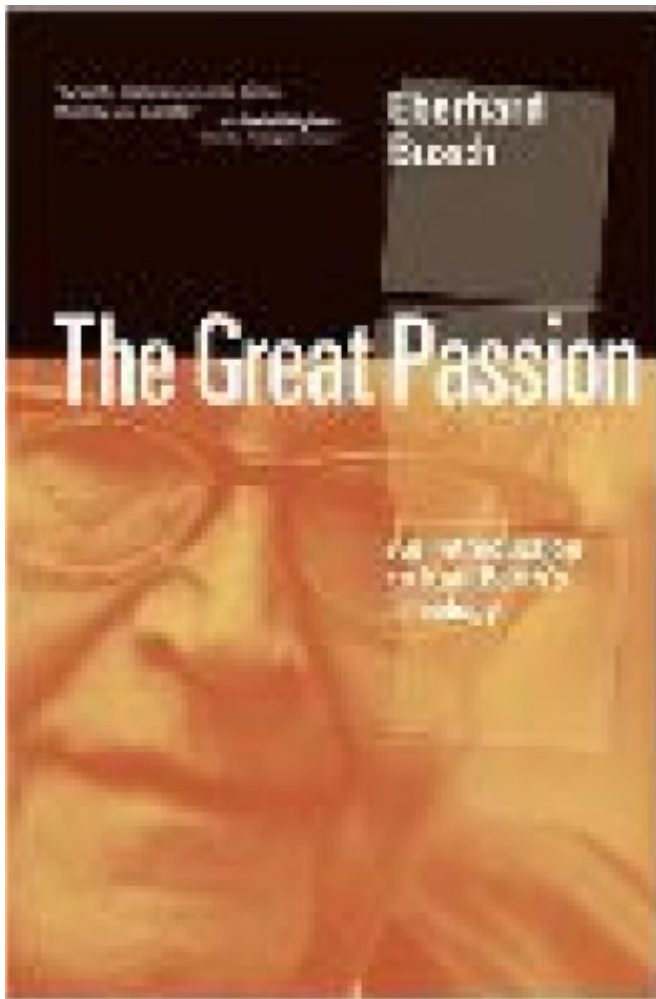


The Great Passion/ Reading Karl Barth/Karl Barth: Theologian of Christian Witness

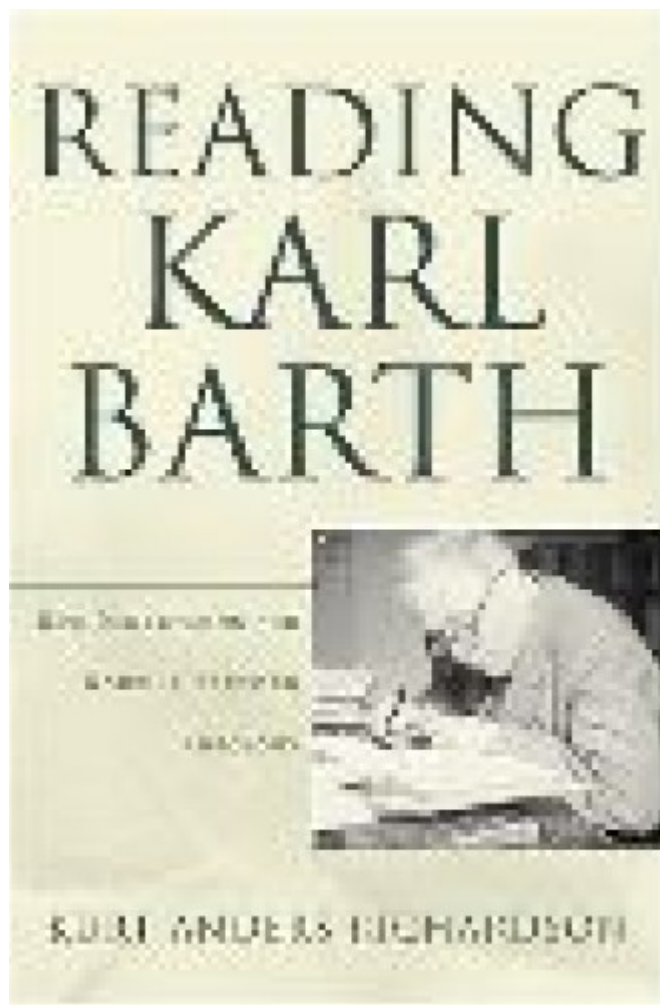
reviewed by [Jonathan Tran](#) in the [November 29, 2005](#) issue

