influenced by the central tenants of so-called “liberal Protestant theology.” The works of Schleiermacher, Troeltsch, Ritschl, and Harnack resonated deeply with Barth’s theological sensibilities, and his early essays and sermons reflect this commitment. Barth bore the mantle of liberalism proudly, and he made such an impression on his intellectual mentors that his professor Martin Rade made Barth editorial assistant for the most influential theological journal at the time: *Die Christliche Welt*. As Barth noted in a letter written many years later,

Everything which I saw and heard in those surroundings had such a self-evident splendor. This world, represented by so many clever and gifted people, went on its way in a manner so certain of itself, that I would have laughed at anyone who would have predicted to me at that time that my own future could lie in any other direction than in some kind of extension of the Marburger, and especially, the *Christliche Welt* theology...¹⁶

In 1911, Barth’s theological training was put to the test as he became the pastor of a tiny Reformed congregation in Safenwil, Switzerland. For the next ten years his rhythms befit those of a working preacher in a blue-collar parish. Right away Barth realized that his preaching could not remain distant from the sociopolitical struggles of his parishioners. All of Barth’s professors in Germany were liberal theologically, but conservative on social issues. In his sojourn in academia, the social democratic movement had swept through Switzerland, resulting in the widespread belief that the gospel demanded a rapprochement between the message of the

¹³ Taylor, *How Shall They Preach*, 44.

¹⁴ See Lance B. Pape, *The Scandal of Having Something to Say: Ricoeur and the Possibility of Postliberal Preaching* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013).

¹⁵ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 207.

¹⁶ Karl Barth to Johannes Rathje (Apr. 27, 1947) in Diether Koch, ed. *Karl Barth: Offene Briefe, 1945-68* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1984), 120, cited in Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 38.

socialists and the gospel preached by the churches. Barth became particularly active in the trade-union movement,¹⁷ and in December of 1911, Barth gave a lecture entitled “Jesus Christ and the Social Movement,” in which he drew a marked contrast between the failure of the church of the previous 1800 years to deal with social needs. He argued that true socialism was the true Christianity of his time.¹⁸ It is clear from Barth’s letters and the tone set in his public lectures and sermons that the social dimension of the gospel presented his preaching with a crisis. A gospel that does not touch the real needs of the people cannot be good news, and Barth’s fervor for the socialist movement rose to such a pitch that five members of his church session resigned in protest and they threatened to remove him from his post as pastor.

A further homiletical crisis presented itself just three years into his pastoral call. In 1914, Barth was shocked to see that some of his former theology professors had signed the infamous “Manifesto of the Ninety-Three,” a proclamation endorsed by 93 prominent German scientists, scholars and artists, declaring their unequivocal support of German military actions in the early period of World War I.¹⁹ In reflecting upon this event, Barth would later write:

One day in early August 1914 stands out in my personal memory as a black day. Ninety-three German intellectuals impressed public opinion by their proclamation in support of the war policy of Wilhelm II and his counselors. Among these intellectuals I discovered to my horror almost all of my theological teachers whom I had greatly venerated. In despair over what this indicated about the signs of the time I suddenly realized that I could not any longer follow either their ethics and dogmatics or their understanding of the Bible and of history. For me at least, 19th century theology no longer held any future.²⁰

Barth’s liberalism was already strained by the preaching task itself. The liberal theology that he had inherited could not open a viable path to gospel proclamation. In the preface to the second edition of his *Epistle to the Romans* (1922), Barth remarks,

I myself know what it means year in year out to mount the steps of the pulpit, conscious of the responsibility to understand and to interpret, and longing to fulfill it; and yet, utterly incapable, because at the University I had never been brought beyond that well-known “Awe in the presence of History” which means in the end no more than that all hope of engaging in the dignity of understanding and interpretation has been surrendered.²¹

¹⁷ Karl Barth, “Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher,” in idem, *The Theology of Schleiermacher: Lectures at Göttingen, Winter Semester of 1923/24*, ed. Dietrich Ritschl, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 263.

