


Article

Divine ‘Pastness’ and the Creation of Hope: The Significance of the *Sepultus est* ...

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Abstract: This article explores Karl Barth’s exegesis of the ‘*sepultus est* ...’ from the Apostles’ Creed, as articulated in his 1935 *Credo* lectures. I argue that Barth accords the *sepultus* a degree of theological significance that is against the grain, not only of the majority of western interpretations of Jesus’s burial, but also of his own later interpretation of it within his *Kirchliche Dogmatik*. Specifically, this article argues that in his 1935 lectures, Barth exegetes the *sepultus* in terms of a divine self-surrender to the ‘pure pastness’ that is the ‘state and fate’ of all humanity. As a consequence, the *sepultus* can then be used as the pivot to a different, and more hopeful, future.

Keywords: Karl Barth; Credo; Jesus Christ; burial; memory



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1. Introduction

It is well known that Karl Barth—arguably the most significant theologian of his generation—lived through, and developed his theology within, one of the most tumultuous periods of modern history. The Great War of 1914–18, the Great Depression, the rise of Adolf Hitler’s National Socialism, World War Two and the Holocaust of the Jews, and the knife-edge years of the early Cold War—all of these provided the contextual backdrop against which Barth taught and wrote his theology, and by which his theology was, in turn, informed. Notwithstanding his rejection of all natural theologies, and his consequent insistence in the Barmen Declaration of 1934 that there were no ‘events’ (*Ereignisse*) outside Jesus Christ to which the church must listen and obey, Barth’s theology nonetheless often spoke *to* the times in which he lived, even if he did not always acknowledge that it spoke *out of* the times in which he lived. As he put it so succinctly, ‘In the present and for the sake of the present, dogmatics [does] not enquire about the voices *of* the day, but about the voice of God *for* the day’.¹ To put it otherwise, Barth lived and worked through a century of rolling global crises—and, therefore, it is not unreasonable to ask whether and how his own theology may have sought to address those crises. Indeed, very many scholars have already asked precisely that question of him.² Furthermore, however, it is no less reasonable to ask whether and how it might now also address us in the context of our own current crises. In this paper, I will explore this question, not by considering in any great detail the church-oriented *Kirchliche Dogmatik*,³ but by delving into a single set of more *occasional* pieces, namely his lectures on the Apostles’ Creed.

2. Historical Background

In the late winter of 1935, Karl Barth delivered a series of sixteen lectures on the Apostles’ Creed at the University of Utrecht. Dedicated to the more stalwart of his colleagues in the *Bekennende Kirche*, as well as to those who had stood, and were continuing to stand, against Nazi oppression,⁴ the lectures were dogmatic in their nature, and political in their implication. The immediate context in which these lectures were given was the decision on 20 December 1934 by the administrative court in Cologne to uphold Barth’s suspension, and subsequent dismissal, from the University of Bonn. Barth’s refusal to swear an oath of loyalty to the *Führer*—and his compromise position that he would do so ‘only so far

as [his] responsibilities as an evangelical Christian allowed' (*soweit ich es als evangelischer Christ verantworten kann*)—were deemed sufficiently egregious to warrant his immediate sacking.⁵ Barth's preaching and teaching activities were curtailed even further when, on a railway platform on 1 March 1935, he was verbally served by the Gestapo with a prohibition against all public speaking. Very clearly, his pastoral and academic career in Germany was now all-but over.

However, insofar as he was a Swiss citizen, and insofar as neighbouring countries were not yet under Nazi control, Barth was still free to travel, speak, and publish elsewhere. This is precisely what he did, by accepting the invitation to speak in Utrecht. As Eberhard Busch has put it, while 'Barth's freedom was being restricted [in Germany], he now had the opportunity to speak elsewhere, and in a way which commanded a good deal of attention'.⁶ Not a little of that attention came about because of the deliberately polemical language used by Barth in these lectures, which he justified by reference to the very particular circumstances in which he, and the German Church, found themselves. Whereas his Dutch audience was still able to 'pursue theology in *comfort*' (*Gemächlichkeit*), Barth was conscious of speaking out of an ecclesial context in which 'a very different wind [was] blowing'. This situation, he explained, during a question-and-answer session at the conclusion of his lecture series, was nothing less than the 'affliction' (*Bedrängnis*) of the Church in Germany', and its existence in those days as 'an *ecclesia militans* ...'.⁷

With this ecclesio-political context—including Barth's personal circumstances—as the immediate backdrop against which these lectures were delivered, it is at least plausible that Barth was not merely providing theological service to his Reformed Dutch colleagues, but was, in a manner of speaking, giving a none-too-subtle 'raised middle finger' to the Nazi authorities. He may have been forbidden from speaking publicly in Germany, but he could still lecture in person, just over the border! The provocative dedication in the book's frontispiece, read in this context, can, thus, be understood as not merely a polite acknowledgment of colleagues, but rather as a signpost pointing to the political meanings embedded in the text of the lectures to follow.⁸

