

'Doctor of the Academy': Ernst Fuchs



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This article focuses on the 'New Hermeneutics' as a development of the hermeneutics of Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Bultmann. The notion 'hermeneutical theology' is explained. From the perspective of the camaraderie between Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs, the article describes the life story of Fuchs and the hostile antagonism he experienced from conservative church circles in Germany. It points out Fuchs's indebtedness on the hermeneutical legacy of Bultmann and emphasises Ebeling's support and collegiality.

This article is dedicated to Professor Dr Graham Duncan, a church historian who has introduced to his Pretoria colleagues the truism that reformation means transformation, and that transformation is conversion's other side of the coin.

Background

Ernst Fuchs was born on 11 June 1903 (see Fuchs 1964c:7–15; Fuchs 1964a:111–146; Soulen 1971:467–487). His father was a lawyer. He began his study of law in Tübingen in 1922, but under the influence of the theologian Adolf Schlatter, he entered studies in theology within the same year. During 1924–1925, he studied in Marburg and became aware of the dialectic theology of Karl Barth, yet was particularly impressed by the interaction between the philosopher Martin Heidegger and the theologian Rudolf Bultmann. After completion of his studies in Tübingen in 1927, he was ordained as minister of religion in Württemberg. At that time, he started studying part-time to obtain his doctorate under the supervision of Bultmann. The topic of the study was 'the relationship between faith and works in the *Shepherd of Hermas*'. Fuchs graduated at the age of 26 in 1929, and in 1930 became assistant to the editor Karl Ludwig Schmidt of the theological journal *Theologische Blätter*.

Schmidt,¹ however, was dismissed from his theological lectureship for political reasons because he opposed Nazism as well as made possible the appointments of two 'social democrats' in Bonn, namely, Karl Barth and Ernst Fuchs. As a result of Schmidt's dismissal, Fuchs lost his work as assistant to the editor and resumed his work as a full-time minister of religion and was, only after the end of the war, able to obtain an academic appointment.

During 1946–1947, while he remained the pastor of the small congregation of Oberaspach (Baden-Württemberg), he filled the position of the New Testament scholar Hans von Soden in Marburg who died at the end of 1945. Marburg honoured Fuchs in 1947 by bestowing an honorary doctorate on him for two reasons: his constant protest against the Hitler regime and his academic achievements.

It is only in 1949 that Fuchs was formally appointed as lecturer in New Testament Studies. Right from the start, he was considered a controversial figure and he lost his post at the university after two years. During these two years, Fuchs and Ebeling (professor of Church History in Tübingen) became kindred spirits on account of the interest both had in hermeneutics, as well as the favour both found with Bultmann, Heidegger and Gadamer – all these three scholars, in important respects, continued to build on the hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Dilthey (see Pelser & Van Aarde 2007:1378–1383). The reason for Fuchs's controversiality was his close relationship with his 'doctor-father' Bultmann and Bultmann's hermeneutical programme of demythologisation.

However, Fuchs was not only an echo of Bultmann but also an echo of his critic. This did not change anything about the fact that the actions of the confessionalists of the right (much more with regard to Fuchs than to Bultmann's other students, for example, Ebeling, Bornkamm and Käsemann) threatened his career. Bultmann retired at the end of 1951 and the intolerance of the confessionalists towards Bultmann shifted to Fuchs. The University of Bonn offered

1. Karl Ludwig Schmidt, Rudolf Bultmann and Martin Dibelius are known as the pioneers in the implementation of 'form criticism' (*Formgeschichte*) as a facet of the historical-critical exegetical approach (see Bultmann [1921] 1970; Dibelius [1919] 1971; Schmidt [1918] 1969).

Fuchs a professorship, but withdrew the offer when the Württembergische Landeskirche took his pastoral privileges away from him and declared his pension null and void. Fuchs left Tübingen in 1954 and became a professor at the Kirchliche Hochschule in Berlin, where Walter Schmithals, also one of Bultmann's students, was professor from 1968 to 1989 in New Testament Studies and later rector of the Kirchliche Hochschule (which is today part of the Humboldt Universität Berlin).

