

## ... which surpasses all understanding (Phil 4:7) On the foolishness and beauty of celebrating worship in the dialectics of *word* and *cult*

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### Abstract

Sunday services may be considered as nonsense and a waste of time. The article shows that it is indeed correct to talk about the foolishness of Sunday services and that this is a theologically fitting description for services in which the congregation walks on the ridge between ontological affirmation of God's presence and elimination of the expectation that God may interact with the congregation. Theological insights and literary texts from the early twentieth century (Rilke, Barth, Rosenzweig, Kafka) are connected with a conceptualization of the Sunday service between *word* and *cult* – thus presenting an outline of a fundamental liturgy of the Protestant Sunday service.

### Keywords

*Fundamental liturgy; Sunday service; Dialectical Theology; ritual; interruption*

It is nonsense  
says reason  
It is what it is  
says love

Erich Fried<sup>1</sup>

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1 Original German version: "Es ist Unsinn / sagt die Vernunft/ es ist was es ist / sagt die Liebe." Erich Fried, *Liebesgedichte, Angstgedichte, Zorngedichte, Quarthefte 124*, Berlin 1995; the translation of the poem is taken from the internet, where it can be found easily and on different websites.

## 1. The foolishness of what we do in Sunday services

It is nonsense and a real waste of time! This is what “outsiders” might think about Christian Sunday services. In the secularized area of Eastern Germany, where I live and work (and had the honour of hosting Johan Cilliers many times in the last few years),<sup>2</sup> this is what a great majority of people might say – not understanding why some Christians get up quite early on Sunday mornings in order to be part of a strange event, to listen to pastors who (more or less desperately) try to find some kind of meaning and relevance in old traditional texts (they call it “preaching”!), to listen to organ music which they would never listen to in their everyday life, and to see, how people eat some “wafer” and drink a mouthful of wine or juice saying that this is the body and blood of Christ, and that this food (which has surely not the highest quality) is eaten in order to “taste and see that the LORD is good” (Ps 34:8).

It is nonsense and a waste of time – not only “outsiders” would say so, but also quite a lot of Christians in my German context act and behave like this. On a regular Sunday, only 3,3% of the Protestants in Germany attend a Sunday service – and the number is declining.<sup>3</sup> Many more people tend to show up as soon as the service makes a little more sense for them (as is the case in baptisms, weddings, funerals)<sup>4</sup> or somehow belongs to the structure

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2 Eastern Germany is one of the most secularized areas in the world; around 80% of the people living in the former GDR do not belong to any religion (Brandenburg: 81,6%; Mecklenburg-Vorpommern: 80,8%; Sachsen: 77,4%; Sachsen-Anhalt: 83,8%; Thüringen: 70,1%; Berlin [composed of former West and East Berlin]: 73,6%). Cf. Esther Peperkamp/Malgorzata Rajtar (eds.), *Religion and the Secular in Eastern Germany: 1945 to the Present* (Leiden et al.: Brill, 2010).

3 In the Protestant Church of Germany (EKD) there are some Sundays on which the number of attendants is counted; one of them is “Invocavit”, the first Sunday in Lent, which is attended by 3,3% of the church members. On other Sundays or holidays the attendance is of course higher: First Sunday of Advent: 4,8%; Christmas Eve: 37,8%. Cf. EKD (ed.), Gezählt 2018. *Zahlen und Fakten zum kirchlichen Leben* (Hannover 2019), 15.

4 Michael Ebertz, Catholic theologian, coined the term “one-sided” vs. “two-sided” liturgical celebrations – meaning that classical Sunday services are in some sense “one-sided”, as they only follow the logic of the church and its tradition. In “two-sided” liturgical celebrations the needs of the congregants meet with the logic of the church and its celebration; cf. Michael Ebertz, „*Einseitige und zweiseitige liturgische Handlungen: Gottes-Dienst in der entfalteten Moderne*,“ in Benedikt Kranemann and Elmar Nübold (eds.), *Heute Gott feiern: Liturgiefähigkeit des Menschen und Menschenfähigkeit der Liturgie* (Freiburg: Herder, 1999), 14–38.

and character of the holiday (as is the case on Christmas or Easter). But church attendance on a “normal” Sunday can be disappointingly low.

It is nonsense and a waste of time – on a deeper level, all who say so are more than right! If Sunday services are what they should be, they are foolish – turning the world and its logic of efficiency, causality, merit, status, economic growth, and success, etc. upside-down. It is a foolish act happening again and again for almost two thousand years. Johan Cilliers has taught us a lot about this specific kind of foolishness – which is theologically connected with the folly of the cross.<sup>5</sup> If Protestant Christians had listened to Johan Cilliers and if his works had been available already decades and centuries ago, they could have learned that foolishness is what it is all about and would have avoided some of the functionalization of Sunday services, some of the destruction of its inherent beauty and foolishness.