It seems clear to me that both the dedication in the frontispiece, and his pointed reference to the particular suffering of the German Church in contrast to the 'comfort' experienced by his Dutch listeners, demonstrates Barth's acute consciousness of that political context. Moreover, both his and Busch's testimony suggest strongly that Barth made deliberate—if implicit—connections between that context, and the content of the lectures. Nevertheless, I will not seek in this paper to draw *direct* links between Barth's creedal exegesis in these Utrecht lectures and the political circumstances in which they were delivered. Instead, I will focus on just one short section of the lectures—Barth's novel interpretation of the *sepultus est* of the second article of the Creed. In this, I will argue that Barth's creative reading of the *sepultus* opened up new God-given possibilities for him, beyond the political constraints of the day, by which not only he was able to claim hope for his own situation, but by which we may be able to do the same in ours.

3. Hermeneutical Alternatives

As I have indicated, my interest in these lectures lies specifically in one small, and what is possibly the most neglected, aspect of Jesus' death, namely his burial. Note that by this, I do not mean the entire period between Jesus' final breath and his resurrection on the third day. The motif of 'burial' should not, that is to say, be understood as expanding to also include all that the Creed means by the descent into the dead. The *descendit ad inferos* has, of course, been the subject of considerable debate, as have Barth's own views on it.⁹ However, debate around that is materially different from consideration of the burial as such, and it is this latter event that is mostly passed over. Whereas so much else in the Passion narratives have received exquisitely detailed exegetical and theological analysis—the triumphant entry into Jerusalem, the tragic final meal, the betrayal in the garden, the trial before civic and religious authorities, the crucifixion itself, the empty tomb and then,

finally, the glorious resurrection—the event of the actual entombment of Jesus’ body is passed over with only scant theological attention paid to it.

This is in large part due to its hermeneutic ambiguity. The burial of Christ following his crucifixion has often been understood simply as a necessary but functionally inconsequential mid-point within the Passion story. It is there in the narrative either as ‘proof’ of Jesus’ death, or as a waiting place before the resurrection. Rarely, however, is the burial of Jesus treated with theological significance in and of itself. Question 41 of the Heidelberg Catechism, for example, takes the first option. Perhaps unwittingly refuting St. Augustine—who was too quick, it seems, to claim that ‘everyone believes that he [Jesus] died’¹⁰—the Catechism asks: ‘Why was he buried?’ The answer? ‘To confirm the fact that he really did die’.¹¹ A World Council of Churches paper on the Niceano-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 CE takes the same stance; within the ten pages devoted to the suffering, death, and burial of Jesus Christ, only six lines refer to the burial, and they serve primarily to underscore Jesus’ real death.¹² That is to say, there is no point attributed to the burial other than as a refutation of those who would argue that Jesus suffered only a ‘docetic’ death—one that appeared to be, but that was in fact not. Popularized by Heinrich Paulus (1761–1851), the so-called ‘swoon theory’ argues that Jesus’ death was nothing other than a ‘deathlike trance’, with his subsequent resurrection being simply the awakening from that comatic sleep. For Paulus, therefore, and those with him who advocate for this implausible proposition, that Jesus was buried is rendered utterly inconsequential, because it is unnecessary.¹³ This is precisely the view that Heidelberg, and later Geneva, are determined to refute. Jesus’ burial is of consequence. However, even for the authors of those two documents it is so, only insofar as it attests to Jesus’ real mortality.

Melito of Sardis on the other hand takes the second option—that is, that Jesus’ burial is merely a theological pit-stop between the two far more important events of crucifixion and resurrection. He puts it this way: ‘He was buried as a human, he rose from the dead as God’.¹⁴ The burial itself is, in this context, thus, relegated to that waiting place. Even here, however, it is not Jesus’ burial as such that is significant for Melito, but rather the fact that he truly and humanly died, and then gloriously and divinely rose again. It is the contrast between Jesus’ death as a human and his resurrection as God that is the key feature, not the event of Jesus’ burial itself. More recently, the two central chapters of Moltmann’s *The Crucified God* amplify the same theme. Never wishing to divorce the historical from the eschatological, Moltmann here always interprets Jesus’ cross in light of his resurrection as a unitary action of the one person. ‘The “risen Christ” is the historical and crucified Christ, and vice versa’.¹⁵ From this perspective, and notwithstanding the importance placed on the historicity of the cross-event, the burial of this one undifferentiated person is afforded, at best, a marginal space.