In 1961, Fuchs was appointed as full professor (*Ordentlicher Professor*) in New Testament Studies in Marburg, and together with Ebeling (and Manfred Mezger) published the series *Hermeneutische Untersuchungen* with Mohr Siebeck.² Their 'New Hermeneutics' becomes known throughout the world, especially because of the instrumental role of Drew University in Madison, NJ. The organisation 'Confessional Movement' (*Bekennnisbewegung*) revived the Bultmann-Fuchs controversy, and as far as Fuchs was concerned, this revolved mainly around the resurrection belief (see Fuchs 1965:453).³

Ebeling was closely involved with this controversy and ecclesiastically driven disciplinary feud. This was primarily in connection with the accusation from denominational circles against Bultmann's so-called atheistic influence on the theological students as future ministers of religion (see Beutel 2012a:159–161) and further to the controversy with Fuchs (see Beutel 2012b:162–166). Ebeling was dean of the Theological Faculty in Tübingen. As far as the 'case Bultmann' is concerned, Ebeling requested the church authority not to handle the objection against Bultmann in a 'canonistically' disciplinary manner, rather to handle it by means of a responsible theological debate. As far as the 'case Fuchs' is concerned, Ebeling saw no reason why Fuchs could not be appointed as professor in Tübingen. In open formal statements as well as in personal interaction, he maintained his friendship with Fuchs. At Fuchs's 50th birthday, on behalf of the theological study group, he conveyed the official congratulations and greetings. And when Fuchs left Tübingen for Berlin, Ebeling wrote to the rector that he could not consider his career without Fuchs and that he foresaw isolation.

Ebeling's and Fuchs's 'new hermeneutics'⁴ dominated the theological scene for a long time. They mainly joined Heidegger's mind shift, of which the first signs were already visible in 1933. These were, however, already clearly evident

2. Volume 9 in the series *Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie*, titled *Marburger Hermeneutik*, was authored by Fuchs ([1961] 1969).

3. In *Thesen zur Auferstehungsfrage*, Fuchs (1964b:19) explained his existential way of understanding the resurrection of Jesus as follows: 'The reality of Jesus' open grave on Easter morning crossed worldly bondage as it should be viewed as a "pneumatic" chain of events. By making the distinction "pneumatic-physical," however, attaches by no means a negative meaning. What is emphasised is that focus is placed on the "new" of this "reality". The connection of "pneumatic" with "physical" is an indication of a miraculous chain of events – actually an "Urwunder" – that makes God's Holy Ghost alive. Thus the apostle Paul testifies in Romans 8:11 and 2 Corinthians 3:6. When the Risen [Christ] after he appeared to certain people (such as Paul handed down the tradition in 1 Corinthians 15:5–8) it is being said that with the appearances, the Spirit of God revealed a new life – indeed *the* life. The new life does not only apply to Jesus the Crucified, but also to many other people. No person is excluded from this. This does indeed apply to the believers, in other words, the church of Jesus Christ that participates and ought to be part of the new life' (own paraphrased translation; emphasis by Fuchs).

4. See Robinson and Cobb (1964) amongst others.

in the publications about poetry of the 'later Heidegger' in 1937, and in Heidegger's reflections about Nietzsche's notion 'God is dead' in 1950. With this, both Fuchs and Ebeling are known for their nuanced difference with Bultmann that the 'that' of the historical Jesus is an indispensable part of theology and faith (and not only a 'presupposition' of theology). Ebeling and Fuchs (similar to Schleiermacher⁵) linked the language *about* God (*theology*, e.g. the 'logos' concept of the Gospel of John) with the language *of* God (*faith*, e.g. 'Lord', 'hallowed be thy name'). In this language of *being*, Jesus became a reality (Fuchs 1960:434).

Barth's Word-theology and Bultmann's concept of kerygma are strongly connected. Fuchs's and Ebeling's connection to the earlier Barth's dialectic theology – as well as the difference with the 'later Barth' as a result of his nonchalance with historical-critical exegesis (see Ebeling 1950:1–46; cf. Porter & Robinson 2011:214–216, 248) – is multifaceted and complex. For the purpose of this article, the only point of reference to Barth's so-called three proclaimed forms of the Word⁶ is mentioned, namely, that Jesus is the 'proclaiming Word, the 'proclaimed Word' and the 'proclaimed liturgy'. To me (A.v.A.), the connection to Bultmann's concept 'kerygma' deserves more attention.

