

'Doctor of the Church': Gerhard Ebeling



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This article's point of departure is the camaraderie of two eminent Protestant theologians, Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs. From the perspective of Eberhard Jüngel, Ebeling is described as a 'doctor of the church'. Focusing on Ebeling's autobiographical notes, the article describes his upbringing in a solid churchgoing family, the effect of critical theological training in Marburg and the influence of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Rudolf Bultmann on his theological convictions. It points out Ebeling's interest in the Reformer Martin Luther. The article follows Ebeling's career in Zürich and Tübingen, and the way in which his visits to the US positively influenced his life and thinking.

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.

A prelude

With this collaboration, we would like to pay tribute by means of two articles to scholars who succeeded to interconnect church history with systematic theology and biblical hermeneutics. The German theologians Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs were such encyclopaedic scholars. The first article, entitled 'Doctor of the Church', focuses on bibliographic notes with regard to Ebeling's life story and his theological interest. In the second article, entitled 'Doctor of the Academy', the hermeneutics of Fuchs is the main theme, while not neglecting the focus on the close interrelationship between Fuchs and Ebeling.

Doctor of the Church – Gerhard Ebeling

Ein evangelischer doctor ecclesiae [an 'evangelic doctor of the church']!¹ This is the way in which Eberhard Jüngel described Ebeling on 2 October 2001, a few days after the death of the latter on 30 September 2001 when, in an obituary, he wrote a few words about him. Ebeling was, according to Jüngel, a 'reforming doctor of the church, a remarkable lecturer and clergyman (*Lehrer*), not only for students, but in particular for the church' (Jüngel 2001:1). He was not only a theologian *of* the church, but especially a theologian *for* the church. His whole existence was embedded in the church.

In this article, we are particularly interested in those biographical aspects that can help us to form a picture of the person Gerhard Ebeling and the manner in which his personhood and humanity formed his theology and led to his collegiality with the biblical scholar and hermeneutist Ernst Fuchs. At the beginning of *Mein theologischer Weg* (Ebeling, in Mühlner, Stoellger & Mauz 2006:7) Ebeling wrote that he has no intention of writing an autobiography; rather, he wants to give an account of his 'theological path'. In this article, 'snapshots' of his life story will be considered, which had defining influences on him and affected his direction with regard to his paradigm and theology. Some aspects will be emphasised more than others. For the purposes of this contribution, a few aspects were chosen, and for the readers familiar with Ebeling's and Fuchs's oeuvres there may be moments that have not been addressed.

Nobody practices theology in a vacuum. If somebody had asked Ebeling: 'Who is your teacher – whose student are you?' – he would have probably answered: 'Rudolf Bultmann's'. He is, however, also Dietrich Bonhoeffer's student. This depends on the focus or approach of the reader or researcher into Ebeling's life story: As far as hermeneutics is concerned, he is Bultmann's student; ecclesiastically, he is Bonhoeffer's student. Reinhard Schwarz (1979:159–160) (church historian in Munich) once wrote to Ebeling that no matter what he does, he (Ebeling) could not

1. In German, the term *evangelisch* refers to being a 'Protestant'. However, the term 'Protestant scholar' or 'Reformed scholar' is seldom used in the academic discourse. The title *doctor ecclesiae* [doctor of the church] is mainly used by the Roman Catholic Church for exceptional great theologians such as Augustine and Thomas of Aquino. When Jüngel applies this title to Ebeling, he implies that he regards Ebeling as one of the greatest theologians of all time.

detach himself from Bultmann's thinking. Ebeling recounted this to Bultmann with pride. Bultmann responded that it was a compliment and an honour when one of his students, who had achieved so much, refers to him in such a manner. But, Bultmann thought, this should be expressed differently: If Ebeling cannot detach himself from Bultmann's thought, it is not about Ebeling or Bultmann, it is rather the student and the teacher, who were both students of someone else: Martin Luther. In this regard, Ebeling's specific 'niche' can be characterised by three broad lines of development:

- the internalisation of the theology of Martin Luther, which is the golden thread of his life story
- his constant hermeneutic theology because of the influence of Rudolf Bultmann
- his existence as ecclesiastical theologian.

Ebeling did not practice theology or biblical hermeneutics for self-satisfaction or for solely scientific reasons, but only with regard to his embeddedness in the church. It is in this respect that Dietrich Bonhoeffer substantially influenced Ebeling.

