

Summary

In this dissertation I wished to introduce Rudolf Bohren, the minister, the professor of theology, the preacher, the practical theologian and the author. I listed his plentiful publications under 1.2. Professor Rudolf Bohren was also a significant preacher of his time. He did not only teach about preaching with passionate love, but he regularly preached in Wuppertal and Heidelberg. These sermons are preserved in several volumes, as I also presented them. Rudolf Bohren was deeply concerned about the issue of preaching. This is also proven by the fact that, besides his work as a professor, he established a research centre for preaching.

I present Rudolf Bohren's practical theological thinking on the basis of his main work, *Predigtlehre*. I translated it for myself. In my dissertation I tried to point out those thoughts and key concepts that are typical of the author and are also present in his other writings. By doing so, the dissertation explores Rudolf Bohren's concept for practical theology, embedding it in the homiletic context in which he was working. I also tried to present how Rudolf Bohren defended the bastions of the theology of the Word at the time when, by questioning the values of the Barthian heritage, the empirical direction of practical theology set out on its conquest. In his homiletics Bohren reaches back to the Reformational confession, according to which the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God. I am convinced that with this Professor Bohren says nothing new or surprising to us Hungarian Reformed theologians. However, in a homiletic situation when it was considered that it is not the essence of a sermon that should be asked about, or what is even worse, the importance and legitimacy of preaching is questioned, it is prophetic to claim that *praedicatio verbi Dei est verbum Dei*. I find this expression precious despite the fact that after the publication of *Predigtlehre* the pendulum of homiletics swung out in the direction of empiricism.

Predigtlehre is a uniquely written homiletics, which is difficult to read stylistically. Its style is rhapsodic. Although it has key concepts, none of them forms a leading thought on which the complete homiletics could be threaded. For example, Bohren calls Lange to account for conceptual clearness, whereas Bohren himself does not meet this requirement in his homiletics loaded with metaphors. His wording is not always clear; he often does not explain what he means by certain terms (e.g. *Sprachlosigkeit*, *Existenzerweiterung*).

One of the characteristics of *Predigtlehre* is that it is in dialogue with modern literature, emphasising that the sermon is a linguistic event. Therefore it wants to teach the language of faith in order to make the sermon become the Word of God.

The theological characteristic of Rudolf Bohren's homiletics is the emphasis on the double nature of preaching. Bohren wants preaching to be both the mystery of the Triune God and a human product. Therefore he finds a starting point for his homiletics in pneumatology, and discusses homiletic questions in the light of a theonome/theonomic reciprocity (*theonome Reziprozität*). The particular aim of this homiletics is the will to grant "freedom" for the preacher; freedom from the listeners, freedom from ourselves and freedom for the ministry.

In *Predigtlehre*, preparing a sermon is not discussed in a practical part, but in a section on the preacher, a paragraph on meditation. Bohren insists on the necessity of the text, emphasises the importance of exegesis, and leads his readers through the traditional steps of preparing a sermon, stressing the importance of meditation and discussion afterwards on the delivered sermon. For Rudolf Bohren the listeners are the second text of the sermon, who also need exegesis. For Bohren the key to understand the listeners is election by grace. The homiletics of Rudolf Bohren expects the preacher to be a model; to live in fellowship (*koinonia*) with the congregation entrusted to him/her; to have his/her whole existence in the background of his/her preaching ministry; to mobilise his/her spiritual gifts for the sake of the ministry of preaching.

According to Bohren the proper form for homiletics is the essay; thus he wrote a fragmental homiletics. The structural characteristic of *Predigtlehre* is due to the fact that Bohren does not wish to distinguish questions of content and form. Therefore he inserts the section "The Temporal Forms of the Word" in the place of material homiletics. This chapter is a theoretical discussion of preaching as remembrance, narration and promise. According to Bohren a sermon is remembering, since the unique event of incarnation once happened in the past. In remembering the past acts of God, God will become manifest and recognisable. The task of the sermon is to narrate the mighty deeds of God recorded in the Old and New Testaments. Narrative preaching includes vividness and illustrations. Bohren considers it important for the sermon to be both a good narrative and right teaching in contrast with narrative preaching which emphasises only narration. Both remembrance and narration belong to the basic structure of the sermon in Bohren's homiletic conception. A sermon construed as promise announces the coming Christ as the coming Saviour and Judge. According to Bohren a sermon must not be silent about the fact that "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ" (2Cor 5:10). The appropriate way of speaking about the coming Judge is the fear of God.

