
**KARL BARTH-RUDOLF BULTMANN
BRIEFWECHSEL 1922-1966**

Edited by Bernd Jaspert
Karl Barth Gesamtausgabe, 1
Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1971
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**KARL BARTH: HIS LIFE FROM LETTERS AND
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TEXTS**

By Eberhard Busch
Translated by John Bowden
Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976
Pp. xvii + 569 + 104 illustrations. \$19.95

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It may appear odd to bring together in a review article two works the appearances of which are separated by nearly six years and the foci of which overlap but slightly. Treating them together is not to be interpreted as an indication that each needs the other for its appropriate interpretation, though very often questions raised in the one are helpfully answered in the other; the fact, made so clear in the volume of letters, that Barth and Bultmann were, as friends, strangers to each other, is both illumined and explained in the biography, albeit only from Barth's perspective. What these two works do exceedingly well when read one after the other is to underscore the aptness of James D. Smart's characterization, a decade ago, of "the divided mind of modern theology"; taken together the two books help one learn the important but much resisted truth that Christian theology cannot but be pluralistic—by which I do *not* mean pluriform—and that it may indeed rejoice in that truth. The life and work of Barth, magnificently told by Busch, show, especially when they touch the work of other theologians, that "the purity of heart which is to will one thing" is an essential virtue for theologians but cannot and indeed should not signal monofornity (however broad its latitude) of theological expression and content. Conversely, the letters, meticulously edited and lavishly footnoted by Jaspert, demonstrate that single-minded devotion and attention to the same goal do indeed result in assertions (symbolizations?) so divergent that even though they are said to be about the same, single crucial issue, they cannot be regarded but as incompatible, i.e., pluralistic.

This review is focused intentionally on biographical exploration of the two works; first to be discussed is the correspondence between Barth and Bultmann.

I

In 1971 the Theologischer Verlag Zürich began a publishing venture which, while gladdening the hearts of all Barth scholars, is of value also in what it may contribute to the ongoing task of theology. The venture, the *Karl Barth Gesamtausgabe*, is intended, initially, to make available Barth's hitherto unpublished writings and, eventually, many of those works now no longer readily accessible. A first series of thirteen volumes is well underway, nine having appeared

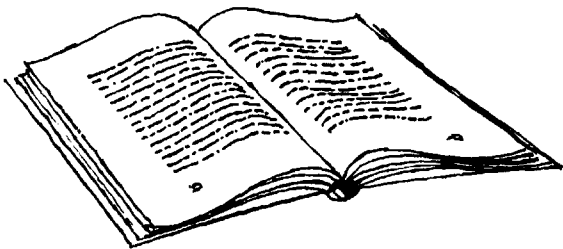
to date: four volumes of letters (Barth-Bultmann, Barth-Thurneysen, and letters by and to Barth from 1962 to 1968), two volumes of sermons (from 1913 and 1914), one volume on ethics, one volume of his exegesis of John, chapters 1 to 8, and one volume of the unedited material for *Dogmatics* 4/4. The Barth-Bultmann correspondence was the first volume to appear, and a good sendoff for the *Gesamtausgabe*.

The correspondence of the two men spans a period the beginning and end of which, 1922 to 1966, one may signal in terms of two fairly accurate slogans: "God after God" and "Death of God." The second edition of Barth's *Römerbrief*, appearing just seven months before the first item of this correspondence, ushered in the "God after God" theology; the last item of the correspondence coincides with the emergence of the "Death of God" theology. From "God after God" to "Death of God" and in between there appeared demythologization, the New Hermeneutic, the Third Reich, Auschwitz, and the continued collapse of Western civilization: it is a book not only of friendship and of theological probing, but also of a shared history.

There are ninety-eight cards and letters in the correspondence: thirty letters and thirty-three cards by Bultmann, twenty-five letters and ten cards by Barth. Eleven items by the latter were lost in transit from Bultmann to the editor. Jaspert has provided excellent biographical and literary notes and added a very valuable supplement of forty other related letters and cards by Barth, Bultmann, and others, as well as public declarations, memoranda, and autobiographical sketches. A fifty-page index facilitates the use of the book in research.

