

***The Early Preaching of Karl Barth: Fourteen Sermons with Commentary.* By William Willimon. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. 171 pages. Paperback, \$18.25.**

In *The Early Preaching of Karl Barth*, William Willimon has compiled fourteen sermons preached by Barth during his pastorate at Safenwil followed by Willimon's own critique of the homiletical practice of young Barth. This era was definitive in Barth's life as he was in the process of making his break from the classical Liberalism under which he had been trained, resulting in the development of his own dialectical theology for which he would become known.

As wisdom is justified by her children, so is a theology justified by its sermons. In this compilation the reader will gain an insightful glance into the inner struggle of Barth as his sermons slowly betray his learned theology. The earliest sermons were the obvious productions of an intellectual liberal, focused on the problems of the day and how a better humanity would be able to overcome any challenge.

However, as Barth simultaneously wrote a commentary on Romans and wrestled with the frustration of the non-transforming message of Liberalism, he eventually became bound to expository preaching. Barth's struggle with his evolving theology becomes most evident in his sermon from Romans 12:1-2 delivered on March 3, 1918, only a few months before the publication of his Romans commentary. By the final sermon delivered in December of 1920, Barth had moved from anthropological to Christological centrism.

Though one gains much insight into Barth as a preacher, the focus of *The Early Preaching of Barth* is Willimon's commentary that follows each sermon. Willimon is equally complimentary and condemnatory to Barth's early preaching. He at times holds forth Barth as the model homilician. Barth's sermon from Matthew 9:14-15 is said to be "up-front and even exuberant in its apparent supposition that here are thoughts that no one has ever had – before listening to the sermon! Well done, you prophetic troubler of Israel!" (110). Contrarily Willimon says of Barth, "He assumes too much for his listeners, is far too subtle in his exposition, and is too abstract in his treatment of a biblical text that bristles with corporeal vividness and stirring exhortation" (55).

Though Willimon offers beneficial contextual commentary surrounding each sermon, his attempt to use Barth's homiletical mistakes as criticism for current well known preachers, including Rick Warren and Joel Osteen, require overreaching. The criticisms may be accurate, but they seem misplaced.

However, many developing pastors will find kinship with Barth as he fails to remain faithful to the text in an attempt to be relevant to the circumstances of culture. Any experienced pastor who blushes at the reminder of his own first sermons will be encouraged by young Barth's failed efforts, providing hope for improvement.

The Early Preaching of Barth should be read by those who proclaim the glorious mysteries of Christ if for no other reason than to see that a faulty theology leaves the pastor with no message and the people with no hope. Pragmatics must finally give way to conviction. The sermons that are birthed reveal the theology from whence they came. A discouraged pastor and a hopeless congregation are poor justifications for a weak theology. Barth's early preaching is an historical illustration of this truth. A lesson for all who preach.