Ebeling's methodology ('thought path') and epistemology (understanding of knowledge)

Ebeling's theology was a hermeneutic theology which significantly influenced the development of hermeneutics itself, as well as the subject field of hermeneutics, in that his approach (in collaboration with Fuchs) achieved the description 'new hermeneutics'. The *methodology* of Ebeling's theology is based on that of Schleiermacher's (cf. Lindbeck 1981:309–311), and with his ontology (how he reflected on the essence or being of things *an sich*) and epistemology (how he understood the phenomenon 'knowledge' and how he perceived the essence of things) he followed in the footsteps of Martin Luther.² To understand this in context, a brief overview of the relevant aspects of the theological hermeneutics of Schleiermacher as well as Luther is given.

The term 'methodology' almost literally means a 'thought path' (Greek *méthodos*) – a path along which a person finds his or her thoughts. Schleiermacher's legacy was the awareness or understanding that so-called believers and non-believers ontologically (through one's own eyes) look at life in the same manner. In other words, the manner in which life is understood is the same for everybody because everybody's 'head' works in the same way. Schleiermacher's argument (see Helmer 2005:232) brought the deep-rooted church legacy that existed since the time of orthodox scholasticism which states that there exists something like a *sacra hermeneutica* ['holy hermeneutics'] and a profane hermeneutics ('mundane hermeneutics') to an end. Since Schleiermacher, the dialectical interrelationship between 'universality' and 'particularity' has become an important

²Ebeling's 'relational ontology' includes aspects from Schleiermacher as well as from Luther. Schleiermacher's insight that theological concepts are formed on the basis of experience and Luther's understanding that the reality should be experienced 'relationally' flow from this relational ontology (Lindbeck 1981:310–311).

landmark in theology (cf. Schleiermacher, in Mueller-Vollmer 1992:89). In this regard, Schleiermacher was the first person to lecture on 'hermeneutics' as a scientific subject within the encyclopaedia of theological disciplines. For Schleiermacher, hermeneutics was not a 'recipe' to understand or a way to rigidly set the 'rules of interpretation'. Schleiermacher began to teach hermeneutics as a theory of the way in which the process of understanding works. He illustrated that 'understanding' is not formulaic, but according to the conceptualisation of a subject who approaches data as the object of investigation from an individual existential point of view (see Grondin [1991] 1994:70).

This 'thought path' (hermeneutics as methodology) had an important influence on Reformed theology since the Enlightenment. It was the beginning of the dialectical theology as thought path (methodology) by which the Bible, belief assertions or religious experience could be interpreted and the results could be articulated. Before Schleiermacher (see Grondin [1991] 1994:72–75), the notion 'dialectic' only referred to 'dialogue' in the rhetorical sense of the word. Dialectical, however, is mutual sense-making in terms of each other – white can meaningfully exist in terms of black and black can meaningfully exist in terms of white, while not making the white black and the black white. Each interacts with the other and from there the meaning arises.

When it comes to aspects of Luther's theological hermeneutics, it is important to note that the sole reason of the Reformation initiated by him was not to break away from the Roman Catholic Church. It was not that he no longer wanted to be a priest or that he wanted to establish a new church order. Luther's frame of reference was one of enrichment and accommodation, and consequently he struggled with the teaching-method underlying the scholasticism of Aristotle and Thomas of Aquino (see Ebeling [1964] 2007:89–92). Luther parted with scholasticism and began to realise that as minister of religion he could not feel at home in the concrete ecclesiastical world of a philosophically inflexible scholasticism which cannot accommodate a dynamic reading and understanding of Scripture as well as doctrine within their contexts of origin (*Art and Weise* of writing). He compared the difference between the world and the church with the difference between the law and the gospel (see Ebeling [1964] 2007:110–124). That was Luther's theological approach, which was renamed by Schleiermacher as the 'psychological interpretation' of Scripture, which is dialectically complemented to the 'grammatical', so-called 'technical interpretation' (cf. Mueller-Vollmer 1992:76).

According to Luther (his formulation based on Paul's formulation in 2 Corinthians 3:18), the strict adherence to the letter of the law in the Bible is something which will not endure (it is of short duration). That leads to death. The gospel leads to life, and in this manner Luther designed his famous 'two kingdom'– doctrine.

Ebeling internalised this and made it part of his theology. However, he did not follow Luther's 'thought path' because

Luther's methodology consisted of the manner in which he renounced scholasticism (it was probably a case of 'how the methodology should not look', rather than how it should look). Ebeling utilised Schleiermacher's 'thought path': The believer as a particular individual understands and believes in a universal manner. In joining Luther, he emphasises *coram Deo* [in the presence of God] but adds *coram mundo* [in the 'presence' of the world, i.e. in relationship to the world]³. One's 'thought path' therefore consists of being a person before God (*coram Deo*) and being a person in ('before') the world (*coram mundo*). These two aspects are in a dialectic relationship. God and the world are in a dialectic relationship: Your being-in-the-world creates a meaningful existence before God and your existence before God ensures that you exist meaningfully in the world. Ebeling could internalise such a hermeneutical approach partly because of his upbringing.

