

Speech-act theory to enhance Karl Barth's homiletical postulation of a sermon's 'revelatory compliance'

Markus Thane

1 Newhaven Grove, Largs, North Ayrshire KA30 8NS, UK

markus.thane@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

Karl Barth's theology is a theology which was born from the pulpit. For Barth the formulation and enactment of the unity of church, theology and proclamation had become an integral part of his life and theological legacy. While Barth taught as professor at the University of Bonn he published his first volume of his *Church Dogmatics (CD)* with an emphasis on divine revelation. At the time of the publication of *CD I*, Barth held two seminars on homiletics. The seminar notes were later assembled and turned into a book with the same title. If both works, *CD I* and *Homiletics*, are compared side by side a major theological inconsistency becomes apparent. In *CD I* Barth emphasises that revelation as the 'Word of God' remains with God, leaving the divine as the solely acting sovereign. Whereas in *Homiletics*, Barth talks about a sermon's 'Offenbarungsmässigkeit' – a sermon's revelatory compliance. These two postulations are not only in tension but they contradict each other. The underlying problem is that Barth cannot define revelation as a solely divine act which takes place separately and independently of human interaction; by simultaneously asking for a sermon and preachers' revelatory compliance, as if otherwise God would not be able to reveal himself. This poses the question as to how this inconsistency can be resolved. The underlying problem for Barth was at that time, apparently, upholding both divine revelation and human proclamation without compromising the character of God and the nature of a sermon. A way out of the dilemma can be found if revelation and sermon delivery are reframed and complemented by the philosophical approach of John R. Searle's and John L. Austin's 'speech-act theory'. 'Speech act theory' better appropriates Barth's desire to elevate a homily because of the 'reality change' which takes places in the very act of proclamation. In this theory proclamation is understood as a human act bound to God's truth which is creating a 'new reality' that opens and expects to have this reality filled and actualised by God's sovereign act of revelation. When proclamation/preaching is interpreted as 'speech-act theory', this follows Barth's desire to elevate the human act of the sermon delivery by simultaneously keeping the distinction between the human and divine, which is really worthy to be called a speech event.

Keywords: homiletics, Karl Barth, proclamation, sermon, speech act

Theology and the pulpit personified by Karl Barth

In his introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, John Webster praises Barth's contribution to theology by stating that the 'work in his [Barth's] chosen sphere is comparable to that of say, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Freud, Weber, or Saussure in theirs, in that he decisively reorganised the entire discipline'.¹ Besides the theological influence of Karl Barth, it is often forgotten that his theology was born in/from the pulpit. Barth's new theological approach started during his pastorate in 1911–21 in the small Swiss village of Safenwil, where he wrote and delivered more than 500 sermons.² His break with liberal Protestantism and the search for a new theology came out of his questioning as to what is the 'appropriate way' and 'how' he, as a pastor and theologian, is 'permitted' to proclaim God.³ These ground-breaking questions about the unity of theology and proclamation were triggered by inconsistency in the action of his prominent and highly regarded teachers – mentors like Harnack, Hermann, Rade and Eucken – who had signed and co-authored the manifesto of ninety-three German intellectuals which legitimised and appeared even to be sanctifying the German Emperor's war policy of the First World War.⁴

For Barth, the formulation and enactment of the unity of church, theology and proclamation had become an integral part of his life and theological legacy. Very early on, in the prolegomena of his *Church Dogmatics* (CD), Barth clarified and grounded the impartiality and coherence of the triad – church, theology and proclamation:

The Church produces theology in this special and peculiar sense by subjecting itself to self-examination. It puts to itself the question of truth, i.e., it measures its action, its talk about God, against its being as the Church. Thus theology exists in this special and peculiar sense because before it and apart from it there is in the Church talk about God. . . . The work in which the Church submits to this self-examination falls into three circles which intersect in such a way that the centre of each is also

¹ John Webster, 'Introducing Barth', in John Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 1.

² Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barths Lebenslauf: Nach seinen Briefen und autobiografischen Texten* (Zürich: TVZ-Verlag, 2005), p. 73.

³ Busch, *Karl Barths Lebenslauf*, p. 103.

