

# Sermons in a Swiss Prison

BY JOHN THOMPSON

**Karl Barth, the Swiss Reformed professor and pastor once described by Pope Pius XII as the most important theologian since Thomas Aquinas, exercised a remarkable ministry from 1956 to 1964. While teaching at the University of Basel, Barth regularly visited and preached to the inmates at Basel Prison.**

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**K**arl Barth (1886-1968) was one of the most astute theological minds of the twentieth century, famed for such enduring works as *Church Dogmatics*, *Commentary on Romans*, and *The Humanity of God*. The Swiss Reformed professor and pastor, once described by Pope Pius XII as the most important theologian since Thomas Aquinas, exercised a truly remarkable ministry from 1956 to 1964. While teaching at the University of Basel, Barth regularly visited and preached to the inmates at Basel Prison. He preached in the prison because he believed that “there people need firm contact with real life; at the same time the gospel becomes remarkably relevant and natural of its own accord.”<sup>1</sup> Barth preached within the walls of Basel Prison twenty-eight times in all. Because the prison’s pulpit was one of the only pulpits Barth occupied late in life, some ventured that in order to hear the famous theologian preach one had to commit a crime and be put in jail.

Fortunately, we do not have to travel behind the doors of Basel Prison for edification from Barth, but need only to open the remarkable little book *Deliverance to the Captives*, a collection of his prison sermons. Barth invites readers of the sermons to “share in these services” in Basel Prison.<sup>2</sup> It is in this “sharing” that Barth’s sermons can help us understand our relationship to prisoners today as captive brothers and sisters in need of deliverance whether we spend our days in a prison cell or not.

## ORDER OF SERVICE: EVERY ACT A PART OF THE MISSION

Barth's prison services are not theological lectures as if he were still in the halls of the university. Instead they are worship events with several elements: prayers that bookend each sermon, a brief Scripture verse, the homily, and Communion. Each one of these elements contributes to Barth's mission — to remind prisoner and non-prisoner of the common brotherhood they share through Jesus Christ. Much more needs to be said concerning this mission and how it helps us understand how we might relate to those in prison, but let me first describe in more detail the four elements of Barth's worship services.

The prayers, Barth says in the foreword to *Deliverance to the Captives*, are "as essential as the sermons themselves" (p. 11). They serve as the overtures and finales of the sermons. Barth is not merely introducing the theme of the sermon in the opening prayer and then reiterating it in the concluding prayer; instead, each prayer hints at the larger purpose of his prison ministry, proclaiming the brotherhood of all Christians. Consider, for example, this closing prayer to Barth's 1958 Christmas sermon:

We remember before thee all darkness and suffering of our time; the manifold errors and misunderstandings whereby we human beings afflict one another; the harsh reality which so many must face without the benefit of comfort; the great dangers that hang over the world which does not know how to counter them. We remember the sick and the mentally ill, the needy, the refugees, the oppressed and the exploited, the children who have no good parents or no parents at all. We remember all those who are called on to help as much as men can help, the officials of our country and of all other countries, the judges and civil servants, the teachers and educators, the writers of books and newspapers, the doctors and nurses in the hospitals, the preachers of thy word in the various churches and congregations nearby and afar. We remember them all when we implore thee to let the light of Christmas shine brightly...so that they and we ourselves may be helped. We ask all this in the name of the Savior in whom thou hast already hearkened to our supplications and wilt do so again and again. Amen. (p. 143)

In this prayer Barth and the Basel prisoners prayed quite a litany of petitions. Remarkably, Barth's prayers generally include almost all of these prayer requests and more. Barth, and the prisoners praying with him, often prayed for the church universal "gathered wherever they may be,"<sup>3</sup> for all prisoners, all poor, all sick, for doctors and nurses, for government officials around the world, for teachers and students, for all parents and children, for judges and those facing judgment, for journalists, for the people of Basel and Switzerland and "all people everywhere," for other clergy and missionaries, for employers and employees, for young and old, and for the humiliated and exploited and those doing the exploiting.

If these prayers are as important as Barth claims them to be, the breadth of these petitions must be a significant point. I believe the significance is that the prayers enclose Barth's proclamation within the claim of common brotherhood. They are the battle cry that reminds those praying, then and now, that the boundaries we often set up between one another must be torn down in the light of our common discipleship of Jesus Christ.

After an introductory prayer, Barth began each sermon with a reading from Scripture. For his prison sermons Barth usually selected short texts — for instance, one sermon is simply on the phrase “My grace is enough” taken from 2 Corinthians 12:9. While not much is striking about each verse, when comparing them it is immediately noticeable that his selected verses, from both the Old and New Testaments, are Christologically centered. This Christological centering is the foundation of each of Barth's sermons which emphasize “the wonderful and mysterious fact that God has spoken to us in his Son, Jesus Christ” (p. 9). This fact, Barth contends, is at the core of all reality; it is a truth that humanity needs to recognize.

