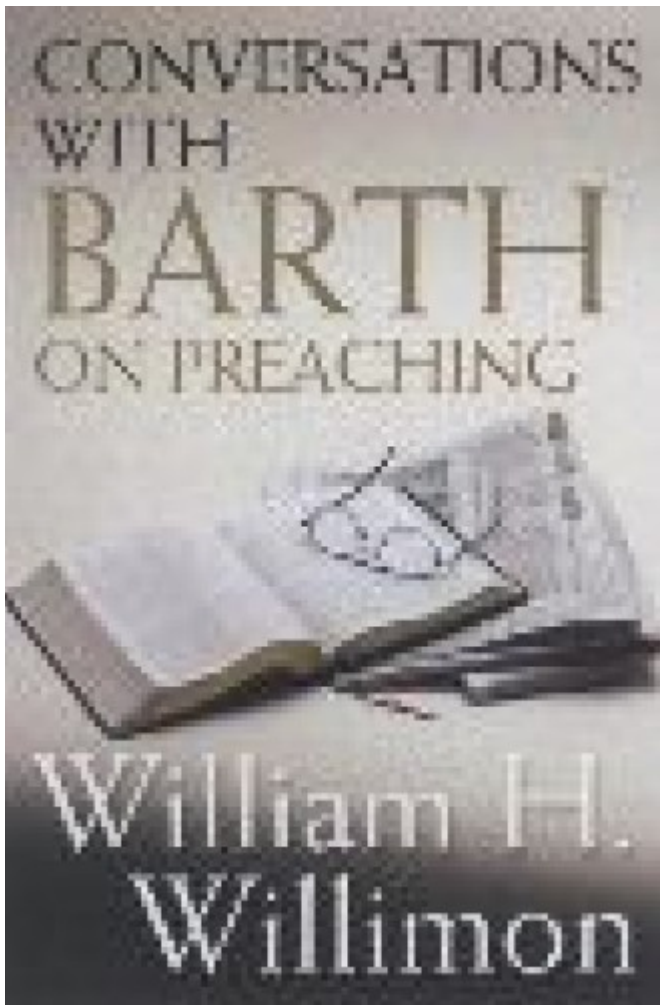


Conversations with Barth on Preaching

reviewed by [Daniel Migliore](#) in the [November 14, 2006](#) issue

In Review



Conversations With Barth on Preaching

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Karl Barth's theology grew out of the task of preaching, and he always kept that task in view. In a radio interview not long before his death, he noted, "My whole theology, you see, is fundamentally a theology for pastors. It grew out of my own situation, when I had to preach and teach and counsel a little." Knowing from experience both the obligation and the inability to speak of God (and having preached some 670 sermons himself), Barth was especially pleased to hear from preachers that they had found help for their difficult weekly task in the fertile fields of *Church Dogmatics*.

In *Conversations with Barth on Preaching*, William Willimon, a former professor of homiletics, a Methodist bishop and a preacher of considerable renown, writes with passion about Barth's theology as a largely untapped treasure for preachers. The author of a book with this title might have chosen to focus on Barth's homiletical theory, on his published sermons or on choice biblical expositions or doctrinal themes from *Church Dogmatics* that could enrich many a season of sermons. Willimon does do some of each of these, but he aims primarily to draw his readers into lively conversation with Barth's theology as a spur to a renewal of preaching that is grounded in scripture and centered on the work of the triune God. Willimon avers that he is "not a Barthian," but far more important, he declares that "Barth keeps me preaching."

According to Willimon, preaching is in trouble today "not because it has difficulty finding the proper form or style, but because it has lost its subject matter": the triune God's work of grace and judgment, centered in Jesus Christ and brought home in the here and now by the Holy Spirit. In Willimon's view, it is Barth's rigorous and undistracted attention to this subject matter that makes his theology an unparalleled resource for preachers. Willimon wants preachers to recover something of Barth's confidence that the primary agent of effective preaching is not the talent, eloquence or personality of the preacher, but instead the Holy Spirit, who is able to make use of the finite, always inadequate words of the preacher.

Willimon also finds exemplary Barth's concentration on the particularities of the gospel, his avoidance of generalities, his refusal to accommodate to the prevailing culture when delivering the church's message, and his gutsy faithfulness to the "disruptive content" of the gospel. In Willimon's judgment, it is "fear of failure and rejection that infects most of us proclaimers." From that fear Barth's theology is remarkably free. Indeed, one of Barth's greatest gifts to preachers is his "contagious optimism" about the sovereignty and freedom of the living, eventful word of God,

which depends for its effectiveness on the ever new and surprising activity of the Holy Spirit.

In writing an earlier book, *Resident Aliens*, Willimon notes, he and Stanley Hauerwas were influenced more than they knew by Barth's critique of Christendom and his conviction that the so-called Christian West no longer exists. Unfortunately, Willimon does not explore the possible differences between the ecclesiology of *Resident Aliens* and Barth's understanding of the church's necessary engagement with modernity. Willimon's comment about Barth's "contempt" for the modern world is un-Barthian because it is altogether undialectical. As Willimon would no doubt agree, Barth's quarrel with modernity was not aimed at replacing its pathos for human freedom with a return to authoritarian rule; rather Barth sought to bear witness to the astonishing freedom of God for humanity—and the new freedom of humanity for God and others—that is announced in and empowered by the gospel.

Willimon's enthusiasm for Barth's theology is tempered by reservations. He confesses: "I'm too much the Wesleyan, sanctificationist, pietist (three things Barth despised) to follow him all the way to the end." Willimon faults Barth for overlooking the importance of the institutional church in his one-sided insistence on the church as event of grace, for failing to give sufficient attention to the need to contextualize the gospel, for being more concerned with revelation than redemption, for failing to offer a strong theology of the sacraments alongside his robust theology of proclamation, and for not sufficiently recognizing the importance of Christian formation as a necessary presupposition of the preaching event.

Willimon does not test any of these criticisms, which are shared by a number of commentators on Barth, and he does not develop them in detail. Indeed, the reader may conclude that throughout the book Willimon has provided evidence that speaks against his critique. Do Barth's prison sermons, for example, bear out the charge that his preaching is inattentive to context? My own reading of the sermons in *Deliverance to the Captives* and *Call for God* suggests otherwise. It is hard to imagine a more contextualized preaching of the passion story than Barth's stunning declaration to the Basel prisoners that the first Christian community was constituted by Jesus and the two thieves who were crucified by his side. Both in his prison sermons and in his prayers before and after them, Barth shows full awareness of the fact that his hearers live in cells, that they have come up against the severity of the law, that they have had to appear in court, that they have been placed under judgment, and that they know well the experience of anxiety and godforsakenness.

He does not try to hide these realities, though he refuses to draw a hard and fast line between prisoners living inside and outside prison walls.

Reflections of this sort, however, only indicate that Willimon has succeeded in bringing at least this reader into conversation with himself and with Barth on the topic of preaching. Enhanced by several of Willimon's own striking sermons, which are interspersed throughout the text, *Conversations with Barth on Preaching* is a lively and much-needed book. It will be required reading for students taking my course on Barth's theology, and I hope a far larger community of seminarians and preachers will read it as well.