

# Reviews



**ON BEING A DISCIPLE OF THE CRUCIFIED NAZARENE**, by Ernst Käsemann. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010. Pp. 337. \$30.00 (paper).

Imagine that Ernst Käsemann, progenitor of the New Quest for the Historical Jesus, champion of demythologization, and formidable German New Testament scholar, throws this gauntlet at your feet: “Whoever listens to the Bible leaves familiar territory and should be prepared for something like a Pentecost event” (53). “Put very pointedly, whoever has not stumbled over God’s word and does not do so again and again will never learn to proceed in true Christian fashion” (310). “Very often one reads only what one already believes, and the great poverty of Christianity stems not least from the fact that it always or mostly finds in the Bible what it already knew, thus actually intends self-confirmation” (103–104). “It cannot be denied that the number of those who live with and out from this book has shrunk mightily” (169). “The most scandalous thesis: that none of us should give up on the Bible, that we cannot do without it if we would hear the voice of the true God” (173).

When Käsemann’s gauntlet hits the ground, will you pick it up? Will you accept the challenge?

This book is your opportunity to be a roadie on an Ernst K speaking tour, with Roy A. Harrisville as your companion and translator. Because it is a collection of essays, lectures, and sermons, all delivered over a period of years, you get to hear various riffs and emphases repeated numerous times. This never feels redundant. It is, instead, training in thinking like Käsemann—certainly a worthy undertaking.

Even if one has not read (or maybe especially if one has not read) his more exhaustive and influential works—such as his *Commentary on Romans*, *The Wandering People of God*, *Perspectives on Paul*, *Jesus Means Freedom: A Polemical Survey of the New Testament*, or *New Testament Questions Today*—this collection of twenty-eight previously unpublished lectures, sermons, and one radio address given over South German radio (when was the last time you heard a full theology lecture given over the radio?) can and should serve as introduction to his thought. It illustrates how his New Quest and demythologization was always in the service of his primary vocation—teacher of the church.

However, this book is not important simply because it introduces Käsemann to a wider reading public, or because it throws down the gauntlet for how challenging the Bible is. This book is important because it gives courage for steadfast discipleship of the one Käsemann calls “the crucified Nazarene.” He is concerned that “almost always the churches have worried more about their members’ peace of soul and tended edification from the cradle to the grave than given courage for resolute discipleship in everyday life” (30).

What precisely does it mean to be a disciple of the crucified Nazarene? A definition is offered: “True surrender of the disciple is unbound, not a private affair, tends toward aid to the world, extends freedom everywhere” (128). This is the outward manifestation, but this definition of discipleship can only be understood in the context of discipleship as spiritual warfare, an essentially apocalyptic approach to understanding biblical interpretation and the Christian life.

For example, in his fascinating retrospec-

tive (a brief memoir that opens this volume), Käsemann concludes, “As a last word and as my bequest, let me call to you in Huguenot style: ‘Résistez!’ Discipleship of the Crucified leads necessarily to resistance to idolatry on every front. This resistance is and must be the most important mark of Christian freedom” (xxi). So discipleship is always resistance to idolatry, and this is precisely because the spiritual life always has something as its lord, always ridden, either by Jesus or the lords of this world. “There is no neutral zone between gospel and idol worship. Whoever is not for the one lives for the other” (87). “What is assumed is an anthropology that defines one at any given time by one’s lord” (131).

Readers unfamiliar with Käsemann but somewhat familiar with the project of demythologization will be fascinated by his sustained attention to demythologization as not simply something that is done in relation to the Bible, but to all contexts needing to be demythologized—especially, he makes a point of

noting, Enlightenment readings of Scripture. In fact, almost all exegetes and preachers would benefit from memorizing his definition of demythologization: “In the evangelical sense demythologizing occurs as a battle and resistance against superstition. And superstition, at least according to Luther’s explanation of the first commandment, is everything that does not allow us most deeply and without compromise to fear, love and trust God ‘above all things.’ Thus demythologizing, evangelically conceived and rooted, denotes ridding humanity and the earth of the demonic” (200). Demythologization does not claim that demons don’t exist—rather, it does battle with the demons.

What are some examples? In the first essay in the volume, Käsemann has been asked to talk about the danger and meaning of anxiety. Specifically, he has been asked to talk about the relationship between apocalyptic and anxiety, and proceeds to do so by demythologizing both. In the end, he shows how true Christian



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apocalyptic does not cause anxiety, but is the antidote for it, whereas worldly anxiety misinterprets the apocalyptic and fails to see how it is the carrier of evangelical freedom and truth.