However, while Melito and Moltmann may be representative of those who have understood Jesus’ burial as little more than a theological pit-stop, at least they mention it. Irenaeus ignores it altogether. In his *Adversus haereses*, he notes that Christians believe that Jesus ‘suffered under Pontius Pilate, and rose again . . .’¹⁶ What happened in the interim between those two events is not only not mentioned, it seemingly counts for nothing. For Irenaeus, the burial is, it would appear, *adiaphora* to the core message of the gospel.¹⁷ This is all the more noteworthy an absence given that Irenaeus’ theology of the atonement is so overtly committed to the whole of the Incarnation and, unlike some others, is not restricted simplistically to the cross-event.¹⁸ Indeed, if one could expect anyone to be concerned with the particularity of the burial, as a constituent part of the Passion story, it would be Irenaeus—and yet this is not what we see.¹⁹

An even more confronting marginalization of the burial event comes from the Irish-American scholar, John Dominic Crossan, who seeks to eliminate it entirely. This he does, not because the fact of Jesus’ death needs no verification (though, for Crossan, it does not—there is no doubt in his mind that Jesus died), nor because the burial exists as merely an inconsequential mid-point between two more consequential events, but that serves no theological point in and of itself. Rather, Crossan wants it gone, because he simply does not

believe it ever happened. For Crossan, Jesus' burial carries no theological weight, because it likely did not occur. The burial, as historical event, is implausible. Far more probable, in his view, is that the body of Jesus was left hanging on the cross, to be devoured there by wild animals and birds of prey.²⁰

In other words, for a host of contrasting reasons, the event of the burial of Jesus has not typically figured prominently in the theological exegesis of the Passion narratives. Irenaeus is remarkable for his complete silence on it, when (unlike Crossan) he does not doubt its historicity, but in a sense he is simply the extreme end of a longstanding interpretive tradition. There has been very little systematic evaluation of the burial itself as a theological event in its own right. It is for this reason that Barth's very particular attention to it warrants consideration. Before exploring that section of his Utrecht lectures, however, we need to consider also—albeit briefly—whether and how he treats the burial in that other great text of his in which he discusses the Passion, namely §59 of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, entitled 'The Obedience of the Son of God'.

4. Jesus' Burial in the Dogmatics

Within this extended discussion of Christ's *exinanitio*, Barth's opening thesis is to insist that the atonement, as a divine event, is nevertheless history; the history of God with humanity, and humanity with God—but above all, the history of Jesus Christ.²¹ Only insofar as we appreciate and enter into this event as Jesus' history—that is, as the history of the One who is continually attested in the New Testament as Son of God and Kyrios—do we enter into it at all.

At this point, a brief excursus on the nature and quality of history is in order. What the English translation of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* fails to illuminate is that there are, broadly, two types of 'history' open for Barth, from which he is able to choose—*Historie*, on the one hand, and *Geschichte*, on the other, which correspond (roughly) to what McCormack refers to as 'so-called history' and 'real history', respectively.²² As David Congdon has helpfully explained, *Geschichte* is the eschatological action of God that occurs as a novum and to which we have no direct empirical access. *Historie*, on the other hand, is the realm of empirical historical science.²³ The distinction itself can be traced back to Martin Kähler's 1896 book, *Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche biblische Christus*. For Kähler, there could be no 'discovery' of the *historisch* Jesus—such an attempt is nothing more than a by-product of modern scientific enquiry, with the Jesus thereby posited nothing other than a scientific hypothesis—but rather only ever the confession of the *geschichtlich* Christ. Thus, it is instructive to note that for Barth, the event of the atonement—cross, burial, and resurrection occurs as a *geschichtlich* event. '*Die Versöhnung ist ... die Geschichte Jesu Christi selber*'.²⁴

We might, then, be forgiven for thinking that Barth has rendered the cross-event, and all other events by which it is surrounded within the Passion story, as something akin to faithful legend; mythic stories that can be encountered and understood only as the symbolic representations of a divine meta-narrative. Yet this is not quite what Barth is doing. Congdon reminds us that, whereas Rudolf Bultmann drew a somewhat sharp distinction between the two historical categories to which we have just referred, Barth sought to identify a more mediating position. In his view, *Geschichte* could and does occur at the phenomenal level—engaging real people, places and things—even if such events are noetically open only to faith and not to science.²⁵ In other words, notwithstanding his categorization of the Passion events as *Geschichte*, it is still a very real set of events that happen in this worldly occurrence. Nowhere does Barth insist upon this more strongly than in his emphasis, not only upon the real humanity of Jesus, but upon his real and necessary Jewishness. '*Das Wort wurde ... jüdisches Fleisch*'.²⁶ Here, perhaps above all, Barth enfleshes Jesus' historicity, in the day-to-day realities of first century Israel. Further, for Barth, the importance of all this is to do away, once and for all, with all suggestions of or tendencies towards Docetism. The singularity of God is made manifest in the very

particularity of this man in this place, an *historisch* particularity to which the characters of Mary and Pilate attest.²⁷