Ebeling's 'bios': Aspects of life and theology

Ebeling was born in 1912 into an ecclesiastical milieu and grew up within it. This is not a self-evident or obvious aspect. The German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, for example, did not grow up in an ecclesiastical setting. Moltmann found God in the desolation and by the unexpected grace of a prison camp. Prior to this experience of grace, during an incident in war, he was existentially subjected to the brutal death of a close friend during a bombardment in Hamburg in 1943 and he became for the first time, in his own words, 'a seeker after God' (Moltmann [1997] 1997:2, [2006] 2008:17). Forgiveness and hospitality offered by the 'enemy' helped the 'seeker' to become a 'finder'. Ebeling's life story differs because of his ecclesiastical milieu. His whole life was in the church. That is the reason why Jüngel described Ebeling as a *doctor ecclesiae*.

His period of study starts in Marburg in 1930

Right from the beginning of his studies, he became acquainted with and formed by Bultmann's hermeneutics (together with Dilthey and Heidegger, Schleiermacher was one of the greatest influences on Bultmann). In *Mein theologischer Weg* (Ebeling, in Mühler *et al.* 2006:7–8), he tells that he attended Bultmann's lectures on Galatians, Romans, John's Gospel and 2 Corinthians and after the lectures had frequent discussions with him, as to not annex him during the lecture.

Ebeling writes: *Der gesammelte Ernst von Bultmanns Paulus-Auslegung zog mich in seinen Bann* (Ebeling, in Mühler *et al.* 2006:8). During this time, on two occasions, he took part in seminars arranged by Bultmann and came into close contact with him. In this way, Ebeling also came into contact with

³In this respect, there are resemblances with the theology of Edward Schillebeeckx, the late theologian of the Roman Catholic Church. He argued for the replacement of the view of the *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* [outside of the church no salvation] with that of *extra mundum nulla salus* [outside the world where humanity exists no salvation]. With his background of Roman Catholicism, he tried to not limit 'being church' to only his theological tradition. For his time, this insight was radical (Van Wyk 2013:3 of 10).

other Bultmann thinkers (scholars) such as Gerhard Krüger (who, in turn, introduced Ebeling to the works of Heidegger and Hegel). Ebeling mentioned that he had other subjects as well, but that he was immensely interested in those specific New Testament lectures and subjects. It was also in Marburg that he 'discovered' Luther's thinking when he attended a seminar about the former's reformational actions and, seen from the perspective of the 'Reformation as social history', the subsequent peasants' revolt as one of the results produced by the Reformation (see Hillerbrand 1972:106–136) – especially Luther's social concern for students (see Spitz 1972:249–270). This became Ebeling's theological focus, and this focus culminated a few years later in his 1938 thesis about Luther's hermeneutics.

His fellow students at the residence made him aware that Emil Brunner had indicated his interest in making contact with 'conversation partners' with regard to scholars influenced by Bultmann's thinking, and that a scholarship was available with Brunner in Zürich. The political situation in Germany, however, made him return to Zürich rather than set on the immediate path of the realisation of his academic ideals.

He becomes a clergyman of the Confessing Church (*Bekennende Kirche*)

In 1935, when he had finished his formal theological examinations, Ebeling started with the early phase of the period during which he was becoming a clergyman. During the winter semester of 1936–1937, he studied at the 'underground' theological seminary at Finkelwalde – 'home' to the Confessing Church (the *Bekennende Kirche*), which demarcated itself from the social nationalism of Hitler and the Nazis. Here he met Dietrich Bonhoeffer who had come to the conclusion that it is not enough to dress and care for the wounds of the victims 'under the wheels of injustice' (Bonhoeffer 1965:226; cf. Wind 1991:65), but to force the wheels themselves to a standstill.

Ebeling previously encountered him at a distance in 1932 when Bonhoeffer spoke at the Berlin theological seminary about 'Is there something like Christian ethics?' (Beutel 2012:47). During the time of his term at Finkelwalde, a bond developed between them. Ebeling recalled how he and Bonhoeffer played table tennis together (he mentioned that Bonhoeffer was an extremely good table tennis player), as well as playing 'four-hand' piano (Beutel 2012:51).