⁴ The struggle for Barth was not only the theological-ethical approval of war and mass killing but the question whether his teachers' exegetical and dogmatic assumptions were correct if they led to such conclusions. See Busch, *Karl Barths Lebenslauf*, p. 93.

within the circumference of the other two, so that in view of that which alone can be the centre it is as well neither to affirm nor to construct a systematic centre, i.e., the centre of a circle embracing the other three. The question of truth, with which theology is concerned throughout, is the question as to the agreement of the Church's distinctive talk about God with the being of the Church. The criterion of past, future and therefore present Christian utterance is thus the being of the Church, namely, Jesus Christ, God in His gracious revealing and reconciling address to man. Does Christian utterance derive from Him? Does it lead to Him? Is it conformable to Him? None of these questions can be put apart, but each is to be put independently and with all possible force. Hence theology as biblical theology is the question of the basis, as practical theology the question of the goal and as dogmatic theology the question of the content of the distinctive utterance of the Church.⁵

Barth embodied this principle, even after his retirement as a university professor in 1955.⁶ He continued to serve as a preacher, despite his age, at Basle prison from 1954 to 1967, just one year before his death in 1968.⁷ This article seeks to outline and honour the gravity of Barth's contribution to an understanding of the unity of church, theology and pulpit. However, this does not mean that critical questions cannot be raised as to whether Barth was in fact always consistent in keeping this unity. Indeed, this article asks exactly this question of Barth's earlier theology of the years 1931–33, when Barth was a professor at the University of Bonn. It was during this time that Barth's first volume of his CD (English CD I/1, German KD I/1) was published. Simultaneously, Barth held two seminars on homiletics. The seminar notes were later assembled and turned into a book of the same title. These two writings, *Homiletics* and CD I/1, are the main primary sources on which this article will reflect. In *Homiletics* Barth appears to be inconsistent regarding one of his key doctrines: revelation.⁸ The reason for this inconsistency is embedded in Barth's own definition of the doctrine of revelation itself. On

⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), hereafter CD I/1, pp. 4–5.

⁶ Barth was nearly 70 years old in 1955 when he retired.

⁷ See Karl Barth, 'Predigten 1954–1967', in Hinrich Stoevesandt (ed.), *Karl Barth Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1, *Predigten*, 2nd edn (Zürich: TVZ-Verlag, 1981).

⁸ 'How' and in what respect Barth is considered to be inconsistent with his own approach and definition of revelation will be explained within the next sentences. However, the underlying problem can be formulated as a question, asking how a sermon can comply with revelation when the very act of revelation is reserved to be and remain a solely divine act of God taking place independently of the human act of proclamation. In other words, a sermon cannot secure its compliance with revelation before the act

the one hand, revelation emphasises that the 'Word of God'⁹ remains with God, leaving the divine as the sole acting sovereign. On the other hand, Barth might have felt theologically uncomfortable that the human act of proclamation, independent of divine revelation, could easily degenerate into an 'empty' shell of human self-portrayal. The article identifies this as the underlying problem for Barth at that time, upholding both divine revelation and human proclamation without compromising the character of God and the nature of the sermon.

Having identified this as a problem, the article wishes to go beyond a mere critique and tries to convey a solution of the dilemma by employing the philosophical strand of so-called 'speech-act theory' to reinterpret and readjust Barth's theology to better maintain the difference between the 'Word of God preached' and the 'Word of God revealed'. The nature of this article is both theological and practical and, therefore, interested to engage not only with theologians but pastors and preachers to uplift them by honouring their regular service in the pulpit from one Sunday to the next.

As mentioned before, Barth postulates in his *Homiletics* that a 'sermon has to comply' with divine revelation. With this focus, the article follows a fourfold structure which will assist in thoroughly deconstructing Barth's argument in order to reconstruct it. Part one depicts the scholarly debate and genesis of Barth's homiletics which represents an important intersection of systematic and practical theology. Part two presents Barth's arguments as to why he believes the 'criterion of revelatory compliance' is important and tests the soundness of this argument by evaluating this criterion against Barth's own systematic theology given in his *Church Dogmatics*. Part three briefly introduces this philosophical concept which will help us reshape the 'criterion of revelatory compliance' of a sermon. With this understanding, the article demonstrates how 'speech-act theory', as a human act versus divine revelation, can be valued independently yet can still be held together in a speech event.

