Four Papers on Preaching Issues

[14 September 1948–15 February 1950]

[Chester, Pa.]

King submitted the following assignments for preaching courses at Crozer taught by Keighton. They demonstrate the breadth of topics and issues that influenced King’s emerging understanding of homiletics. “Karl Barth,” a review of a sermon by this theologian, includes a harsh critique of the theological complexity of Barth’s homily: “The preaching of theology must be presented in the light of the experiences of the people. This Barth fails to do.” Keighton gave the paper an A. In “The Limitation of Experience,” King criticizes ministers who fail to read regularly and learn from others, claiming they “starve the people for the gospel.” He questions the viability of capitalism in “Will Capitalism Survive?” claiming it “has seen its best days.” In the final assignment, “Is the Church the Hope of the World?” King challenges the church, calling it “one of the chief exponents of racial bigotry.”

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project

“Karl Barth”

Karl Barth, round whose name centres the great discussions now agitating the theological world, was born at Basle, in Switzerland, in 1886. He was born in the atmosphere of theology, for his father was a Professor of the Reformed Church and author of two useful books. Barth first went to school at Berne, and proceeded thence to the other Universities at Berlin, Tubingen and Marburg. The Neo-Kantian school at Marburg has left its mark upon the philosophical outlook of

1. King also criticized Barth in an essay he wrote for Davis’s course at Crozer, Christian Theology for Today (King, “The Place of Reason and Experience in Finding God,” 13 September–23 November 1949, in Papers 1:230–236). During his first semester of graduate studies at Boston University, King also focused on Barth’s theology in L. Harold DeWolf’s Seminar in Systematic Theology. In an essay for DeWolf, King challenged Barth’s theology, commenting, “Most of my criticisms stem from the fact that I have been greatly influenced by liberal theology, maintaining a healthy respect for reason and a strong belief in the immanence as well as the transcendence of God” (King, “Karl Barth’s Conception of God,” 1 January 1952, in The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., vol. 2: Rediscovering Precious Values, July 1951–November 1955, ed. Clayborne Carson, Ralph E. Luker, Penny A. Russell, and Peter Holloran [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994], p. 104).

2. Karl Barth (1886–1968) was a Swiss Reformed Church theologian. He studied at a series of universities between 1904 and 1909, including the University of Bern and the University of Marburg. After his ordination as a pastor in 1908 and the publication of Epistle to the Romans (1919), which established his reputation as a theologian, he became a professor of Reformed Theology at Göttingen (1921), Münster (1925), and finally at Bonn (1930), despite never receiving a doctorate. He was eventually exiled from Germany in 1935 because he refused to take an oath of loyalty to Adolf Hitler. His later writings include Fide Quaerens Intellectum (1931) and the multi-volume Church Dogmatics (1932–1968). Barth held that theology should be based solely on the Bible and the figure of Jesus Christ instead of human experience and reason. Keighton inserted an “a” before “round.”

3. Fritz Barth (1856–1912) was the author of several books, including The Gospel of St. John and the Synoptic Gospels (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1907). Die Hauptprobleme des Lebens Jesu (Göttersloh, Germany: Bertelsmann, 1918), and Einleitung in das Neue Testament (Göttersloh, Germany: Bertelsmann, 1921).

4. Keighton corrected Tubingen to Tübingen.

Barth. Barth gives interesting information concerning the writers who later influenced his thought. His “ancestral line runs back through [Søren] Kierkegaard to [Martin] Luther and [John] Calvin and so to Paul and Jeremiah.” To understand Mr. Barth’s views one must know something of how he came to his present point of view. He has told us that most of his views came from the principles of the Reformed

5. Neo-Kantianism was a late nineteenth-century outgrowth of the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). One of its main expressions was the Marburg school, founded by Hermann Cohen (1842–1918), which developed a philosophical system emphasizing Kant’s critical, a priori idealism as foundational in logic, ethics, and aesthetics.
Churches. Such a dogmatic assumption as the utter depravity of man as a consequence of the Fall, is an example of the influence that the Reformed Churches had on Barth. All of this helps us to understand the views expressed by Barth in many of his books and also in the sermon that will be discussed at this point.

Karl Barth opens his sermon, “Repentance,” with the moving Biblical phrase, Jesus calls us: “Come unto me!” He states that Jesus desires to speak truth to us. He wants to talk God to us. He, who lets himself be told, repents. “Repentance,” according to Barth, “is turning about to that which is nearest and which we always overlook.”