Second, a major focus of Käsemann throughout his essays is a call to the “white race” to acknowledge its complicity in the sufferings of the world. This leitmotif can be found in almost every essay. He pushes the topic of race to such a degree because he firmly believes that the church of Jesus Christ should be “a resistance movement of the exalted Lord against all who make God’s creation a prison for anyone, near or far, a playground for their selfishness, vanity, and lust for rule” (277).

For those interested in making use of this book in a study group, consider focusing on two pairs of essays, discussing the essays over two sessions. In session one, read “Evangelical Truth and Radical Change in Christian Theology” together with “What is Due in the Church?” These two essays will give a sense of the book as a whole. Second, compare “The Righteousness of God in Paul” and “Divine and Civic Righteousness.” These two essays sound a *basso profundo* in Käsemann’s thought, and approach righteousness each from opposite sides, divine and human, in a fruitful fashion.

Clint Schnekloth  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Fayetteville, Arkansas

**PATHS NOT TAKEN: FATES OF THEOLOGY FROM LUTHER THROUGH LEIBNIZ**, by Paul Hinlicky. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009. Pp. xiv + 385. \$50.00 (paper).

There are certain things in life that we don’t think much about, but that have a dramatic impact on our life. Think, for example, of computer code or theoretical nuclear physics, both highly theoretical subjects that the average person thinks of rarely, and cares for even less.

Yet these things often stand behind the modern marvels that are essential to our lives, and without the technology these theoretical disciplines make possible, our modern world would collapse. Seen in this light, theoretical disciplines that are usually dismissed as the realm of “eggheads” and “geeks,” are in fact foundational to our very existence.

In the realm of religious thought the similar theoretical discipline that is foundational for our theological language and thought is “philosophical theology.” This sector of theology examines basic questions of what we can know of the world, ourselves, and God. This discourse is often so far removed from our everyday thought that we often do not consider how these basic questions (and their common solutions) deeply affect the ways that we do theology. Yet several of the basic philosophical decisions that have been made since the time of the Protestant Reformation have dramatically influenced the course of modern theology.

And not for the good, says Paul Hinlicky, Tise Professor of Lutheran Studies, Roanoke College, Salem, Virginia. Hinlicky surveys what he calls “the dubious state of theology today” (3) and sees that modern theology has collapsed into incoherence and irrelevance, being unable in any meaningful way to speak about either God or humanity. This state of affairs, he believes, came about due to pivotal philosophical decisions made in the late eighteenth century, above all in the thought of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), which have affected most Western theology since his time. Critical of the Western traditions of metaphysical theology that had come down to his day, Kant seriously undercut any attempt to logically prove and describe God through the ideas of the natural world; instead, for Kant, theology could only properly be based on the internal, subjective human sense of faith and ethical duty. It is this crucial turn, Hinlicky believes, that leads to the shallowness and futility of modern Western theology.

Hinlicky’s project is to survey the recon-

structive potentialities of the “paths not taken,” namely, the possibilities for Western metaphysics that had been derailed by Kantian skepticism, and that, he believes, might alternatively provide a better foundation for modern theology. These paths, interestingly enough, lead him to a reconsideration of the philosophical theology of the German Idealist thinker Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716). Leibniz seems a strange choice, for he has long been out of favor among Western thinkers, many of whom follow Voltaire’s scathing satire of Leibniz in his play “Candide,” and see him as a figure whose whole philosophical world was demolished by Kant. Yet Hinlicky argues for a rehabilitation of Leibniz; perhaps not so much for Leibniz’s own specific theological proposals (which Hinlicky finds ultimately unsuccessful) but for the possibilities inherent in his approach to theology, which just may provide a way for postmodern Christian thinkers out of the theological dead end into which a reliance on Kantian skepticism has forced them.