Dogmatics and homiletics at an intersection

This section presents the genesis of Barth's homiletics, which was as a seminar held at the University of Bonn, where Barth was professor of systematic theology from 1930 to 1935. The book is a reprint of 'Übungen in der Predigtvorbereitung' (seminary practice in sermon preparation), which Barth offered in the winter term of 1932 and again in the summer term

of revelation authenticates the human act of preaching during or respectively after a sermon is delivered.

⁹ 'Word of God' is the divine *logos* of God who speaks and acts through revelation.

of 1933.¹⁰ Primary sources indicate that the examination board of Bonn University instigated this seminar because of its insistence on considering topical sermons as the only possible form.¹¹ Despite his full schedule of lectures, Barth considered this seminar precious because it would emphasise the significance of biblical preaching. Barth so vehemently opposed the board's point of view that he made the whole issue a matter of true belief in the form of a *status confessiones*.¹² The seminar must have been very popular, because 110 students enrolled in it during the winter term, a very high number specifically for a seminar.¹³ This context is important because 1932/33 is significant for Barth's theological path. Eberhard Busch points out that Barth had clarified and had sorted the main lines of his theology at the time he took up his professorship in Bonn.¹⁴ Five years after the publication of the 'The Göttingen Dogmatics', Barth had defined the theological kernel of his systematic theology and was apparently much more confident as to how his new dogmatics should be shaped.¹⁵ At the end of 1932 the first printed edition of the *Church Dogmatics* was published, which coincided with his first homily seminar.¹⁶ However, Barth had also already lectured on the material of CD I/1 in the summer of 1931 and then again in the winter term of 1931/32. In other words, the publication of CD I/1 lagged approximately one to two years behind Barth's formulation of the 'Threefold Word of God' section, which had been a part of his lectures in 1931. The explanation of this is essential, because Barth's homiletical interpretation of revelation deviates, as will be shown in the following section, from the assertions in his own dogmatic work. It is noteworthy that this deviation cannot be justified by arguing Barth's theology on revelation was still in flux, as revelation and proclamation had been settled one to two years prior to his homiletics. Without question, Barth's theology was firmly grounded in the year when he held the seminar. Barth's inconsistent postulation of a homily's 'revelatory compliance' can hardly be explained as an inconsistency of his own dogmatic reflections.¹⁷

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *Homiletik: Wesen und Vorbereitung der Predigt* (Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1966), Einband.

¹¹ Busch, *Karl Barths Lebenslauf*, pp. 232–3.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

¹⁷ One semester before his homiletic seminar, Barth lectured on what was going to become CD I/2, showing that he had been pleased with his writing of CD I/1, at least in that he did not think of a revision but felt comfortable to continue his dogmatic work. See Busch, *Karl Barths Lebenslauf*, p. 232.

Another possibility to exonerate Barth is to dismiss his authorship of homiletics. The genesis of homiletics from seminar to its final book form is quite unusual. The English translation in its narrative foreword provides a scholarly glimpse into how this book came into existence.¹⁸ Two sources were amalgamated into one piece of writing: the records provided by Barth as study material and ‘Studentenmitschriften’, notes of students who attended the seminar.¹⁹ Günter Seyffert is the one who gathered the sources and turned the material into a book manuscript.²⁰ Therefore, it could be argued that Barth is the originator of the material *per se*, but not the one who should be considered as the authentic author of the book. One might even argue that Seyffert is the one responsible for the inconsistency between homiletics and the *Church Dogmatics*. While this argument appears plausible, the English foreword indicates that ‘[t]he lectures were edited in consultation with Barth by Günter Seyffert in 1965’.²¹ This important sentence clarifies that Barth is undeniably the author and therefore ultimately responsible for the content and its theological implications.

Finally, it has to be further noted that this article enters scholarly uncharted territory of research. None of the most recognisable scholarly accepted standard reference books mention this intersection between Barth’s systematic theology in *Church Dogmatics* and his practical theology of *Homiletics* in 1932.²² The reason for this can only be guessed. As Barth research

¹⁸ The German *Homiletik* has very limited information in comparison to its English translation. While the author of this article is not a fan of translation, because the original is the more accurate form, in the case of *homiletics*, the more detailed insight information of the foreword is of inestimable scholarly value.