It is quite correct to state, as a reviewer did in *The Times Literary Supplement*, that these letters do not offer much which people well acquainted with Barth and Bultmann did not already know. Barth's assessment of the author of *Honest to God* as a man spooning the foamy head of three beer glasses labelled R.B., P.T., and D.B. respectively (Bultmann, Tillich, Bonhoeffer), mixing it together, and presenting this concoction as the finally discovered theological *eau de vie* (205f.) was known at least three or four years before the letter in which it is made became public. But there is a whole host of significant and not so significant items of information and interpretation which, because they are all available in one book, make it so valuable. There are, for example, the two autobiographical sketches by Barth and Bultmann. The former, composed in 1927 and expanded once in 1935 and again in 1946, makes a very fine prolegomenon to Barth's three *Christian Century* articles on "How my Mind Has Changed." The sketch by Bultmann was first published by Schubert Ogden, in his edition of Bultmann essays entitled *Existence and Faith*, expanded for Charles Kegley's *The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*, and expanded yet again in a hitherto unpublished sketch (included in this volume) about Bultmann's relation to Marburg. Or there are those many touches of the men's humanity: their humor, their sorrow, their failings. Bultmann, for example, informs Barth that the plans for a mutual holiday at a North German resort had to be cancelled because his wife threatened to go on strike. "I must not spend my holidays with you since this would take me away from my family; I would theologize the whole time and get no rest at all" (46).

Friends and strangers, or attempts to understand each other—this is a formula-like description of what pervades the whole correspondence. And whether “friends” describes more accurately how things stood between them at one time and “strangers” at another, the wish to understand each other manifests itself throughout the book. Precisely because Barthians and Bultmannians react to one another’s critiques of their respective masters with so much disdain, it is good to see the insistence of the two men on staying in contact, the personableness of that contact, and the need they both felt to meet again in order to have that *talk* which would identify and possibly heal the *theological* breach between them. No *rabies theologorum* here; would that the epigones were so minded!



Barth and Bultmann had met each other at Marburg in 1908-09 and again in 1919 at Tambach where Barth gave his now famous address “The Christian’s Place in Society.” From then on the contact was steady; of the ninety-eight published items in the correspondence ninety-one predate World War II. The war permitted no contact and the correspondence resumes in 1950, although the two had met twice personally between 1945 and 1950. Of note is a seven-year gap: in 1952 Barth published his *Rudolf Bultmann: Ein Versuch ihn zu verstehen* to which Bultmann replied at great length, which Barth acknowledged, also at great length; after that there is no correspondence until 1959. There is no doubt that very apparent theological differences had led to this lessening of contacts. And yet, no matter how sharp those differences were, the dialogue represented in this correspondence continued the obvious pattern of openness and fairness established at the outset. What produced this, on the whole, rare relationship? In spite of critical differences the two firmly believed themselves to be friends to the last, and although they were theological strangers even from the first, they clearly had genuine respect for each other. Why does Barth, assessing the way things are between them, ask, “Is it clear to you where you and I are? To me it is as if a whale and an elephant had met in utter bewilderment on some oceanic shore. In vain the one sends spouts of water high up into the air. In vain the other beckons, now amicably, then threateningly, with his trunk. They lack a common key to what both, each one from his proper element and in his own language, obviously and so anxiously want to say to the other” (196).

The relationship had really begun when Bultmann sent Barth a copy of his lengthy review of the 1922 *Römerbrief* before it was printed. In an accompanying letter he said that he had a number of reservations which he would prefer to discuss personally with Barth in order “if possible to reach understanding” (3). He was critical of Barth’s historical-philological exegesis and his lack of precision in the use of terminology. Barth responded to the review (in one of the

letters lost in 1969), and Bultmann incorporated some of the corrections suggested by Barth in the published version. For the next printing of the *Römerbrief* Barth wrote a new preface which is directed almost entirely to Bultmann’s review. He sent Bultmann a gift copy of that edition, and Bultmann responded with a long letter. He indicated that there was no really essential difference between their points of view regarding exegesis, although exegetical practice would show quite variant results.