But instead, many Protestant theologians learned to be “serious”, not to waste time with “meaningless” and “fruitless” ritual activity, not to long for a God who surpasses all understanding, but to do what people can do when they come together: learning, understanding, interpreting. The basic interruption of a Sunday service gets lost by doing so – the space of grace in the time of grace which no one can “produce”, but which is given as a gift, the fundamental paradox of God’s time which becomes our time and of God’s peace which confuses our political systems. When the multitude of the heavenly host sang: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours” (Lk 2:14), these words couldn’t have been more removed from the reality in the Roman Empire. And yet the heavenly host spoke out the truth, which is deeper than the Roman truth of the military and power systems. Whenever the congregation sings this Biblical verse in the “Gloria” of the Sunday service, they proclaim a truth which surpasses all understanding, which is completely foolish and at the same time interrupting the powers and opening up a space of grace and peace.

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5 Cf. Johan Cilliers, ‘A royal waste of time? Perspectives on liturgy as space against waste’. *Scriptura* 113 (2014): 38–48; ‘Timing Grace’. *International Journal of Homiletics* 3 (2018): 112–113; ‘Seeing, Sighing, Signing – Contours of a Vulnerable Homiletics’. *Scriptura* 116 (2017), 1–13; Johan Cilliers and Charles Campbell, *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly* (Waco (TX): Baylor University Press, 2012).

This essay is based on this liturgical, homiletical, and theological idea. And it is written 100 years after Karl Barth published the first edition of his “Römerbrief”, thus marking a starting point of “Dialectical Theology”. At least in my German context, this theology has quite a hard time. Schleiermacher on the one hand and the Liberal theologians of late nineteenth and early twentieth century (like Ernst Troeltsch and Adolf von Harnack) are much more popular in Systematic Theology and many practical-theological contexts as well.<sup>6</sup> In this context, this essay is a reminder of a theological subversion, which happened 100 years ago, and of an expectation that God him- and herself speaks his and her word, interrupting all our assumptions.

## 2. Beyond a new ontology of “the Holy” and a modern functionalization of the Sunday service

Celebrating the Sunday service is like walking on a ridge. Whoever has done so, knows that you can only *walk* there and should not stand (if you don't want to risk falling). It was Karl Barth in one of his three impactful lectures of 1922 and 1924 who spoke about being a theologian as walking on a ridge. In his lecture titled “Das Wort Gottes als Aufgabe der Theologie” (October 3, 1922; Egelsburg, Thuringia) he speaks about the *dogmatic way* of talking *about* God by affirming his “presence”, and the *critical way* of questioning exactly this. Then he describes the third way, which he calls the *dialectical way* and compares it with a ridge between Yes and No:

On this narrow ridge of rock one can only walk; if he attempts to stand still, he will fall either to the right or to the left but fall he must. There remains only to keep walking – an appalling performance for those who are not free from dizziness – looking from one side to the other, from positive to negative and from negative to positive. Our task is to interpret the Yes and the No and the No by the Yes without delaying more than a moment in either a fixed Yes or a fixed No; to speak of the glory of God in creation, for

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6 Cf. e.g. Wilhelm Gräb, *Vom Menschsein und der Religion: Eine praktische Kulturtheologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018). Wilhelm Gräb is only one example of the revival of a cultural anthropology which is based on “religion” as part of the general human way of life and as a specific way of self-interpretation and meaning-making.

example, only to pass immediately to emphasizing God's complete concealment from us in that creation, [...] of the creation of man in the image of God simply and solely to give warning once and for all that man as we know him is fallen man, whose misery we know better than his glory [...]. A Christian is the master of all things and subject to nobody – a Christian is the slave of all things and subject to everybody. I need not continue. He who hath ears to hear will understand my meaning.<sup>7</sup>

Barth's metaphor of the *ridge* seems a very fitting one to me in Barth's homiletical, but also in a broader liturgical and theological context. Every theology of the Sunday service is confronted with the danger of falling to one side or the other.

German Practical Theologian Manfred Josuttis (1936–2018) developed a new liturgical theory in the early 1990s.<sup>8</sup> His basic method was to “reread” the texts of the liturgy (as published in the “Agende” of the Protestant Church) – and to take them seriously. By doing so, he discovered again, how strange it is what Christians are doing there week by week. He connected his observations with the reflections of the so-called “New Phenomenology” (Bernhard Waldenfels, Hermann Schmitz)<sup>9</sup>, a German school of thought which tries to work against the internalization of perception and speaks about “atmospheres” which “exist” and “are there”, and influence human understanding without primarily being influenced by human perception. In this line of thought, Manfred Josuttis spoke about the atmosphere of “the

7 Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York: Harper, 1957), 207–208; cf. for the German version: Karl Barth, ‘Das Wort Gottes als Aufgabe der Theologie,’ in Jürgen Moltmann (ed.), *Anfänge der Dialektischen Theologie, Teil 1: Karl Barth – Heinrich Barth – Emil Brunner*, Theologische Bücherei 17 (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1962), 197–218, 212–213.