Kerygma is not only the message of salvation of church worship that happens at a certain time and a certain place. It is much more a 'language-event' (*Sprachereignis/Wortgeschehen*) through which the salvation of God happens. For Bultmann, it means that the grace and salvation of God is experienced in the gospel that is *now* being preached, obeyed and lived. Kerygma does not articulate liturgical practices or human conventions, and the intention is also not that it should make a 'better' person of someone, but a 'new person'. Kerygma transcends dead letters and forms them into powerful words of the Spirit of God (see 2 Cor 3:5). The manifestation of these 'events of salvation' in the Bible was shaped in terms of the pre-modern mythological worldview and world of thought (in other words, in terms of observable objects and perceptible subjects). It is thus the task of theology to 'de-objectivate' God, that means de-mythologising. This process takes place in the kerygma. Kerygma is heard and lived when we are in a relationship with God – when transcendence is existentially and immanently experienced in the Lutheran sense of a dialectical between *coram Deo* and *coram mundo* (see Ebeling [1964] 2007:199).

Language events as hermeneutics – hermeneutics as language events

For Heidegger ([1927], 1963:38, 436), the expression *hermeneutics* is not an indication of the theory of understanding, rather the *process* of understanding itself. In this context also, Gadamer ([1960] 1994:512) proposes that

5. See Schleiermacher ([1893] 2008:40), who states it as follows: 'In the Gospel of John the concepts Logos [Word] and Son of God are statements about the relationship of the historical Christ [*geschichtlichen Christus*] with us, as well as his origin' (my translation of *Im Johannesevangelium sind die Begriffe des Logos und des Sohn Gottes Aussagen über das Verhältnis des geschichtlichen Christus zu uns und dessen Herkunft*).

6. See Otto Weber ([1955] 1964:195–2013): 'Das geschehene Wort'; 'Das bezeugte Wort'; 'Das verkündigte Wort'.

truth cannot be reached methodologically, but only *dialectically*. Strictly speaking, a method is not able to manifest new truths; it only explicitly brings to the fore the kind of truth that is already implicitly present in the method. In the *method*, it is the investigating subject that takes the lead, which exercises and manipulates control; in *dialectics*, it is *matter*, with which one has to become acquainted, that poses the question to which the investigating subject provides the answer. This dialectic process is called a *language event*.

Ebeling and Fuchs emphasised with their 'New Hermeneutics' the *meaning and power of language*. For Heidegger, it is the *Dasein* itself that finds expression in language. Language has not been invented by people, and it is not such that people express themselves in language. It is *language* itself that speaks and humankind is the human being insofar as he or she makes space for the ultimate divine 'Being' that speaks, in that he or she answers to the speak of the 'Being'. In brief, it amounts to what Schleiermacher already recognised that making sense of the meaning of the human existence is constituted by interactional dialogue. Humanity as 'being' exists by communicating and exists as 'being' where communication is being responded to. Humankind is human where the voice of the other as 'being' – and the voice of the ultimate divine 'Being' – is being heard and, based on the hearing and answer, finds a home. It is thus not humankind that gives birth to language; on the contrary, a *human being is born from language*. Language is not just an instrument of communication between people; it is a *happening*, an event that *brings something about*; it is the accomplishment of humankind as 'being'.

In conjunction with Bultmann's notion of 'kerygma',⁷ Fuchs talked about *Sprachereignis* and Ebeling talked about *Wortgeschehen* (see Fuchs [1954] 1970; Huxel 2004; Jüngel & Schunack 2003). Fuchs illustrated what is meant by *Sprachereignis* by pointing out that one does not call somebody a 'brother', simply based on biological data. No, somebody becomes a 'brother' or a 'sister' by *calling* him or her 'brother' or 'sister'. To call or name someone as such, a relationship is created and stabilised; the relationship becomes a reality. Language can therefore be described as an admission because it allows somebody to enter and as such exist in his or her genuine *Being*. Language therefore collects by bringing peoples together. Fuchs and Ebeling thus perceived language much more than the provision of information. One should not ask what words contain, rather what words can accomplish. For example, to speak *about* faith is different from words that *arouse* faith. Churchgoing people expect too much faith and the preaching of the Word during a liturgical

7. For some New Testament scholars, the 'kerygma' is entirely a post Easter tradition. Bultmann ([1948–1953] 1984:39), for example, believes that the imperative kerygma has for the Christ followers is the result of the value that the cross as salvation event has. The reason for the imperative is based on the events of the proclamation of the message of the cross – and precisely because this proclamation inextricably accompanies the preaching of the Resurrection. Christ as the crucified and the risen meets the Christ followers in the 'word of the preaching of the gospel (=kerygma)' and nowhere else. Faith in this 'word' is the true faith in the Resurrection. Regarding Bultmann's reception, it was not his understanding of the kerygma that provoked the most criticism, rather his conviction that in the New Testament the kerygma is dressed in ancient mythology and that the imperative of the kerygma can only be heard and answered by the modern believers, when the kerygma is demythologised from its ancient cultural drape (cf. Bartsch 1948).