This evangelical focus of Barth's sermons draws some criticism from contemporary prison chaplains. One writes, “It is admirable that Barth preaches the gospel, yet in doing so he often doesn't meet prisoners where they are.”<sup>4</sup> However this criticism fails to take into account the larger context of the sermons. Both the other components of Barth's prison services and his pastoral visits with prisoners defy this hasty dismissal.<sup>5</sup>

Barth's sermon and concluding prayer usually were followed by Communion, not as a ritualistic afterthought to the worship service, but as its crown. The communal celebration of the Lord's Supper was a further testimony to the common

brotherhood between all present. Throughout his theological writings, Barth emphasizes the importance of the practice of Communion for the Church. In *Church Dogmatics* he writes that Communion is the practice that unites all Christians. Indeed, “They are so linked together by Christ who links himself to

them that they ‘mutually adapt themselves to be one organism which can be used in the world in His service.’”<sup>6</sup> For this reason the service of worship “reach[es] its climax in the celebration of the supper.”<sup>7</sup> For Barth, Communion is what makes the Church a “mobile brotherhood.” The celebration of Communion at the conclusion of the worship services at Basel Prison included those labeled “criminal” as a part of this family.

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*Deliverance to the Captives* presents carefully crafted services that proclaim a specific message: prisoner and non-prisoner are brothers in Jesus Christ. This message is the mission of Barth's prison ministry. Each element of the service – the prayers, the Scripture reading and sermon, the concluding Communion supper – uniformly asserts this common brotherhood. The declaration of common brotherhood is meant to be heard not just by those in Basel Prison, but by the present day reader. We too are reminded of this relationship and challenged to enact it. This is Barth's invitation.

### **A TYPICAL SERMON: "THE CRIMINALS WITH HIM"**

While I hope I have made clear the importance of each element of the worship service for contributing to Barth's overall prison ministry, special attention needs to be given to the written sermons as they most plainly illuminate our relationship with those who are imprisoned. The sermons are unambiguous proclamations about humanity's common condition. As Oxford University theologian John Marsh, a contemporary of Barth's, put it, "Barth knows that when he preaches to prisoners he is but preaching to himself, to them and to himself as dying sinners and yet as men redeemed from death by the gracious act of God" (p. 9). We are all prisoners, Barth argues, some of us just spend time in iron and concrete cells. Therefore, Barth's sermons are not just for the Basel Prison inmates but "for the countless crowd of those unaware that they themselves are prisoners" (p. 43).

This theme of the universal condition and brotherhood of all humanity is particularly salient in the sermon entitled "The Criminals with Him." This sermon is an explication of Luke 23:33, "They crucified him with the criminals, one on either side of him." Barth declares that this gospel verse describes "the first certain, indissoluble and indestructible Christian community." These two criminals were with Christ the first church. Not even the apostles could lay claim to this distinction. In his sermon Barth anticipates the objection that one of the criminals mocked Jesus rather than asked for fellowship. While this is a notable distinction between the two criminals, this action, Barth proclaims, was "not important enough to invalidate the promise given so clearly and urgently to both of the prisoners without distinction." That promise is that "Jesus died precisely for these two criminals who were crucified on his right and on his left and went to their death with him. He did not die for the sake of a good world, he died for the sake of an evil world, not for the pious, but for the godless, not for the just, but for the unjust, for the deliverance, the victory and the joy of all, that they might have life." The thieves crucified with Jesus remind us that to follow Jesus we must begin to see ourselves as crucified criminals who are brothers and sisters with those bound in real chains. We must identify ourselves with rather than apart from prisoners for, "If anyone identified himself with prisoners it was [Jesus Christ].... That is the Lord who has mercy on you: this prisoner who is your liberator, the liberator of us all" (pp. 75-84).

“The Criminals with Him” is only one of many sermons in *Deliverance to the Captives* that emphasize the common brotherhood between prisoner and non-prisoner. In this sermon Barth challenges the readers to find solidarity with prisoners; to tear down any dichotomy between the two categories. To do so is to follow Jesus who identified with prisoners. Barth is only asking us to do the same as Christ’s disciples.

