Käsemann, Ernst

On Being a Disciple of the Crucified Nazarene: Unpublished Lectures and Sermons


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The title On Being a Disciple of the Crucified Nazarene captures well the central concerns of this collection of Ernst Käsemann’s Unpublished Lectures and Sermons. The posthumous publication was made possible by Käsemann’s daughter, Dr. Eva Teufel, who granted access to her father’s literary estate, Rudolf Landau and Wolfgang Kraus, who carried out invaluable editorial work, and Roy Harrisville, who has produced a fine translation of the original German publication, In der Nachfolge des gekreuzigten Nazareners: Aufsätze und Vorträge aus dem Nachlass (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005). The collection will be of interest to New Testament scholars, theologians, pastors, and lay people both inside and outside the church, especially those concerned with the political implications of Christianity.

The front matter of the book should not be skipped. The editor’s foreword already leads the reader to the heart of the work, and it is important to learn here that “the essays printed in part 2 (not arranged in any particular order) were intended by Ernst Käsemann for the publication of a second volume of Kirchliche Konflikte” (ix). The translator’s preface is also perceptive, especially in its attention to the nature of Käsemann’s dialectic stance. Finally, Eerdmans has done the English reader a service by including “A Theological Review” here, since this retrospective essay both defines Käsemann’s multi-
faceted relationship to pietism and his theological teachers and powerfully sets forth his partisan struggle against the Nazis and their supporters within the church. It reminds us that Käsemann did not write from an ivory tower but rather from his first-hand experience of “the most barbaric century” (200). Indeed, the conclusion of this essay provides a perfect introduction to all that follows: “As a last word and as my bequest, let me call 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.”

The book contains twenty-eight chapters that have been left unnumbered, presumably to remind the reader that they have been arranged by the editors in no particular order. (However, for ease of reference I will refer to chapter numbers in this review.) Since the chapters contain much overlapping material, I will adopt a thematic approach in order to highlight some of their main content. (For a list of the twenty-eight chapters, see the end of this review.)

Perhaps the most striking feature of the book is Käsemann’s relentless focus on the meaning of the gospel for the majority world and his corresponding critique of Western Christianity and society. In fact, it would not be misleading to classify his work as a radically Lutheran theology of liberation. While many (Lutheran) scholars take care to distance themselves from “liberation theology,” Käsemann nails his flag to the mast on many occasions: “A theology that does not proclaim liberation, even of bodies from demonic slavery, is heretical ideology” (18); “Christianly viewed, a heavenly salvation that does not also and, as its distinguishing mark, set out as earthly help is a pious deception” (33); “The key-word ‘universal priesthood of believers,’ however, assumes that we do not separate service to the gospel from the social diaconate, as foolishly occurs in German church societies” (179); “Every decent theology was, is, and will be a theology of liberation” (318; cf. 202).

I have included the preceding quotations from Käsemann to make unavoidably clear that his theology is indeed a form of liberation theology. This point, however, must be clarified in two ways.

1. In my view, Käsemann intentionally transgresses conventions of political correctness in using terms such as “the white race” and the “Third or Fourth World” in order to polemically highlight a condition of oppression and exploitation. By contrast, I have chosen to speak of “the majority world” in this review because it accurately captures Käsemann’s critique of the terminology of “Third or Fourth World” (68), his repeated emphasis on the fact that the earth is an inferno or hell for the majority of its inhabitants (e.g., 219), and his claim that the majority of Christians, the future of Christianity, and the world’s center of gravity no longer reside in the West (e.g., 29, 284).
First, it must be stressed that, while there are points at which he distances himself from other forms of liberation theology (e.g., 192–93, 201), even speaking once of “so-called liberation theology” (280), Käsemann is much more concerned to express his solidarity with this movement’s central concerns. With James Cole’s black theology, for example, he vigorously affirms that “Our Lord is the God of the oppressed” (233). Indeed, he is even prepared to relate this perspective to Marxism (193, 202, 237; cf. 18, 145, 150), claiming that “in a certain respect the gospel is more Marxist than Marx because it does not believe that we ourselves can break our chains, and thus it involves God Almighty in our worldly game and makes this hell on earth the place of his revelation” (237).