Besides Bultmann's hermeneutics and Luther's relational theology, Bonhoeffer's ethics had an enormous impact on Ebeling – especially with regard to the relationship between the church and the world. A particular sermon written by Ebeling in 1940 is of relevance. He was already back in Germany. The sermons were only published in 1995 by Ebeling, entitled *Predigten eines Illegalen: 1933–1945* (Ebeling 1995; cf. Stroud 2013). He chose the title 'Illegal Sermons'

because he preached illegally in Berlin in a part of a church for members of the Confessing Church. The 'illegality' was situated in him not being an 'ordained minister of the church', but probably because of the sentiments of the Confessing Church towards National Socialism. In the specific sermon, he referred to the Nazi's systematic process of programme to wipe out everybody that was 'aimless and discardable' – that was *Aktion T4* (cf. Stroud 2013:50). Under the banner of 'The general Charitable Foundation for Care' and by means of transport by the 'General Welfare Transport Society', patients (people who could not contribute to the German superpower), who required care by others, were transported by train and subsequently murdered. When the 'target number' of 70 000 deaths was reached, Hitler gave orders that other 'patients' should be killed by starvation and lethal medication, rather than through gassing. Family members received 'forged death certificates'.

It were the parents of one of the 'useless people', who also received a forged death certificate, who from another congregation in Berlin came to pastor Ebeling with the news that their son had been killed by the government. The government sent the son's ashes in a container to them and they asked Ebeling to conduct a memorial service for him. Ebeling, in preparation for the service and sermon, made enquiries in Berlin about similar cases. He made a frightening discovery. He referred in his sermon to Jesus' welcoming of the least and the lesser ones (Mt. 18:10) of society and Jesus' command to regard each person as God's beloved child – and he preached that God does not tolerate oppression 'of these little ones' (Ebeling 1995; cf. Stroud 2013).

As was the case for Jürgen Moltmann, and also for Karl Barth, for Ebeling the German political situation had an enormous influence on his theology. Thus is the role of the church in the world realised in Ebeling's theology which was significantly influenced by Bonhoeffer's theological reaction to National Socialism in Germany.

His theological work takes place as a coming and going between Tübingen and Zürich

During the first Tübingen phase (1946–1956), Ebeling fulfilled an important role as dean. During this period, there was pressure to suspend Fuchs and also a call for Bultmann to be placed under ecclesiastical discipline. It is likely that, because of Luther's influence on his understanding of reality, Ebeling promoted tolerance rather than ecclesiastical discipline and excommunication (see Beutel 2012:158–162).

In 1948, he met Ernst Fuchs – also a student of Bultmann – who greatly influenced Ebeling's move from Church History to Systematic Theology in 1954 (Ebeling 1998:159–160; cf. Beutel 2012:140–150). In the same year, Ebeling filled the chair of Systematic Theology that was left vacant by the

Protestant theologian Helmut Thielicke (1908–1986), an active member of the Confessing Church who was dismissed by the Nazi regime as professor of theology at Heidelberg in 1940. After the war, he served as professor and rector at the University of Tübingen until 1954 and subsequently appointed as rector of the University of Hamburg. He served in this capacity from 1960 to 1978 (see his autobiography, *Notes from a wayfarer*, Thielicke [1995] 1999).⁴

In 1956, Ebeling left for Zürich to fill the position of Systematic Theology there after Emil Brunner's retirement (Ebeling 1998:159–160). It is noteworthy that he was also appointed dean in Zürich. His visits to the USA also had a great influence on his life and theology (Beutel 2012:237–242), especially the manner in which he was received there made a great impression on him.⁵

In 1965, his second Tübingen phase began. The subject of his research during this time was the legacy of the Reformation (with emphasis on the heritage of Martin Luther), and in 1968 he returned to Zürich for the last phase of his academic career. During this time, he discovered the influence that Luther and Schleiermacher had on his own theological 'thought path'.

He writes in his journal (*Schwarzes Tagebuch*) until almost the end

During most of his life, he enjoyed good health – with a visit to the dentist here and there (Beutel 2012:528). As a matter of fact, on the evening of his 72nd birthday (1984), he records his gratitude for his good health in his journal:

*Solang ich hier noch leben darf,
Will ich mich dessen freuen,
Zumal ich meinen Anker warf
Im Leben dort, dem neuen.*

In 1993, he had a heart attack and thereafter his health was no longer the same. He tried to practice theology – in fact literally until the day of his death. He wrote daily in his *Schwarzes Tagebuch* [black journal book] and recorded his weakened health and decreased theological work therein: *Kein gutes Befinden, ziemlich müde, extrem müde, Weiterarbeit nicht gelungen, schlechterdings nichts getan* [no good realisations, tired, really tired, no further work took place, horribly enough – nothing has been done].