Since this vast section of *Predigtlehre* stands in the place of material homiletics, the homiletics of various Biblical writings and feasts of redemptive history is missing from Rudolf Bohren's homiletics. Neither does it speak about the homiletics of casual preaching or the sacraments. All these deficiencies, even if they cannot be considered negatives, make Rudolf Bohren's main work so specific and individual that we must say that *Predigtlehre* is not suitable for

students of theology to learn the basics of homiletics from it. However, practicing preachers may greatly benefit from reading it. Bohren advises those preachers who feel that the style of their sermons have become boring to turn to writers and poets in order to enrich the language of their preaching. Preachers who have become tired of the seed falling always along the path and among thorns when reading Bohren's homiletics will feel motivated to preach again with passionate love, and will be strengthened in faith in that the Holy Spirit has the power to make the sermon become God's Word. Preachers who have become tired of church work when reading Bohren's homiletics will search the way to the listeners of the Word again; and in the members of the congregation will recognise the ones God has elected for salvation, Christ has redeemed and the Holy Spirit has sanctified to be royal priesthood. Counselling the preachers is another characteristic and particular feature of *Predigtlehre* which is considered very positive.

As we have seen, in the Hungarian homiletic literature of the late twentieth century it was not questionable that preaching is both the work of the Holy Spirit and a human product. Bohren rightly reminds those who trust in methods to consider the work of the Holy Spirit. However, in my opinion when trusting the Holy Spirit we cannot turn our backs on the results of empirical homiletics. The findings of communication research are noteworthy, which also show a kind of way to be found to the listeners of the Word. Bohren wishes to communicate the Word to the ears of the listeners with love; and empirical homiletics point out communicational obstacles. By overcoming these obstacles we get closer to the hearts of the listeners with the Word. I find it appropriate that the preacher should look at the listeners in the light of election by grace. However, I also find it important that the preacher should pay attention to the homiletic situation as well – the age of the listeners, their knowledge of faith, where they live, etc. In the same way we must also look at the person of the preacher from two viewpoints. We must look at him/her from the viewpoint of the Scriptures, as a model, a follower of Christ, a preacher with one's whole life. However, we must also look at him/her from the viewpoint of empiricism, as a person with temptations, a person losing authority, a person with burdens.

In his homiletics Bohren persistently insists on the primacy of dogmatics, especially the theology of the Word, the Barthian heritage. This insistence is significant in the last third of the twentieth century when a sudden advance of the empirical direction could be felt. At that time it could have seemed that either the leading position of the theology of the Word would remain or the Barthian heritage would be lost, perhaps along with the heritage of the confessing church. In my opinion, today the two directions should not be set in opposition. I find it conceivable to have homiletics which considers the sermon to be the Word of God, but which also wishes to prepare the sermon meeting the requirements of artistic speech, and keeping it in sight that one must preach each Sunday. I find it conceivable to have a method according to which the preacher

praying for the Holy Spirit “puts into action” all sorts of human resources in order to find the way to the listener. I do not find it impossible to see the listener of the Word as justified and sinful at the same time. Also I do not find it impossible to see the preacher as the committed servant of the Word and a person with temptations at the same time. Accordingly, we should find the relevant message with faith in the power of the Holy Spirit and applying human resources and methods at the same time.

In my dissertation I presented the main thoughts of Rudolf Bohren, which appear not only in his main work but permeate his whole practical theological work. The most significant among these is his pneumatological way of thinking, his faith in the power of the Holy Spirit. Under 3.1 I presented how practical theology related to the question of the Holy Spirit from the modern times up to the academic achievement of Bohren. From this historic overview it seems that Rudolf Bohren’s pneumatological thinking marks the beginning of an era in the history of practical theology, since practical theology built on pneumatological bases gained ground due to his academic achievement. However, Bohren expects the renewal of spiritual counselling also from the Holy Spirit. What is more, he directs the attention of the whole of theology to the power of the Holy Spirit: “I believe in the Holy Spirit’ means that I believe in the Holy Spirit as the One acting both in the church and in the world. The great issue of theology today is to help us recognise the acting of the Holy Spirit.” Géza Boros rightly calls Rudolf Bohren the “practical theologian of the Holy Spirit”. By this he appoints the unique place of Bohren in this discipline.