For Hinlicky, the most important elements of Leibniz’s philosophical theology are its metaphysics, its understanding of “natural theology,” its general approaches to the problem of evil, and the way in which Leibniz reconciles the simultaneous existence of both human and divine freedom in the world. He sees that “Leibniz’s is a path that *may* be taken up again by Christian thought in leading us to see ourselves (in Christ!) as embedded in nature under God rather than superior to nature in place of God” (11). For Hinlicky the best possibilities for the fruits of this theological approach come through the theology of Karl Barth (1886–1968), and much of the book is cast in a sometimes dizzying series of “conversations” between the thought of Barth, Leibniz, Melancthon, Luther, and Thomas Aquinas, among others. Not granting that Barth, or anyone else, has finally overcome the dilemmas posed by the Enlightenment metaphysical skeptics such as Spinoza and Kant, Hinlicky does believe, however, that there is a

promising line for the reconstruction of Christian metaphysics, and he does see that the work of some of the modern Trinitarian theologians (such as Jüngel, Pannenberg, Jenson, and others) might benefit from being undergirded by this revived tradition of thought.

This is not an easy book to read, and many readers (including this seminary professor) will need to read it with a good theological dictionary at close hand. Yet Hinlicky’s project is both thoughtful and ambitious and, as an examination and critique of the key theological and philosophical assumptions of modern theology, is extremely stimulating. How ironic it might be, if that dusty old German metaphysician Leibniz were, after all, the key to a fundamental examination of the assumptions of modern theology!

Mark Granquist  
Luther Seminary  
Saint Paul, Minnesota

**UNDONE BY EASTER: KEEPING  
PREACHING FRESH**, by William H.  
Willimon. Nashville: Abingdon, 2009. Pp.  
116. \$14.00 (paper).

William Willimon addresses the lurking question that invades the mind of every preacher at at least one point in their ministry: “How can the gospel be preached over and over again without getting old?” Or to put it more vividly: “How [do you] preach a fourth Easter when you have already told the parishioners all that you know in the last three?” (xi). The answer he provides to this seemingly complex dilemma is simple—it is the resurrected Jesus Christ as the *actual* proclaimed Word who works within the congregation to refresh and to renew. Therefore, the call to preach has a whole lot more to do with faithfully telling the old story than with being the funniest, most cutting-edge speaker. The often forgotten truth that Willimon calls preachers to remember is that the old story of Christ who died on

the cross and rose from the dead is still the earth-shattering news that people long to hear.

In dialoguing with Barth, Kierkegaard, and other key theologians and philosophers, Willimon offers a penetrating insight regarding the modern world's concept of time as opposed to God's. He points out that time, for human beings, is a linear concept in which the only thing that is "real" is the present moment, and both the past and the future are either a memory or a figment of our imagination. Enslaved by the boundaries of time, we compulsively strive to control our lives toward what is manageable for us. One expression of such aberration is what Willimon refers to as "Powerpoint Preaching"—the kind of preaching limited to the "immediate, practical impact and instant quantifiable results" (17). However, if such fragile and confined existence is ours, God is wholly Other—the One who is beyond time and thus cannot be contained by the prison of time; the One who moves freely and actively and thus cannot be predicted by a few general principles that we have formulated.

Willimon suggests that there are two key implications of this truth. The first is that preachers must reconsider time in light of resurrection. On Easter, God stepped into time through Jesus Christ to set us free from the tyranny of our finite, bounded existence. And yet, if we truly confess that God is the God of Easter, then, he argues, we must also realize that the Lord of new creation and new beginning has the power to surprise us still. Secondly, preachers must have renewed trust and expectation for the Holy Spirit. This means that even if the contemporary culture labels the faithful repetition of the same story as "boring" and "stale," we must recognize that it is the Holy Spirit who makes the sermon and hence empowers fallen beings to know God. Willimon calls preachers to be reminded of the fact that "because of resurrection, and the activity of the Holy Spirit, we have more time left with God in the future than in the past" (31).

Willimon's work is a prophetic voice that must be heard by all of God's messengers—ministers, parish theologians, teachers of preaching, as well as laypeople who take seriously Christ's call to go and share the gospel. If you are looking for a book that offers ground-breaking discoveries and progressive explorations in the field of homiletics, this is not for you. Yet, if you are like most Christians—hungry for the reminder of the simple promise of the resurrected Christ who swore to be present with his witnesses even when the going gets tough on the path to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth—you will appreciate the encouragement that this book offers. Stylistically, since the book is based on a series of lectures, at times it may feel rather superfluous and repetitive. Nonetheless, it is a devotional-like reading that will inspire both the heart and mind. Willimon's words ring with power and conviction: "Our chief task as preachers is not to succeed but to try to preach again next Sunday, to keep at it, to keep saying the gospel, over and over again, confidently repetitious, sure in the conviction that God gives the gospel the hearing it deserves if we will stick with words akin to the God who sticks with us" (69).