In Review



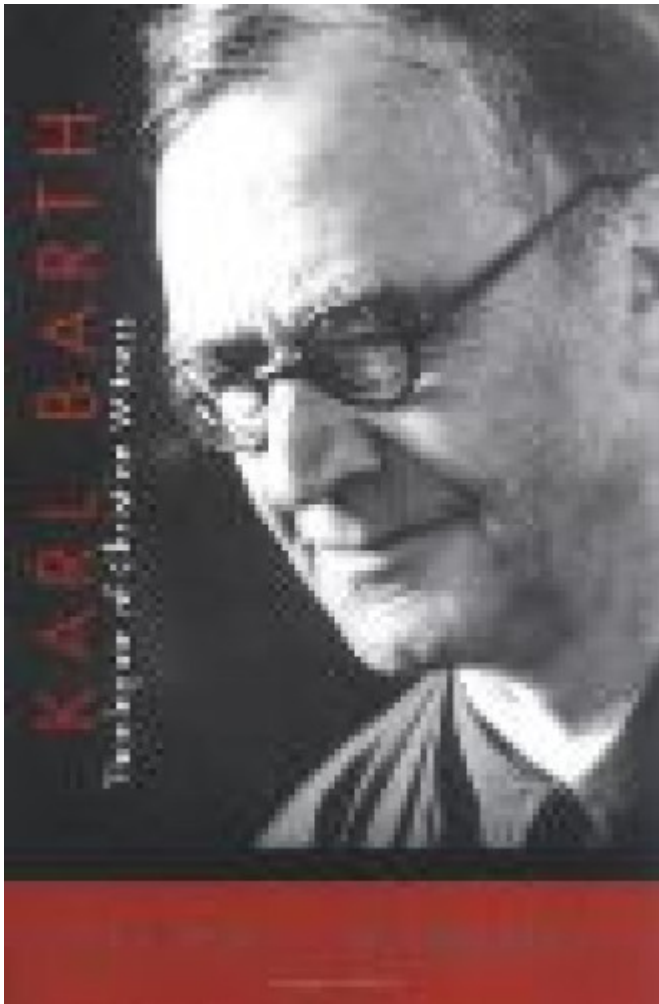
The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth's Theology

Eberhard Busch
Eerdmans



Reading Karl Barth: New Directions for North American Theology

Kurt Anders Richardson
Baker



Karl Barth: Theologian of Christian Witness

Joseph L. Mangina
Ashgate

Nearly 50 years after Karl Barth uttered the words “He will reign” and breathed his last, his work has returned to the center of theological discourse. Three recent introductions portray his theology as an event that jarred the world awake by announcing “God!” elegantly, powerfully and persuasively in a time when “man” had become the biggest show in town.

Eberhard Busch set the standard for telling the story of Barth in his biography *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, and now he sets a new standard for outlining the story that Karl Barth told. According to Busch, Barth’s theology witnesses to the humanity of God in Christ, a story that both challenges anthropocentric theology and champions God’s anthropocentrism.

A misreading of Barth's theology as primarily a disavowal of his liberal contemporaries misses the forest for the trees. Barth's central argument extols the witness of scripture to the God who acts for us. Barth's contempt for liberalism should be understood as secondary to his account of the story of God, who from eternity remains relentlessly anthropocentric in Jesus Christ. Barth did not see the problems of his age and then construct a positive theology in response to them; rather, the biblical witness was his starting point. In Busch's account of Barth's theology we uncover nothing less than the tragic drama of the Christian West.

Busch worked for years as Barth's assistant, and only someone so familiar with the theologian could offer the rare combination of exquisite scholarship and a voice that so closely matches Barth's. Whereas most Barthians fail in their attempts to reiterate Barth (Yale theologian Hans Frei characterized these efforts as "painfully boring"), Busch exemplifies, explains and extends Barth's "great passion."

Busch subtly but forcefully responds to the major readings and critiques of Barth while presenting Barth's work as theologically vital for contemporary Christian concerns. His restatement of Barth's odium for Christendom is a stinging critique of modern church-growth strategies. Simply put, there may be no better book on Barth.

In *Reading Karl Barth*, Kurt Anders Richardson, who teaches theology at McMaster University in Canada, does his most productive work in articulating how Barth invigorates orthodox christological formulas in order to construe human existence in terms of pilgrimage. Richardson highlights those moments in *Church Dogmatics* where Barth's Christology grounds human knowledge of God in God's action. God in Christ thus becomes both the content of human knowledge and the condition of possibility for such knowledge.

In Barth's day, it had become a given that in order for theology to go forward, it first had to legitimate its claims in something more substantial than the biblical witness. Barth, however, came to realize that such presumptions were atheistic: they assumed that there is a greater truth than the God witnessed in scripture.

Richardson goes to great lengths, sometimes circuitously, to guard against readings of Barth that make him too Roman Catholic, postmodern or socially liberal. The problem of such a project is that it betrays the very pilgrim theology Richardson so beautifully envisions. Making Barth safe for evangelicals domesticates Barth while insulating North American evangelicalism from the always-reforming potency that

makes Protestantism a gift to the church.

Joseph Mangina's *Karl Barth: Theologian of Christian Witness* is best for readers engaging Barth for the first time, if for no other reason than that its stated goal is "to wean the student from the secondary literature as quickly as possible, and to move her along toward an actual engagement with Barth." The central five chapters focus on five core themes of the *Dogmatics*, and each concludes with a discussion by an interlocutor—Stanley Hauerwas, for example, for the chapter on creation.

Mangina orients the reader to the rich theological, philosophical and political world from which Barth emerged and to which he wrote and locates Barth's influence within contemporary theology. Like Busch and Richardson a teacher of theology, Mangina tells the same grand story of God's eternal reconciling act for humanity, but less elegantly than Busch and less contentiously than Richardson. Like the other two he offers superb discussions of the major themes of the *Dogmatics*. His summaries are straightforward and provocative, clear but not overly simple. One could not ask for a better text to introduce theology students to Barth's work, and even for the well-versed Barth reader, Mangina's presentation is fresh, astute and appealing.