

PREACHING GOD'S WISDOM

Response to Marilynne Robinson

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A CALVIN AND LUTHER – OR: ONTOLOGY VS. ESCHATOLOGY?

Dear Marilynne Robinson, thank you so much for your inspiring and challenging words and your great keynote lecture here in Wittenberg. Actually, we have not only heard a great keynote lecture, but also a courageous one. Speaking here in »Lutherstadt Wittenberg«, in Luther's town of Wittenberg, and admitting so frankly your fascination for Calvin, is surely a brave and courageous enterprise.

Luther and Calvin – the two of them never met. And maybe it was better like this. Sometimes Martin Luther could be quite aggressive and sharp in tone towards his »enemies«. Luther and Calvin – there was no direct contact between both of them. And even a letter from Calvin sent in January 1545 never reached Martin Luther, because Philipp Melanchthon did not dare to hand the letter out to Martin. Obviously he feared that the letter could not be very supportive for the health of the 61 year old Wittenberg reformer. This is a pity, because Calvin expressed his esteem and high respect for Luther and wrote: »O, if I was only able, I would love to fly to you, in order to enjoy at least one hour of your presence. I wished so much to talk to you face to face. But as this is not possible here on earth, it will – as I do hope – soon be possible in God's reign. Farewell to you, you famous man and felicitous servant of Christ and honored father of mine! May the Lord continue to guide you with his spirit till the end for the sake of his church.«¹

¹ Quoted according to <http://www.reformiert-info.de/2441-0-105-15.html> [1st of August 2012; my own translation; AD].

467 years after this letter, you, Marilynne, brought Calvin to us in your lecture, to Lutherstadt Wittenberg – so somehow Calvin could finally fly to Wittenberg – and bring some of his ideas with him. »In the beginning was the *sermo*« (John 1:1; not the *sermon*, as some of us homileticians would have loved to hear!). »In the beginning was the *sermo*«, the *sapientia Dei*, the »wisdom of God«, the *Sophia*. Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος. You pointed out that »his [Calvin's] concern is to insist on the ontological meaning of John 1. Christ, the Wisdom of God, is present in the order of being itself.« »The very sinews of reality are made of the wisdom proceeding from this source.« »Divine wisdom« is »the eternal source of all being.«

I do think there is a difference between Calvin and Luther. Calvin surely thinks much more ontologically, whereas Luther thinks much more eschatologically. In an early sermon of Martin Luther, preached here in Wittenberg on Christmas Day 1514, his text was John 1:1: »In the beginning was the word ...« connected with verse 14: »... and the word became flesh«. And already in this sermon of the 31 year old Wittenberg professor – three years before the 95 theses – Luther shows his dynamic interpretation of Christian faith and Christian life in the interaction with what God does. Luther says:²

»As the word became flesh, it is surely necessary that the flesh becomes word.«

We are part of the dramatic transition taking place. We, »the flesh«, are not only somehow *related to* the »word« (as the basis or background of all being), but we become »word«. We, the sinners, are not somehow *related to* God, but we *are* justified and a »new creation« (2Cor 5:17) at the same time, as Luther would later say. In 1514 Luther continues:

»God becomes man, in order that man becomes God. [...] The eternal logos puts on our form and our shape and our image, in order to dress us with his image and with his shape. This is how wisdom was made foolishness in order to make foolishness become wisdom.« In Latin the last sentence sounds like this: »[...] ideo sapientia fit stulta, ut stultitia fiat sapientia.«

This is the eschatological transition taking place – and we are part of it. This makes Christian life somehow paradox: Luther states in the same sermon that only the word is given to us as the faith in things to come. But at the

² WA 1,28f.

same time, we »are already now the whole word.« Luther writes: »Keinem nämlich, der glaubt, wird hier schon gegeben, was er glaubt. Gegeben wird vielmehr das Wort als Glaube an künftige Dinge. [...] Aufgehängt und gefangen in diesem Glauben aber sind wir schon jetzt das ganze Wort.« »Nulli enim credenti hic dantur quae credit, sed verbum fides futurorum, et in hoc suspensi et captivi totum verbum sumus [...].«³