Given that this is how he frames his interpretation of the Easter story in §59, it would not be unreasonable to expect Barth also to have something concrete to say about the concrete event of the burial of Christ, as a constitutive element of that wider narrative. Yet, we do not, in fact, find that to be the case. Aside from one section in which Barth briefly cites the creedal affirmations of ‘*passus, crucifixus, mortuus, sepultus*’ in reference to Jesus’ obedient service,²⁸ Barth’s very clear tendency when speaking of Jesus’ burial—not only in IV/1 but indeed throughout the *Dogmatics* as a whole—is to treat it as an event that connotes simply and primarily the reality of Jesus’ death. He largely conforms, that is, to the hermeneutic of the Heidelberg Catechism. The new historical (*geschichtlichen*) act of God that confirms our reconciliation to God in Christ is, Barth says, the resurrection of the very same Jesus who is proven by the fact of his burial to have been really and truly dead (‘*wahrhaft und wirklich gestorbenen!*’).²⁹ That is to say, despite Barth’s clear insistence that the entire act of atonement is, though *geschichtlich*, nonetheless particularly located in time and place and, thus, *historisch Geschichte* (‘historical history’)³⁰, he does not treat the burial of Jesus as an event of much significance in and of itself. Its service is simply to prove, against all docetic alternatives, that Jesus actually died. As a single act in the drama of the Passion, the burial, thus, disappears almost entirely from view.³¹

It is true that in other parts of the *Dogmatics*, Jesus’ burial is occasionally afforded a slightly wider set of meanings. So, for example, in §15 it is used as part of the confirmatory testimony to the *vere homo*³² while in III/3 the Lamb who opposes the opponents of the Kingdom of Heaven is none other than the One who suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried (‘*leidenden, gekreuzigten, gestorbenen, begraben*’).³³ In the context of the Passion narrative itself, however, the burial is rarely interpreted by Barth in any deeper fashion, or as a datum of theological exploration in its own right.

5. The Sepultus in Credo

It is in this context, and with this contrast, that we turn now to the manner in which Barth sought to interpret the burial event within his earlier lectures from 1935, that were to be published as *Credo*. As we shall see, what he has to say here is in stark contrast, both to broader dogmatic history and to his own later explorations of Christ’s cruciform humiliation in KD IV.1. Insofar as it is, it is possible to claim that Barth’s reading of the *sepultus* in 1935 was particular to that environment and, thus, consequentially, probably informed by it. Remarkably, within this book the *sepultus* is not only not passed over but is, on the contrary, accorded dogmatic significance in and of itself.

Barth opens the section by noting that, if the second article as a whole is the centre of the Creed, then the events that are narratively book-ended by Jesus’ death and resurrection are ‘the centre within this centre’. In highly descriptive language, Barth says that the whole of the apostolic witness ‘pours in’ upon this focal point, where ‘all the threads of Christian knowledge run together . . .’³⁴ Not only is this the ultimate measuring-stick of any Christian proclamation, but it is here that the ‘spirits are separated’ (*Hier scheiden sich darum auch die Geister*).³⁵ Clearly, Barth wishes to accord this part of the Creed the most serious attention. So, it is entirely in keeping with this seriousness that, when he turns his mind to the burial of Jesus, Barth neither overlooks it nor relegates it to secondary significance. On the contrary, Barth says of this very event—the ‘humblest part (*unscheinbarsten Teil*) of our symbol’, that is on the face of things both trivial and insignificant—that it is, from Paul’s day to our own, ‘an important moment’ (*ein wichtiges Moment gewesen*).³⁶ More than that, indeed, even in its triviality, this moment has, says Barth, ‘an extremely critical significance’ (*eine eminent kritische Bedeutung*). Thus, with Barth positioning himself apart from much dogmatic tradition on this point, we can rightly and fruitfully ask what he thought the significance of Jesus’ burial was.

According to David Lauber, Barth’s interpretation of Jesus’ burial—even in the *Credo* lectures—is that it stands as a confirmation of Jesus’ genuine humanity. The burial ‘is

directly observable and historically verifiable. As a result, Jesus Christ's particular existence as a human being is confirmed'.³⁷ If this were what Barth was doing, then, as we have seen, he would be standing solidly in the line of much hermeneutical history. It is true, as I have indicated above, that this is the connection that Barth makes in §15 of the *Church Dogmatics*. However, this does not exhaust the meaning that Barth draws from the *sepultus* in the 1935 lectures, and indeed Lauber's contention does Barth's creedal exegesis a great disservice. Much more than that, Barth here parses Christ's burial with the grammar of existence and memory. That Jesus was buried means much more than simply that Jesus was truly human, or that he truly and humanly died. It also suggests more than a mere nod in the direction of divine humiliation. Certainly, the *exinanitio* of the Son of God is in view here, with the kenotic hymn from Philippians being explicitly referenced. There is, however, much more than this going on here. In veiling his Godhead by the assumption of our humanity, Jesus takes to himself the destiny of every human: for Barth, this means that in dying and being buried, Jesus became 'pure past' (*reine Vergangenheit*).³⁸ To put it in Barth's own words, Jesus' burial—and this is the theological force of the *sepultus*—is testimony not just to the fact that Jesus died, but that he has taken to himself 'the state and fate (*Sein und Schicksal*) of every man [*sic*]'.³⁹ However, what Barth means by this is astounding in its audacity. In self-surrendering to burial, Jesus—like everyone who is buried—gives up his present and also his future. This, says Barth, is the fate towards which everyone runs, and so in submitting also and even to this fate, in being willing to submit even to this extent to the fullness of humanity, Jesus surrenders what we might call his 'timeliness'. He becomes as though he were not, with neither present nor future, but only past—he becomes accessible only to memory.⁴⁰