Second, once the inclination to distance Käsemann from liberation theology has been forcefully resisted, it is equally important to unpack the radically Lutheran character of his theology of liberation.

Let us begin with Käsemann’s approach to the Bible and evangelical truth amid change. On the one hand, he explicitly advances “the 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). On the other hand, he emphasizes the need to interpret the Old Testament from the New (104), underscores the diversity within Christianity and the Bible itself (e.g., 28–34; 103), and insists that even the Bible is to be measured by a single decisive question, namely, “Who is Jesus, and What does he bring us and require of us?” (138). In other words, “evangelical truth only exists in discipleship” (36), and Christology—more specifically, the crucified Christ as the living lord who rules through his Spirit—is the ultimate criterion for the disciple, even in relation to Scripture (e.g., xiv, 34–37, 83, 104–5, 221–22, 264).

At the center of Käsemann’s theological vision stands his interpretation of the first commandment. This is viewed as the sum of Scripture (159) and the truth of the Old and New Testaments (175). It is also given christological focus: “the first commandment is personified in Christ” (xiv); it is “Christologically repeated, unequivocally defined and made concrete” in the New Testament (159). Finally, the first commandment is understood not primarily as prohibition but rather as promise: “whoever is subject to the Creator not only should not, but need no longer be captive in body or soul to other lords” (58; cf. 65, 197, 218). Käsemann’s theology of liberation breaks forth from this central point. Developing Luther’s statement that “A ‘god’ is the term for that to which we look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need” (175), he argues that we always live in the threatening or actual subjection to idols or to demons (58) and associates the demonic with what is beyond our control and inhuman (203).
The category of the “demonic” or of “possession” is, in fact, central to Käsemann’s vision (esp. chs. 6, 16, 17). On the one hand, he affirms the right to demythologize the ancient worldview (63, 185, 196; cf. 203). On the other hand, he stresses the need to go further and also demythologize the optimistic Enlightenment faith in human goodness, progress, and self-determination (63, 163), which has “to a large extent become a tool of the white race for subjecting the rest of the world” (185). Theologically, he describes “possession” as “the condition in which the first commandment is no longer heard or taken seriously, thus in which the earth is inevitably handed over to idols” (187), and he critically (re)appropriates the doctrine of “original sin” from this standpoint (63, 204). Concretely, Käsemann insists that the majority world must be a mirror in which the brutality of tyrannical pride is reflected back as the reality of the West’s supposed maturity (186; cf. 279, 305), and he claims that “it is a monstrous possession when billions are spent yearly for military armament, when one everlastingly asserts one’s will to peace yet supports military dictatorships through the delivery of weapons, weakens freedom movements, and apart from this keeps the hungering alive merely to be able to exploit them” (186).

The many chapters on the righteousness of God also develop in this same direction (chs. 2, 5, 16, 20, and 27). In contrast to the Greek ideal of righteousness, in which impartial judgment on the basis of merit is represented by a blindfolded woman with scales in her hand, Käsemann argues that the righteousness of God in Paul is thoroughly partial and that rather than being punitive it paradoxically creates salvation (15–16, 53–54, 181, 229, 307–9). Accordingly, Christians must not confuse divine righteousness, which involves their creator’s right to his creatures, with the preservation of earthly order (25–26). In short, “our political behavior does not recognize order as the last word, but rather love, which sets free” (26).

Käsemann’s exchange with Martin Hengel on the political implications of the Sermon on the Mount is of particular significance as an instructive clash of Tübingen Lutherans (ch. 11). In the tradition of Luther, Hengel argues that the Sermon on the Mount serves to show us the superior power of our own sin (127). Käsemann, by contrast, sets a different accent, stressing that “it is precisely the weak, in themselves imperfect and rejected by perfectionists, whom the Father of Jesus uses as instruments” (128). Moreover, he asserts the need for disciples to struggle against human exploitation (130–31), an emphasis that is further developed in his chapter on the fourth beatitude (ch. 13). Notably, Käsemann also takes up the topic of nonviolence, violence, and the use of force here (128–32; cf. xviii, 25–26, 31–32, 149, 201, 234, 306, 318).