There is a far more basic difference [he continued]. It has become more and more obvious to me that your relation to the science of history is not nearly as strong as your relation to idealistic philosophy. Just as Plato’s philosophy leads to the boundaries of the human, so does history for Wilhelm von Humboldt. And where historical criticism is exercised, not for the sake of establishing causal connections, but as a method of never-ending questioning in the service of self-reflection, it leads from hypothesis to hypothesis, finally up to the questions of the ultimate hypothesis. For me Hellenistic mysticism or Jewish legalism, etc., are not facts of historical interest by which one can then “explain” a certain Pauline statement . . . but manifestations of specific spiritual positions, the discovery of whose exertions in the sources draws the exegete into dialogue with them and lets them ask the decisive questions (9f.).

In retrospect it is clear that Barth and Bultmann had to part theological company on the issue of the aim of historical criticism. But in 1922 Barth could not yet see clearly why such a view caused him unease. As it was, this discussion brought them quite close theologically for a while, as Barth wrote in the preface of the 1963 reprinting of the first edition of the *Römerbrief*—close enough that Barth expressed interest in being called to Marburg (18). In early 1924 he wrote to Thurneysen that Marburg was a place on which one’s eyes could rest with satisfaction. Barth applauded Bultmann’s article “Die liberale Theologie und die jüngste theologische Bewegung” as a *Götterdämmerung* (27). One can judge Bultmann’s positive relation to Barth from the fact that, through Bultmann, Heidegger expressed a desire to have Barth come to Marburg (33).

Yet underneath there were the questions. When Bultmann was to give a public lecture at Göttingen, Barth urged that *in public* they should maintain a common front. He asked to know beforehand what Bultmann was going to say so that he would not be tripped into opposing him in the heat of the discussion after the lecture (38). What Bultmann wanted to say was that theological exegesis of scripture was an impossible possibility (35) which would, of course, reveal to the alert the differences between the two men. Barth requested that Bultmann not attend his classes on the theological exegesis of Colossians. After the visit Barth confided to Thurneysen that Bultmann had criticized his terminology; “I told him that his thinking was too anthropological-Kierkegaardian-Lutheran (plus Gogartian): ‘To speak of God is to speak of man,’ that his relation to scripture is outrageously eclectic and that he was not quite rid of his historicist eggshells” (letter of February 15, 1925). In the letter Barth confirmed Bultmann’s fears that he would not think very highly of Bultmann’s book *Jesus* (44).

By the end of 1926 there appeared signs of anxiety over the sensed but not firmly conceptualized differences between them. Bultmann wrote that “it is really important to

me that we finally come to a definite understanding of the disagreement between us which manifests itself in so many details" (63). Again in April 1927:

I am quite depressed by the lack of correspondence between us . . . Since you surround yourself in silence, I almost fear that you have given up on me. Even though I believe that in the closer theological relationship between Gogarten and myself vis-à-vis yourself the old Lutheran-Calvinist cleavage is operative, I do hope that that feud need not be revived because of it. Our oneness seems to me to be much greater and more decisive. I also hope that you do not think me unteachable . . . (68).

Barth replied quickly and with warmth.

Do not interpret my stubborn silence as wickedness. I know that you do not and am really grateful to you for that. You see, with me it is simply that at this time—which might last a little longer—I do not quite see through all that which seems indeed to be between you, Gogarten, and me . . . Somehow it must be those old Lutheran-Reformed controversies, never really settled, which make problems for us from both sides. But right now, quite apart from all tactical reasons which may also be very significant, I need to continue my work as thetically as possible and at the same time leave you and Gogarten time to develop more clearly what it is you actually wish to say . . . For the time being I do not wish to raise foolish questions and objections . . . [but wish instead] to pursue my course, even as you all do, too (70).