¹⁸ Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life From Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 70.

¹⁹ Karl Barth, *Karl Barth – Rudolph Bultmann: Letters, 1922–1966*, ed. Bernd Jaspart, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 154.

²⁰ Karl Barth, “Evangelical Theology in the Nineteenth Century,” in idem, *The Humanity of God*, trans. Thomas Wieser (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1978), 14.

²¹ Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1933), 9. Though I quote from the sixth edition of this text, the text remained the same after the second edition, which differs markedly from the first, after which Barth sensed the need for a “new edition in which the original has been so completely rewritten that no stone remains in its old place” (2). Further references to this work will be parenthetically cited as *R*.

His sermons in Safenwil bear the weight of a pastor struggling to resource his congregation for the socio-political turmoil they faced, while the “liberal” theological reservoir amassed during his education at Marburg, Tübingen, and Berlin seemed increasingly insufficient for the task. More than anything, I believe it was his dissatisfaction with his education to provide adequate theological resources for his preaching—coupled with the close, conscientious attention he paid to the biblical text for sermon preparation and teaching—that impelled Barth’s “Krisis theology.”²² Barth later confessed that his theology had its roots in his ministry in Safenwil.²³

For the young Karl Barth the crisis of preaching was twofold: he struggled against a theology aloof from the real world struggles of his parishioners, on the one hand, while he grappled with a theology subservient to the Chancellor rather than Jesus Christ. In a letter to his best friend and fellow pastor, Eduard Thurneysen, Barth writes, “One broods alternatively over the newspaper and the New Testament and actually sees fearfully little of the organic connection between the two worlds concerning which one should now be able to give a clear and powerful witness.”²⁴ As Barth began to question the philosophical assumptions inherent in his theology, his confidence wavered. The so-called *truths* of Christian theology he came to see as “nothing more than surface varnish” that occluded the true revelation of God to humankind.²⁵ Barth needed a better paradigm than those presented to him, and the quest for a solution to his homiletical crisis would radically alter the twentieth century.

A Tale of Two Preachers

On the cusp of Barth’s socio-theological crisis, he came under the influence of two preachers: Friedrich Naumann and Christoph Blumhardt. A brief description of both of these men will be important in discerning the contours of Barth’s crisis and the path upon which he would later embark.

Naumann began his career as a pastor in Hamburg working in an inner-city mission church. Passionate about the rising socio-economic disparity between the working poor and their

²² See Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen, *Briefwechsel, 1913-1921*, ed. Eduard Thurneysen (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1973), where Barth frequently comments to his fellow pastor the difficulties of the preaching task vis-à-vis his theological education. See also several recently translated sermons of Barth’s early preaching (1917–1920) published in Karl Barth and William H. Willimon, *The Early Preaching of Karl Barth: Fourteen Sermons with Commentary by William H. Willimon* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009). For a thorough treatment of Barth’s theology of *krisis* see Henri Bouillard, *Karl Barth: Genèse et Évolution de la Théologie Dialectique* (Paris: Aubier, 1957), 79–118. On “krisis theology” as a theological response to the Great War see Gary Dorrien, *Theology Without Weapons: The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 47–80. Nb., The degree to which Barth’s theology is a specimen of “krisis theology” is debated. In *Romans*, Barth offers a deeper critique than mere cultural response: “Wherever [people] pray and preach, wherever sacrifice is offered, wherever in the presence of God emotions are stirred and experiences occur—there, yes! Precisely there, the trespass abounds. Precisely there, the invisible truth that before God no flesh is righteous, which may perhaps have remained invisible from Adam to Moses, becomes visible. Precisely there, [people] encounter God; and there breaks forth the KRISIS of God, the sickness unto death” (R II, 186).

²³ See Karl Barth, *Letzte Zeugnisse* (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1969), 19, cited in Busch, *Karl Barth*, 61.