¹⁹ ‘Studentenmitschriften’ are common at German universities; they become ‘scripts’ which are study material for following semesters.

²⁰ Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), foreword, p. 7.

²¹ Barth, *Homiletics*, foreword, p. 7.

²² The following standard and most renowned scholarly works do not mention or refer to Barth’s homiletics, Günter Seyffert nor the presented theology of the ‘Word of God preached’ in its practice: Hans Urs von Balthazar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. John Drury (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971); G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Harry R. Boer (London: Paternoster Press, 1956); Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to his Early Theology, 1910–1931* (London: SCM Press, 1962); Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990); John Webster, *Barth* (London: Continuum, 2nd edn, 2004), John Webster, *Barth’s Earlier Theology: Four Studies* (London: T & T Clark International, 2005); John Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). The only one noting the account of Barth’s homily seminar, but without mentioning

focuses more on his systematic theology there has been an assumption that Barth's practical theology would be congruent with his systematics. How the two, practical theology and systematics, deviate from one another, and the resulting consequences, will be explored in the following section.

A homily's 'revelatory compliance'

This section has a threefold task. (i) A brief account and theological interpretation are given of Barth's treatment of revelation based on the German text version of Barth's *homiletics*. The reason for preferring the German text is that the originals, student records, notes and manuscripts were all composed in German and, therefore, the subtleness and nuances important for a proper interpretation have to be taken from the original and not from a translation which is less accurate. (ii) Barth's understanding of revelation from CD I/1 is presented because this is the only book of his *magnum opus* that had been published by the time of his seminar. (iii) The fallacy of Barth's argument is presented; explaining why the revelatory claim is inconsistent with Barth's own postulations of revelation.

(i) *Homiletics*

After Barth defined the characteristics of a homily, he continued to assert the criteria a homily has to meet. The first criterion he called 'Offenbarungsmässigkeit'. Bromiley's translation misses entirely the edge of the word, ignoring that it consists of two parts, 'Offenbarung' (revelation) and 'mässigkeit'. Bromiley's translation, 'revelation', depicts only the first part of the expression, and ignores the rest of the word entirely. The word '-mässigkeit' does not mean 'moderate, average, indifferent, mediocre or reasonably'²³ but the German form '-gemäß' carries the meaning 'appropriate, according, conform or complying'.²⁴ The same translation problem continues with the second criterion 'Kirchlichkeit' which means 'ecclesiasticism', referring to a sermon's attachment and fixation to the church. Bromiley's inexpressive title is merely 'church'.²⁵ Two important observations can be made. First, the German version already clarifies by its headings that all of the nine presented criteria have to be met by a homily. Second, Bromiley's English translation of the outline deviates significantly

Seyffferth, is Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barths Lebenslauf: Nach seinen Briefen und autobiografischen Texten* (Zürich: TVZ-Verlag, 2005), pp. 232–3.

²³ *Encyclopaedic German Dictionary German-English 'Der Große Muret Sanders'*, vol. 2, L-Z, ed. Otto Springer (Berlin: Langenscheidt, 5th edn, 1990), p. 1061.

²⁴ *Encyclopaedic German Dictionary German-English 'Der Große Muret Sanders'*, vol. 1, A-K, ed. Otto Springer (Berlin: Langenscheidt, 5th edn, 1990), p. 661.

²⁵ See Barth, *Homiletics*, p. 5, and *Encyclopaedic German Dictionary*, vol. 2, p. 893.

from the German original by ignoring a homily's interconnectedness with revelation and church. 'Offenbarungsmässigkeit' reflects this connection by emphasising a homily's compliance/conformity with revelation. Before the interpretation can be continued, the exposition of this criterion has to be properly investigated. On pp. 47–55,²⁶ Barth explains how the criterion has to be understood. The very first sentence of Bromiley's translation 'preaching must conform to revelation' summarises what has already been said, though this is less demanding. Barth's explanation follows:

First, this means negatively that in preaching, we are not to repeatedly transmit the revelation of God by what we do. Precisely because the point of the event of preaching is God's own speaking (*Deus loquitur*), there can be no question of our doing the revealing in any way. In all circumstances we must respect the fact that God has revealed himself and he will reveal himself as the one who comes again. All the action that takes place in preaching, which lies between the first advent and the second, is the action of the divine Subject. Revelation is a closed circuit in which God is both Subject and Object and the link between the two.²⁷

From then on, Barth draws some practical conclusions for the preparation of a homily. His practical advice is twofold: he explains first what preaching is not:

1. Preaching cannot try to be a proof of the truth of God.
2. Again, preaching need not try to create the reality of God.²⁸

Then he moves towards a positive definition of what a homily is:

The positive definition, too, has saddled practical implications.

1. There is unconditional 'whence.' God has revealed himself, the Word became flesh.
2. Second, we must speak about the unconditional 'whither' of preaching. This 'whither' can be understood only when we recognize that the revelation, the reconciliation, the fulfillment of Immanuel, God with us, which, as the New Testament tells us, have taken place unconditionally and once-for-all, are to be presented no less unconditionally as ahead of us in Jesus Christ: yesterday, today, and forever.²⁹

²⁶ English version.

²⁷ Barth, *Homiletics*, p. 47.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

These quotations are only helpful to a certain extent, but do not resolve the underlying problem. Barth is certainly right in his emphasis that a homily is neither a proof nor creates the reality of God. The problem, however, becomes partly visible in his practical advice, which leaves entirely open how 'whence' and 'whither' have to be understood. Are the means a form of a directional signpost for a sermon or should they be interpreted as a provision/precaution, so that the homily fits purposefully into the events of salvation history?

Before this question will be pursued further, an important interjection has to be made, namely, whether the German-English translation of 'Offenbarungsmässigkeit' is in itself so rigid that it does not allow differing interpretative alternatives. The translation offered in this article interprets only the ending of the word, '-gemäss', which does not directly involve the meaning of revelation. This German ending signifies the appropriation, conformity and the article's favoured version is the understanding of the homily's 'directed conditioned consideration in form of a provision' to revelation. An alternative interpretation, a homily's compliance with divine revelation as a revelation recorded in time worked out in church or scripture, does not fit into the given context as each, church and scripture, is already a different criterion of its own according to Barth. This leaves only the one option to interpret 'Offenbarungsgemässheit' as a homily's 'directed conditioned consideration in form of a provision' to revelation.

With the clarification of the translation, it remains important to parse Barth's criterion of 'Offenbarungsgemässheit', showing that the criterion consists of two constituent parts: (1) this part is a statement of a homily's dependency on revelation; (2) the second part is the reversed cause of statement 1, arguing that the first statement allows the reversal, namely that a homily has to be shaped with the provision that revelation can take place. Those two claims have to be evaluated separately from each other. (1) The dependency argument: Barth is certainly correct with his postulation of a sermon's dependency on divine revelation and the fact that the preacher cannot manufacture or even force God by his or her own preaching attempts to reveal himself. While it is the hope and wish of a preacher that God's Word as divine revelation comes alongside his or hers, transforming the joined words of human and divine into a speech event, it has to be noted that the whole event remains solely dependent on the divine counterpart. Therefore, on the dependency argument, there is no disagreement with Barth. (2) The provision argument is the illegitimate reversal of the former dependency argument, making the claim that, in the case of a speech event, the human

act of preaching has to make provisions for the joined act of divine and human speech.

Exactly the second, the provision argument, presented as a criterion, is the critique. Without question, this article supports Barth's claim that a homily is solely dependent on divine revelation in the act of the speech event, when human and divine speech come together. However, does this dependency allow the reversibility of this dependency, deducing a homiletical demand to make considerations/provisions for revelation? In an over-subtle way it can be claimed that Barth proposes that a homily has to be created and preached in such a way that it 'leaves God enough space for His revelation'. This contradiction becomes even more evident when Barth's claim of 'Offenbarungsmässigkeit' is evaluated against his own systematic theology. In §§8–12 CD I/1,³⁰ Barth developed his doctrine of divine revelation.