Barth continued by expressing his desire to meet with Bultmann face to face again.

After the publication of Barth's 1927 *Dogmatics*, Bultmann sent him a long list of questions and criticisms, expressions of critical gratitude, as Bultmann characterized them (80). He urged that the critical discussion of the work of Barth's friends, especially of Gogarten, be corrected.

What is more important is that you have rejected the (latent, but radical) discussion of theology with modern philosophy and have taken over naively the old ontology of patristic and scholastic dogmatics . . . You sovereignly ignore modern philosophical work and hence, above all, phenomenology . . . It seems to me that you are guided by the worry that theology might let itself be led into dependence on philosophy. You try to avoid that by ignoring philosophy, and the price you pay for that is that you in fact fall victim to a past philosophy. Since faith is the faith of a believer, that is to say of an existing human being . . . dogmatics can speak only in the concepts of existentialist ontology which—deriving from a preceding understanding of existence [*Daseinsverständnis*—are elaborated by philosophy (80f.).

He adds further on, "I am the one who receives from you, the pupil, albeit the critical one. More important than critique is to me the gratitude I owe you; my critique itself is guided by the conviction that I am *at one* with you in the matter which you defend in your dogmatics" (82).

Barth's response was most appreciative. "It was a festive moment yesterday when I unrolled your scroll with its notes. I was quite aware that for the first time I was about to read something against my dogmatics which I shall not be able to avoid considering very seriously" (83). And yet he sensed that what Bultmann demanded was no less than "a radical transformation of the spiritual *habitus* with which I approach my work . . . It is as if you wished to give a wild and misshapen tree (that is how I saw myself in the light of your critique) a more pleasing appearance by placing a straight pole next to it" (83). Barth had no genuine interest

any more in discussing theology with Gogarten (this in a letter to Bultmann of June 1928, i.e., well before the Nazi events).

What you ask of me regarding philosophy is simply not my concern. I shall not explain in principle what you call my ignoring of philosophy. It is possible that someone else can do better in regards to precision of conceptuality. You see, no philosophy has taken hold of me as Heidegger's obviously has of you so that I would be under the compulsion to measure and purify my thinking in light of your standards. Furthermore, I now quite abhor theology's game of doing things right according to the philosophy of its time but forgetting its own proper subject matter in the process . . . My course in the *Römerbrief* and now in the *Dogmatik* is this: in regard to the subject which I saw that the Bible and the history of dogma concern themselves with I made use of "concepts" which appeared most suitable to me without reflecting on the problem of a pre-established harmony between the subject and those *defined* concepts, just because I had my hands full with expressing something quite definite . . . my anxious question is whether I will be successfully domesticated or whether it is worthwhile for me for the rest of my life to purchase an unambiguous conceptuality from the phenomenologists . . . I admit that this looks like dreadful dilettantism . . . but my concern is to hear the voice of church and Bible under all circumstances and to let it be heard, even if, lacking something better, I have to be Aristotelian for a while. . . I do concede that it would be good for me to understand the art which I, with admiration, watch you practice . . . but it could be that your critique has its value in pointing out those limits across which I cannot proceed (84f.).

Bultmann was pleased with Barth's positive response but could not help wishing that Barth had as great a desire as he for a critical dialogue and understanding (88).

In early 1930 it became apparent that the divergences between the two men were fundamental and in fact well nigh insurmountable. After a guest lecture in Marburg on January 20, and several good talks with Bultmann, Barth wrote that he had left Marburg quite grieved.

From my point of view the meaning . . . of your endeavors looks like a grandiose return to the fleshpots of Egypt. What I mean is that you are all busy understanding faith once again as a human possibility or, if you like, as founded on a human possibility, and thereby you deliver theology into the hands of philosophy anew. Of course you do so in a new and very different way from the theology of the nineteenth century . . . Wherever one plays with the possibility of a natural theology and is assiduous in theologizing within the framework of a non-theologically gained pre-understanding, one ends up inevitably in such contortions and reactionary corners, which are no better than the liberalism of the others . . . How I wished personally to be able to see things differently and to know myself more at one with you (101f.).