²⁴ Barth to Thurneysen (Nov. 11, 1918), in *Revolutionary Theology in the Making*, 45. Earlier in the letter, Barth writes, “Just up again after an attack of the grippe, we must now get quickly in touch in these extraordinary times. But what goes on round about us? *What* is there to say? One stands astonished, does he not, and can only state how the face of the world changes visibly: on *this* side of things. But the *other* side: the meaning and content, the actual trend of it all, the movements in the spiritual round that now take place, the doors of God that now open or close, the progress of standstill in the *eleutheria thes doxes ton teknon tou theu*? Who is there now with a comprehensive view was able to see to the very roots of world events in order to speak and act from that standpoint?”

²⁵ Barth, “Barth to Thurneysen (Sept. 4, 1914)” in *Revolutionary Theology in the Making*, 26.

industrial overlords (does this sound familiar?), he founded *Die Hilfe*, a weekly magazine providing support and political advocacy on behalf of the underclass. As time wore on, Naumann became convinced that a strong nation-state was a necessary condition for the possibility of seeing Jesus' vision for the poor actualized in the real world and thus he turned his attention to political life. In 1907 he was elected to the Reichstag. From 1905 to 1914 Naumann was a stentorian advocate for the German military buildup and a strong supporter of Wilhelm II. In 1914, at the threshold of WWI, Barth wrote a review on Naumann and his work in *Die Christliche Welt* in which he questioned the foundational assumptions of his former mentor. Barth wrote that the Christian is not to be tied to the powers and principalities of this world. We recognize the necessity of political compromise on behalf of justice and social progress, but we do so only in service of "something greater": "It is one thing to become accustomed to the world of relativities, finally becoming completely satisfied and...at home in them, as those who have no hope. It is another thing altogether, in the midst of this world of relativities, to be incessantly disquieted and full of longing after the better which will come, after the immediate goal of a human community of life beyond all temporal necessities."²⁶

The other preacher who came to influence Barth during his time in the pastorate was the widely popular Pietist preacher from the Black Forest, Christoph Blumhardt. A bit more background is necessary to appreciate his influence. Christoph was the third son of Johan Blumhardt, a preacher in the village of Möttlingen, which lies on the outskirts of Stuttgart. The elder Blumhardt had a largely unimpressive ministry there; in fact his predecessor at the parish maintained that the people had been "preached to death,"²⁷ and sleeping in the church was a general practice. A turning point came in the elder Blumhardt's ministry when a twenty-four-year-old woman named Gottliebin Dittus came under his care. This woman was believed by all to be possessed by demonic powers. For two years Blumhardt wrangled in the Spirit with the powers of darkness and, during the Christmas season of 1843, the woman was miraculously cured. Blumhardt would later describe this season of his ministry as his "*Kampf*," and in particularly dramatic fashion, when the unclean spirit eventually departed it shouted, "*Jesus ist Sieger!*" (Jesus is Victor!) This became the battle cry for Blumhardt as well as his son, Christoph.

Word quickly spread about this miraculous display of spiritual power, and Blumhardt became a celebrity. People flocked to the sleepy town to receive healing. In fact, Blumhardt became so popular that after only a month the state church authorities banned healing and Blumhardt was forbidden to lay hands on any non-resident who came to the parish.²⁸ Eventually the municipal and ecclesial constraints became so restrictive that Blumhardt purchased a spa located near the town of Göppingen. The ministry complex was called Bad Boll, and its sulfur spring was originally constructed by Wilhelm I as a "Wunderbad" (wonder bath). If you've ever visited or heard of Heritage USA, the Christian theme park built and operated by Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker in the 1980s, you might have an idea of what Bad Boll was like.

The elder Blumhardt was a simple man and the notoriety was a hindrance to his lifestyle. In 1872, Johan's son, Christoph, began working in his father's ministry as a preacher and healer.

²⁶ Karl Barth, "Die Hilfe 1913," *Die Christliche Welt*, 28 (15 Aug. 1914), 776, cited in Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1905–1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 109.

²⁷ Friedrich Zuendel, *Johann Christoph Blumhardt: Ein Lebensbild* (Basel Brunnen Verlag, 1924), 83.