service becomes a mere repetition of what is believed traditionally. The Bible should rather be *interpreted* for the person of today, but that does not mean that the original words can be *repeated* without any further question. To just repeat the original words may be meaningless for people under the present circumstances. For that reason, Ebeling suggested that the *same* word can only be meaningfully spoken for another era if it is spoken *differently*. Not only must the why and the wherefore of the text be expressed, but the *place* must also be found where this matter can today find fruitful ground to be planted in.

Bultmann was convinced that an existing life relationship and life context that is present with the exegete, with regard to the matter at hand, will make understanding possible. Such a thing as *voraussetzungslose* exegesis is not possible (see Bultmann [1961] 1993:142–150). It, however, comes down to something that sounds paradoxical, namely, what must be understood, must first be known. Because exegetes are part of a historical tradition, prejudices (*Vorurteile*) are inevitably present. Being conscious of these prejudices in which exegetes find themselves and which are based on historical and cultural tradition, they also become aware of the distance in time and circumstances between their time and the time in which the text originated. Only when exegetes are aware of this distance, they can *expand* the horizon of their own world until it merges with that of the text. Only then mutual consent (*Einverständnis*) is possible and a dialogue of *question and answer* between the exegete and the text can take place. However, it does not mean that the exegete is blind to what has *traditionally* been added, which could block access to the text. Exegetes should also be able to distance themselves from all traditional interpretation that does not do justice to the text. Exegetes thus come with their preliminary questions to the text. Their questions are probably not in all instances appropriate or correct, but the text will take over and will throw light on their situation. They are given the opportunity to pose their questions differently or to formulate them better because the more clearly the questions are formulated, the more understandably and clearly the text will provide the answer. In this manner, the exegete will again and again be enabled not only to interrogate the text about the matter under scrutiny, but the matter will be more strongly and clearly expressed in the situation in which the exegetes find themselves. And this is what hermeneutics is all about: the text from the past must be evaluated anew in the present, in today's situation. It must interpret the present, *throw light on the present*, and only then it can become an event of discussion in the present. In this way, the language of the text gives existence to a happening, an event of existential value.

Hence, it is essential, according to Fuchs, that the exegete be involved (*beteiligt*) to make possible a discussion, and therefore an understanding (cf. also Gadamer [1961] [1986] 1999:121–132). He illustrated this involvement of common, reciprocal understanding with reference to the situation in a family: persons of the same family do not speak with each other for them to understand each other, but because they

understand each other. According to Fuchs, the significance of the concept *Einverständnis* can be seen in the parables of Jesus (Linnemann [1961] 1966). Through *Einverständnis* the horizons of the worlds of the speaker and the listener meet each other and *merge* in order to accomplish a common world or ground of understanding. Through this a *new reality* comes into existence, and through this new world the person's old world changes and an end is put to the norms and preferences of the person. Every time that Jesus is met in the '(Word) chain of events', a new hope arises according to Ebeling (see Beutel 2012c:627). According to Fuchs ([1961] 1969:50), this type of understanding is not an exercise of the human mind. It is to live with God and to experience the joy and peace that accompanies such a life (Fuchs [1961] 1969). Authentic human existence, a life of happiness and peace does not mean that adversity, misfortune or fear will disappear. Only in God's presence can peace, happiness and love become a constant in a person's life (Fuchs [1961] 1969:155; see Huxel 2004:305).

The Jesus event reveals the true spirit of God's law: to let God's righteousness become a reality, to help others and to serve in love (see Jüngel & Schunack 2003:208). In this way, a person finds the truth in his or her everyday life to which the Jesus event refers. *Einverständnis* with God will result in a life of peace, love and happiness, and also makes *Einverständnis* possible with the other. It is precisely the other for whom the love is meant and together with whom the happiness can be experienced. Human beings have a choice as to wherein they try and find their fulfilment in life: in love, aimed at the other or in themselves (see Huxel 2004:310). Faith is the presence of God in humans for the sake of humans. A self-directed existence is unsettled and unfulfilled.

