To Give an Account of Hope (2008)

By Gerhard Sauter

I was born on May 4, 1935, in Kassel (Hesse), in the middle of Germany. The ancestors of my father, Swiss Mennonites, emigrated to Southern Germany in the seventeenth century to 'seek the welfare of the city' (Jer. 29:7) by striving for truthfulness and keeping peace, at the same time guarding the integrity of their faith. I hope that something of this heritage is still effective in my genes. The father of my mother Adelheid was a Basel missionary in Northern China. He, his wife who came from a missionary family active in Africa, and their newborn child survived the Boxer rebellion in 1900.

My father, Hermann Sauter, served as a minister in a little industrial town near Kassel. He had been called there to reconcile the parish that was split into several factions, especially of rigid evangelicals and Pentecostals. Religious disagreement was intensified by political controversies in the 1930s. Many people were unemployed and economic exploitation for decades had caused social tensions, diseases, and spiritual impoverishment. In 1934, my father joined the Confessing Church, resisting the so-called German Christians who supported Hitler's policy. He was accused, for example, of insulting the German nation because he had preached about the guilt of the German people. Conducting a funeral on January 27, 1945, he died of a heart attack, worn out by the struggles he had faced in those troubling times, at age 45. At his burial service there were the first signs of a reconciled parish. Three months later, the parsonage was destroyed at the end of the war, and my mother, who had supported my father in his work, suffered from a lasting illness.

These early experiences molded my childhood and later formed my studies as well as my teaching of theology. The disunity between Christians has always challenged my perception of the unity of the church and its grounding. To become more acquainted with the social impact of Christian life, I wrote an essay about *German Protestantism Facing Social Tasks in the Nineteenth Century* in my last year at high school. During my later teens, Otto Salomon, a Jewish Christian, a poet, writer, and publisher, a friend of my father, introduced me into the life and work of Johann Christoph Blumhardt (1805-80) and his son, Christoph Blumhardt (1842-1919). The Blumhardts had been charismatic Swabian ministers who proclaimed the coming kingdom of God prefigured by signs of reconciliation healing body and soul. God's reigning power breaks in and simultaneously opens the suffering human being for faith and hope, for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in unexpected ways, shattering the self-perception of human beings and of their views of the state of the world. Blumhardt father and son opposed the individualism and self-containment of the piety characterizing many of their contemporaries. The younger Blumhardt extended the proclamation of the coming kingdom of God to the social and political conflicts of his time. My father had learned from this message that 'God is with those who are broken and still growing.' Otto Salomon was married to a granddaughter of the younger Blumhardt and had to emigrate to Switzerland in 1938. In him the spirit of the prophets was alive. His sharp warning of any church's self-satisfaction remains with me. He used to say that 'only he who is shaken endures.'

Another crucial element of my father's small legacy was his evaluation of Rudolf Bultmann's program of demythologization (1941): the interpretation of the biblical, to a large extent mythological language, especially the talk of God's acting in a way that is comprehensible to the modern mind. The leaders of the Confessing Church in Hesse, of which Bultmann also was a member, had asked my father to look into the effects of this hermeneutical project on the tasks of the church. My father agreed with some intentions of Bultmann's work, but

objected to what he considered its anthropological reduction. He concluded that Protestant theology is far behind other sciences and humanities in portraying the whole scope of human existence as it is called, justified, and sanctified by God in the context of God's whole work. After decades of participation in theological research and education, I am convinced that the task of a comprehensive theological anthropology is still unfulfilled, and I will try to contribute whatever I can to accomplish it.

In 1954-59 I studied theology and philosophy at the universities of Tübingen und Göttingen. Afterwards, the Blumhardt family provided me with sermons, documents of pastoral counseling, reports, and unpublished writings for my ThD thesis on *The Kingdom of God According to the Elder and the Younger Blumhardt* (1962). In 1961-62 I got my practical pastoral training in the Protestant Church in Kurhessen and Waldeck and was ordained in 1962. In the same year, I married Annegrete, a teacher, who later worked in a school for disabled children. Her experiences with suffering adolescents became an important influence on my theology.