Barth was deeply involved in his study of nineteenth-century theology at that time and it appeared to him that what had been labeled dialectical theology was in danger of bringing back exactly those things it had believed itself to be opposing. "It could be that what I understand by 'the Word of God' was never a concern for you in this way," Barth continued (102). Bultmann was not able to answer at length but urged Barth to agree to a meeting at which—at Brunner's and Gogarten's suggestion—the four, plus Thurneysen, could talk things over and see where they all stood. Barth agreed gladly, but, regrettably, the meeting did not take place. A year later, in May 1931, Barth wrote that such a meeting, now that he was much clearer about the

others' essential positions, would have uncovered the painful truth that they were very far apart and that, basically, there had never been a real oneness. Between himself and Gogarten as well as between himself and Brunner, he added, something decisive had gone awry, which it would be very difficult to discuss (118).

All this puzzled Bultmann; he asked why Barth was so suspicious. "Don't you think that I honestly want to learn at last what you have against my work—where the point is at which our disagreement arises and where I have possibly gone wrong—how you substantiate the charges in your letter" (123)? He urged Barth to state publicly where he thought Bultmann betrayed theology. This did not occur until twenty-one years later; indeed, Barth in reply suggested that both should continue in their own work, have some good personal discussions in the meantime, and in this way learn to understand what the other really wanted (129). But Bultmann took this to be an indication of Barth's faint interest in exploring his work. He felt that there was really no basic difference between them. Then came 1933 and all that. The letters now rarely touch on theological issues. Issues of the state in relation to Barth and the Confessing Church predominate. But at one point Bultmann tells Barth that he had been hurt to learn that Barth expected him to join the German Christians. It is a sign of how much you misunderstand me, he wrote (151). Barth conceded that and apologized but asked Bultmann to explain to him how such a step would not have been consistent with his fundamental position (153).

Before Barth had to leave Germany there was one more occasion when the growing theological divergence showed itself. Bultmann sent Barth two sermons, asking that they be considered for inclusion in the series *Theologische Existenz heute*, which Barth edited. In the accompanying letter he stated his impressions of Barth's sermons.

You interrogate a text according to a dogmatic formula so that it cannot speak with its own voice. After a few sentences one knows everything else you are going to say and occasionally wonders how one is going to get that out of the next verses . . . You will sense heresy in my faith and understanding. But I think that Paul addressed himself differently to the existence of his hearers than do you . . . namely, in such a way that their existence became transparent to them under the impact of his words (163).

Barth sent the sermons back with the critique that Christ was not made known in them but instead the believing person was explicated. Barth then identified what stood between them, namely, the difference in the relation between christology and anthropology (165).

The items of correspondence of the postwar period consist of five short and two very lengthy communications. The latter have to do with Barth's *Rudolf Bultmann: Ein Versuch ihn zu verstehen*. For the discussion of the relationship between the theologies of these men it is essential that the two lengthy letters be read alongside Barth's *Versuch* and his other public discussions of Bultmann's work, e.g., in *Church Dogmatics* 4/1, for to do so will not only show that many existing attempts to understand the *Versuch* are short circuits, but it will also prevent whatever Barthniks and Bultmaniacs still exist from prematurely adopting inflexible stances toward one another and the others' masters. In addition, the two letters—but also those in the entire corre-

spondence—place the *Versuch* into the context of three decades of fermentation and thereby illumine the person writing it, the person and thought to which it is addressed, and the actual remarks made about them. Reassessment of the *Versuch* is an urgent task but one lying, unfortunately, outside the scope of this review.