Barth, however, is not content to stop here. He goes on to insist that the acting subjects of Jesus' burial are not limited to the characters listed in the evangelical narratives. Whereas the Synoptic Passion stories simply note that Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea (Matt.27:57; Mk.15:43; Lk.23:50), with some of the women looking on—John, of course, adding Nicodemus to the burial party (Jn.19:39)—Barth insists that the *sepultus est* was not primarily an act of Jesus' friends, but rather an act of God (*einem Handeln Gottes*)⁴¹ in which God himself was subject. To put it starkly, God buries Godself. That is to say, it is God who self-surrenders to humanity's fate, and so it is also God himself who, in and with the person of Jesus Christ, surrenders his present and future and becomes 'pure past' (*...in und mit diesem Menschen Jesus von Nazareth Gott selbst wie keine Zukunft so auch keine Gegenwart mehr hatte und also reine Vergangenheit wurde*).⁴²

We may well ask what the theological consequences of this might be. At the very least, we can say with some certainty that Barth here interprets the *sepultus* as something far more than a mere creedal place-holder between the supposedly more important articles of the *crucifixus* and the *resurrexit*. On the contrary, he suggests that the very fact of Jesus' burial denotes something that God takes to be true for himself: 'the eternal God himself', in the man Jesus, dies and is buried into the nothingness of what might reasonably be termed utter 'pastness'. As Barth words it, God in Christ has 'sacrificed His existence for us' (*seine Existenz für uns geopfert hat*).⁴³

Had these lectures been delivered some twenty years later—at the time, that is, of the writing of KD IV/1 and IV/2, when Barth was working out the implications of an actualistic rendering of Christology—we might expect an extended discussion here of divine ontology and the question of God's passibility. By the time of IV/2, for example, Barth could say unequivocally that the two-directional 'impartation' of the divine and human attributes requires us to speak 'concretely' in reference to the one Jesus Christ, if we wish to say anything about his divinity or anything about his humanity. 'He was crucified, dead, and buried. With concrete reference to Jesus Christ, this is all to be said not of a man called Jesus who was different from God, but of the Son of God who is one essence with the Father and the Holy Ghost'.⁴⁴ Or, as Bruce McCormack summarizes it, 'So complete is the two-dimensional communication of attributes that Barth can say that God is the Subject of human suffering and the man Jesus is eternal'.⁴⁵

That of course is not quite what Barth is doing here in *Credo*. There is no explicit claim made regarding God's being, other than an affirmation of such divine solidarity with humanity's 'state and fate' that our destiny becomes God's, such that it is no longer really 'ours'. Such a claim lacks the actualistic emphasis that would become apparent in Barth's later dogmatic work. Nevertheless, it is not without its own weighty significance. That in his burial, God in Christ both sacrifices his existence, and assumes for our sake a pure 'pastness', enables Barth to explore what this means for the possibility of future human life.

6. Implications of God's 'Pastness' for the Creation of Hope

The consequences of God's self-surrender are, in Barth's presentation of them here, paradoxical. Precisely by becoming for our sakes the curse of being both presentless and futureless, and having, therefore, only 'pastness', God opens up the opportunity for the creation of new futures. How might this be so? Because, in these lectures, the burial of Christ is linked finally by Barth to Paul's baptismal language of our burial with Christ, to denote that in, with and through that burial we now live into the new future of forgiveness and eternity. Eschatologically, the imprisonment of condemnation having been taken from us by Christ's burial—that is, that punishment itself has now been 'buried' into pure pastness (it is 'over and done with')—'means that we may now live as those that have been released by Him'.⁴⁶ The final word is, thus, one not of timelessness but of what we might call 'timefulness'—a state of life that is pregnant with potential, and hope. God's utter past, and the passing into pastness of our condemnation, becomes our utter future. In the divine death, there is life; in the divine 'pastness', there is the (re-)creation of human possibility.

I have said at the start of this paper that the delivery of these lectures, as well as some of the more strident language used by Barth within them—including, but not only, in the final Q&A session—were acts of both theological and political defiance, in the face of a hostile regime that had so recently sought to silence him. Now, I believe it can be claimed that, even embedded within his exegesis of the *sepultus*, there was a politically oppositional undertone. Most immediately, the possibility of a new future that Barth had so creatively expressed in his Utrecht lectures was an implicit refusal to allow the tyranny of Nazism to be the final arbiter of his (or anyone's) fate. The Nazis' attempts in 1934–1935 to make Barth's career into a pure past—by banning his writings and exiling him from Germany—could, according to the logic of the *sepultus*, only ever be a pale and ultimately futile reflection of the pure pastness that, through his burial, Jesus himself assumed and, therefore, overcame, for the sake and in the service of a new and hopeful future.

