

One New Book for the Preacher

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THE GREAT PASSION: AN INTRODUCTION TO KARL BARTH'S THEOLOGY by Eberhard Busch. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004. 302 pages.

The key word in the title of Eberhard Busch's *The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth's Theology* comes from Barth's own synonym for "Zeal for the Honor of God": "Christians are people with a definite passion. In no circumstances, then can they be cowards, blind-worms, bored, boring, or commonplace" (*Church Dogmatics* [C.D.] IV, 4, *The Christian Life*, Eerdmans, 1981, 111). After recalling Barth's life and theological pilgrimage in the first two chapters, Busch provides us with a thematic account of *Church Dogmatics* (hereafter, *CD*), the theologian's major work. The author has named Barth's own great passion, his zeal for the honor of God, as the energy of his heart and hand that wrote, between the years 1932 and 1962, this great and massive theology for the church, and in this introduction he invites us to take it in for ourselves.

To write his introduction, Busch reread Barth's theology. In 1995, when he had completed a lengthy review of secondary literature on Barth's theology, Busch says, "What I read *about* him motivated me to look again at Barth himself, especially since his work has accompanied me on many stations of my own path" (ix). Busch became Barth's student at Basel in 1959, and he attended the lectures on the Christian life, the portion of *CD* IV devoted to ethics, which the theologian was giving at the time. He adopted Barth's passion for God and theology and has devoted much of his own vocation to reflection and writing on the theology of his teacher. He became Barth's assistant and edited the final fragment of *CD* on baptism from the lectures that he heard, "The Foundation of The Christian Life" (C.D. IV, 4, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1969), which Barth, on retirement in 1962, left incomplete. Later, in 1975, Busch published a remarkable biography, *Karl Barth: His Life From Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Fortress Press, 1976). This introduction is a companion piece to the biography, and here he provides a topical commentary on the main themes of *Church Dogmatics*. The book manifests Busch's career-long reflection on Barth's theology.

In Chapter 3, "Primary Work," Busch admits "this dogmatics is a gigantic work that can frighten off even the well-disposed and discourage them from reading it" and "It must also be said than an age when everything goes by so quickly, when what is desired is a fast-food theology, is not a time when access to a work of this kind is easy" (39). Yet for those willing to take the time, Busch offers some hints on how to handle *CD*.

First, because in *CD* Barth is "always seeking to say the same thing differently," focusing on "the one totality of the Christian confession," one may start anywhere, and Busch goes on to encourage the reader of *CD*: "It is much better to read a small portion and understand it well than to read a large part superficially" (39 f.). Second, the unfolding of *CD* is not one long monologue, but a conversation with many voices. Busch explains, "Since this is a theology in which prayer and study belong together,

the dialogue is first of all with God, and then with the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, with an abundance that is remarkable in a dogmatician.” Barth also dialogues with Christian and secular contemporaries, with what we read in the newspapers, and with his students. “With increasing intensity there is also dialogue with figures in theological and intellectual history” (40). Understanding *CD* as an ongoing conversation asks the reader to be aware of various contexts. Third, *CD* is not only theology, but also exegesis, church, theological, and intellectual history, and includes extensive ethics. *CD* integrates all the classical theological disciplines. Fourth, Busch shows *CD* follows a definite plan: “it is not a wild concoction of stray thoughts.” Rather it has a well-arranged order, and to understand it properly, we must pay attention to the location where something is said or not said and to the “structures that give form to the contents” (41).

That well-arranged order appears generally in the successive volumes of *CD* and specifically in the particular material in each topic. Busch explains that in contrast with much nineteenth-century theology, Barth presented the introduction (prolegomenon) to theology as part of theology itself, so that instead of beginning with the *possibility* of theology, measured by standards of culture and general human and religious presuppositions, Barth “begins his work with a crash of the drum by understanding prolegomena in precisely the opposite sense: It has to do with ‘the *first part* of dogmatics rather than that which is *prior* to it.’” Barth’s introduction to his theology in *CD* I contains the subject matter of the whole of his dogmatics, a doctrine of the *Word of God*. God speaks and is heard in the Word because God is revealed and really present in the speaking of the Word. This speaking is the incarnation, the action and event in which God’s Word assumes a human being, in which humanity may perceive it. Barth includes in the introduction a doctrine of the Word of God in three forms: a) in Jesus Christ and Israel, imparted to us by the Holy Spirit, b) attested in Holy Scripture, and c) proclaimed in the church. This threefold form of the Word of God reflects God’s own reality in the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So the introduction to his theology includes a survey of his presentation of God, the covenant maker and creator, and of Jesus Christ, the reconciler, which he elaborates in the successive volumes of *CD*. Barth never began a proposed fifth volume of *CD* on redemption. As Barth prepared his lectures from 1932 to 1962, he kept to his plan.

