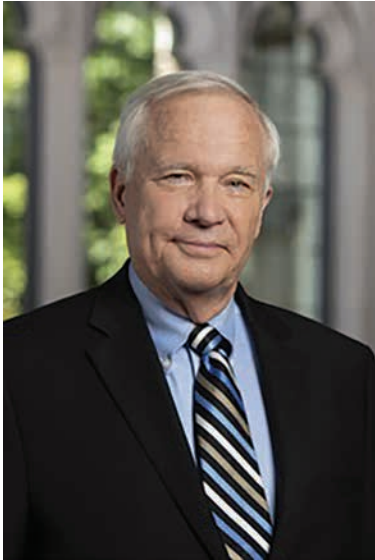


On Not Giving Politics the Last Word

By Will Willimon



A bishop in the United Methodist Church, Will Willimon is Professor of the Practice of Christian Ministry and Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program at Duke Divinity School. Among his books are Conversations with Barth on Preaching and The Early Sermons of Karl Barth.

Back when America was preparing to anoint Joe Biden in the election that loser Donald Trump denied, a worshipper emerged from Duke University Chapel, smirking, “You were the fourth guest preacher in a row to condemn Trump and his deplorables. Wow. The guts it must take to stand in the pulpit of an unfailingly, uniformly liberal university and virtue signal your support for an aging, liberal Democrat. How I admire you courageous preachers!”

Shut up, I replied, in love.

About the same time, I received a pitch for a new book by Eric Metaxas: “Can it really be God’s will that His children be silent at a time like this? Decrying the cowardice that masquerades as godly meekness, Eric Metaxas summons the Church to battle. Silence is not an option ... God calls us to defend the unborn, to confront the lies of cultural Marxism, and to battle the globalist tyranny that crushes human freedom. Confident that this is His fight, the Church must overcome fear and enter the fray ...” This is no time for counterfeit meekness! Outshout the opposition!

A turbulent, politically vociferous time such as this calls for a dose of Karl Barth’s peculiarly political homiletics. Barth preached during two political convulsions otherwise known as World Wars I and II. Back during Barth’s first days as a small town pastor, he picked up the newspaper and read a statement signed by his most revered professors, all stepping into line behind the Kaiser. Young Barth was aghast.

In an instant Barth saw that the theology he had been taught at the university—all that psychological pap about the “inner Jesus” who puts us in touch with our feelings and connects with our existential anxieties (why am I thinking about many of the mainline sermons I hear and some that I preach?)—was bogus. Then and there Barth began working on what was to be his bombshell of a book, *The Epistle to the Romans*. Rather than read the newspapers, let’s hear some real news delivered by Paul. What God may be up to in the *hic et nun* is so much more interesting than our anxieties about the Kaiser’s future.

Though Barth openly said that the war was both a disaster for German culture and the just wages for nationalistic sin, in the pulpit he rarely mentioned the war. In a turbulent time we must not allow world events to determine the content of the church's proclamation. World history is being determined, not by European cataclysm but by Christ. Barth repeatedly preaches that we are privileged to be living in "a unique time of God" not because of the war, but because God refuses to leave us to our own devices, especially in turbulent times.¹ God has thrust us into an exceptionally apocalyptic age of unveiling in which the folly of our Promethian myths are self-evident and our dependency upon God is undeniable. In a world of lies and disinformation, God has given us not only the way and the life but also the truth—Jesus Christ, our judgment, our deliverance. If God is not the one who meets us in Jesus Christ, if Jesus Christ is not Lord, there's no hope. Rather than talk about a return to normal, or how the economy might dig out of this disaster, Barth coached his congregation to ask, in effect, "What's a gracious God up to in this unique time and how can we be part of what God is doing?"

Just three decades later, now as a professor in Bonn, Barth watched the German church step into line behind National Socialism. Sure, we may not approve of everything the Nazis say and do, but the oppressed German people have spoken. Church is where we come to lick our wounds and overcome the trauma inflicted upon us by the unjust armistice terms of the Allies. We have a sacred responsibility to step up and do our bit to help make Germany great again, MGGA.

Germany was a tense, conflicted, hyper-politicized place in 1932. The July 31 elections were a triumph for Hitler who won an unprecedented 38% of the vote and saw the victory as a confirmation of the inevitability of the power grab that he had been projecting since 1930. Yet the November 6 election results were a political setback for Hitler and the Nazi Party. The Nazi share of the vote dropped to 33.1% as the Communists and antifascist parties surged. (Hitler himself spoke of suicide during the last weeks of 1932.) Amid this seesaw uproar, Barth urged preachers not to be jerked around by events of the moment but rather to be tethered to a peculiar "politics"—Jesus Christ and his church.