In 1962-64 I wrote my second thesis to be qualified as a university professor (*Habilitationsschrift*), entitled *Future and Promise: The Problem of the Future in Contemporary Theological and Philosophical Discussion* (1965). Here I argued how the perception of 'future' depends on ontological as well as linguistic presuppositions to have critical importance. 'Promise' is the leading category of theology, opposing any kind of self-explanation of human beings who are only trying to stabilize their world. God is promising God's action, and God is acting in a promising way. It is a characteristic of God always to reserve further action for Godself, and yet to cast a hint of that future action into the present as a promise. I also tried to integrate biblical-theological insights about the relation of promise and fulfillment. Walther Zimmerli, my teacher of Old Testament studies, had told us that God works on God's promises in a surprising way, shaping our expectations, not confirming and closing them. Fulfillment does not mean the execution of something predicted by God. In contrast, fulfillment characterizes the very special way and manner God acts to pursue the divine will. Therefore, fulfillment often shatters expectations based on God's promises; it reshapes them and leads to a renewed hope. This constitutes a new perception of our 'being in time,' forming an *Eschatological Rationality* (1996).

Later, I often have been asked how my approach relates to Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* (published in Germany in 1964). Independently from each other, we searched for the grounding of Christian theology that is always shaped by eschatology. We were both interested in *The Principle of Hope* of the Jewish and Neo-Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch (1959, ET 1986). Bloch favored hope as vigorous, stimulating human energy to imagine possibilities and to anticipate their reality in order to put them into effect. Moltmann adapted Bloch's intention. He interpreted biblical promises as real-utopian goals that move us to grasp what is really possible in this world and to realize it towards the promised future of the justice, life, and kingdom of God. While Moltmann's work was and is related primarily to political hermeneutics, I concentrated more on the implications of 'hoping against hope' (Rom. 4:18) for Christian spirituality and the characteristics of Christian God-talk. Eschatology should be a touchstone for arguing theologically in general. In later writings, I emphasized that God confirms in Jesus Christ God's promises of everlasting life, justice, peace, rest in God, immediate vision of God. Everlasting life is prefigured in the communion with Christ, justice in the justification of the godless by faith, peace in the community of the justified sinners and in keeping the unity of faith, hope, and love. Resting in God is prefigured in the sharing of the body and blood of Christ, immediately seeing God in looking at Christ in prayer. These are only some signs of the dramatic reading of God's promises in the narratives of Israel in the light of the Christ-story, a reading that started with the New Testament and is going on in church history. Ethical tasks must be judged by the relation of promise and fulfillment. In this way,

eschatology needs to be reconsidered as giving an account of hope, as being 'accountable to everyone who raises questions about the hope that is in you' (1 Pet. 3:15), questions caused by passions and actions, ways of life and preparations to die (*What Dare We Hope?* (1999)).

In 1965, I was called to teach systematic theology at the University of Göttingen. Three years later I succeeded Wolfhart Pannenberg at the University of Mainz. In those years, the so-called critical theory of the Frankfurt School, a Neo-Marxist social philosophy (Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Jürgen Habermas), influenced many theologians and intensified a crisis of traditional hermeneutics to be replaced by political analysis and sociological reconstruction of all areas of culture. I also became acquainted with representatives of the opposing philosophical party, the Neo-Positivists (Karl R. Popper, Hans Albert, and others). Both positions challenged me to ask again for the characteristics of arguing theologically, and they led me to studies in theory of science (*Wissenschaftstheoretische Kritik der Theologie*, 1973) - an opportunity to exchange some views with Pannenberg.

Theology as a discipline of reasoning is characterized by an intrinsic rationality that is valid whether its communication is internal or external. While theologians make themselves understandable to those who do not assent to what they argue, they cannot submit the rationality of their arguments to any vague universality, even to universal moral values. In the 1970s I could test this in a series of interdisciplinary debates on philosophy, sociology, and psychology of religion as well as in a working group discussing features of religious language with Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur in Paris for many years. These studies resulted in a theological and philosophical essay on *The Question of Meaning* (1982; ET 1995).