The ten chapters that make up the second part of Busch’s introduction are really a series of inter-connected essays on the main themes of Barth’s theology. Busch leads us through *CD*, drawing together expositions of Barth’s presentation, while at each step he adds illuminating supplemental material from other parts of *CD* and from many other shorter works. He gives imaginative titles to these themes: “The Wonderful Beginning—The Doctrine of Revelation and of the Knowledge of God”; “The Fulfilled Covenant—Israel and Christology”; “The Divine Freedom—Trinity and Predestination”; “The Disconcerting Truth—The Problem of Religion”; “Exacting Exhortation—Gospel and Law, Ethics”; “The Good Creation—Its Basis and Preservation”; “The Critical Reconciliation—The Doctrines of Sin and Justification”; “The Prevailing Spirit—Pneumatology”; “Moving Out Together—The Doctrine of the Church”; “Limited Time—Time and Eternity, Eschatology.” In each of these, about twenty pages, Busch interprets for us Barth’s particular emphasis, with a sharp eye to the dialogue the theologian engaged.

Sometimes the emphasis and particular turn of phrase comes in theological

response to culture. For example, Barth's major shift from theological liberalism came in response to his former teachers of theology, as well as other academic and public leaders, who in 1914 supported the Kaiser and said "seriously that war was a revelation of God" (59). The German Christians and other compromisers with Adolf Hitler would repeat this sort of claim in Germany after 1933 (67-72), and Barth would join with members of the Confessing Church to write "The Theological Declaration of Barmen" (1934). Other times Busch shows how Barth *raised a criticism against Christian theology itself* as a way of answering modern critiques. For instance, Barth "assaulted the notion that God is to be understood as the absolute, as an abstract concept that is the contrary concept to the human." This critique of traditional Christian renditions of the doctrine of God was Barth's indirect way of attacking modern atheism, a kind of apologetic in reverse. Instead of the absolute (think of the *potentia absoluta*, absolute power, in some Scholastic theology or again, double predestination in classical Reformed theology), God is "the human God" (86-90) who has great "friendliness for humanity" (x). For another example, in his reformulation of the doctrine of sin, placing it in his Christology, Barth was revising traditional Protestant views of sin, speaking to "the terrifying and monstrous appearance" of man in the violence of recent history and seeking to address with his theology the disconnect between the obvious terrors of the twentieth century and humanity's "loss of a consciousness of guilt" (199). Sometimes Barth was confronting culture with Christian claims; other times Barth was confronting theology with his eye to the value in worldly truth. Busch is a master of showing us the specific theological and cultural contexts in and to which Barth was speaking. His summaries, paraphrases, and quotes from various sources serve to show us the way the theologian works and to appreciate the contemporary meaning of his theology.

Busch reports that as he attended Barth's lectures, he "also devoured volume 4, part 3" (ix). This third volume of the Christology presents Barth's version of the prophetic office of Christ, the witness, through whom God calls the Christian community to the task of ministry. Barth hung Matthias Grünewald's painting of the crucifixion from the Isenheimer Altarpiece above his study desk. It depicts John the Baptist pointing to the gruesome corpse of the crucified savior, saying, "He must increase, but I must decrease." From the central metaphor of the Baptist's pointing hand, Barth elaborated his vision of the church as witness. The witness of Christ to God and the vocation of the church to bear true witness to the reconciliation of the world to God are themes which express "the pointing hand" of John the Baptist.