It is Rudolf Bohren’s pneumatological thinking that makes him able to see the congregation in its biblical reality. According to Bohren’s teaching the Holy Spirit distributes spiritual gifts to the members of the congregation. A congregation gaining spiritual gifts is a community of counselling in Bohren’s view. Rudolf Bohren believes the holy catholic Christian church therefore he emphasises that the congregation has come of age, is royal priesthood according to the Word of God. Therefore Bohren disapproves of applying the *Einmannsystem* and demands that the members of the congregation could speak up in the worship service and make critical comments after the service because, according to Bohren, sermon criticism is an organic part of preaching.

These thoughts are foreign to our church. At first hearing it is strange that the “laity”, who have not studied theology and have not been ordained into the ministry, should carry out tasks which particularly belong to the minister. Yet we should think about whether today’s church model, with the minister as the general servant or the man/maid-of-all-work, is a good one. He/She is the one buying building material, supervising the office, teaching religious education classes, and by the time Sunday approaches, he/she preaches the good news sadly, because he/she is tired and mouths dogmatic platitudes in his/her unreadiness. It is a rhetoric question whether we should rethink our ecclesiology and preach in a way that would make our congregations understand that they are

God's people, a priestly nation representing God, and as such each member has a task in the congregation. Why does Bohren emphasise the principle of catholic (universal) priesthood, the maturity of the congregation and its charismatic character? Because his practical theology is evangelisation theology! He asks us the question whether we believe the church and the congregation according to the Word or we see only the empiric body of Christ carrying all sorts of illnesses. Bohren's practical theology teaches us to believe! Looking with the eyes of faith we see the congregation has come of age. This is not the voice of a daydreamer or a naïve person, but of a theologian, who pays attention to Blumhardt, who is waiting for the Holy Spirit and comes from the Barthian school, who lives in the tension of the "already and not yet", and suffers from this tension. He knows it very well that the congregation has not come of age but it may by the Holy Spirit, and it must become the salt of the earth and the light of the world. That is why in the twenty-first century theology, not just only the sermon, must be "congregation-like"; that is why the preacher must look at the congregation as a mature one. What a wreck is a twenty-year-old youth whose mother still sees him/her as a child and does not entrust him/her with anything. Such a person will never grow up to the tasks. To see maturity with the eyes of faith in the congregation and to make it grow up to its tasks – that is the recognition we must learn from Bohren. It does matter how we look at the congregation: we see them as half-pagans, as Unitarians or as the ones redeemed by Christ. However, the redeemed ones have spiritual gifts if they recognise their redemption. Bohren helps us recognise the spiritual gifts.

Exorcism is a singular thought of Bohren's. He appoints "casting out the devil" as one of the tasks of spiritual counselling and understands preaching as exorcism too. Preaching can carry out exorcism if it communicates absolution. This has taken us to Bohren's next main idea, which is the use of the authority of the keys, that is, announcing absolution. According to Bohren spiritual counselling is renewed if it uses the authority of the keys of the kingdom, because it is the task of the counsellor to communicate absolution. Homiletically speaking, preaching is also the use of the authority of the keys, because the preacher absolves and binds, since it is in the absolution that the gospel is concentrated for the listeners of the Word.

Rudolf Bohren's practical theological achievement does not only help recognise the power of the Spirit, but also the power of the forces of darkness. In an age in which humankind does no longer reckon with the reality of sin this has prophetic significance. At the time of legalising sin, among demonising and demonised circumstances it must be highly appreciated that Bohren makes the struggle against the Evil, the "casting out the devil", the use of the authority of the keys and the pronouncement of absolution the task of preaching and spiritual counselling.

The overall picture of Rudolf Bohren's practical theology can be formulated in the following way: a piece of the Kingdom of God breaks in

where the essence of theology is found in prayerful obedience. The congregation becomes a counselling community where the Holy Spirit works in the congregation. Bohren continuously tried to show that everything is related to one another; theology and praxis mutually need each other. Outwitting one against the other is an old game. Bohren's academic achievement seeks discussion between theology and church, practice and theory, spirituality and theology, and the ways of renewal for the congregation and the ministry.

The Reformed Church of Hungary needs exactly this kind of renewal. The future of our church consisting of superannuating and dying congregations and strongly secularised urban congregations stands or falls on this inner spiritual renewal. According to Bohren there is renewal only if we learn to ask for the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, Rudolf Bohren's theology teaches us to pray: Come, Holy Spirit, Creator blest! *Veni, Creator Spiritus!*