(ii) Barth's understanding of revelation from CD I/1

First, Barth defines the ground or the 'roots' of revelation.³¹ Revelation is God's revelation which is the 'absolute ground' within the divine being itself 'which has no higher or deeper grounds above or below'.³² For Barth, revelation and the divine being of God are inseparable and represent the ultimate reality and truth against which no objections/appeals of reality or truth claims can be made.³³ 'Revelation is reality and truth ontically and noetically in itself'.³⁴ Barth concludes that the ground manifests God's self-revelation as the Lord which cannot be compared or judged by humanity.³⁵ The divine truth can be accepted or rejected only in a human act which does not alter the truth.³⁶

Second, Barth explains how the divine self-notification/declaration has to be comprehended. This self-notification of God is, according to scriptures, the imparting of the unveiling of God whose being is generally veiled

³⁰ §8 God in His Revelation, pp. 295–347; §9 The Trinity of God, pp. 348–83, §10 God the Father, pp. 384–98, §11 God the Son, pp. 399–447, §12 God the Holy Spirit, pp. 448–89.

³¹ The following translations have been made by the author from the German original text, Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik, I/1*, 7th edn (Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1955), hereafter *KD I/1*, p. 320.

³² *KD I/1*, §8.2 Die Wurzel der Trinitätslehre, p. 321.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 322–3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 322.

from humanity.³⁷ Barth tries to point to the dichotomy of this veiling and unveiling. He summarises it in this formula: ‘because there is this veiling of the Personhood of God, there can be an unveiling’, and vice versa, ‘only as there is a veiling and unveiling of God, can there be a self-impartation of God’.³⁸ Barth prevents, with this simultaneity of veiling and unveiling, God becoming fully visible and comprehensible for humanity even in the divine act of revelation.

Third, the important part, this is the total juxtaposition of Barth’s concept of ‘Offenbarungsmässigkeit’. Barth argues that in the subject–object relationship of revelation God is and remains the acting subject throughout revelation.³⁹ Furthermore, God’s self-revelation does not change the subject (God) into an examinable object for humanity.⁴⁰ The divine–human encounter is constituted on a personal level in which the divine ‘You’ meets a human ‘I’ and forms a union.⁴¹

Finally, the Holy Spirit guarantees humanity the participation in revelation.⁴²

(iii) The fallacy argument

At this stage, the fallacy argument(s), ‘False cause, non causa pro causa, and reversing cautions’⁴³ of Barth’s ‘Offenbarungsgemässheit’ can be summarised and presented.

Barth’s revelatory compliance cannot be reconciled with his own dogmatic postulations of revelation. A ‘reversed causation’, understood as a homily’s conformity with revelation, juxtaposes the whole doctrine of revelation and what it represents.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the fallacy of ‘non causa pro causa’ signifies the improper conclusion of one thing (revelation) from another (homily).⁴⁵ In other words, a homily cannot be elevated as the cause for revelation. The cause of divine revelation is the ultimate cause and action in itself, being independent of a homily being preached – the homily cannot and should not be causally related to revelation. From the point of logic, the

³⁷ Barth states that the *deus revelatus* is simultaneously the *deus absconditus*, *ibid.*, p. 338.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, §9.1 Dreiheit in der Einheit, pp. 382–3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, §9.4 Der Sinn der Trinitätslehre, p. 402.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, §12.1 Gott als Erlöser, p. 475.

⁴³ Dowden Bradley, ‘Fallacy’, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/fallacy> (accessed Jan. 2015).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

speech event is the accidental coincidence of human preaching and divine revelation.

Barth's desire to strengthen 'the Word of God preached' is understandable; however, such an attempt should not be made at the cost of depleting revelation. The next section proposes how the proclamation can be theologically augmented while complying fully with the doctrine of revelation.