In 1972, I received a call from the faculty of Protestant theology of the University of Bonn; we moved there in 1973. In 1976 I became Director of the Ecumenical Institute. The interchange with Roman Catholic theologians, already begun in Mainz, was extended and deepened. I taught twice in the ecumenical studies program at the Dormition Abbey in Jerusalem. The encounter with Orthodox theology drew my attention to the interaction of liturgy and theology. In the following years I was able to establish some partnerships: with the Faculty of Theology of the University of Oxford, which made me an external member in 1990, with the Theological Academy in Warsaw, which educates all non-Catholic students of theology in Poland, with the Divinity School of Duke University, Durham, NC (USA), where I was visiting professor in 1979 and 2003, and with the Faculty of Protestant Theology of the Charles University in Prague since 1995. The exchange with English and North American colleagues and students enriched me enormously by their way of thinking, arguing and debating that is quite different from the German tradition. One of the fruits of the exchange with colleagues of Oxford was a research project on *Revelation and Story: Narrative theology and the centrality of story* (edited with John Barton, 2000). I am grateful that I could contribute something to improve theological education and training of graduate students in Poland. I also became a partner of a group of young Hungarian theologians led by my friend Ervin Valyi-Nagy, who had resigned his teaching position in Budapest because of political suppression. These experiences of doing theology under very difficult circumstances and often disturbed by misleading church politics cast a fresh and often exposing light on church and theology in Germany and in the Western hemisphere in general as well as on some tendencies of the policy of the World Council of Churches toward Eastern Europe. In particular, I regarded highly the theological thinking that developed in East Germany, less vain and interspersed with personal attitudes than in West Germany.

The participation in three consultations at the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, Switzerland, in 1972-74 was instructive and formative (cf. the documentation *Doing Theology Today*, ed. by Choan-Seng Song, 1976). There I noticed both a readiness for a pluralism of different

theologies that can hardly communicate with one another and the tendency to establish a new framework of doing theology by referring to 'contextual' preconditions. This led me to consider again the basic questions: What is truth in theology? How are substantial theological understanding and a forward-looking agreement possible which neither avoid inevitable conflicts by cheap tolerance nor rely on a common denominator found by an overarching worldview and by rigid moral intentions, for example, social justice and peace? If ecumenical discussion is confined to particular experiences, referring only secondarily to the Bible and perhaps, marginally, to confessional doctrinal traditions, how is theological significance of these experiences to be assessed? How are we able to distill genuine theological insights which are decisive to the whole Christian world family from historical or actual differences? How can we evade the temptation that theologians may merely depict their own biographical experiences and make themselves the subject matter of theology?

Here my analytical training helped me to distinguish between the context of discovery and the context of validation. The context by which we may discover perceptions to be addressed by theological arguments covers all the factors that in some way promote insights or contribute to significant findings. There may be different contexts of discovery: socio-cultural and economic conditions, gender relations, participation in the history of a church, of a nation or of a wider cultural setting, public affairs, etc. The context of validation (or justification) is the interrelation of statements that seek to follow the scope of God's work. Our theological integrity is precisely at this point at stake. Are we finally going to speak mainly of ourselves, of our feelings, of our wrestling with the conditions of life, of our social role, and of God only in so far as God enables and forces us to execute what we understand as God's will? The theological context of validation is a context in the strict and precise sense of the linguistic context in which we move. It is an open one, yet it is still coherent and consistent, so that it can support individual arguments and allow us to reject anything which may be said in disbelief. This specifically theological context is based on the interpretation of the Scripture and is continually nurtured by the art of reading the Scripture. It is developed by theological experiences in thinking that form dogmatics.

