

One New Book for the Preacher

Charles Raynal

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

Eberhard Busch, *Barth*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008.

Eberhard Busch gives us a brief and glad introduction to the life and work of the joyous Reformed theologian, Karl Barth. The author, who was Barth's assistant, has previously written several important interpretations of the great theologian's life and work. This one, in the Abingdon Pillars of Theology series, is only 83 pages of text, with a few footnotes and a nice bibliography. The series aims to serve seminary and college classrooms, but preachers and church educators who face the weekly challenge to be thoughtful in preaching and teaching can, with this little book, become reacquainted or get to know for the first time Karl Barth's theological mind, heart, and imagination.

The book has three short chapters on Barth's life, each beginning with one of his memorable quotes that is revealing for the biography and theological work. "God is God" was Barth's watchword and discovery in his early years while he was a preacher and became so disappointed with his theological teachers who supported the German militarism that caused World War. "The one Word of God" was the concentration of the Barmen Declaration of May 31, 1934, the theological confession of United, Reformed, and Lutheran pastors and lay people who took a brave stand against the emerging conformity to the Nazi state by the established protestant state church. "Not only your loved ones," was Barth's answer to an inquiring woman at one of the frequent discussions he loved to have in his older years with all sorts of people who wanted to ask him heartfelt questions. She asked him, "Herr Professor, can I be sure that I will see my loved ones in heaven?" He replied, "To be sure, you will see not only your 'loved ones'!" We can see from these quotes, particularly the last one, that Busch brings new material to this introduction. He shows how paying attention to the rich, larger-than-life biography, especially the pastoral and teaching work of Karl Barth, gives compelling interest to his theology.

The fourth chapter is an outline and commentary on some salient points in Karl Barth's theology. How could one summarize the ten thousand pages of the major theological work *Church Dogmatics*, which Barth began to write in Germany in 1932, was still composing when he retired in 1962, and never finished. Most other summaries are pedantic and dull. However, Busch offers an outline organized around themes that embody the moves and emphases of Barth's work in the nine sections, each of six to eight pages. His sections are lively and include little-known references and insights that come from his life-long study.

Chapter 4, like the previous ones, also begins with a telling quote that characterizes Barth's theology: "To think is to think after." Barth wanted to emphasize that theology may begin its work because the people in the church have spoken and speak of God. Sometimes they speak in a "terribly distorted and confused way." Theology's task is to help the church speak of God in a correct and appropriate way. Theology is possible and necessary because God has spoken and

speaks to humanity in Jesus Christ by the action of the Holy Spirit. The test and guidance for the proclamation of the Christian Community is Holy Scripture which contains the defining witness to God's speaking to humanity. Theology guides the thinking, action, and new speaking by the people of God for their witness today. Theology is "The Faith That Seeks Understanding" (Busch's Section 4.1 and 4.2).

Following this affirmation and exposition of the doctrine of God's revelation, Barth introduces the doctrine of the Trinity at the beginning of *Church Dogmatics* as the main theme to which he would return again and which Busch describes as "The Freedom of the Triune God" (4.2). Then he presents Barth's exegesis and exposition of "The Covenant of Grace Made with Israel and Fulfilled in Jesus Christ" (4.3), "The External Basis for the Covenant and the Internal Basis of Creation" (4.4), "The Content of the Covenant-Law and the Form of the Covenant Promise" (4.5), "The Exposure of Sin in Light of Its Overcoming" (4.6), "The Justification and Sanctification of the Sinner" (4.7), "The Gathering and Sending of the Church" (4.8), and "the Resurrection of Jesus and Our Hope" (4.9).

Two examples from Busch's account of Barth's affirmation and fresh interpretation of theological points illustrate the value of this little book. Justification, especially important for Lutheran and Reformed Protestantism, became a topic that attracted a wide Roman Catholic reading of Barth. The resurrection of Jesus from death on the cross in the New Testament challenged theological Liberalism and historical studies of the Bible.

In examining the sources of the Reformation emphasis on justification in the Bible and in the history of theology, Barth both affirms its Old and New Testament roots and its historical value for guiding the voice of the church today. Even though he aimed to help overcome Lutheran and Calvinistic differences, when asked what he had against the Lutheran focus on the doctrine, Barth answered,

What I have against it is that in I Corinthians 1:30 I read: "Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness, and sanctification and redemption." This is a bit more than the narrow pass into which Lutheran theology...entered during the sixteenth century when everything was reduced to the common denominator of this concept.... It was disastrous that one did not first receive this: "Jesus Christ..." and from there go on to Mark 2: "Your sins are forgiven." And then, set back on one's feet: "Take up your bed and go home!"

Barth emphasized what he read from Paul, summarized in 2 Corinthians 5:18-19: "All this [the new creation] is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us" (NRSV). Barth's binding of sanctification to justification is typical of Calvinism, but Barth also wanted to expand justification to include our vocation and ministry in service to the world.

Barth also rethought and reaffirmed the resurrection of Jesus from death on the cross. In his student days he was strongly influenced by his teachers who followed Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), the German Reformed theologian. Accepting critical historical method typically led them to deny the factuality of the resurrection or to conclude that the facts behind the New Testament writings

were inaccessible. This way of using historical research typically led them to deny the importance of the resurrection of Jesus for modern believers. Schleiermacher concluded that the New Testament presented a picture of Jesus that was sufficient to inspire us to the Christian faith in God, without making the resurrection essential to the church's teaching about Jesus Christ. His theology did not need the resurrection of Jesus. He thought that when modern Christians believe in the resurrection, it is because it is "written down" in Scripture, and their view of the Bible's authority requires it. To affirm the resurrection of Jesus grew out of a literalistic view of the Bible, not because it was theologically necessary for faith in Christ.

Barth grew suspicious of dispensing with the resurrection of Jesus. He did not respond by a simple argument that the New Testament reports of the resurrection were factual in a sense accessible to modern historical criticism. He rethought the biblical testimonies to the resurrection. The biblical witnesses to the resurrection present "an event in which God alone acts," writes Busch interpreting Barth. The resurrection happened. As in God's original act of creation and God's providential interaction in the world, its possibility precedes, and its actuality is not bound by the normal course or the usual understanding of ordinary historical physical events. Barth both challenged the use theologians put to historical method and affirmed the centrality of the Easter message as the indispensable foundation of Christian speech and action that are faithful to God.

The examples of Barth's re-thinking of justification by faith and the resurrection of Jesus are two of many points that Eberhard Busch's book invites us to think about. Richard and Martha Burnett have made a very readable translation. This little book is a welcome help for a reminder about or a first introduction to Karl Barth's theology.