The word is given to us – and we are the word. This is the eschatological dynamic of Christian faith according to Luther. And the words of the sermon are one of the points where this eschatological transition takes place – again and again. This is why for Luther preaching was so central and so important. This is why it is correct to speak of the »living voice of the Gospel«, the »Viva Vox Evangelii«: »The word is given to us – and we become the word.« I would call this Luther's eschatological ontology of the word. – In a much later sermon on the same text (Christmas 1538), Luther still stresses this transition and explains that this is the point, where human rationality will surely limp and be out of step (»Dabei muss die Vernunft hinken und aus dem Gleichschritt kommen [...].«).⁴

Luther's eschatology and Calvin's ontology – there may be some difference at this point. But at least the homiletical expectation, the importance both of the reformers in Wittenberg and Geneva attribute to preaching, connects and unites both of them. You expressed this expectation in wonderful words [...].

B TOWARDS THE MYSTERY – OR: HOMILETICAL EXPECTATION

You spoke of the »hope« you »and so many others bring into the extraordinary moment when someone attempts to speak in good faith about something that matters, to people who attempt to listen in good faith.« What a wonderful description! In the following you give a reason why the time of the sermon is so extraordinary: a sermon can be the moment where people recognize that »there is more to reality than [the] reductionist notions of science can comprehend«. »Religion [...] addresses and celebrates mystery.«

³ WA 1,29.

⁴ Quoted according to PETER MANNS (Ed.), *Predigten Martin Luthers durch das Kirchenjahr*, Bd. 2: Advent und Weihnachten, Mainz 1983, 63.

This is, according to your words, what people are looking for when they come to church and when they listen to a sermon - mystery! But at the same time, you express the fear that »there is a tendency, in the churches and in society as a whole, to push mystery aside as if it were a delusion of ignorance or fear that can have no relevance to people living in the real world.« I think you are absolutely right.

Let's take the example of Lutherstadt Wittenberg. What once was the city of the reformation, now is a town with a total of about 12 to 15% Christians. 85% of the population do not belong to any religion. Our conference takes place in one of the most secularized areas of Eastern Germany and Europe. But does this mean that there is no longing for something which transcends the boundaries of our perception of what is real? Have people lost only their belonging to the church as an institution or also their *longing* for something beyond the daily routines and rationalities? There is a big discussion about this theme in the last ten to fifteen years here in Germany. Is our society really getting more and more secularized or does *religion* find other and more individual forms? Are people looking for transcendence in sport events, in music or theatre, in cinema or books?

I can't spread out the different sociological data proving the secularization-theory or the theory of religious individualization, but I can talk about a small experience I had some weeks ago. I was walking around in Leipzig with a group of friends from my time as a student at university. They came from all over Germany and we were talking about the religious situation here in Eastern Germany. I was just explaining that I more and more believe that the secularization theory is correct. That there are more and more people who live here, who do not belong to any religion, do not ask religious questions, do not live in any somehow religious forms - and do not miss anything in their life. Just saying this, we heard music and stepped into the remembrance celebration for Michael Jackson on the »World Cry Day«. There was a procession, with people wearing shirts saying e.g. »We are his messengers to heal the world« - and at the end of the procession people gathered around some kind of altar. My friends started to smile and said: Well, this is secularization in your secular city of Leipzig?

It may be that we - in the churches - try to be so close to the people and try to be so *relevant* for the people in their daily needs that we »push mystery aside« - as you said in your lecture, that we put a »supposed realism« in the place of mystery - and forget what we are called to be: »stewards of God's mysteries«, as Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians (4:1).