8 Cf. Manfred Josuttis, *Der Weg in das Leben: Eine Einführung in den Gottesdienst auf verhaltenswissenschaftlicher Grundlage* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1993); cf. also *Die Einführung in das Leben: Pastoraltheologie zwischen Phänomenologie und Spiritualität* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1996).

9 Cf. as an introduction: Hans Werhahn (ed.), *Die neue Phänomenologie und ihre Themen* (Rostock: Karl Alber, 2003); cf. Hermann Schmitz, *Neue Phänomenologie* (Bonn: Bouvier 1980); Schmitz *Atmosphären*, Freiburg i. Br.: Karl Alber, 2014; cf. Bernhard Waldenfels, *Phenomenology of the Alien: Basic Concepts*, trans. by Alexander Kozin and Tanja Stähler (Evanston (IL): Northwestern University Press, 2011).

Holy" and the "hidden and forbidden zone of the Holy", which is "there" and into which Sunday services may lead us. He was thus able to describe the way of the liturgy as a way of *preparation* (getting out of everyday life and into the nearness of the "Holy"), *initiation* (especially by reading Holy texts and listening to a sermon), and *union* (the climax and culmination in the Eucharist – eating, drinking and thus incorporating the "Holy"). The pastors function as "guides" into the concealed and forbidden zone of the "Holy", knowing techniques how to be there and get in contact with the "Holy". Josuttis writes:

Pfarrer und Pfarrerin führen Menschen [...] in die verborgene und verbotene Zone des Heiligen. Ihr Dienst an der Gemeinde besteht also nicht vorrangig in Akten der Verwaltung [...]. Er besteht auch nicht zu allererst in den Angeboten von Unterhaltung [...]. Pfarrer und Pfarrerin haben sich jenen Expeditionen und Exerzitien zu widmen, in denen, soweit das menschenmöglich ist, die Annäherung an den Machtbereich des Heiligen versucht wird. Pfarrer und Pfarrerin haben deshalb hauptsächlich mit religiösen Ritualen und Symbolen zu tun.<sup>10</sup>

Compared with the experience of "normal" Protestant Sunday services in Germany this is surely a strange, provoking and eye-opening description of the Sunday service. Josuttis' emphasis is on the *action* of human beings in the service, on space and ritual – and not on interpretation and meaning-making.<sup>11</sup> His liturgical theology interrupts basic assumptions of what can be done and achieved when congregants meet, and has (among other factors) provoked a new awareness of embodied reality in Germany's liturgical discussion. But – and this is my question: Is Josuttis falling down on one side of the ridge? On the side of the Yes? By starting with the "affirmation" of the "Holy" and allocating it a specific "zone", Josuttis goes (in my view) too far claiming the ontological existence of the "Holy"

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10 Josuttis, *Die Einführung in das Leben*, 85n.8.

11 Note again that the sermon is not more than one step on the way into the "Holy", and its primary aim for Josuttis is to guide congregants into the Living Word of God – and not to teach them truths about faith or to give them material for their own human self-interpretation.

(note again, that Josuttis is not speaking about a personal “God”!<sup>12</sup>) and reflecting on how experts of religion can behave in this zone.<sup>13</sup>

Thus (1) “the Holy” is transferred into a “zone” separated from everyday life – whereas one of the punchlines of Biblical theology is the interconnectedness of the “Holy God” and the world; and (2) God tends to lose his/her ability to “show up” “ubi et quando visum est Deo” (as the Augsburg Confession declares in CA V; “whenever and wherever it pleases God”) or to remain concealed.

In my view, reading Josuttis is still a very worthwhile enterprise – as he may correct our “typical” way of dealing with the Sunday service in my German Protestant contexts. Josuttis at least tries to rediscover the beauty of the foolishness of the Holy; many others (me all too often included!) make the Sunday service plain by destroying its foolishness and mystery and transforming it into something which is “doable”. This transformation has manifold faces – and I just mention four of them (knowing that reality is always more complex and that many of these faces appear together at the same time):

(1) *Pedagogy*: Already Martin Luther was ambiguous about the aim of Sunday services. In his famous Torgau sermon (during the inauguration of Torgau church on October 5, 1544) he said: “It is the intention of this building that nothing else shall happen inside it except that our dear Lord shall speak to us through His Holy Word, and we, in turn, talk to Him through prayer and praise”. In this sense, Sunday service is centered on God’s activity and His word and the divine-human interrelation. But on the other hand, Luther wanted to “use” the Sunday service (especially in its German form) to teach “lay” people. In the preface to his “German Mass” (1526) he writes:

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12 Thus, making use of Rudolf Otto’s famous descriptions; cf. Otto, *The idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational* (London et al.: Oxford University Press, 1925).