Speech act theory

The term 'speech act theory', given by J. L. Austin, is a specific strand in the philosophy of language which focuses on a specific type of inquiry.⁴⁶ Its beginnings can be traced back to the philosophy of Wittgenstein who developed the theory of interdependency between world and language in its forms and boundaries.⁴⁷ J. R. Searle is, with Austin, the other major name in the discipline of 'speech act theory', because he is the one who has not only built on Austin's foundation but developed the theory further by providing the most comprehensive classification in the theory of speech acts.⁴⁸ Three important underlying assumptions are the foundations of this theory, which are also helpful for the understanding that a sermon delivery is more than a mere act of information exchange. (i) Speech-act theory has challenged the long-standing assumption of philosophers that human utterances consist exclusively of true or false statements about the world.⁴⁹ (ii) For Austin, *performatives* or *constantives* are categories of sentences where it is obvious that those statements are going beyond the function of information sharing because they are designed as statements to perform certain acts or state of affairs.⁵⁰ (iii) This theory takes into account the human self-involvement as being a part of the language and the human utterance.⁵¹ This prerequisite is equally applicable to a preached sermon because it qualifies as a speech act. Now the stage has been reached to apply Searle's comprehensive description and classification. Without going into all the details, this article focuses on what is called the *illocutionary act* based on Searle's

⁴⁶ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), ch. 2.

⁴⁷ Thomas Blume, 'Wittgenstein, Ludwig', in Wulff D. Rehfus (ed.), *Handwörterbuch Philosophie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), p. 230.

⁴⁸ Richard S. Briggs, *Words in Action: Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation – Toward a Hermeneutic of Self-Involvement* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), p. 4.

⁴⁹ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, pp. 1–4.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Briggs, *Words in Action*, pp. 7, 17, 36.

definition. An *illocutionary* act is stating, questioning and commanding.⁵² For our purpose, Searle's subdivisions of illocutionary speech acts are of utmost importance for our interpretation of the proclamation. Again, the taxonomy of all *illocutionary* acts is not important for this investigation but only two of them: *assertive* and *declarative*. An *assertive* illocutionary speech act commits the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition.⁵³ An example is the recitation of a creed. A *declarative* illocutionary speech act changes the reality in accord with the proposition of the declaration.⁵⁴ Examples of this case are baptisms, pronouncing someone guilty or pronouncing someone husband and wife.

The relevance of this exposition will become clearer in its application by reviewing the proclamation within this given framework. Barth's classification of the 'Threefold Word of God' is, according to speech-act theory, an *illocutionary* (statement, questioning, commanding) *assertive-declaration*. Before this is further expounded, it is important to acknowledge the double-helix, *assertive* and *declarative*, provides the only basis for a proper theological ground of a proclamation. The truth assertion, being bound to God's divine truth witnessed in its threefold form, is the necessary safeguard that not every human speech act qualifies as proclamation. Therefore, *illocutionary assertive* means the speaker in the speech act is committed and bound to the truth of God's own word which remains with God, witnessed and known in its threefold form, preaching, scriptures and revelation. The second defining element is the *declarative* part of speech act, theologically commonly called preaching or proclamation. Unfortunately, the importance and deeper meaning of the act itself are often ignored. The reason for this is today's information society, a thought which has also penetrated our churches and studies of homiletics. Far too often, the mistake is made of taking a sermon as a means to pass on information or to validate Christian beliefs or worldviews. Such an approach forgets that a preached homily as *illocutionary assertive-declarative* speech is first and foremost a reality-change. Some examples may explicate what is meant by reality change.

When a judge pronounces a verdict, the judge does not solely pass on the information to the involved parties but creates and opens with the very speech act a new reality.

⁵² John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 24–5.

⁵³ John R. Searle and Daniel Vanderveken, *Foundations of Illocutionary Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 182–92.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 182–92.

When a boy says to a girl 'I love you', then the boy does not inform the girl about a chemical process in his neuron-transmitters, but he creates and opens with those very words a new reality.

And surely, when a homily proclaims God's love and reconciliation, this creates/opens an entire new reality. In a theological interpretation it might be more appropriate to state that the speech act opens a new reality, the reality which has been created through God's revelation in Christ.

It can be concluded that 'speech-act theory' better appropriates Barth's desire to elevate a homily because the reality change which takes places in the act of proclamation prohibits one from interpreting this as 'emptiness', independent of divine revelation. Understanding the proclamation as a human act bound to God's truth and creating a new reality opens and expects to have this reality filled and actualised by God's sovereign act of revelation. When proclamation/preaching is interpreted as speech-act theory, this follows Barth's desire to elevate the human act of the sermon delivery by simultaneously keeping the distinction between the human and divine, which is really worthy to be called a speech event.