Where Barth ends up is not, in many ways, unexpected. His was a theology that was always deeply characterized by its note of ultimate hope.⁴⁷ As we have seen, this hopefulness was articulated by Barth even in the midst of some of the greatest crises of modern history. Far from ignoring those crises, Barth not only lived through them, but constructed his theology to speak into them. What is surprising, however, is the way in which Barth managed to leverage a small and often overlooked part of the Creed and bring it to bear in the service of this hopeful message. Whereas so many others before him have passed over or marginalized the *sepultus*, Barth on the contrary exegeted it as the pivotal moment on which the gospel hangs—the 'centre', as he says, 'within the centre'.

This, surely, is a message of hope that remains as necessary now as it was in 1935. Our own contexts are neither those of Nazism nor of global armed conflict. However, they do include the continuing scourge of racial oppression, the erosion of democratic freedoms, and the existential threat of irreversible climate change. In the face of such emergent catastrophes, there is an abundance of reasons why people may, and increasingly do, feel hopeless. In such an environment, it is tempting to assume that the thoughts and words of a long-dead Swiss theologian—whose theology, even in his own day, was sometimes (unfairly) criticized for its impractical 'otherworldliness'⁴⁸—will have nothing to say to us today. Yet the contention of this article is that such an assumption is misplaced. Even without excavating the riches within the *Church Dogmatics*, one can find a joyous word of evangelical hopefulness in Barth's short but theologically dense exegesis of the *sepultus est*.

By taking on the burden of pure pastness that is the *Sein und Schicksal* of every person in death—by willing to be buried—Jesus Christ assumes the inevitable fate to which all people go, and, thus, heals it; pivoting it from hopeless pastness, to hope-filled future.

There is one final but important matter, however, that needs to be addressed, namely, the nature of the hope, and the timefulness of the future, which Jesus' burial facilitates. Crucially, neither the hope nor the future lie, for Barth, in some transcendent eschaton, nor are they depersonalized abstractions. On the contrary, as John McDowell reminds us, Barth locates eschatology not in a where or in a what, but in a who; Jesus Christ himself is the one who is the eschatological end, the one in whom we hope, and—in his vicarious, representative, high-priestly ministry—also the one who hopes for us.⁴⁹ To quote McDowell,

Christian hope ... realize[s] its true subjectivity ... [in its] turn to the subject (Jesus Christ) that is paradoxically also a decentring of the subject (away from ourselves as secure hoppers) in realizing subjecthood (that we are called to live hopefully). Jesus, as the subject and object of Christian hope determines to set us on our way as ourselves subjects of hope for the world in and through him, participating in his hope-fulness.⁵⁰

The hopeful future into which we are called to live is, therefore, one that is lived within this world, and this life, even—and perhaps especially—when this life is marred by chaos and crisis. Like Barth's theology itself, it is a future that is deeply engaged in the here-and-now, and in which we bear witness to the fact that, by his burial—which, as we have seen, assumed and, thus, heals the empty 'pastness' that would otherwise have been our destiny—we are set free into hope, joy, and paradoxically, life.

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Notes

- ¹ 'In der Gegenwart und für die Gegenwart wird die Dogmatik nicht nach den Stimmen der Zeit, sondern nach der Stimme Gottes für die Zeit fragen.' *KD* I/2, 946; *CD* I/2, 843.
- ² As just a very small sample of recent contributions, see: S. Brettmann Busch (Brettmann 2014), *Theories of Justice: A Dialogue with Karol Wojtyla and Karl Barth*, (Eugene: Pickwick, 2014); Hancock (2013), *Karl Barth's Emergency Homiletic, 1932-1933: A Summons to Prophetic Witness at the Dawn of the Third Reich*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013); Haddorff (2011), *Christian Ethics as Witness: Barth's Ethics for a World at Risk*, (Eugene: Cascade: 2011); M. Beintker, M. Trowitzsch & C. Link (eds), *Karl Barth im europäischen Zeitgeschehen: Widerstand-Bewährung-Orientierung*, (Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2010).
- ³ As he said in his well-known explanation for the change of title from *Christian Dogmatics* to *Church Dogmatics*, 'Dogmatik is keine "freie" sondern eine an den Raum der Kirche gebunden, da und nur da mögliche und sinnvolle Wissenschaft.' *KD* I/1, 3. ET 'Dogmatics is not a "free" science but, on the contrary, is bound to the church, and there—and only there—is it possible and meaningful.'
- ⁴ '1935! To the Ministers. Hans Asmussen, Hermann Hesse, Karl Immer, Martin Niemöller, Heinrich Vogel. In memory of all who stood, stand, and will stand.' In K. Barth (Barth 1936), *Credo: A Presentation of the Chief Problems of Dogmatics with Reference to the Apostles' Creed*, trans. J.S. McNab, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936), v. [German edition—*Credo: Die Hauptprobleme der Dogmatik, dargestellt im Anschluß an das Apostolische Glaubensbekenntnis. 16 Vorlesungen gehalten an der Universität Utrecht*, (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1935)—hereafter cited as GE].
- ⁵ E. Busch, *Karl Barths Lebenslauf: Nach seinen Briefen und autobiographischen Texten*, (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1975), 268. ET *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. J. Bowden, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) (Busch 1994, pp. 257–58). Remarkably, the Confessing Church refused to support Barth in his appeal against the Cologne judgment, even when he made his continuing role in the Church's leadership conditional upon this support being forthcoming.
- ⁶ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 259.
- ⁷ *Credo*, 173–75; GE, 150–51.
- ⁸ Eberhard Busch confirms that Barth himself drew a direct connection between these personal and professional difficulties, and the content of the lectures that he delivered at this time. 'He considered the stern tone of his lectures to be founded on the fact that he was speaking from the situation of a struggling church ...' E. Busch, 'Intellectual and Personal Biography II: Barth in Germany (1921–1935)', in P.D. Jones and P. Nimmo (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Barth*, (Oxford University Press, 2019), 49–50.