13 It should at least be noted that Josuttis was not only influenced by the philosophical stream of “New Phenomenology”, but also by Andre Tarkowski’s film “Stalker” (1979), in which the protagonist takes visitors to a mysterious restricted site (the “Zone”!). The film is based on the novel “Roadside Picnic” (1972) by Boris and Arkady Strugatzky.

Next, there is the German Mass and Divine Service, of which we are now treating. This ought to be set up for the sake of the simple laymen. [...] They are not yet believers or Christians. But the greater part stand there and gape, simply to see something new: and it is just as if we held Divine Service in an open square or field amongst Turks or heathen. So far it is no question yet of a regularly fixed assembly wherein to train Christians according to the Gospel: but rather of a public allurement to faith and Christianity.<sup>14</sup>

The tendency to transform the Sunday Service into some kind of “Sunday School” is very prominent throughout Protestantism – and is connected with the transformation of the “churches” into “class rooms”, which happened quite early in the history of Protestantism (especially by introducing pews – quite often with specially allotted seats for each and every congregant! – in order to give them the chance to follow the sermon in a concentrated way).

(2) *Mission*: The transformation of Sunday services into teaching lessons can be connected with the transformation of these services into missionary activities trying to convince people to be (true or better) Christians or to become Christians at all. Already Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher was in strict opposition to these transformations as he saw that the very essence of Sunday services could and would be destroyed by trying to functionalize the celebration of the congregation and making it “effective”. Today many “seeker services” or “services in open forms” have an open or hidden aim of trying to attract people to Christianity and its world views and of presenting Jesus Christ as the solution for almost all possible problems of everyday life.

(3) *Sunday morning wellness*: In the little upper-Franconian town in which I was born (Rehau), there was some intensive dispute after a service celebrated in a beer tent on the occasion of one of the folk festivals in July 2019. The background for the discussion was primarily a sermon which was seen by many as far too political. But even more interesting was what people wrote afterward about their expectations concerning Sunday services in

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14 Martin Luther, *Introduction to the German Mass and Order of Divine Service*, 1526; [Online]. Translation available: <https://history.hanover.edu/texts/luthserv.html> [31.07.2019].

general. In a letter to the editor of the local newspaper, even the mayor raised his voice claiming that services should give the participants a good feeling and should concentrate on the “good news”.<sup>15</sup> People are longing for something that does them good; and if I were to describe this longing in a critical way, I might denounce it as a longing for some specific kind of Sunday morning wellness – with comforting or helpful words, enjoyable music, and the feeling of being entertained well.

(4) *Cultural highlight*: Especially in inner-city churches, Sunday services are not seldom cultural highlights – which is especially true for their music program. In my home town of Leipzig (the town of Johann Sebastian Bach and Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy) there might be a special tendency to celebrate services as some kind of Sunday morning matinées for educated people. The aesthetical beauty of these services is much less connected to the beauty of folly and much more to the beauty of middle- or upper-class styles of culture.

To point to these four transformations does *not* mean that it is problematic that Sunday services may have pedagogical or missionary effects, may do people good or may be cultural highlights.<sup>16</sup> But there is the problem of losing the expectation that something more and something else, something above all human possibilities may “happen” whenever we celebrate: God speaking with us and we with him, as Luther might say, the interruption of our world by the foolishness of the cross, as Johan Cilliers might argue. Only in this sense, these transformations (and other possible transformations) mean falling from the ridge to the side of the “No”, mean transforming Sunday services into the duplication of other events – because “something” quite basic and elementary may be missing: *God!*

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15 Cf. [Online]. Available: <https://www.infranken.de/regional/hof/rehau-buergermeister-gegen-pfarrer-wiesenfestpredigt-zu-politisch;art155656,4333729> [Accessed: 05.08.2019].

16 Cf. Christoph Dinkel, *Was nützt der Gottesdienst? Eine funktionale Theorie des evangelischen Gottesdienstes*, Praktische Theologie und Kultur 2 (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2000). Much has been learned in recent years in empirical studies about the motivations of people to visit or not to visit Sunday services – cf. e.g. Folkert Fendler, *Kundenhabitus und Gottesdienst: Zur Logik des protestantischen Kirchganges*, APTLH 94 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019).

### 3. “Ob’s denn wahr ist?” – “Is it true?” – God in the condition (post-) moderna

Throughout the Bible, we find a line of critique of “wrong” services, which forget “God” and are concentrated around people’s own self. In Isa 66:3–4, we read:

Whoever slaughters an ox is like one who kills a human being; whoever sacrifices a lamb, like one who breaks a dog’s neck; whoever presents a grain offering, like one who offers swine’s blood; whoever makes a memorial offering of frankincense, like one who blesses an idol. These have chosen their own ways, and in their abominations they take delight; I also will choose to mock them, and bring upon them what they fear; because, when I called, no one answered, when I spoke, they did not listen; but they did what was evil in my sight, and chose what did not please me.

