Four Papers on Preaching Issues

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.”

“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,” n January 1951, 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 Intellec tum (1951) 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 & Main, 1907), Die Hauptprobleme des Lebens Jesu (Gütersloh, Germany: Bertelsmann, 1918), and Einleitung in das Neue Testament (Gütersloh, Germany: Bertelsmann, 1921).