Barth asserted that we preachers know less about the significance of current events or the future course of history than we know and can say about the relentlessly revealing God who meets us in Jesus Christ.

Anybody can see why Hitler is a threat to everything that Christians hold dear, said Barth. More difficult to see how our idolatry, our failure to worship, our confusion of German culture with Christianity, our timid, liberal biblical interpretation, our docile church, flaccid preaching, and self-pity made the collective delusions of National Socialism possible.

Christ is God's answer to what's wrong with the world. The church is called to

¹ See William Klempa, translator and editor, *A Unique Time of God: Karl Barth's WWI Sermons*, (Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox, 2016).

be a showcase of what God can do when God commandeers a group of sinners to tell the truth that the world can never tell itself. This truth arises not from within us but graciously comes to us. Truth is a person with a name, it's an external address, an invitation to come forward and be part of God's grand, but not always apparent, inevitable retake of history—*Jesus Christ*.

Barth's Peculiarly Political Homiletic

In 1935, the University of Bonn faculty and students fell eagerly into the hands of the Nazis. Barth was Swiss and had signed an oath to refrain from political organizing as a condition of employment in Germany, still Barth felt compelled to make a political statement. What's the most important political act for a theologian in the present moment? Offer preaching classes, "Exercises in Sermon Preparation." Without asking the permission of Bonn's aging, Nazi-sympathizer homiletics professor, Barth began his preaching lectures (later published as *Homiletics*.)

Irrelevance in preaching can be defeated only by a fresh, strict, and urgent attentiveness to the biblical text—the remedy for the bourgeois blather, urbane paganism, and sentimental nationalism that infects too many sermons is Scripture. The text liberates us from modern theology's preoccupation—analysis of our human experience of God followed by prescriptions for better human behavior—so that we can do the main business of the church, daring to listen to and to talk about the jealous God who is, rather than prattle about the culture's more accommodating godlets.

To the uniformed Nazis who stood at the back of the lecture hall taking notes, Barth quipped jovially, "I didn't know that Herr Hitler had an interest in preaching."

That spring, a number of congregants walked out of Barth's sermon in the university chapel in which he fiercely asserted the church's complete freedom to preach what Christ tells the church to preach and the church's utter dependence upon Israel and God's promises to God's elected people, the Jews.

Barth sent Hitler a copy of the sermon.

Deprive Them of Their Pathos

Barth's preaching lectures were influenced by his earlier second edition of his commentary on Paul's Letter to the Romans. In his exegesis of Romans 12 and 13, politics came to the fore as Barth reflected upon the relationship between the Church and the State. To would-be activists and revolutionaries, especially Christians who were (Barth thought rightly) dissatisfied with the status quo, Barth said that Paul's epistle provides no justification for either reactionary, nationalistic conservatism or violent left-wing revolution. Both of these political alternatives tend to inappropriately give sovereignty to human entities rather than to God.

In a turbulent political time, when political spokespersons were eagerly, frantically, histrionically scrambling to be the loudest voice, Barth said it is most important that

preachers talk politics in such a way that “deprives them of their pathos.”²

While Barth was anything but a disengaged quietist, he worried that the messy back-and-forth negotiation required by democratic politics had been replaced by the pathetic “convulsions of revolution,” right and left. A truly biblical politics practices grace and requires humility born out of the biblical recognition that all political participants are not only finite but also sinful. Our projects, even the best of them, must not be pathetically imbued with eternal significance nor must our political systems be treated as if they, not God, were sovereign.

During a discussion of Romans 7:5 and “the sinful passions” that captivate us, Barth wrote:

There can be no more devastating undermining of the existing order than the recognition of it which is here recommended, a recognition rid of all illusion and devoid of all the joy of triumph. State, Church, Society, Positive Right, Family, Organized Research, and so forth live off of the credulity of those who have been nurtured upon vigorous sermons-delivered-on-the-field-of-battle and other such solemn humbug. Deprive them of their PATHOS, and they will be starved out; but stir up revolution against them, and their PATHOS is provided fresh fodder.

In *Ars Rhetorica* Aristotle defined *pathos* (with *ethos* and *logos*) as one of the three “modes of persuasion.” Pathos is an appeal to the emotions and ideals of the audience and elicits feelings that already reside in them. To achieve *pathos* and work it to one’s advantage, a speaker must truly know and understand his or her audience. Aristotle describes the discoveries the speaker must make in order to kindle listeners’ anger against a foe:

Take, for instance, the emotion of anger: here we must discover (1) what the state of mind of angry people is, (2) who the people are with whom they usually get angry, and (3) on what grounds they get angry with them ... [then] we shall be unable to arouse anger in any one.