God announces a harsh reaction to the functionalization of the cult for people’s own purposes. It seems to be easier to “have” one’s own god than to have to rely on a God who is beyond human reach. This is what explains the attractivity of all kinds of idols (cf. Isa 42:17; 45:20; 48:5 ...). The Bible also gives testimony of an ambiguous God, who cannot be experienced continuously and is quite often a “hidden God”. There are the “big” stories of God’s concealment: the Aqedah (Gen 22), Job, the exile (cf. Lamentations), and of course the cross on Golgotha and Jesus’ question: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mat 27:46). And there are many, many smaller stories about God’s hidden presence and the wish of people to experience Him/Her. About Elisha, the successor of Elijah as “leading prophet” in Israel, the Bible tells an almost humorous story: When Elijah had departed to heaven, Elisha remained there – and had nothing but Elijah’s “mantle”. Some hours before he saw, how Elijah managed to split the waters of the Jordan by using this mantle and striking the water with it. And now – that Elijah was gone – Elisha tried as well. And failed! The Jordan flew as it did – and Elisha was left with a big question: “Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?”, he asked. After having done so, after having shouted his lament to God, he tried again, stroke the Jordan with Elijah’s mantle – and this time it worked (cf. 2 Kings 2:13–18).

“Where is the LORD?”, this has been *the* question for centuries and even more so in modernity. In his “Stunden-Buch”, a cycle of poems written between 1899 and 1903 (and first published in 1905), Rainer Maria Rilke publishes the following poem (dated on 22.9.1899, Berlin):

You, neighbour god, if sometimes in the night  
 I rouse you with loud knocking, I do so  
 only because I seldom hear you breathe  
 and know: you are alone.  
 And should you need a drink, no one is there  
 to reach it to you, groping in the dark.  
 Always I hearken. Give but a small sign.  
 I am quite near.

Between us there is but a narrow wall,  
 and by sheer chance; for it would take  
 merely a call from your lips or from mine  
 to break it down,  
 and that without a sound.

The wall is built of your images.

They stand before you hiding you like names.  
 And when the light within me blazes high  
 that in my inmost soul I know you by,  
 the radiance is squandered on their frames.

And then my senses, which too soon grow lame,  
 exiled from you, must go their homeless ways.<sup>17</sup>

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17 The German version reads as follows: “Du, Nachbar Gott, wenn ich dich manches Mal/ in langer Nacht mit hartem Klopfen störe, – / so ists, weil ich dich selten atmen höre / und weiß: Du bist allein im Saal. / Und wenn du etwas brauchst, ist keiner da, / um deinem Tasten einen Trank zu reichen: / ich horche immer. Gib ein kleines Zeichen. / Ich bin ganz nah. // Nur eine schmale Wand ist zwischen uns, / durch Zufall; denn es könnte sein: / ein Rufen deines oder meines Munds – / und sie bricht ein / ganz ohne Lärm und Laut. // Aus deinen Bildern ist sie aufgebaut. // Und deine Bilder stehn vor dir wie Namen. / Und wenn einmal in mir das Licht entbrennt, / mit welchem meine Tiefe dich erkennt, / vergeudet sichs als Glanz auf ihren Rahmen. // Und meine Sinne, welche schnell erlahmen, / sind ohne Heimat und von dir getrennt.” Cf. [Online]. For the English version, available: <https://thefloatinglibrary.com/2009/12/21/you-neighbor-god-if-sometimes-in-the-night/> [05.08.2019]; [Online]. For the

In the centuries before modernity, some kind of metaphysical security may have existed. God may have been hidden from time to time, but the idea that there is “no God” was seldom thought.<sup>18</sup> Now, in modernity, Rilke shows a different picture: the existence of God is dependent upon “us”. He is the one who may need “our” help. The separation between God and “us” is erected by a wall made up from God images. “God” becomes – for the poet Rilke – a question of language. Of course, the word “God” is part of our language, and we “use” it. But exactly this – our language as the only possible connection between us and “him” – is the wall we are building.

Twenty-three years after Rilke’s poem, in 1922, Karl Barth delivered his Schulforta lecture “Not und Verheißung der christlichen Verkündigung.”<sup>19</sup> In this lecture, he suggests that the question “is it true?” is the only relevant question for our Sunday services. All the other possible questions are secondary ones. Barth understands well that a lot of pastors flee exactly from this question and try to find other solutions. So, they offer what they can give: some lessons to learn, some good piece of advice, some ideas about how to interpret your life, some good emotions, some high-quality culture program, etc. Karl Barth writes:

„Is it true, this talk of a loving and good God, who is more than one of the friendly idols whose rise is so easy to account for, and whose dominion is so brief? What the people want to find out and thoroughly understand is, *Is it true?*“<sup>20</sup>

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German version available: <https://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/rainer-maria-rilke-das-stundenbuch-815/4> [05.08.2019].