- 9 The broader literature on Christ's descent into hell is voluminous, and so even a select listing of sources is not possible here. For Barth's own understanding of this part of the Creed, see D. Lauber, *Barth on the Descent into Hell: God, Atonement and the Christian Life*, (Aldershot: Ashgate), (Lauber 2004).
- 10 Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 120.6. Cited in G. O'Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 138n2.
- 11 K. Barth, *The Heidelberg Catechism for Today*, trans. S. Guthrie, (London: The Epworth Press), (Barth 1964, p. 69).
- 12 World Council of Churches, *Confessing the One faith: An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as it is confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)*, Faith and Order Paper No.153, (Geneva: WCC Publications), (World Council of Churches 1991, pp. 54–64).
- 13 Probably the most notorious example of this theory in recent years has been the late Barbara Thiering's book, *Jesus the Man: Decoding the Real Story of Jesus and Mary Magdalene*, (Transworld), (Thiering 1992).
- 14 Melito, *On the Passover*, 8–9.
- 15 J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, (London: SCM Press, 1974), 160. ET *Der gekreuzigte Gott*, (Munich: Chr. Kaiser), (Moltmann 1972, p. 147).
- 16 Irenaeus, *Adv.h.*3.4.2
- 17 The same could be said for more modern writers, such as Helmut Thielicke who, in his *I Believe*, fails even to mention Jesus' burial in the chapter headed 'Crucified, Dead and Buried.' See. H. Thielicke, *I Believe: The Christian's Creed*, trans. J. W. Doberstein & H. George Anderson, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), (Thielicke 1968, pp. 108–21).
- 18 As Gustav Aulén stressed (Aulén 2003), Irenaeus is perhaps the archetypal representative of that view of the atonement that regards it as a 'continuous Divine work ...' And again, 'Irenaeus is altogether free from the tendency ... to emphasise the death of Christ in such a way as to leave almost out of sight the rest of His earthly life ... [The] earthly life of Christ as a whole is thus regarded [by Irenaeus] as a continuous process of victorious conflict ...' G. Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A.G. Hebert, (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 5, 29–30.
- 19 Irenaeus does make one brief mention of the 'buried body' of Jesus, but this is done to illustrate his true humanity, as opposed to docetic traditions. See Irenaeus, *Adv.h.*4.23.2.
- 20 See Crossan (1994), *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, (Harper San Francisco, 1994); and *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus*, (Crossan 1996). See also Dijkhuizen (2011), 'Buried Shamefully: Historical Reconstruction of Jesus' Burial and Tomb', *Neotestamentica*, 45.1 (2011), 115–29.
- 21 KD IV/1, 171–172; CD IV/1, 157.
- 22 B.L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, McCormack 1997, pp. 142–48).
- 23 Congdon (2015), *The Mission of Demythologizing: Rudolf Bultmann's Dialectical Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 181–84. Or, as Paul Daffyd Jones puts it: *Geschichte* is that mode of history that 'identifies a narratable story, grounded in a delimited sequence of concrete events, that is received in faith and that bears witness to faith.' P.D. Jones, 'The Riddle of Gethsemane: Barth on Jesus's Agony in the Garden', in D. Migliore (ed), *Reading the Gospels with Karl Barth*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), (Jones 2017, p. 124).
- 24 KD IV/1, 172; CD IV/1, 158.
- 25 Congdon, 183.
- 26 KD IV/1, 181; CD IV/1, 166.
- 27 KD IV/1, 183–184; CD IV/1, 168. This, of course, does not detract from the equally true and important point, on which Barth also insists, that the divinity of the Son is in no way changed or diminished by its union with the man Jesus. The kenotic incarnation is a 'free divine activity' ('eines freien göttlichen Handelns'), in which God is always God ('Gott bleibt Gott') even in the humiliation of assuming flesh (KD IV/1, 196; CD IV/1, 179). Ultimately, where this leads to, is the characterization by Barth of Jesus' suffering as a real suffering that is experienced not only by the human Jesus but by God himself; 'Gott wider Gott', [Gott] scheitert und zerbricht an Gott' (KD IV/1, 191, 201; CD IV/1, 175, 184).
- 28 KD IV/1, 181; CD IV/1, 165.
- 29 KD IV/1, 329; CD IV/1, 299.
- 30 See Congdon, 182.
- 31 See also KD IV/1, 336 (CD IV/1, 305), where Barth (1953a) says that Jesus' being in the grave was 'as One who had been and had ceased to be ...' ('Ausgelöschter, Vergangener, Gewesener'); also KD IV/2, 169 (CD IV/2, 151) (Barth 1953b), in which the grave is confirmatory of Jesus' death: 'Und dann war er in unzweideutiger Feststellung und Bestätigung des ihm Widerfahrenen begraben worden.' The same is broadly true of the references to Jesus' burial in KD II/2, 453 (CD II/2, 409) (Barth 1942); KD III/2 (Barth 1948) 540 (CD III/2, 450).
- 32 Barth says that the *sepultus*, along with all the other creedal pronouncements about Jesus' life that are made between the *conceptus* and the *resurrexit* 'all have, in addition to their own meanings, the significance of emphasizing the *vere homo*'. See CD I/2, 147; KD I/2, 161.
- 33 KD III/3 (Barth 1950), 550; CD III/3, 471.
- 34 *Credo*, 83; GE, 75.
- 35 *Credo*, 83; GE, 75.