The attempts of the two men to understand each other remained there—unresolved. What their public utterances would not readily show becomes blatantly apparent in this *Briefwechsel*: neither was ever really sure he knew precisely what the other really meant. But why did neither make a determined effort to get to the root of these theological differences? How could friends—and both clearly believed that that is what they were—live out their friendship with that cloud always hanging over them? Could it be that in the one issue to which their minds and major efforts were devoted, the proclamation of Christ, the friends had consciously or unconsciously discerned that oneness really means the harmonious coexistence of the plurality of our mythologies?



2

That this book provokes such a question is not the least of its merits. It is also a good guide to that long and formative period of the history of theology in the twentieth century, for which Barth and Bultmann set the tone. Their questions and answers to each other illumine, like flashes of lightning, many of the unresolved issues facing post-Barth-Bultmann theology and above all guide the steps of those who, as theologians with a sense of responsibility toward their world and a purity of heart like that of these two men, want to see what they saw, witness to it as they did, and also go beyond them, following their lead or striking out afresh. The correspondence makes one wish for more glimpses behind the often-times so polished and seemingly secure theological positions the two presented publicly; above all, it allows us to see theologians who were not all that sure of their own positions or of those of the other.

It is tempting to treat Eberhard Busch's work from such a perspective and to present it here as showing a Barth much mellowed than the reading of his *magnum opus* would suggest. The biography does that, *inter alia*. But to follow that path would do to it what Bultmann thought Barth did to the texts he preached on, namely, forbid them to speak with their own voices. It would have the advantage, however, of providing a single focal point around which to cluster the incredible wealth of biographical material Busch has assembled—but it is an advantage resolutely to be rejected.

Some external facts about the book. It comes graced (on the dustjacket) with laudatory comments from quarters as diverse as Wilhelm Pauck and John Godsey: "marvelously detailed account . . . a fresh description of the dramatic development of his theological thought," says the former, "this will remain the standard work on Barth's life and thought," the latter. From Germany comes an assessment by Eberhard Jüngel in an open letter to Busch printed in an advertise-

ment by the German publisher: "one more word about your skill in letting Barth speak so extensively. In my judgment you have successfully created a new literary genus. Your selection of texts is so balanced that from now on no one will ever be able to be fooled by fabricated images of Barth."

Like Eberhard Bethge, in his preparation of his great Bonhoeffer biography, Busch in writing this volume had access to all the primary data: every one of Barth's writings, all of his notes and drafts, his entire files of correspondence and, as he graciously points out in the preface to the German edition, the unstinting help of the whole Barth family, as well as of Eduard Thurneysen and Hinrich Stoevesandt, the curator of the Barth archives before Busch himself took that position. The 104 illustrations not only permit the reader to picture Barth in almost all the situations the book describes him in but also show many of the numerous friends he had. It is literally staggering to imagine the reading and note-taking Busch did in preparation of this book: there are 2,116 references in the book to letters, autobiographical texts, transcripts of conversations, lectures, books, seminar minutes, and sermons. The index at the end of the book alone covers twenty-five pages. In addition, the translator, John Bowden, whose work here is truly magnificent, has added Barth's family tree, maps of Basel, Berne, the Aargau in Switzerland, and Germany, and a chronological list of Barth's major works, showing also what has been translated into English.

It was Busch's intention not to paint a portrait of Karl Barth, as Casalis had done, but to provide a map to a life the geographical parameter of which was quite small when compared with the intellectual one: from Basel to Basel. Those eighty-two years from 1886 to 1968 are divided into nine sections: childhood, eighteen years; theological study, seven years; "Comrade Pastor" at Safenwil, ten years; "between the times" at Göttingen and Münster, nine years; Bonn and the Nazi era, five years; a voice from Switzerland and the fight against Hitler, eleven years; "Between East and West," the years of the hot Cold War, nine years; the final years as professor, seven years; the period of retirement, six years. One cannot but notice already in the table of contents that Busch gently but firmly repudiates the erroneous orientation which sees Barth's life structured by his theological development. Instead the map is laid out according to those real issues which demanded from Barth the *engagement* relevant both to Christian faith and worldly reality. One can speak of an early and a late Barth, only to face the difficult and always arbitrary decision of where the one ends and the other begins. Busch makes quite clear, for example, that to see Barth's Anselm book as the turning point is a caesarian section and no more. Instead there is abundant support for the comment of Barth's Catholic compatriot Hans Urs von Balthasar that in a hidden but very dynamic way Barth's latest thinking is also his earliest. So one comes to see not the course of a theologian's life—T. H. L. Parker chose to go that road in his Barth biography of 1970—but the theological existence of a man who, trying to be a partisan of the God of Jesus of Nazareth, had both eyes on the world in which he lived. Michael Novak asserted during the Barth Colloquium at Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1970 that the world in which Barth apparently lived was lined with books. Busch helps us