I hear your keynote lecture as a kind of calling - calling us, the homileti-

cians, back to be exactly this: »stewards of God's mysteries« and connecting this with one important and almost forgotten word: *wisdom*! Maybe there are a lot of people with a huge expectation and a longing - and we are so concerned to be close to them that we forget to be servants of the God who is always much closer than any church can be. The God who became flesh - in order to make flesh become word.

C WISDOM IN THE BIBLE AND IN OUR DAYS - OR: WISDOM VS. RELEVANCE

»On my side of the ocean«, you said, »on my side of the ocean, at least, we have more or less let the word and the concept *wisdom* fall into disuse.« Well, I can tell you - it is almost the same on this side of the ocean, perhaps on any side of it.⁵ *Wisdom* - you reminded us of a big word in our tradition, an almost forgotten word.

More than 40 years ago Gerhard von Rad published his late work on »Wisdom in Israel«.⁶ He showed that Israel's wisdom literature has a lot in common with the wisdom literature of other cultures: wisdom tries to find out rules about how the world goes, rules for a good way of life in the ambiguities of everyday realities. This is what the wise men, the sages in Israel, did as well. But at the same time, they do not only reflect about the »world« as it is, but always reflect on the world as »God's creation«, in which He is still active. The world - which is not the playing ground of fates and destinies and fortunes, but God's good creation with the creator still pulling the strings. For Gerhard von Rad the search for wisdom is for the sage a *response* to God's action. This is why sages need »an understanding mind« (1Kings 3:9) - or an »understanding heart« (as the King James version puts it) - which is given by God himself. Being a sage is more a charisma than a competence or capacity. And at the same time, it is God who »conceals things«. This is the dynamic of biblical wisdom - maybe best described in Proverbs 25:2:

»It is the glory of God to conceal things,
but the glory of the kings to search things out.«

⁵ I mention here the exception of ALYCE M. MCKENZIE's books on preaching wisdom.

⁶ GERHARD VON RAD, *Weisheit in Israel*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1970.

Just put »sage« instead of »kings« in this quotation - and you get an impression of the sages' continuous and never ending activity in the interplay with God - who conceals things which the sages search out.

Gerhard von Rad not only sees a big difference between wisdom literature and the sages' activity in Israel and in the other nations around, but also between biblical wisdom and what we today sometimes call »wisdom« or more often »rationality«. First of all, our wisdom, our rationality seems to be grounded, says von Rad, in a certain »Weltbild«, a certain »idea of the world«, in a certain »idea of man«, »Menschenbild«, in a specific scientific system (cf. 404), whereas biblical wisdom literature showed an amazing abstinence toward any system and any idea and works as an open ended and never ending dialogue about God and the world in the context of God's activity in the world. In Job 37 we read: »The Almighty - we cannot find him, he is great in power and justice« (Job 37:23). This is the limit of every search for wisdom (cf. Qoh 8:16f.). And this boundary/border-line remains forever. Nowadays we think much more in gaps which are *still* open, because there are some things we do not *yet* know, but surely will know in future. In biblical wisdom literature there is always a great gap, *the* great gap between God and man, the gap which will never be »filled« as long as we are living in this world. As Paul put it: »For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known« (1Cor 13:12).

The second big difference - according to Gerhard von Rad - between biblical wisdom literature and our way of describing »wisdom« is that our modern rationality has lost the specific structure of being a response to God's creation. In modern theory of rationality, the individual subject has the power of interpreting. And rationality is technically determined - whereas the sage in old times is the one hearing, listening and using the (God-given) charisma of interpretation (cf. 377).⁷

In your lecture, you discover still another difference: Biblical wisdom is connected to mystery, whereas the »wisdom of this world«, as I would like to put it, is connected to »relevance«. *Relevance* - »a word that fell like a curse on American religious culture«. Relevance is bound to the life we know and confines people to stay where they are and who they are. Relevance is lacking of history and of future. Relevance makes the world become increasingly narrow.

⁷ »The way in which the sage obtains his wisdom remains in darkness, but in a promising darkness« (377; my own translation [AD]).