²⁸ Leonhard Ragaz, *Der Kampf um das Reich Gottes in Blumhardt: Vater und Sohn—und weiter!* (Erlenbach-Zürich: Rotapfel-Verlag, 1922).

Christoph took immediately to the prestige and notoriety he had inherited. In fact, one of his commentators noted that Christoph strutted about the grounds with a “stateliness” that put him on par with the nobility who came to stay at his house as guests. His barns and park were a model of good management, and he rode around in an elegant coupe drawn by a fiery team of thoroughbreds driven by an imposing coachman.²⁹ If we adjust for time and cultural differences, the younger Blumhardt rode around in a chauffeured Bentley; imagine a carriage with gold spinners.

Sixteen years into this post-ministry empire, Christoph experienced a conversion of sorts when the last eyewitness to his father’s “Kampf” in Möttlingen died, and his preaching and healing ministry became focused on the righteousness of God. In a sermon preached in October of 1896, we see this shift in Blumhardt’s preaching that resulted in a rapid decline in his popularity. He proclaimed that the Kingdom of God cannot be reduced to Christendom or to miraculous signs of healing, but to the love of neighbor. He proclaims:

Love your neighbor! [*Liebe deinen Nächsten!*] We must respect each other—the social groups, the nations, the sexes must respect one another. The husband must respect the wife, the high must respect the low, the governing must respect the governed. We will make more progress in that way than with all our Christianity. Today it serves no purpose to sit down in a pious gathering and put on a pious air. Today the call is: Get out into the world! [*hinaus in die Welt!*] Pay attention to the trumpet that is sounding in the world! That is piety [*das ist fromm!*]³⁰ (In the German text, Blumhardt includes over fifty exclamation points in this sermon!)

This conversion toward a social justice impetus informed by a radical theology of love as the centerpiece to the Kingdom of God would have a profound effect on Barth’s ministry. For Blumhardt, the social problems of his day were inextricably linked to deep Christian piety. It was this dialectic beyond subsumption that captured the young Karl Barth’s imagination. Allow me to illustrate. In a sermon preached on April 24, 1899, Blumhardt declared, “God wants to solve the social problems and that is why I am a socialist!”³¹ Furthermore, in another address Blumhardt proclaims that the expressions of social democracy are commensurate with the confession that Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth.³² In a letter sent to his friends explaining his new found orientation, Blumhardt describes the socialist movement as a sign of fire in the heavens announcing God’s judgment, and while help can come only from beyond the scope of human agency, the movement is seeking such help by “seeking the freedom of humanity by a bloodless revolution.”³³

In an article published in the *Neuer Freier Aargauer*, Barth reflected on the life and influence of Naumann and Blumhardt on his own socio-theological development. In that article, Barth writes, “There is an uncomfortable moment when an upright man begins to reflect with both open eyes about religion and about life. Religion? Yes, what does religion mean and what help is it; what is the *truth* of religion when life with its ordinances and relationships, the whole

²⁹ Eberhard Zellweger, *Der jüngere Blumhardt : was verdanken wir ihm?* (Basel: H. Majer, 1945), 128–9.

³⁰ Christoph Blumhardt, *Ihr Menschen seid Gottes! : Predigten und Andachten aus den Jahren 1896 bis 1900*, vol. 3, ed. Robert Lejeune (Erlenbach-Zürich & Leipzig: Rotapfel-Verlag, 1936), 454.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 289.

³² *Ibid.*, 286.