see what Novak evidently did not see, that Barth's world was one in which the Swiss government bugged his telephone (319), American intelligence had him under scrutiny (382), the chief of the Soviet delegation to the Society of European Culture meeting in Venice, where Barth sat next to Sartre, called him a revolutionary (412), and Barth refused to participate in the five-hundredth anniversary of Basel University because it refused to invite representatives of universities from behind the Iron Curtain while inviting representatives of *all* (sic) Western universities (442).

Theological existence is for Barth *ipso facto* political existence. Helmut Gollwitzer once said that whoever does not understand every sentence of the *Church Dogmatics* politically does not understand it; a hyperbole, no doubt, but most appropriate. Already as a nineteen-year-old, addressing, of all people, the members of his fraternity at the University of Berne, Barth linked Jesus and human social responsibility toward the lower strata of society (37). And in Safenwil it was among the Social Democrat Workers' movement that Barth heard the best things said about the kingdom of God and the struggle for it (76). Hence his interest in finding out what the Bible could possibly have to do with Christianity and its historic forms (98). It was from this time onward that Barth, often a rather solitary figure (193), felt compelled to oppose and attack Christendom, while in no way claiming that he knew exactly how to specify real Christianity. Citing Isaiah 21:12, "Morning comes, and also the night" (NEB), he said, "I saw and lived . . . between the times" (198). He felt unprepared: the entire thirteen-volume *Dogmatics* is one attempt after another to focus on that "bird in flight," as he once characterized Christianity. Of course the very magnitude of that work made him wonder "whether he was building Solomon's temple or the tower of Babel" (374), but when he decided to cease from his labors on that work on Easter 1967, a task on which he had spent four decades, he knew it was an *opus imperfectum* (486), unfinished in both senses: it was not completed and it had not accomplished its aim perfectly. "Perfection is the epitome of the divine attributes, so that it is better not to seek or to imitate it in a human work" (486f.).

At no time, however, did his alertness to politics and the dangers of a political stance detrimental to an existence faithful to Christ fade on account of that inability to state explicitly what Christianity really is. His stance toward Hitlerism is well documented elsewhere and his attitude and consequent behavior in relation to Communism have been given notoriety, especially by those who disagreed with him. Again Busch is helpful in at least throwing more, yes, new light on this matter. Barth's essay *Das erste Gebot als theologisches Axiom*, a relatively neglected piece but crucial to an understanding of Barth's methodology, was written when Hitler seized power in Germany. The connection between it and the first thesis of the Barmen Declaration is obvious. Precisely that same iconoclasm reemerges when Barth speaks to and about Communists. In the summer of 1946 he visited Berlin. He met with the heads of what would later become the German Democratic Republic.

I was taken into a room and there I found Pieck, Grotewohl, and even Ulbricht with his little beard . . . and other great figures sitting at a long table. I sat opposite them in solitary state . . . It reminded me so much of Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper" . . . I shall

never forget [something] that Pieck said to me on that occasion. . . . "Herr Professor, what we need in Germany is the Ten Commandments." I replied, "Yes, Herr President, especially the first!" (340).