You don't push the point so far, but I would dare to say that *wisdom* and *relevance* are counter concepts.

D WISDOM AND HISTORY – OR: TWO TYPES OF PREACHING AND THE NECESSITY OF CONNECTING THEM

In the Bible there is another counter concept to *wisdom: history*. In his already mentioned book on »Wisdom in Israel« Gerhard von Rad points out that there are two big streams, two big concepts in the Old Testament: the concept of salvific history and the concept of wisdom. In the concept of salvific history God is seen as the one who interferes in certain situations, who changes the world in certain circumstances: calling Abram in Haran, calling Moses at the burning bush, freeing Israel from Egypt crossing the Red Sea, giving his commandments in the Sinai-desert etc. In the later parts of the Old Testament these »events« were connected to one big stream of salvific history – a story of God's intervention and human failure and God's mercy and human answer and God's new beginning and human failure etc.

The concept of wisdom, on the contrary, sees God as the creator and tries to find out the ever-lasting rules for everyday life; the concept of wisdom is primarily concerned with what happens now (and not with what happened in the past or will happen in the future), is much more interested in the life of the individual person and not so much in the history of Israel and the nations around, is discursive in its nature and open for new insights by others.

As a homiletician, I asked myself whether we could discern two types of preachers as well: the preachers of salvific history on the one hand, the wisdom preachers on the other hand. The first ones are primarily concerned with the big lines; they see God's deeds in history, they love to retell the stories of the Bible, to see first of all the church and its way in this world and not so much the individual person. And there are wisdom preachers on the other hand, concerned very much with everyday life and its questions. Seeing the individual person, asking questions a lot of people ask and trying to give some answers to these questions.

Of course, each side has its problems and shortcomings. The big-line-salvific-history-preacher tends to forget the questions of today and now, of people living their normal lives in their ordinary circumstances. The day-to-day-preacher of life questions tends to forget the liberating perspective of salvific history. We are not bound to our small little life, but belong to a much

larger context. Our stories belong to the one big story, have a history and have a future.

If I may dare a big thesis today: Reforming preaching may mean, that we do our very best to combine these two different types of preaching. It is one of the admirable facts of Jewish and Christian tradition that these two concepts are connected in the biblical canon. There we find both big streams (and a lot more!). Our treasurer Albrecht Grözinger once called the biblical canon a productive shelter for pluralism (»der Kanon als produktiver Schutzraum des Pluralismus«⁸) - and he was right to have done so!

Up to now I haven't said so very much about Jesus Christ - though we are here in Wittenberg and Luther's discovery of reformation was a discovery of the Christ-event in the context of scripture and faith.

E WISDOM AND CHRIST – OR: THE FOOLISHNESS OF OUR PREACHING

It was Paul, who connected Christology with wisdom - and did it in a very specific and exciting way. He differentiated two types of wisdom: the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of Christ. And the last one, the wisdom of Christ, turns the first one, the wisdom of this world, upside down. In the light of Jesus Christ, the wisdom of the world becomes complete foolishness. »Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?« (1Cor 1:20) And vice versa: in the light of the wisdom of this world, the Christ event - Paul mentions *pars pro toto* the »cross« - is nothing more than pure foolishness (1Cor 1:18). The consequence is that we as preachers are »fools« in the eyes of the world.

There is a book which opens our eyes for this Christological transformation of wisdom in a fantastic way. Our members Charles Campbell and Johan Cilliers published »Preaching Fools. The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly« in 2012. They write:

»The cross invades the world like a fool who can never be controlled by human wisdom or rhetoric, but is always disorienting us and humbling us; the cross disruptively invites us to rely on its odd power, rather than our own. The liminal space created by the interruption of the cross is always unsettling; it is never something we can master. That is why Paul cannot preach with eloquent words of wisdom.« (33)

⁸ ALBRECHT GRÖZINGER, *Homiletik, Lehrbuch Praktische Theologie 2*, Gütersloh 2008, 148.