- 18 Cf. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 2007); Taylor basically asks the question why 500 years ago no one may have doubted the existence of God and most were full of fear and expectation towards him, whereas nowadays this assumption has disappeared for many people (at least in the West). He answers this question by telling his story of modernity and secularization – a story of the transformation from porous to buffered self.
- 19 German version: Karl Barth, „*Not und Verheißung der christlichen Verkündigung*,“ in Holger Finze (ed.), *Karl Barth: Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1922–1925*, Karl Barth-Gesamtausgabe (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1990), 65–97.
- 20 Karl Barth, ‘*The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching*,’ in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1928), 97–135, 108.

If this is the question, then our Sunday services are all about God – or they are nothing than boring duplications of what people already have or sense or experience. But if they are all about God, it is impossible to give people what they might long for – but we (pastors and preachers ourselves) have to be on the way *with* the congregants – longing for God, hoping for God, expecting His word, lamenting Her silence ...

#### 4. On the way or: celebrating what we do not “have”

It is strange what we are doing: celebrating what we do not “have” – a foolish enterprise. A Sunday service is a hiking tour with the congregation on a ridge, a hiking tour on the ridge of language: “O God, you are my God, I seek you ...” (Ps 63:1). The God we pray to is the God we seek. The God we hold on is the God who can only be hoped for.

Martin Luther said in a sermon of 1538 on Mt 13:45–46:

Ein Christ steht nicht im Worden Sein, sondern im Werden, denn Christus spricht zu ihm bittet, suchet, klopfet an, es heißt nicht ihr habts, ihr habts gefunden, ihr seid hereingekommen, sondern bittet, suchet, klopfet an. Darum, wer ein Christ ist, der ist kein Christ, d. h. wer da meinet er sei schon ein Christ geworden, der ist nichts. Denn wir ziehen zum Himmel, wir sind aber noch nicht im Himmel. Und gleich wie der niemals in den Himmel kommt, der da meint, er sei schon drin, so ist auch wiederum der bereits im Himmel, der nach dem Himmel zieht, denn Gott siehet ihn an, als wäre er schon darin. Summa summarum: Wachsen und zunehmen muss man, nicht stehen bleiben und in Sicherheit erschlaffen. [...] Weh dem, der schon ganz erneuert ist, [...] denn bei dem hat die Erneuerung ohne Zweifel noch gar nicht angefangen und er hat noch nie geschmeckt, was es heißt ein Christ zu sein. Denn wer begonnen hat, ein Christ zu sein, der meint nicht er sei schon einer, sondern möchte nur gerne ein Christ werden.<sup>21</sup>

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21 Martin Luther on Mat 13:45–46., quoted according to Erwin Mühlhaupt (ed.), *D. Martin Luthers Evangelienauslegungen*, Bd. 2: *Das Matthäusevangelium (Matthäus 3–25)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973, 488); cf. WA 38, 568f.

A Sunday service is being on the way together – leaving self-made “securitas” and longing for God’s “certitudo”, not only “doing good”, but also destabilizing, not only producing sense and meaning, but also creating spaces of non-sense and meaninglessness – thus opening up spaces and times of grace beyond all understanding.

## 5. Excursus: „Go over“

Let's stay for just a short excursus in 1922. In September Franz Kafka wrote his famous “meta-parable” on the parables – thus giving another (but as I would suggest: in some sense similar!) answer to Karl Barth's question “Is it true?”:

Many complain that the words of the wise are always merely parables and of no use in daily life, which is the only life we have. When the sage says: “Go over”, he does not mean that we should cross over to some actual place, which we could do anyhow if the labour were worth it; he means some fabulous yonder, something unknown to us, something too that he cannot designate more precisely, and therefore cannot help us here in the very least. All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already. But the cares we have to struggle with every day: that is a different matter.

Concerning this a man once said: Why such reluctance? If you only followed the parables you yourselves would become parables and with that rid yourself of all your daily cares.

Another said: I bet that is also a parable.

The first said: You have won.

The second said: But unfortunately, only in parable.

The first said: No, in reality: in parable you have lost.<sup>22</sup>

Kafka's parable on the parables is complex and was widely interpreted. In the context of this essay, the words of the wise are important: “Go over!”

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22 The English version is quoted according Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé, ‘*The Everyday's Fabulous Beyond: Nonsense, Parable and the Ethics of the Literary in Kafka and Wittgenstein*’. Comparative Literature 64 (2012): 429–445, 429.

There seems to be the other side, but where it is or what can be done or found there remains mysterious. So those who have to live their “daily life” and are stuck in its routines, logics, functionalities, wonder in a mixture of anger and lack of understanding if it is worthwhile to “go over”. And yet – there remains a promise of the “transcendence”. It might indeed be worthwhile to “go over” in order to “rid yourself of all your daily cares”. But to do so, it is necessary to start “moving”, not to stay where you are, to set out ... Kafka would surely not say that Sunday services are such starting points; but in my interpretation of Kafka’s meta-parable, I would say exactly this.