The 'hermeneutic event' as 'hermeneutic theology'

The concept 'hermeneutic theology' that was coined by Ebeling ([1965] 1969a:99–120; cf. Ebeling 1959:224–251) was taken over by Fuchs ([1954] 1970:116–137) – which has according to Bultmann ([1950] 1968:211–235) the aim of *Existenzverständnis* (authenticity), and that, in turn, is the result of a 'hermeneutic happening' (cf. Hamman 2009: 307–319). As a biblical scholar, Fuchs described these 'hermeneutic events' as language events, and Ebeling as a systematic theologian saw these as 'word happenings' that occur in homiletic preaching in the liturgical worship of the church (see Ebeling ([1958] 1967a:56–71); [1962] 1963; ([1965] 1969a:99–120; 1959:224–251; 1967b:343–371; 1969b).

Ebeling (1959:224–251) considered the ministry of the church as the 'hermeneutic key to Christology'. Bultmann also saw, from the perspective of theology (*Gotteslehre*), the *Daß* of the historical Jesus (Ebeling [1958] 1967a:65–71) as the key to an authentic existence.⁸ It is, however, not the historical

8. Ebeling (1967b:370) puts it as follows: [I]n der Christologie das *Daß* des Geschenseins, in der Gotteslehre das *Daß* des Existentiellen (In Christology, the *that* (*Daß*) which has happened historically [i.e. the whole life of the historical Jesus] is in the center; theology focuses on the existentially significance of the *Daß* [i.e. *that* which is expressed in Christology] (my translation).

investigation about factuality relating to the historical Jesus that is the hermeneutic key. The 'word event' – Jesus as 'finite' human being – is the door to God who is infinite, as formulated in Schleiermacher's frame of thought (cf. Brandt 1941:105–130). For Ebeling ([1958] 1967a:56–71), the Christian faith is for that reason thus 'really honest' (*konstitutiv*) when it relates to Jesus of Nazareth.⁹ The expression 'historical Jesus' assumes thus more than just an episode in the life of Jesus.¹⁰ For example, the emphasis should not only fall on either the Resurrection or the Sermon on the Mount as if they are separate events which a believer can choose to prefer the one as more essential than the other. Being serious about the *entire* life of the historical Jesus leads to being serious about the totality of life in reality.

For Ebeling, there exists a dialectic relationship between 'faith' and 'world'. According to him, you can only believe in this world because you do not believe in a vacuum (in other words, in a '*selbst errichtetes Ghetto* [self-constituted ghetto], a '*falscher Ort* [Beutel 2012c:261]) and you also do not believe in an outer world context. It is merely in the reality of this world that faith has meaning and leads the believer to deal solidarily-critically with worldly matters (cf. Beutel 2012c:261). Ebeling ([1965] 1969a:103) regarded 'true' and honest (*richtige, ehrliche*) theology to be in service of the realisation of the gospel in the present world.¹¹ According to this, the function of theology is to be of service to the world in which we now live.

An epilogue

Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs as a two-man team took Schleiermacher's and Bultmann's theology with their hermeneutics further. They remained loyal to Luther's conviction that the living ministry of the gospel (*viva vox*) is the focus of theology. They respected, as did Luther, Schleiermacher and Bultmann, Jesus as central to their theology and the Christian faith. They reminded the church and academic theology of their responsibility to the world. It is therefore understandable that Ebeling considered the witch-hunt by the 'right confessionals' on Bultmann as nonsense. This increased his appreciation for Bultmann and strengthened his friendship with Fuchs.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

9. Albrecht Beutel (2012c:277) formulates it as follows: 'According to Ebeling it is constituent for the Christian faith to absolutely hold onto the historical Jesus'. (*Für den christlichen Glauben ist nach Ebeling der Anhalt am historischen Jesus schlechterdings konstitutiv.*) (my translation).

10. Ebeling's biographer, Beutel (2012c:277), formulates it as follows: 'Faith does not represent only part of the teaching of Jesus, but the (totality of the) person and work of Jesus'. (*daß der Glaube nicht etwa nur einen Teilbereich der Lehre Jesu ausmachte. Vielmehr als der Inbegriff von Person und Werk Jesu zu verstehen sei.*) (my translation).

11. [I]m Dienst der Ausrichtung des Evangeliums an die heutige Welt emphasis original; see Beutel 2012c:261).

Authors' contributions

A.V.A. is the main author of this article which focuses on the hermeneutics of Fuchs and Ebeling, and T.V.W. is the main author of the first article in this series which focuses on the bibliographic notes about Ebeling.

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