³³ *Ibid.*, 443–52.

raging course of the world as it is, so notoriously bypasses the love and righteousness of God, of which religion speaks?”³⁴

With Nauman, Barth also wonders how it is possible that the godless social democrats understood God better than the church did. He asks, “Was it possible that the church needed to repent and turn to the God of the godless?” Barth’s frequently cited quotation about how to hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, and how the two are supposed to relate to each other, IS the crisis of preaching.³⁵

In a letter Barth wrote in 1915, he notes that it was the need to preach each Sunday that forced him to solidify his position on the relationship between the Bible and the newspaper. He writes, “Above all, it has become increasingly clear to me that what we need is something beyond all morality and politics and ethics. These are constantly forced into compromises with reality and therefore have no saving power in themselves. This is true even of so-called Christian morality and so-called socialist politics.”³⁶

Barth describes this time in his life between Naumann’s socialized Christianity and Blumhardt’s Christian socialism as that in which he “battered like a bumble-bee against all the closed windows.”³⁷ Barth wrote that he was “[c]onfronted by the choice between the visible and the invisible, between the possible and the impossible, with a heavy heart, but finally deliberately and resolutely, [Naumann] grasped the visible and the possible.”³⁸ Under Blumhardt’s influence, Barth came to see that God, not humanity, was the ultimate reality, the first certainty. The decision to begin with God as the starting point for social and theological engagement changed everything for Barth. The Kingdom of God had to be proclaimed as both present and future, breaking in upon contemporary life while meeting a resistance at every point in society and in the human spirit. Thus, for Barth, there could be no complacency, no rest, and no identification of it with the spiritual and cultural achievements of modernity. Life in the present had to be viewed as a time of tense liminality between the victory of Christ in his cross and resurrection and the coming victory when his sovereignty would be made complete.

The battle cry of the eschatologically invigorated social awareness was thus *warten und eilen*, wait and hasten!

In an article written just two months before the armistice agreement of the First World War, Barth wrote that Blumhardt’s work was, “the most direct and penetrating Word from God into the need of the world that the war years have produced so far.”³⁹ Blumhardt’s writing and preaching allowed Barth to “experience the echo” of the biblical texts.

³⁴ Karl Barth, “Past and Future: Friedrich Naumann and Christoph Blumhardt,” in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, vol. 1, ed. James M. Robinson, trans. Keith R. Crim (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1968), 36.

³⁵ Karl Barth, “Interview von ‘Time’ (I),” *Karl Barth Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Eberhard Busch (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 2005), 356. Or, as he put it elsewhere: “This Word concerns mankind in all times and places, the theologian in his own time and place, and the world in its occupation with the routine problems of the everyday. This Word challenges the world in which X, Y, and Z appear—with their own big words—to have the say and to determine the lot of all men and things as well as the lot of theologians. While the theologian reads the newspaper, he cannot forget that he has just read Isaiah 40 or John 1 or Romans 8. He, at any rate, cannot suppress the knowledge that the Word of God speaks not only of an infinitely deeper need but also of an infinitely higher promise than the sum total of all the needs and promises characteristic of his time and place.” Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Foley Grover (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 78.

³⁶ Karl Barth to W. Spoendlin, 4 January 1915, cited in Busch, *Karl Barth*, 84.

³⁷ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 86.

³⁸ Barth, “Past and Future,” 39.

³⁹ Karl Barth, “Auf das Reich Gottes warten,” *Die freie Schweizer Arbeiter* 49 (15 September 1916).

What captivated Barth almost as much as the content of Blumhardt's work was the method of his argumentation: "Blumhardt always begins right away with God's presence, might, and purpose: he starts out from God; he does not begin by climbing upwards to Him by means of contemplation and deliberation. God is the end, and because we already know Him as the beginning, we may await His consummating acts."⁴⁰ Pleading, a "living waiting" on God for the world," is the "nerve center" of Blumhardt's theology.⁴¹

By 1918, the young Karl Barth had cast his lot decidedly with Blumhardt's vision for an eschatologically driven social ethic. In his famous Tambach lecture, entitled, "The Christian's Place in Society," Barth writes, "It is better for us to be conscious of our primary inadequacy than to surrender ourselves to a religious mood which, despite all our sincerity, might again veil from us the real situation."⁴² This in no way implies a turning from the world toward some solipsistic utopia. Rather, the particular movements of God in lived reality are like a bird in flight—a snapshot or a picture of the bird does not do justice to its majestic movement. Following Blumhardt's charge to lean into the dialectical tension between waiting and hastening, Barth argues that the Christian is called to "participate" in the radical in-breaking of the Kingdom of God, which is never reducible to any social program or political policy. Our task is to enter the fray in a particular way, in the fear of the Lord. An eschatological hopefulness is, for the Christian in society, like a blanket pulled back over reality: "the living and divine element is always there; and this very committing of ourselves to God in the world is our power of not committing ourselves to the world without God."⁴³