Knowledge of one’s listeners is one of the most important requirements for the Aristotelian rhetorician. Through his extensive, detailed analysis and categorization of the preferences and emotional inclinations of listeners, Aristotle becomes the first psychology.

But Aristotle didn’t know about a God (Jesus Christ) who is relentlessly determined to self-reveal and to speak; the God who has decisively, verbally turned

² Jason Micheli, “Deprive Them of Their Pathos: Partisan Politics, Social Media, and Karl Barth,” *Mockingbird*, 9/21/20. <https://mbird.com/theology/deprive-them-of-their-pathos-barth-politics-social-media/> For a counter assessment of Barth’s pathos comments see, Arne Rasmusson, “Deprive Them of Their Pathos”: Karl Barth and the Nazi Revolution Revisited, *Modern Theology*, 20 June 2007. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.2007.00388.x>

toward us and who is determined to have us, sinners though we are. Against classical rhetoric Barth contended that it's less important to know our listeners and what presses their buttons (what self-deceptive, wily sinners we are) than to know Jesus Christ who is sovereign over all listeners and speakers and is active and revelatory in the present moment.

Barth's "deprive them of their pathos" is a humbling caveat for both liberal, leftward leaning preachers like me and goofy Trumpist surrogates like Metaxis and his right-wing buddies. Rather than imbue politics with religious zeal and pathos, Barth says that those who care about the good of the polis should "do their best to prevent the intrusion of religion into that world." Preachers "will lift up their voices to warn those careless ones, who, for aesthetic or historical or political or romantic reasons, dig through the dam and open up a channel through which the flood of religion may burst into the cottages and palaces of men."

Deprive them of their pathos, puncture their righteous indignation, and refuse to (as Barth says) "storm the heavens" with sermons that presume to know and to speak to *the* most important issue of the moment. (Explaining why Stephen Colbert's nightly political satire is often more to the point than Rachel Maddow's thoughtful, though righteously indignant, commentary.) With good cheer and the love of neighbor, we must counter the attempts by politicians of the right or the left to limit the conversation to godless politics. We ought to refuse to accept that the resolution of this or that political issue is of such ultimate consequence that any means to achieve election success are justified.

Followers of Christ have our eyes upon an ultimate goodness that is beyond even our best politics to produce. While political activity is important and necessary, Barth thought, says Angela Hancock, that politics is "a game that is played in full and vigilant awareness of its relativity."³

To novice communicators of the gospel, in the thick of nationalistic propaganda and fascist demagoguery, Barth's preaching lectures cautioned against rhetoric that chokes our national discourse and feeds the pathos which fuels political passions. I contend that it is important to defeat President Trump at the polls this November, but for me to preach that Trump is an existential crisis, an apocalyptic threat to America, will only feed the need of his MAGA-clad fans to think that they belong to something ultimate and world-changing. To deprive them of their pathos is to extend grace, to refer us both to the relativity of our righteousness and the eternal unwillingness of God to be defeated by our stupidity, of the right or the left. Or, as Barth sees it, politics is saved from the demonic when it is seen to be essentially a game where absolute righteousness is an impossibility.

Pathos—investing politics with all-encompassing meaning and identity—results, as Angela Hancock notes, "in an escalating exchange of the political propagand-

³ Angela Deinhart Hancock, *Karl Barth's Emergency Homiletic, 1932-1933: A Summons to Prophetic Witness at the Dawn of the Third Reich*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

da. Because their respective political views are held with deadly eternal seriousness, neither critical distance nor reasoned dialogue about politics is possible any longer.”

A student Christian group on our campus put up a poster advertising a, “Pray for the People of Gaza” gathering. On one side of the poster a passerby had scrawled, “Palestinians are Rapists and Murderers.” On the other side someone wrote, “Israelis Are Killers.”

As If Nothing Happened

In 1934, just before his preaching lectures, Barth wrote the Barmen Declaration for the nascent Confessing Church in Germany. Thesis Five of Barmen, after a nod to First Peter 2:17, “Fear God. Honor the Emperor,” affirms the necessity of the State: “Scripture tells us that by divine appointment the State, in this still unredeemed world in which also the Church is situated, has the task of maintaining justice and peace, so far as human discernment and human ability make this possible, by means of the threat and use of force.”

Then comes Barmen’s condemnation: “We reject the false doctrine that beyond its special commission the State should and could become the sole and total order of human life and so fulfill the vocation of the Church as well.” And, “We reject the false doctrine that beyond its special commission the Church should and could take on the nature, tasks and dignity which belong to the State and thus become an organ of the State.” Hitler is never mentioned.