Mr. Barth makes it very clear that other voices also call us. He uses the church as an example. Today she calls men to thanksgiving, repentance, and prayers. But when the church says something, it is always an open question. Repentance must go beyond the church, for in many instances the church is the greatest hindrance to repentance. The church, in many instances, has betrayed God to the needs and humours of men. If we want to hear the call of Jesus we must hear it despite the church.

The question arises, who is Jesus? We know him best by those whom he calls to himself. Jesus says, “Come unto me, all ye!” He is free enough to invite all to himself. It is essentially at this point, says Barth, that Jesus differs from other great men, other aims and movements. Even the church is not for all men.

Again the question arises, who is Jesus? He is the one who calls the laboring and the heavy laden to Himself. Because we labor and are heavy laden we belong to the “all” to whom the invitation is given.

In conclusion the question arises, what does Jesus want of us? He wants nothing of us but that we come. Here Barth makes it very clear that Jesus does not want “ours” but “us”. Of course to come to Jesus means to labor and to be heavy laden, therefore it is hard to come. But we must see, says Barth, that coming to Jesus begins with the knowledge that something difficult is asked of us.

6. Reformed Churches are the Reformed, Congregational, United, and Presbyterian denominations, which have their theological roots in the works of John Calvin.
7. Cf. Matthew 11:28. Keighton indicated the “a” and “r” in the word “pharse” should be reversed.
8. “Jesus calls us: ‘Come unto me!’ He seeks to tell us what is true. He desires to speak truth to us. He wants to talk God to us. He, who lets himself be told, repents. Repentance is turning about to that which is nearest and which we always overlook; to the center of life which we always miss; to the simplest which is still too high and hard for us” (Karl Barth, Come Holy Spirit: Sermons [New York: Round Table Press, 1931], p. 67).
9. Barth, Come Holy Spirit, p. 69: “Other voices also call us: ‘Come unto me!’ The voice of the church, for example. Today she calls us to the Confederation’s service of thanksgiving, repentance, and prayer . . . When the church says something, it is always an open question.”
10. Barth, Come Holy Spirit, p. 71: “The call of Jesus resounds despite the church. But the church is a great, perhaps the greatest, hindrance to repentance. If we wish to hear the call of Jesus, then we must hear it despite the church.”
11. Barth, Come Holy Spirit, p. 71: “Who is Jesus? We know him best by those whom he calls to himself.”
13. Barth, Come Holy Spirit, p. 78: “What does Jesus want of us? He wants nothing of us but that we come. He does not want ours but us. If we come as we are, all is well. For this is the new and all-important thing, the mystery that confronts us in Christ. Our coming consists in this, that we permit Jesus to tell us that we labor and are heavy laden. On this account it is so hard for us to come.”
It is very clear that many of Barth’s theological concepts creep into this sermon, such as God, “the Wholly other.” Of course, one complaint that I must make is that Barth sets up an obtuse mode of expression which only the learned can understand. He leaven the average mind lost in the fog of theological abstractions. I am not saying that one must not preach theology, but I am contending that the preaching of theology must be presented in the light of the experiences of the people. This Barth fails to do.

Another complaint is that Barth doesn’t fully explain his views, great terms like God, Faith, Repentance, are thrown out without adequate definition, as though their meaning were self-evident. For these reasons I found this sermon very boring.

[signed] M L King Jr

THDS CSKC Sermon file, folder 36, “Sermon Notes"

“The Limitation of Experience”

In historical theology three different things have been put forward as the source of authority in religion: the church, the Bible and experience. Luther and his friends destroyed the Church as the central religious authority for the Protestants and put the Bible in its place. Most Protestants are confused on this issue as they lean on both the Bible and experience. The Protestants talk about the Bible and then proceed to rely on experience. But experience has its limitations.

What is experience? In philosophy according to Immanuel Kant, Experience is a compound out of sensation and the activity of the understanding. According to psychology, it is a change in a set pattern of behavior. According to the “man in the streets” it is simply living a long time. And this is the danger.

Just because a man has lived a long time is no sign that he is a man of experience. There are plenty people thirty who have had more experience than a person fifty. A farmer who has spent fifty years on the same plantation has certainly not had as much experience as a son who has been roaming all over Europe and the USA and is now thirty.

It is therefore a sign of mature judgment when you rely absolutely on your own experiences. The teachers in our schools have been pounding this in the heads of students to long. We must come to see that lives are enriched by the experiences of others.

A minister who therefore tries to preach out of his own experiences all the time soon becomes shallow. He should let the great souls of the world enrich his life. The run around all the week and never look in a book and then get up on Sunday and...