Barth in Conversation
Volume 1, 1959–1962

Edited by Eberhard Busch

Translated by
The Translation Fellows of the Center for Barth Studies
Princeton Theological Seminary

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The three volumes of Barth’s “Conversations” in the German Gesamtausgabe [Collected Works] provide an unusual and enriching encounter with the person and thinking of Karl Barth. These edited collections of diverse encounters with Barth were the work of Professor Dr. Eberhard Busch, already well known as Barth’s biographer. They were one of the outcomes of years of work at the University of Göttingen, where Busch was Professor of Reformed Theology (the chair that Barth inaugurated in 1921). With the assistance of his students, he painstakingly assembled, edited, and annotated these accounts. The result is a highly readable experience of Barth in retirement. He was sought by a great diversity of groups and individuals and often joined them at the Restaurant Bruderholz not far from his home in the Basel neighborhood of that name. In these discussions, we see how Barth’s vast theological project actually works, how it translates into concrete contexts, and how it remains a living, dynamic process, with profoundly important trajectories for the thought and practice of the Christian church.

The translation of the Conversations is a project of the Center for Barth Studies at Princeton Theological Seminary. From its inception in the mid-1990s, under the leadership of then Director of the Princeton Seminary Library, Dr. Stephen Crocco, the faculty affiliated with the Center had discussed the challenges of expanding the English translations of Barth’s works. Linked to the daunting challenge of such expansion of the English Barth library was the issue of reliable translations. Without in any way diluting our gratitude for the English edition of the Church Dogmatics, there were growing concerns about some aspects of that massive project. It was becoming clear that challenging issues were to be confronted with regard to terminology, consistency, accuracy, and stylistic appropriateness. More and more scholars found themselves revising citations from the English edition in order to make points that were congruent with the German text. To foster a higher standard of translation and to encourage expanded translation efforts, the Center for Barth Studies decided to invite a small group of Barth scholars interested in translation issues to meet and work on texts together. The first group gathered in June of 2007, immediately after the annual Barth Studies Conference on campus.

The experience of working together on translation issues proved to be stimulating and rewarding. This small group of avid Barth readers had a solid interest in meeting annually to explore ways to improve the general quality of Barth translation as well as to do actual translation projects as a group. To carry out the first objective, the group began to develop a “glossary” for Barth
translations, in which we noted, among other things, our agreement on how
certain distinctive terms in Barth’s vocabulary might be translated. The group
was mentored by Karlfried Froehlich, emeritus professor of church history at
Princeton, who is not only a native German speaker but also studied under
Barth in Basel. His role has been to interpret the nuances and often complex
allusions of the German text so that a resulting English rendition reliably cap-
tures the syntax, content, and mood of the German original.

At its first gathering, the group experimented with the translation of Barth’s
“conversations” in the first of three volumes in the Collected Works with that
title: Gespräche. The advantage of this volume was that the various documents
or chapters could be assigned to different translators. The annual meeting in
June was then used as an opportunity for each translator to present challenges
and questions that emerged from the actual task of translating texts. For discus-
sion in the meeting, each participant prepared a segment of a current assign-
ment. The sessions proved to be extraordinarily productive, not only in terms
of the quality of each translated “conversation,” but also as a training process
focused on the improvement of translation skills. In 2013 a doctoral student at
Princeton, David Chao, joined the project as its program manager. He brought
with him not only expertise as an academic theologian and great skill with
the computer technology needed to carry out the project. He also had several
years of experience in academic publishing as an acquisitions editor. Chao has
organized the project, set up systems for tracking the process of translating
and editing each segment, and brought the project to a place where publication
has become a real possibility. He has facilitated the formulation of policies and
practices for “fellows” of the Center for Barth Studies, working out procedures
for submission of assigned texts and their editing process. Also beginning in
2013, Kait Dugan, Curator of the Center for Barth Studies, has been instrumen-
tal in developing the fellows program through providing institutional support
and funding.

The production of this volume has thus gone through several steps: Ini-
tial translation by a fellow, review of representative excerpts from the trans-
lated text at the annual meeting, critical review of all translations by Professor
Froehlich as a multilingual native German speaker, with attention to the faith-
fulness and accuracy in rendering the German into English, and final editing by
Professor Darrell Guder as a bilingual native English speaker, with attention to
the quality of the English-language version.

The texts reproduce conversations, not carefully drafted and formulated lec-
tures. The speech is idiomatic and not literary. There are sentence fragments
and interjections as a normal part of conversations. In some instances, the Ger-
man editors have reconstructed the text from cursory notes prepared for a con-
versation or taken down in the course of a conversation. Square brackets are
used by the German editors to indicate such editorial emendations. In most
cases we have integrated these clarifications into the translation but have con-
tinued the use of square brackets to indicate material that the translator has
added to enhance understandability. The annotations of the German original
have all been translated, making this volume a valuable resource for study of
a great range of themes in Barth’s theological project. There are several con-
versations or presentations that took place originally in English or French. In
the German edition, these were translated into German and then annotated. In this volume, the original English text is provided, the French is translated into English, and the annotations have been incorporated. The English originals were also conversational and not carefully written-out lecture texts. Thus at times the English is quite idiomatic and evidences the typical problems of spoken English. Citations from the *Church Dogmatics* (*CD*) are given first in the English edition, followed by the reference (*KD*) to the German original, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*. Where possible, English editions of cited German resources are provided in the footnotes.

Our appreciation for the work done by the original German editors, Professor Busch and his students, has grown as we have engaged these documents. They have created a wealth of scholarship that is a great enrichment of the Barth legacy. It is the hope of the fellows of the Center for Barth Studies that the availability of this resource in English will enhance the serious engagement of Karl Barth’s theological legacy, building on the excellent work of our German and Swiss colleagues.

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