Käsemann’s emphasis on corporality (41–46, 58–59) and his discussion of solidarity and the body of Christ (chs. 4, 21, 23, 25, 26) also inform his theology of liberation. “God, like the demons, wants our body, because he will have us totally” (58). The body of Christ, in
turn, is the Lord’s means of communicating with his rebellious world, indeed, to every corner of it (58). Just as the Lord showed solidarity with his Father’s creatures up to the cross, so his disciples must show solidarity with all who need help (244).

Throughout the book Käsemann’s vision is characterized by a relentless critique of piety and especially what he views as bourgeois middle-class Christianity. Here his treatment of the resurrection may be taken as representative: whereas middle-class Christianity, he suggests, has largely reduced the Christian hope to a concern for our own survival after death, the basic message of Easter is that Christ reigns and that his rule involves the whole earth (10–11, 20, 32, 51, 55, 59, 70, 166, 232, 255, 256, 261, 274, 279, 286).

Space prohibits further discussion of Käsemann’s many concrete criticisms of Western Christianity and society (see, e.g., 132, 151, 164, 279). Two last, important points must suffice. First, Käsemann is highly critical of merely giving alms or charity, thus casting aspersion on the entire business of aid (31, 32, 51, 145, 164, 194, 211, 240, 243, 256, 284, 300, 303, 318). Second, he emphasizes instead that in our time love “must intend to alter and break structures, systems, and ideologies that foster inhumanity” (164; cf. 244, 256). In fact, to Käsemann it seems that “a Christian in our day can only be a nonconformist, someone who resists the dominant powers in state, society, and economy and declares oneself in solidarity with the damned of the earth” (244). Concretely, this means becoming the mouthpiece for the weak (303; cf. 26) and as such advocates for the redistribution of power (299–300, 303) and the equitable distribution of material goods (151).

Altogether, these essays represent an intellectual and theological tour de force, and many readers—in the academy, church, and elsewhere—will no doubt be challenged and rewarded by reading through them. Indeed, for me what Käsemann says about his first work applies all the more to his last: “I am moved by the courage and resolve to connect independent thought with faith” (39).

** Addendum on the translation of “(sich) bewähren”: As an addendum to this review, let me comment briefly on a potentially significant point of translation. My purpose here is not to detract from the high quality of Harrisville’s translation but rather to illustrate the importance of engaging the German original, even after the publication of a particularly good translation such as this one. My inquiry concerns the translation of the German verb “bewähren” or “sich bewähren,” which Harrisville variously renders as “preserve” (Nachfolge 48, 66, 173, 194, 255, 257; English translation 50, 69, 177, 198, 259, 261), “needs protecting” (N 70; ET 73), “maintain” (N 160; ET 164), “persists” (N 207; ET 211), “proved” (N 27, 200; ET 29, 203), “confirm” (N 108, 208; ET 111, 212), “still stands” (N 248; ET 252). Whereas “proved,” “confirm,” “still stands,” and “persists” may adequately
capture the force of this verb, the translations “preserve,” “maintain,” and “needs protecting” arguably all miss the mark, reflecting the force of bewahren rather than bewähren. A perceptive note on the importance and meaning of bewähren for Käsemann is provided by David Way (The Lordship of Christ, 147 n. 63; cf. 164 n. 87): “Käsemann’s repeated use of bewähren expresses his understanding of the connection between, on the one hand, the doctrine of justification and, on the other, Christian life and ethics: Christians are not called to do ‘works’ which might be held to earn salvation; nor, however, are they to remain inactive. By service and discipleship, they authenticate, verify, prove, or confirm that they have been transferred to a new lordship” (emphasis added).

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