

Book Review

Karl Barth.

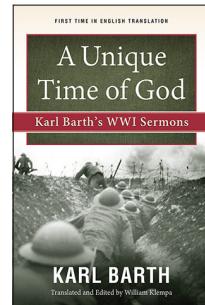
A Unique Time of God: Karl Barth's WWI Sermons.

Translated and edited by William Kempla

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Reviewed by, Daniel L. Stevenson, Jr., Fuller Theological Seminary



Before Karl Barth was the most prolific writer of the 20th century he was a pastor and preacher to a small reformed church in the quaint village of Safenwil, Switzerland. Preaching and the theology of preaching is a foundation of Barth's later theological work, particularly the *Church Dogmatics* and his lectures translated as *Homiletics*. While publishing these works, Barth put forth his own sermons to the English-speaking world. With preaching as such a hallmark of Barth's theological journey, seeing it as a necessity to the church, it is a wonder why there are so few works focused on Barth's homiletics and practice of preaching or so few collections of his sermons in English.

William Kempla's curation, *A Unique Time of God: Karl Barth's WWI Sermons*, will prove itself to be a timeless and valuable resource in understanding early Barth, both as a theological preacher and political commentator.

A Unique Time of God is divided into two sections. The first is Kempla's beneficial introduction of Karl Barth's influences from birth until the outbreak of the Great War in 1914. Kempla places emphasis on Barth's pastorate in Safenwil, particularly his engagement with the union movement, his early break with Liberal Protestantism, and the general historical and cultural situation in Europe pre-1914. Kempla's thesis counters previous notions that WWI was the sudden turn for Karl Barth and

his relationship with Liberal Protestantism. While the Great War certainly had a dramatic impact on Barth and others at the turn of the century, it should not be seen Barth's Pauline-like repentance from liberalism. Rather, Barth experienced a gradual turn which started years before WWI, with his work within the social fabric in Safenwil, and developed during the course of the Great War. Kempla's introduction sets us up to see Barth as a social and theological preacher who is struggling, with a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other, to say something and allow the Word of God to speak anew in a war-torn Europe; a Europe thoroughly Christianized, yet deaf to the Word of God.

The second half of *A Unique Time of God* consists of Barth's sermons previously unpublished in English. Unlike the collection of sermons Barth published in English during his lifetime, these thirteen sermons are sequential. They begin the week before the Great War commences on August 1, 1914 and end on Reformation Sunday, November 1, 1914. If one is looking for an example of Barth's sermons that follows his advice and teachings in *Homiletics*, they will be hard-pressed to find them here. The sermons reveal a Barth baptized in Liberal Protestant theology and homiletical practices, yet confronted with the atrocious Great War, which cost not only young men their lives, but also the reputations of notable theologians, including Barth's teachers, Hermann and Harnack. As fear and anxiety grip

his congregation, we see a Barth guiding them towards a renewed understanding of God's 'otherness'. He thoroughly rejects the modernist packaging of God as the god of *Deutschland*, the god of militarism, or the god of comfort, and delivers to them the Creator God, the God of peace, the God of forgiveness by way of repentance. He takes headlines from the local newspapers and speaking to both comfort the congregation (that God is near) and to challenge the congregation (that God is near). These sermons indeed invite preachers today to reflect on what it means to preach during a time of crisis.

Kembla provides helpful footnotes regarding pertinent and relevant historical information Barth's congregation would have been well aware of. Included is a timeline providing each week's major events, the sermon's text and theme, and Barth's simultaneous literary activity. Having this necessary information assists us to understand the fear and void the congregation fears and the impact of Barth's continuous reminder that "We belong to God, God does not abandon us to sin or guilt."

Kembla tasked himself "to explore these sermons' themes of...irregular dogmatics, noting where Barth retains elements of his liberal teachings...and where he has shed some of his liberal presuppositions." His introduction sets us up to engage and interact with Barth's preaching in its cultural and historical context. He provides us with a well translated and well noted work that does just that, bringing to light a "Barth in Transition," a Barth turning from trust in culture of humanity, one obsessed with militarism and power, to a Barth who only places faith in the God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. A *Unique Time of God* is a necessary addition to anyone wanting to know early Barth and will prove itself worthy to stand

next to other volumes of Barth's preaching.

The strength of Klempa's methodology is its unique successive nature. Unlike any other collection of Barth's sermons, Barth can be seen addressing the same congregation week after week. This allows one to see how Barth carries his themes from week over week, how in a short period he can both comfort and challenge the same congregation, while allowing God to remain unchanged during this tumultuous time. By the same token, Klempa's choice of 13 successive sermons hinders an English reader's ability to gauge just how much Barth had changed during the course of the war. If there are going to be any critiques made concerning Klempa's curation it is that it does not cover enough of Barth's sermons. Perhaps this would be suggested for another collection in the near future.

Klempa's translation of some of Barth's earliest sermons is a positive step forward towards understanding Barth as a preacher and for considering preaching place not only in engaging with the reality of God, but political realities and situations. This work causes preachers to consider how the sermon functions to reorient the church towards a posture to engage crises.