Ahmi Lee  
Fuller Theological Seminary  
Pasadena, California

**NOVEL PREACHING: TIPS FROM TOP WRITERS ON CRAFTING CREATIVE SERMONS**, by Alyce M. McKenzie. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2010. Pp. 180. \$16.99 (paper).

As the contemporary field of homiletics continues to emphasize the importance of congregational engagement with the sermon, books such as Alyce M. McKenzie's *Novel Preaching* are to be expected. Many books have lately been written on integrating preaching and music, preaching and the visual arts, and preaching and poetry. McKenzie is the first to

make an explicit attempt at identifying connections between the art of preaching and the art of writing novels.

The basic argument of McKenzie's work is to assert that the writer who pens a novel has much in common with the preacher who crafts a sermon. Both activities, she argues, are exercises in imagination, both are invitations to enter into a story, and both take their beginning in inspiration.

In order to fully appreciate this book's con-

tribution to the burgeoning field of homiletical literature, we should understand that McKenzie considers a good sermon to be an artistic product, crafted by artists (preachers) who understand the complexities of their world and who have been inspired to create good art (by the Holy Spirit). On the other hand, if we attempt to approach sermon-making from a scientific point of view, in which we focus on the precise steps needed in order to reproduce a particular phenomenon, we will utterly fail to understand this book. It does



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not provide an extensive series of forms or complex sermon diagrams, nor does it articulate a tried-and-true method of implementing what the author suggests. Rather, McKenzie seems to argue for a particular trajectory of thought by which a preacher can begin imaginatively and energetically thinking about the task of sermon-making.

Beginning with a series of diagnostic observations, McKenzie makes the following statement about the failing congregational interaction with sermons: "People are easily bored; at the same time, they crave knowledge about the Bible and their faith tradition. They need sermons that teach with imagination" (5). In an effort to resource the preacher who stands before a bored congregation and who preaches a boring three-point sermon with a boring introduction and a boring conclusion, McKenzie turns to a gaggle of professional writers for assistance.

The first part of this book engages the writing community on the nature of their discipline. McKenzie paints in wide brush strokes in order to provide the reader with a macro-perspective on the art and craft of writing. McKenzie argues vigorously that good writers and good preachers must be able to notice well the things of life: desires, choices, interactions, what sticks out, round characters, and plots. McKenzie concludes the first part of the book with a survey of some basic habits that good writers and good preachers should develop. Some of the habits she suggests include: keeping a journal, focused freewriting, listening to music, reading, and talking walks.

Part Two opens with what is arguably the most critical chapter in the book. Whereas much of the previous material has dealt with the intersection between preaching and novel writing on a more implicit basis, here the focus is far more explicit. McKenzie begins with a typology of four basic sermon pitfalls: sermons that lack depth, sermons that are incoherent, sermons that are boring, and sermons that offer false teaching. Each of these are pro-

gressively unpacked and integrated with advice offered by professional writers. Sermons that are shallow are introduced to concepts such as imagery and vividness, sermons that are incoherent are introduced to outlines and plot structures, and so forth.

Next, McKenzie introduces the reader to major figures in contemporary homiletics. Borrowing the image of a popular television cooking show, McKenzie playfully imagines these well-known preachers as chefs, each with his or her own "recipe" for preaching. While humorous, this chapter succinctly explains the homiletical nuances each figure represents. In a final chapter, McKenzie concludes with several of her own sermons that demonstrate the basic points of good writing she has suggested thus far.

The tone of the book is playful, energetic, and quite hospitable to the preacher who scours the shelves of the bookstore hoping for some help with her preaching. This is one of the greatest strengths of the book: its informal character, which makes it a helpful read for the preacher who might shy away from complex and theoretical books on preaching. A second strength is the first-class list of writers to whom McKenzie makes reference throughout her book. She does not limit herself to the use of one or two writers, but consults a list of writers from Annie Dillard to Stephen King with a dozen or so others along the way.

The book quite helpfully diagnoses several major problems in contemporary preaching and introduces the modern preacher to a hidden ally: novelists. While the language may sometimes be informal to a fault and while the metaphors used may seem a bit overdone, the book accomplishes its basic goal, which is to find the areas of continuity between the arts of preaching and writing. To this end, *Novel Preaching* is a helpful resource for the preacher.

Joseph A. Novak  
Fuller Theological Seminary  
Pasadena, California