## 6. Celebrating in the dialectics of *word* and *cult*

In my attempt to delineate what Protestant Sunday service “is”, I discovered a basic dialectic: *word* and *cult*.<sup>23</sup> In other words: Protestant Sunday service is – in my view – characterized by a constant mutual interruption: the *cult* (I could also have said: the ritual) is constantly interrupted by the *word* (which is current, personal, up-to-date ...) and vice versa. The *cult* is thus prevented from becoming totalitarian and leading into a separate world – not connected with this world and our everyday lives. The *word* is vice versa prevented from its own totalitarianism transforming everything into something understandable and “doable”, which has some causality and some function. In this dialectic, I see the Protestant Sunday service open to lead congregants to the expectation of the word of God (or the “outer word” as the Protestant reformers said!). Thus, my short-definition of the Sunday service is: “Wort-Kult in der Erwartung des Wortes” – “Word-Cult expecting the WORD.” The Cult gives the Word its form, the Word critiques and inspires the Cult.

### 6.1 The cult and the beauty of foolishness

For Protestants, the most important liturgical discovery, again and again, might be the discovery of the cult. Protestants tend to disesteem or even despise the ritual because they suspect it of leading into the emptiness of

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23 Alexander Deeg, *Das äußere Wort und seine liturgische Gestalt: Überlegungen zu einer evangelischen Fundamentalliturgik*, APTLH 68 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012).

mere conventional action losing the relationship with God and the world. In this sense, Protestant theologians like Götz Harbsmeier pled for an “Entkultung” of the Protestant service – going hand in hand with the hermeneutical program of demythologization (Entmythologisierung).<sup>24</sup> In a bird’s eye view, the history of Protestant Sunday service can be seen as a permanent struggle of “sermon” vs. “the rest of the service” – and mostly the sermon won and took over. Already Martin Luther once wrote in one of his early texts about the Eucharist/Abendmahl (Ein Sermon vom Neuen Testament [1520]):

[...] die tzeychen muegen wol nit sein, das dennoch der mensch die  
wort habe, und also on sacrament, doch nit on testament selig werde  
[...].<sup>25</sup>

The “signs” might be dispensable, if there is only the word – and people will be blessed without the sacrament, but not without the testament (which is Jesus’ own words!). Especially in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the liturgical movements tried to accentuate the power, potential and theological necessity of the ritual (sometimes leading to an overcorrection!). In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the discussion about embodiment showed that there are a body-knowledge and a bodily way of understanding. In recent years many scholars stressed the role of ritual for the Protestant Sunday services<sup>26</sup> – among others Danish Practical and Systematic Theologian Bent Flemming Nielsen.<sup>27</sup> He points out that ritual means *interruption* insofar as it is a kind of action without causality and functionality. Usually, all human action is characterized by the “in order to”-logic – which ceases to exist in the ritual.

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24 Cf. Götz Harbsmeier, „Das Problem des Kultischen im evangelischen Gottesdienst,“ in Ernst Wolf (ed.), *Festschrift Rudolf Bultmann, zum 65. Geburtstag überreicht* (Stuttgart/ Köl: W. Kohlhammer, 1949), 99–126.

25 WA 6, 363, 7–9.

26 Cf. Richard Graupner, *Der Gottesdienst als Ritual: Entdeckung, Kritik und Neukonzeption des Ritualbegriffs in der evangelischen Liturgik*, EKGP 5 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019).

27 Cf. e.g. Bent Flemming Nielsen, „Erlebnis Predigt im Ritual des Gottesdienstes,“ in Alexander Deeg (ed.), *Erlebnis Predigt* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2014), 141–161. Bent Flemming Nielsen’s theory of ritual is based on Frits Staal, ‘The Meaninglessness of Ritual,’ *Numen* 26 (1979): 2–22; Staal, ‘Rules without Meaning: Ritual, Mantras, and the Human Sciences,’ *ZE* 126 (2001): 1–25.

At the same time, ritual and cult have effects and consequences. The ritual interruption may free people from the circular structure of permanently self-centred action, which Martin Luther once called the basic structure of *sin* thus opening up the “crack” through which light may get in people’s lives and the life of the world.<sup>28</sup> But the ritual may also have problematic effects – even on the political sphere. Johan Cilliers showed convincingly that the separation at the table of Eucharist in the Reformed Church of South Africa in the nineteenth century was the beginning of the later politics of Apartheid in the twentieth century.<sup>29</sup> This is one of the reasons why cult and ritual have to be interrupted again and again by the word – criticizing any kind of self-satisfied celebration.

## 6.2 The word and its interruption

The Bible is full of words which are interruptive experiences. Well, I say: “are”, but the indicative here may not be correct if I have a (self-)critical look at the practice in our services and our preaching. Just one example: Isa 55:1–5 is a prophetic word, upon which our students have to preach quite regularly in our homiletics’ classes in Leipzig. The first two and a half verses read:

“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.”