About four years ago, I [T.v.W] learnt from an unexpected source that:

... there are people for whom the action of reading is only that of a road sign, whereas writing is saved for the chequebook. One may not judge, everyone digs his own grave ... but one of the

⁴Thielicke was known for his critique against both Karl Barth's negativity towards 'natural anthropology' and Rudolf Bultmann's hermeneutical programme of demythologisation.

⁵It is interesting to note that Jürgen Moltmann had a similar experience during his first and subsequent visits to the USA. The contrast to the stiff German theological context was liberating for Moltmann ([2006] 2008:131–147).

most positive and healing activities is that to write down one's thoughts. That teaches one to organise one's thinking, to make sense of the running around and to shake parts of the brain from a deep sleep ...⁶

The manner in which Ebeling – almost until his death – expressed his thoughts and the theological development in daily written entries into his journal is the foremost aspect that one needs to know about him: It is witness to a deep spirituality which takes the acuteness of reality into account (*coram Deo, coram mundo*). But perhaps even more: It is a testament of someone who could examine his own hypotheses and think about them in a dialectical manner: a religious-spiritual and critical theologian.

At four o'clock on the morning of 30 September 2001, Gerhard Ebeling passed away.

A last thought: *Coram Deo, coram mundo* (before God, before the world)

In the obituary that Jüngel wrote 3 days after the death of Ebeling and in which he referred to him as *ein evangelischer doctor ecclesiae*, he starts with the question: 'Ist Leben lehrbar?' It is rather difficult to reproduce it verbatim, to translate it into English. Perhaps literally in English, it can be translated as 'Is life teachable?' Jüngel acknowledges that it is a simple but deceptive question. He in fact asks the question to be able to probe the depth of Ebeling's life and theology. He therefore actually poses a question to which the life of Ebeling is the answer. Perhaps the question could be translated in terms of meaning as: 'Is ethos theology?' Jüngel's answer is 'yes' – because Ebeling's life and death are testimony to that. By doing theology and preaching (doctrine) you existentially create a space for the gospel in life and death, in your own life as a theologian and in the lives of everyone (students or church members) that cross your path. The Latin phrase, *Media vita in morte sumus* – 'in the midst of life we are in the midst of death' (with the implication: 'in the midst of death we are in the midst of life'), which represents an important truism in Paul's and Luther's thinking⁷ – is expressive of Ebeling's *bios*. This was also the choice of Jesus, and that is

6.The writer, philosopher, artist and entrepreneur Nataniël (2004) refers in this manner to the few open pages that appear in his first *Kaalkop* book. He encourages people to practice emotional intelligence (self-understanding) by leaving a few pages blank on which you can arrange your thoughts amidst the precariousness and frequently disjointedness of the human condition. The attitude towards life, as shown by Ebeling, to keep a 'Black Journal', is also found in other theologians, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The previous complete reference to Nataniël appears in the reference list.

7.This influence in Ebeling's theology originated from Martin Luther (Jüngel 2001:2). In 1524, Luther transformed and translated the Latin as *Mythen wir ym leben synd*, as it is recorded in the German Evangelisches Gesangbuch und Gotteslob, Lied 518, 'Mitten wir im Leben sind' (Luther [1524], *Eyn Enchiridion oder Handbüchlein*):

Mitten wir im Leben sind
Mit dem Tod umfängen.
Wen such'n wir, der Hülfe tu',
Daß wir Gnad' erlangen?
Das bist du, Herr, alleine!
In the midst of life, behold
Death has girt us round.
Whom for help then shall we pray,
Where shall grace be found?
In Thee, O Lord, alone!

(transl. Catherine Winkworth, *Lyra Germanica* [1862]).

what the Christian believes and confesses. This is the ethos that the minister of religion lives existentially.

Ebeling learned from Luther that a Reformed theologian is determined by the relationships in which he or she partakes. That is, the relationship with and in the presence of God (*coram Deo*) and the relationship with and the presence in the world (*coram mundo*). Therefore, theology, according to Ebeling, has to do with accountability (*Mein theologischer Weg*): To give account of (to answer to) the Word that has been given to us and the responsibility to do it 'before the world' (amidst, in relationship with the world). In this regard, the theologian is on a lifelong journey, or on a lifelong 'thought path'. Ebeling's life testifies of that. His friendship and spiritual association with Ernst Fuchs formed an important element of this 'thought path'.

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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.

Authors' contributions

T.v.W. is the main author of the first article which focuses on the bibliographic notes about Ebeling and A.G.v.A. is the main author of the second article which focuses on the hermeneutics of Fuchs and Ebeling.

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