And they conclude and repeat again and again: »The gospel is foolishness. Preaching is folly, the preacher is a fool.« (37) It is amazing how Campbell and Cilliers manage to show the *political implications* of this complete transformation. Reforming preaching, the *viva vox evangelii*, has had this impact as well – and will have it in future. Let me turn to one of the better known events of reformation history at this point [...].

Excursus: Luther in Worms

Preaching is a foolish enterprise. And in this foolishness it is of religious importance *and* of political significance. In 1521 Luther was »invited« to appear at the Imperial Diet in Worms. And there he stood – a single monk and theologian – and on the other side the representatives of the mighty church institution and the emperor. Luther's books were placed on a table. He was then asked if they were his works and whether he wanted to recant any of the information. Luther requested time to think over his reply and the next day he answered with his well-known speech: »Unless I am convinced by scripture and plain reason – I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other – my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.« It is legend that Luther said the words »Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me, Amen!« But nevertheless – these words are a fitting continuation of Luther's statement. »Here I stand ...« With my conscience and the Word of God – and there they stand. Here I stand: the wisdom of God, and there they stand: the wisdom of the world. – That's foolishness. But »God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength« (1Cor 1:25).

**F »[...] IN WORDS NOT TAUGHT BY HUMAN WISDOM«
(1COR 2:13) – OR: CHALLENGES FOR OUR PREACHING**

I think this is exactly the point where our homiletical enterprise must start again and again anew. We do not *have* the sermons and we do not *have* the language, but it is our duty to find these words again and again anew.

When Paul reflects on his preaching to the Corinthians he says that he speaks »of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit« (1Cor 2:13). The »*viva vox evangelii*« is a living voice because it cannot be fixed to a certain code of expressions. It must be much more than

a mere repetition of formula which sounded convincing years ago. Preaching is a continuous enterprise to find new words in different situations and different times.

When I analyze sermons together with pastors or with students, we often discover the problem of *homiletical conventions* which may be one of the biggest homiletical problems (at least here in Germany). We tend to use our formulae, which sound persuasive – but only for those who are already persuaded, convincing – but only for those who are already convinced. Formulae which connect us to the »wisdom of the world« and make us forget what our task is, an impossible task, but still our task. »What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived [...]« (1Cor 2:9) – this is what we are called to proclaim.

Christian preaching needs a new language again and again – a language that interrupts and disturbs. That breaks open the boundaries of this world and opens up a new perspective. Martin Luther once called it the »nova sprach de resurrectione mortuorum«, the »new language of the raising of the dead«.

G IN THE BEGINNING WAS AND IN THE TIME TO COME THERE WILL BE – THE WORD

»In the beginning was the word [...]«, was »sermo« as we learned, logos, »wisdom«. In the beginning was the word – and in the time to come there will be – the *word*. This is my combination of Calvin's ontology and Luther's eschatology. And in my opinion this is what Paul already stated in his letter to the Philippians (3:12): »Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.«

»Because Christ Jesus has made me his own« – this is the basis and the promise of our preaching. »But I press on [...]« – this is the reality we are in. And both is true at the same time. Everything is achieved already – and we are still on our way. While this might be the end of my response, it may sound a little too solemn or elevated, so I end with a last short excursus: Luther's last sermon.

Excursus: Luther's last sermon

Luther's life ended almost exactly where it began. Luther was born and baptized in November 1483 in Eisleben (around 100 km south west from Wittenberg), and there he died on February 18th 1546. Before his death he spent

some weeks in the town of his birth - and he preached his four last sermons there (at the Church of St. Andrew's). It is reported that there were only five (!) people listening to his very last sermon. This is the reality of preaching - and somehow is a consoling story for me as a preacher (even if it may not be historically correct!). The great reformer of the church, the eminent preacher Martin Luther, had only five listeners at the end of his life. Foolishness of God's wisdom! »Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on [...].«