Most of the sermons I have heard and read on this text are sermons stressing God’s *invitation*. “We” are somehow invited to come close. But the point is, I believe, that *hearing* this word *is* itself the interruption the word is talking about. All those who listen *are* transformed by the language of the text. They may be astonished or even shocked, overwhelmed by the idea of buying without money, unsettled by the questions the text asks. Maybe

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28 Cf. Leonhard Cohen’s famous line: “There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”

29 Cf. „Die Bedeutung des Abendmahls für die Menschenwürde: Eine südafrikanische Geschichte“. Scriptura 112, no. 1 (2013): 87–102.

John Austin's "How to do things with words" is one of the most quoted texts about language theory in our theological contexts, but one of those, which are seldom taken seriously. The word has the power to interrupt – if we only let it do so and do not try to embed it in our theological conventions and logics (e.g., in the logic of "invitation").

Johan Cilliers has shown again and again, in many papers and lectures, how the humble words of sermons interrupted political "realities" in the South African society – and showed that the word has transformative power.<sup>30</sup> It is the interruption of truth in a political situation based on lies, which is so powerful that the rulers fear the power of these words more than any other military power.

Another example of speaking a true word in times where the fog of lies disturbs the view is Oscar Romero (1917–1980), archbishop in San Salvador (1977–1980), who was shot during the celebration of a Mass. He writes in his diary on November 5<sup>th</sup> 1979:

[...] it is normal for one who dedicates himself to preaching truth and justice to be at cross-purposes with the world and for his voice, even though it be silenced by death, to continue to be heard in the conscience of those who think as he does.<sup>31</sup>

On the internet, there is a great collection of the texts and the audio-recordings of his sermons as arch-bishop.<sup>32</sup> Romero always starts with quite a long exposition of the Biblical texts of the respective Sunday or holiday. But then his sermons shift their attention to what happened in the congregations and the country in the last week. He presents "truth" in the context of alternative facts which were used for the official state propaganda. His sermons were live broadcast via radio and were very powerful. In January 1980 there was an attack on the radio station, which

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30 Cf. Johan Cilliers, 'Between separation and celebration: Perspectives on the ethical-political preaching of Desmond Tutu'. *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 1, no. 1 (2015), 41–56; 'Preaching between affirmation and anticipation: Contours of a paradoxical homiletic'. *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 2, no. 1 (2016): 109–130.

31 Oscar Romero, *A Shepherd's Diary*, trans. Irene B. Hodgson (Cincinnati (OH) 1991: St. Anthony Messenger Press), 375f.

32 Cf. [Online]. Available: <http://www.romerotrust.org.uk/homilies-and-writings> [Accessed: 05.08.2019].

could not destroy the technical equipment. On the following Sunday, January 27th, 1980, Romero said:

The power of people attempted to destroy our voice, but as you can see, no one can prevent the words of the gospel from being heard.<sup>33</sup>

And then:

The people's cry for liberation is a shout that rises up to God and that nothing and no one can now stop.<sup>34</sup>

The word interrupts the cult by connecting it with the world we are living in; and it interrupts the powers of lies and alternative facts.

## 7. Not knowing but celebrating God!

And for one last moment, I jump back around 100 years – to one of the eminent thinkers of the time: Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929). In 1921 his “Star of Redemption” was first published – a book which Rosenzweig started to write in the times of World War I. The way of Jewish philosophy he describes in this book is directed against idealism and its strong concept of subjectivity; but it is also directed against nihilism – and can thus be found on a ridge which reminds us of Karl Barth. The first sentences under the headline “God and His Being or Metaphysics” read:

About God we know nothing. But this not knowing is a not-knowing about God. As such, it is the beginning of our knowledge about him. The beginning, not the end. The not-knowing as end and outcome of our knowledge is the fundamental idea of “negative theology”, which demolished and discarded assertions that had been found about God's “attributes” until there remained only the negation of all these attributes as God's essence; God could no longer be defined, therefore, other than by his totally indefinite nature. This way that leads from a found something to the nothing and as the end of which atheism and mysticism can shake hands is not the one we are taking; we are instead taking the way leading from the nothing

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33 Sermon from January 27th, 1980, 5.

34 Ibid., 14.

to the something. [...] That is why we must put the nothing of the sought-after concept at the beginning; we must get it behind us; for ahead of us lies a something as a goal: the reality of God.<sup>35</sup>

Rosenzweig's way in his "Star" is to undertake a close reading of Jewish liturgy and the Jewish year – discovering the space and time of God's grace beyond nihilism and idealism, in the foolishness and beauty of celebrating a God, whose sanctuary has an open gate "that leads out from the mysterious wonderful illumination of the divine sanctuary where no man can remain alive. But whither to the wings of the gate open? You do not know? INTO LIFE."<sup>36</sup>

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35 Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara E. Galli, Modern Jewish Philosophy and Religion (Madison (WI): University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 31.

36 Ibid., 447.

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