The chapter on Barth's ecclesiology is a good illustration of Busch's method of unpacking the central claims in Barth's theology, showing us the historical moment for his presentation of ideas, referring to the intellectual and contemporary environment shaping his argument and calling attention to the revisions in traditional theology.

In "Moving Out Together—The Doctrine of the Church," Busch describes Barth's innovative emphases in ecclesiology. From the title we see that the church is a community with a task. Movement, other directedness, active task, and community are all important features of Barth's vision of the church. The church is not first the work of an individual, or an institution, a structure, or a hierarchy of offices. The task of ministry is the witness of the pointing hand from the image of John the Baptist in

Grünwald's painting, directing the church and the world to the picture of God's reconciliation in the crucified Christ.

With the orientation of the church toward the task of witness, Busch explains five moves that support Barth's vision of the church.

The Church's Predicament. Particularly from the time of Hitler in Germany of the 1930's, Barth argued that in our age Western society no longer offers a "practical concurrence between civilization, culture and political power on the one side and the Church on the other," the presumed legacy of the fourth century Roman unity of people, society, state, and empire (Barth, 1935). On the critical side, the Constantinian arrangement tempted the church to adapt to the powers of the world to guarantee its own existence. On the positive side, it could be understood as the promise of the incarnation, a "provisional fulfillment of the promise...that the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of God and his Christ" (Barth, 1935). Now, as this arrangement is disappearing, Barth warns the church against two temptations. On the one hand, the church is in danger of alienation (secularization), and on the other, the church is in danger of self-glorification (sacralization). The one is an extroverted church, "looking sideways" toward the world, the "church in defect"; it accommodates the church to the world and to the space left to it by society, rather than embracing a new freedom and confession. The other is an introverted church, asleep in regard to its commission to the world, the "church in excess," using the Lord for its own sake, "boasting about *him* in order to be able to boast about *itself*" (Barth, 1976). Barth's keen observations about the "church in defect" and the "church in excess" seem to fit our present church's fixation on its own life, funding, polity, and ordering of ministry at the expense of mission, and also the grasping after prestige through mega and consumer church models. It also implies a critique of niche churches, which tend to maintenance and live without specific public commitments in mission.

The Church That Is the Church. The loss of the church's unity with society offers us a new possibility: "the church *must really be* the church" (Barth, 1933). This mandate requires faithful action and loyal criticism of the actual, visible church. On the one hand, the church is the object of faith, the invisible church, which is the foundation for the visible church, through which the Holy Spirit gathers, builds up, and sends forth the people of God into the world. These three, the gathering, upbuilding, and sending, Barth describes in the successive volumes of his Christology (CD IV, 1-3); in these three, the visible church *bears witness* to the true, invisible church, which is Christ's work and in which we are called to be Christ's visible witnesses. Barth criticized the church from his affirmation of its reality. He said the main threat was not from outside, but from "the guilt of the church itself" and especially of its ministers, who have "done more to narcotize than to stimulate." Barth frequently quoted I Peter 4:17, "the judgment of God [begins] with the household of God," but Barth said the critique was legitimate only as the Lord's critique, as one in solidarity with the church, subjects herself or himself to it. In his commentary on Romans, Barth said the critic of the church has "no friendly lifeboat into which he can clamber...[he] must remain at his boat in the engine room or on the bridge." With this conviction, Barth rejected Bonhoeffer's proposal in 1933 to leave the church instead of staying to fight against its compromises with Facism; he thought leaving was, after all, more "clerical." Staying and fighting compromise is a pastoral and prophetic admonition for a church living under threats to its peace, unity, and purity.