### **DELIVERANCE TO ALL: BROTHERHOOD OF THE CRIMINALS**

During his only visit to America, Karl Barth was asked by a student-skeptic if he could sum up everything he had learned in a lifetime of study. Quite seriously, but presumably with a twinkle in his eye, Barth gave this answer: “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” In the many pages of Karl Barth’s daunting theological writings, this simple message is repeated again and again. This is the good news made known by the Word of God, Jesus Christ, who comes to each one of us. This message is both intimately personal and profoundly universal. In his sermon “Nevertheless I Am Continually with Thee,” Barth proclaims to the Basel inmates God’s promise of abiding presence. He concludes his sermon with a question: “Who are you? Who am I? The answer,” Barth says, “is one whom God holds by his right hand, on whose heart and lips God has laid the confession of faithfulness and the great comfort” (p. 18). The comfort of God holding our hand is the good news to all. It is the ultimate marker of humanity as children of God. This common message unites us under a common brotherhood that extends to all regardless of race, gender, or social station. It includes sick and healthy, poor and rich, and free and imprisoned.

We are each one of us called by God to be a part of a great fellowship created and sustained by God’s enduring presence.

*Deliverance to the Captives* bears witness to the great gift we might receive when visiting those in prison; a gift that can be known only by those who are willing to follow Jesus behind

walls of concrete and bars of iron. To look upon the incarcerated and see not criminals or convicts but rather brothers and sisters, for this is how Jesus sees them, reminds us of the great grace given to us which offers freedom from our chains. Jesus came to free us from our captivity. As we are all delivered captives, we are also all brothers and sisters. This is the gift Karl Barth proclaims. It is a message which he saw as his “task and privilege

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to tell [us] that God himself said so and says so until this day" (p. 65).

Toward the end of his life, Karl Barth humbly reflected upon his astounding impact on twentieth-century theology by recounting a dream he often had. In his dream Barth was now in heaven toting his many volumes of the *Church Dogmatics* in a wagon behind him. Instead of standing in awe, the angels begin to laugh and mock Barth saying, "Look here he comes now with his little pushcart full of works of the *Dogmatics*." Barth knew that his work, great as it was, was only a shadow of a full understanding of the deep mysteries of God.<sup>8</sup> The angels laughed at Karl Barth's attempts to understand God, but perhaps they stood in awe of his ministry within Basel Prison. Perhaps the angels knew the name of Karl Barth not for his erudition but for his compassion toward the incarcerated. In an apocryphal take upon Karl Barth's dream one writer ponders that Barth, after the angels' mockery, learns that a great welcoming feast has been arranged in his honor. This feast is not given by theologians or philosophers or church officials. Instead Barth's heavenly arrival is celebrated by the many prisoners whom he visited those Sunday mornings. These visits, not his theological scholarship, are why all of heaven knows and honors his name.<sup>9</sup>

God calls us all to a ministry toward the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned (Matthew 25:34-40). Among prisoners is where Christ died upon the cross, the first Christian community. This is one place we are invited to find Christ today. Barth knew this call well, so he put down his pen, left the university, visited Basel Prison, and preached the gospel of Jesus Christ. Barth spent time with the inmates of Basel Prison because he understood that he was no better than any of these men. He understood that he was in need of graceful deliverance just as they were. Barth's prison ministry should serve as a paradigm for our own ministry to prisoners. It is easy to differentiate with pejorative labels of "us" and "them." However, the gospel tears down the dividing walls that these labels construct, and reminds us of the truth that the real prison is in the heart of each one of us. The good news is that God offers deliverance to all captives through Jesus and fashions us as family, as a common fellowship of crucified criminals. *Deliverance to the Captives* merely gives us an example of how we might enact this relationship.

## NOTES

1 Quoted in Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life From Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 414.

2 Karl Barth, *Deliverance to the Captives* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1961; reprinted Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 18. Further page citations to this book will be in the text.

3 Interestingly enough for a man who is often charged with being anti-Catholic, mostly due to his argument against natural theology as "the tool of the anti-Christ," Barth prays specifically for Roman Catholics including a prayer in his 1959 Easter sermon for "the new man now at the head of the Roman Catholic Church," Pope John XXIII (*Deliverance to the Captives*, 150).

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4 Chaplain Dave Nickel, a minister to prisoners in Orange County Correctional in Hillsborough, NC, in personal communication to the author.

5 In his masterful biography of Karl Barth, Eberhard Busch writes, “Barth did not want merely to preach to his audience. In order to preach to them properly he also wanted to get to know them personally, and so he often went to visit them in his cells. For instance, he once reported that ‘this morning I listened at length to three murderers, two confidence tricksters and one adulterer, added the odd remark here and there and gave each a fat cigar’” (*Karl Barth: His Life From Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, 415).

6 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.2, edited by G. W. Bromley (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers), 635-636.

7 *Ibid.*, 639.

8 Quoted in George Casalis, *Portrait of Karl Barth* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), 3.

9 Benjamin Myers, “The Great Theologian: A Parable (Based on a True Story),” *Faith and Theology* blog (May 25, 2009), accessed December 30, 2011, [www.faith-theology.com/2009/05/great-theologian-parable-based-on-true.html](http://www.faith-theology.com/2009/05/great-theologian-parable-based-on-true.html).

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