We sometimes forget that Barmen asserts, from various perspectives, that nobody, whether they be good German political liberals or bad fascist Nazis, can tell the church what to preach. The first political duty of the church is to preach the truth about God, otherwise known as Jesus Christ.

Months before being ousted from his Bonn professorship, when asked by his fellow preachers how they should respond to the Hitler dictatorship, Barth advised them to “preach as if nothing happened.”

The most prominent mass murderer of history, a “nothing”? Barth warned that in condemning Hitler, the church must not allow its imagination to be captured by the world’s myths of who has power and who is in charge (politics). In a world when politics has become the functional equivalent of God, preachers must speak in a way that robs lordless politics of their pathos. In our strident (though justly deserved) criticism of fascist powers, we must not give the Nazis inappropriate glory, honor, and dominion that belong only to God. In our vehement condemnations (or adulation) we must not speak as if secular politics is our salvation, if we can just get the right people elected.

We are in this mess because our witness has become so muddled we can’t tell the difference between Germany and the Kingdom of God. Bear witness! Much that we once regarded as something has been rendered into nothing because of the decisive something that has happened in Christ.

Of course, Hitler's dictatorship is a terrible "something," but the little man in Berlin is not Lord of history. Thus the *Nazizeit* presents the church with an extraordinary opportunity to testify to the world that the world is God's and that a Jew from Nazareth who lived briefly, died violently, and rose unexpectedly, is even now busy reconciling the world to God. How? In great part through the witness of the church. Nazi power is, like all earthly power, "lordless power"—dangerous but provisional, passing away, dethroned by the cross and resurrection though it hasn't yet gotten the news. All presumptive lordlets are defeated, but not yet fully. The last word will be given not by Hitler, but by Jesus, spoken through frail humans called preachers.

Any Christian commentator (except for Eric Metaxas, Paula White-Cain, Franklin Graham, or Mark Robinson) can tell that Trump is a fake, a con, and a loser. It takes a bit more exegetical depth to refuse to give sovereignty to what passes for American popular democracy. I hear Barth telling the UMC bishops that we have more to say to the church than, "Get out the vote!"

In the past few years I have lowered myself to condemn Trump in no more than twenty or so sermons. Three responses to my sermons rattled me: "So you think that if we had elected Hillary Clinton, Black folks in America would be markedly better off?" asked a young African American woman.

"How do you know that maybe God is chastising America for its nationalism and arrogant abuse of power by sending us a clown like Trump?" asked another.

"You condemn Trump when you ought to be asking yourself why millions of Americans, some of whom you preach to regularly, think he's our savior." I had no ready comeback other than, "I promise to work on my preaching."

Later, Barth was roundly condemned by the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr for not forthrightly and frequently condemning Russian communism. Barth replied that communism is an unworkable mistake, a short-lived phenomenon that shall soon be dumped in the dustbin of history's other messianic experiments. Besides, many Communist criticisms of American capitalism are on target. American self-righteous exceptionalism may be a greater insult to God's intentions than Russian communism.

So when he came to America toward the end of his career, Barth made sure to visit American prisons, noting the nasty similarity between democracy's incarceration and Stalin's gulags. For Barth, the American church's inability to tell the difference between an American and a Christian was a bigger political problem than the Soviets.

Refusing, in his sermons, to be jerked around by what the world regarded as momentous, earth-shaking events, Barth said our greatest challenge is to deal with the shock that God has, in Jesus Christ, made our history God's. All human history, all economies and polities have been shaken, relativized by Bethlehem.

If Trump is elected in November (God may forbid, but maybe won't) I expect a disaster. Still, if we don't elect Trump, we won't be out of the woods. Trumpists will

still be around and so will aging, raging liberals like I. In the meantime, it's our job as preachers to give people the news that they can't give themselves, pointing to the world's true, though always disputed, Sovereign whose rule is love, and in whose worship is our best hope, our only, peace.

God is our refuge and strength,
a help always near in times of great trouble.
That's why we won't be afraid when the world falls apart,
when the mountains crumble into the center of the sea,
when its waters roar and rage,
when the mountains shake because of its surging waves. Selah

*There is a river whose streams gladden God's city,
the holiest dwelling of the Most High.
God is in that city. It will never crumble.
God will help it when morning dawns.
Nations roar; kingdoms crumble.
God utters his voice; the earth melts.
The LORD of heavenly forces is with us!
The God of Jacob is our place of safety. Psalm 46:1-7, CEB*