The Church's Fellowship. Positively, the church must claim its proper role of being the human community that bears witness to Christ. Witness refers both to the one who has seen and heard the acts of God in Israel and in Jesus Christ and the calling to declare and impart the Word to others. Barth spoke of the church as the "provisional natural and historical environment" of Jesus, called to bear witness. Several provocative implications follow. The visible church is provisional in that it points beyond itself to the fellowship of all humanity in Christ. Fellowship is a mark of the church. Barth says that "There is no legitimate private Christianity" and "To be awakened to faith and to be added to the community are one and the same thing" (CD IV, 1, 688). The celebration of worship and the supper are *communion*. Most striking of all, referring to the community as the "provisional natural and historical environment of Jesus," Barth was referring both to Israel and to the Christian Church of Jews and Gentiles. He opposed Friederich Schleiermacher's positing of two different religions here and claimed that Israel and the church are the one people of God. If the community believes in Jesus Christ, then they are called to confess and show the unity of God's community; the breach between the church and Israel is "the most serious of all the wounds in the body of Christ." Barth has a salient word in contrast to popular end-time prophecies which support the modern state of Israel with a view toward the conversion of the Jews.

The Mature Community. The fellowship of the church allows and invites people to maturity in Christian commitment. In this move, Barth is responding to the emphasis of the Enlightenment on the freedom of self determination and its related rights of the individual's choosing what to believe and voluntarily associating with whom one wishes. Barth sought a third way between either a simple self-determination and choice in matters of faith or a passive, graceless acceptance of the faith once and for all delivered. He found the talk of a world come of age, made popular by Bonhoeffer, too facile and said he preferred to espouse individual and corporate maturity of Christian confession. Barth liked to speak of God's *omnipotent will* fashioning *free persons* who determined themselves *in partnership* with God. This Christian maturity is active, not passive, and in fellowship with God and others. For Barth, this emphasis on maturity led him to revise the traditional teaching about infant baptism and claim the sacrament for mature Christian affirmation. The Reformed churches have not yet fully engaged Barth's baptismal theology for a post-establishment church situation.

The Open Host. In the face of its displacement by secular society, Barth calls the church to face squarely, "What the church is for?" Is the church still necessary? What does the church provide that would otherwise not be done? One insufficient response would be for the church only to provide religious services to its members. Another would be for it to linger, reaching out in the spaces left to it or designated for it by society. However, Barth advocates, instead of either defective response to disestablishment, that the church maintain what is distinctive about Christian faith while at the same time reaching to those outside. The legitimate foundation of both distinctiveness and mission is first to recognize that the same reconciling God is at work for reconciliation beyond the church in world occurrence outside and also is working in the church. The Holy Spirit makes this reconciling work of God known to the church, whose task becomes the proclamation and demonstration of its truth. With this way of looking at the place of the church in a post-Constantinian environ-

ment, Barth revised the classical position that outside the church there is no salvation (*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*). In regard to salvation, the boundary is hidden and fluid.

But Christians are those who know of the salvation of the world and the church and who practice faith, love, and hope in the world and in the church. This view of the witnessing church also means that Barth attenuates the habitual distinction between clergy and laity, and more generally, the role of office in the church. The traditional division of clergy and laity is exchanged for “the over-againstness of the community and the rest of society” (262). The pattern does not imply domination, but rather that as “the provisional representation” of God’s reconciliation in Christ, the Holy Spirit calls and sends the church into the world as witness. Instead of emphasizing a polity of church office, Barth sees the church engaged in multiple forms of ministry in the world. Barth proposes twelve forms, six in which the community acts by its speech and six in which it speaks by its acts (*CD IV*, 3, pp. 863-901). Through them, bearing witness with faithful words and deeds, Barth proposes that the church may avoid the twin perils of either neglecting or patronizing those to whom Christ sends the people of God.

Busch’s other chapters are like his exposition of Barth’s ecclesiology. He maps out Barth’s theology by gathering material from early to late; he paraphrases and quotes Barth’s own words, pointing us to his obvious and sometimes less obvious biblical and theological dialogues. Frequently Busch locates Barth’s ideas in the particular cultural and historical settings of the theologian’s career. Busch is able to write as he does because of his own theological gift and many years of reflection and teaching. At times he is critical of Barth’s formulations. He does not espouse a new Barthian scholasticism or the simple repetition of Barth’s biblical and theological interpretations. The impression Busch gives us is of a remarkable consistency in Barth’s vision, elaborated with richness and conceptual eloquence. He writes his introduction for those who already know something about Barth and are looking for depth and freshness in interpreting the Bible and confessions for the life and witness of the Church today. It is an introduction with an invitation to share the passion of commitment to the ministry of the people of God.