- ³⁶ Credo, 84; GE, 76.
- ³⁷ Lauber, *Barth on the Descent into Hell*, 7–8.
- ³⁸ Credo, 87; GE, 78. In the *Dogmatik*, Barth speaks of burial – not specifically Jesus’ burial, but any example of the same act—as an act that denotes something that is pure past. The war of the Spirit against the flesh is a war against a form of life that ‘is to be treated as a thing of the past. It is to be demolished and buried.’ ‘*Jenes Leben im eignen Konflikt ist in der Tat als Vergangenheit zu behandeln: es ist abzubauen und zu begraben.*’ KD II/2, 816; CD II/2, 729–30.
- ³⁹ Credo, 87; GE, 78.
- ⁴⁰ Credo, 85; GE, 77.
- ⁴¹ Credo, 87; GE, 78.
- ⁴² Credo, 86; GE, 77.
- ⁴³ Credo, 93; GE, 83.
- ⁴⁴ CD IV/2, 74. Emphasis added.
- ⁴⁵ B.L. McCormack, ‘“We have ‘actualized’ the doctrine of the Incarnation . . .”: Musings on Karl Barth’s Actualistic Theological Ontology’, *Zeitschrift für Dialektische Theologie*, 32.1 (McCormack 2016, p. 184).
- ⁴⁶ Credo, 93; GE, 83.
- ⁴⁷ See especially J.C. McDowell, *Hope in Barth’s Eschatology: Interrogations and Transformations Beyond Tragedy*, (Ashgate), (McDowell 2000); J.C. McDowell, ‘Karl Barth, Emil Brunner and the Subjectivity of the Object of Christian Hope’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 8 (McDowell 2006, pp. 26–41); G. Sauter, ‘Why is Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* not a “Theology of Hope”? Some Observations on Barth’s Understanding of Eschatology’, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 52 (Sauter 1999, pp. 407–29); J. Stewart, ‘Hermeneutics and Teleology in Ethics across Denominations—Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth’, *Religions*, (September 2017), 5 (Stewart 2017).
- ⁴⁸ In the 1923 edition of his work on Martin Luther, Karl Holl chastised the ‘Barthian school’ for its lack of ‘moral concern’ or indeed of any ‘positive relation to the world.’ See E. Thurneysen to K. Barth, 30 October 1923, in GA V.4, 230. Even more recent commentators have fallen into the same interpretive falsehood. Alister McGrath, for example, has described Barth’s ethics as being ‘peculiarly abstract’, and not being ‘adequately grounded in the realities of human existence.’ See A.E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell), (McGrath 1990, pp. 219–20). Stanley Hauerwas (1988) makes a similar claim in his ‘On Honour: By Way of a Comparison Between Barth and Trollope’, in N. Biggar (ed), *Reckoning with Barth: Essays in Commemoration of the Centenary of Karl Barth’s Birth*, (Oxford: Mowbray, 1988), 145–69.
- ⁴⁹ McDowell, ‘Karl Barth, Emil Brunner and the Subjectivity of the Object of Christian Hope’, 35, 37.
- ⁵⁰ McDowell, ‘Karl Barth, Emil Brunner and the Subjectivity of the Object of Christian Hope’, 39.

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