The true crisis of preaching arises from the etymology of the word crisis: decision. In light of the young Karl Barth's struggle to preach we see a decision that we who would bear the mantle of Christian ministry, too, must make. Our decision is not between biblical fidelity and social justice. That can never be a Christian choice. Rather, the decision we must make is to proclaim God's word such that every political ideology trembles in the wake of God's eschatological insurgence.⁴⁴ Will we, like Blumhardt, embrace the impossible, or like Naumann, settle for the possible? The preaching crisis itself is the crisis preaching produces in itself: the decision to proclaim "Jesus is victor," not as an end in itself, but as a catalyst for Christ-followers to live lives of radical impossibility.⁴⁵

Conclusion: Embracing the Crisis of Preaching Politics

While a student at Crozier Theological Seminary in 1948, the late great Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. argued that preaching ought to hold "duel processes" in creative tension. On the one hand, he contends that preaching must aim to affect the soul of individuals so that societies may be changed. On the other, he argues preaching ought to change the societies so that

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Karl Barth, "The Christian's Place in Society," in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978), 285.

⁴³ Ibid., 299.

⁴⁴ With gratitude, I borrow this language of insurgence from Brian K. Blount, *Invasion of the Dead: Preaching Resurrection* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014).

⁴⁵ See Jacob D. Myers, *Preaching Must Die! Troubling Homiletical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017).

the individual soul will have a change.⁴⁶ The young Rev. Barth and the young Rev. King would have had much to talk about.

Dr. King caught a vision and embodied a way of preaching *through* the crisis that the young Karl Barth also saw. In a Christmas sermon that Barth preached to his tiny parish in Safenwil, we find a radical hope that fuels social action. Barth proclaims that “hard and tense oppositions will not hold following the birth of the Christ child. The incarnation of God destroys a way of life in which “goodwill...never becomes act; nor [where] evil and dangerous conditions...are left as they are, with no attempt to change them; nor misery inside and outside, for which there is no redeeming word...” Following the bodily indwelling of God the “dark world” can no longer be dismissed “with a shrug of the shoulders...” When Christmas happens, Barth declares, “all that belongs to the past.”⁴⁷

Several contemporary homileticians capture the all-encompassing impact of God’s radical in-breaking as the centerpiece of preaching that transcends the pulpit into the political sphere. Richard Voelz, for instance, avers, “When we proclaim a vision of the kingdom of God, we inherently proclaim a version of the public sphere that becomes entirely reordered from its present state and that offers a compelling invitation to live now into the shape of God’s future.”⁴⁸ Frank Thomas’s moral homiletical imagination leads preachers to preach “dangerous sermons.” Such sermons bypass the impasses between political parties. Rather, Thomas urges us to “preach the moral base of issues,” to cast a theological vision that subsumes mere politics.⁴⁹ These recent contributions contribute to a way of preaching politics without attempting to wriggle around the necessary crisis preaching provokes.

⁴⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Preaching Ministry,” in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Volume VI: Called to Serve, September 1948–March 1963*, ed. Clayborne Carson, et. al. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, & London: University of California Press, 1992), 71–2, emphasis added.

⁴⁷ Karl Barth, “25. Dezember (Weihnacht): Lukas 2, 25–32,” in *Predigten 1918 (GA I.37)*, ed. Hermann Schmidt (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1999), 257.

⁴⁸ Richard W. Voelz, *Preaching to Teach: Inspire People to Think and Act* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019), 32.

⁴⁹ Frank A. Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), 90.