Again and again he urges friends behind the Iron Curtain, men such as Hamel of East Germany, Hromádka of Czechoslovakia, and Bishop Ravasz of Hungary not to go "too far in the direction of compromise with the new order" (355). And finally what untiring effort Barth put into the fight against the remilitarization of West Germany and the spread of nuclear arms. His "Eleven Points of Criticism of the Allied Military Régimes," sent to the commanders of the four occupying powers, are a complaint that "as a result of the mode of government and administration practiced in Germany by the Allies" the German people "were still not being given any practical instruction in what they had never yet seen or known in their history: in a democratic way of thinking, pattern of life and politics (based on humanity, freedom, justice and so on)" (341). As far as Barth was concerned personally, political vigilance and resolute participation in public affairs were necessitated by "concern for an orderly theology" as well as "guided by it" (303).

Busch consistently refrains from the urge to develop his own assessment in this biography. He is more an annalist, who chronicles one step at a time, instead of drawing sweeping lines. But even as we observe Barth's trips and lecture tours, meet his friends and hear of those whom he opposed, we also participate in half a century of history of continental theology. We see the world as it appeared to Barth—and we see him as, with pugnacity, intense anger, but also with humor, he relates to that world. Yes, he was a highly engaged "Partisan of the Good God," as Busch entitles the eighth chapter.

We see moments when Barth feels discouraged, saddened by friends and students who go in directions he had to oppose. We are made aware, without having it dwelt upon at length, that Barth's marriage was for years very strained: "Over the last months [1966-1967] they had come together again, and after all that had happened they were granted some time in which they could deepen their relationship in more tranquil circumstances" (486). We read that the *Nein!* to Emil Brunner in 1934 was not meant to be a separation from him. "If he is still alive and it is possible, tell him again, 'Commended to our God,' even by me. And tell him, Yes, that the time I thought I had to say 'No' to him is now long past, since we all live only by virtue of the fact that the great and merciful God says his gracious Yes to all of us." We are told that "These words were the last that Brunner heard in his life" (476f.).

Of the numerous vignettes recounted in the book I will content myself with repeating only one. Barth enjoyed going to the movies, and he enjoyed especially "the films of the 'immortal Marlene Dietrich . . . (I don't know where she will have a mention in the *Dogmatics*—perhaps in eschatology, because she is such a borderline case?)" (312). She did not make it, by the way.¹

Before the appearance of this volume, at least four other, shorter biographies had been published in English, French, or German, and the works interpreting Barth's thought are legion. It is neither excessive praise of this book nor unfair devaluation of that other biographical and interpretive literature to state that henceforth Barth study of

any kind that ignores this book is retrograde. The intent of this assessment, again, is not to negate the importance, seriousness, and validity of what has been written about Barth so far; not at all! But because the theological guild is now far more prepared to see the links between theology and biography and because there is in this book such a wealth of accurately drawn details giving contours and continuity of the valleys and mountains of this life, Barth study is unthinkable, both in method and content, apart from Busch's work. Now the broad scope of Barth's life and thought, its multileveled range and intensity, is there for us to see and, above all, to juxtapose to his major theological writings. Busch's work better equips us to pursue what Barth himself envisaged as the desideratum of theologizing:

We are not here to agree with one another and to pass compliments. If there are "Barthians," I myself am not among them. We are here to learn from one another, and to make the best of the literary works we present to one another. After that we go our way—not into a theological "school" but into the church—and we go it alone. Precisely because of that we must understand one another (375f.).

The exciting prospect opened up to readers of this book is that it may move them to ask whether the human being who emerges in these pages, with his peculiarities, strengths, and failings, but especially with his affirmation of the penultimacy of all existence and all human works and words is not, after all, greater than the author of those works which once shaped the theological climate, one which current theology has already begun to ignore. Busch's work is exactly the tool needed for a theological age calling itself post-Barthian to engage Barth and his thought, so it may become genuinely an age that has taken him seriously and then, but only then, goes on beyond him.

NOTE

¹ It is interesting to note also that only once is it recorded that Barth took pleasure in one of the many christenings honoring his name, when in 1936 a mountain in New Zealand was named after him in honor of his fiftieth birthday (277).