No fear of dogmatics! I am aware that the term 'dogmatics' is widely suspected today, even in some Catholic circles, of being outdated or repressive. A dogma seems to restrain and to hinder our freedom, it seems to be only a burden of tradition. Dogmatics is accused of closing all discourse instead of opening it. But carefully investigated, dogmatics relies on tried and tested experiences in thinking to be thought through again and developed further. It is a movement in thinking that is addressed by God's immense, tireless, and often disturbing actions and blessed with the abundance of God's promises. Therefore, dogmatics can encourage us to take seriously contextual relations of our doing theology. But it helps us to distinguish between the living source of proclamation and any derivation of theology from conditions that can be mastered by reflection on that situation, by its analysis, and by coping with its problems. Dogmatic statements assert who God is, what God has done, and what God has promised to accomplish. If these statements are linked with the freedom of faith and hope, they encourage us to be outspoken about what has been entrusted to us. This requires responsible reflection on what needs to be said under all circumstances, in a way that does not neglect the empirical context while not being determined by it either. The most crucial dogmatic statements were developed to clarify or to correct theologically church practices that had been distorted. Many statements were established as an explanation of the inner grounding and intrinsic rationality of church practices.

I hope to contribute more to this debate by two recent books: *Gateways to Dogmatics: Reasoning Theologically for the Life of the Church* (2003) and *Protestant Theology at the Crossroads: How to Face the Crucial Tasks for Theology in the Twentieth-First Century* (2007). I

wrote most parts of these publications as a member of the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey, where I could stay for several times from 1988 until 2003. There I found dialogue partners from various parts of the world, theologians, philosophers, historians, and scientists. I was involved in the Pastor-Theologian program of the Center that drew attention to the ordained ministry as a theological vocation and to the church as a theological community. I also shared in two projects of the Center, reported in *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology* (edited by John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker, 2000) and in *God and Human Dignity* (edited by R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead, 2006). The second topic inspired me to extend and to consolidate my studies on theological anthropology. The first combined my lasting interest in eschatology as well as in a dialogue with scientists, mainly because a serious examination of cosmology in German theology has been absent for a very long time, at least since A Ritschl, with the exception of Karl Heim.

In 1990, Princeton Theological Seminary called me to be the first Professor of Theology and Science there. This offer attracted me very much because the relationship between the natural sciences and theology is taken into account much more in the United States than in Germany. It would have been also challenging to work in a new context of discovery. But just after the unification of Germany and facing the new situation in Europe, my wife and I felt that we should stay in Bonn, among other reasons to continue the ecumenical obligations in a rapidly changing East Europe.

A grant made it possible to initiate and to supervise a three-year documentation and evaluation of the criteria of theological decisions of the Hungarian Reformed church in the period 1967-92. Many of these decisions were intended to overcome the guilty feeling of former wrong political judgments and of omissions in social life: Obedience of faith meant to refer to God's will as it is manifest in progress, often synonymous with the Marxist concept of history that promised to save humankind, and critical attitudes to it were suspected of lacking faith. After the political change in 1989-90, there was often the acclamation of the opposite political option. This justification of church politics by a concept of 'God in history' significantly differed from the efforts of some (not of all) German Protestant theologians and church leaders to confess the guilt of the German Protestant church, its complicity in the rise of National Socialism and the cruelty of World War II. In October 1945, the *Stuttgart Declaration* was presented by members of the Confessing Church to an ecumenical delegation. The German church leaders confessed to God, who judges and reconciles, as well as to brothers and sisters. The confession of guilt was used in public worship, hoping that a new beginning may be possible.

In 1985 I had published a theological interpretation about the *Stuttgart Declaration*, asking, How can Christians confess their guilt? How can they speak of a new beginning? Preparing this essay I often talked with Hellmut Traub (1904-94) who had as a student assisted Karl Barth during Barth's years in Bonn (1930-35), became a friend of Barth, suffered in a concentration camp and did pastoral counseling to imprisoned Nazis after the war. Traub helped me to understand more of the turbulences of the Third Reich, of the disastrous situation of Germany after 1945, and of the theological conflicts addressing this situation. He informed me about the life and work of Karl Barth much better than my theological teachers could. Traub was critical about Barth's move to an ethical attestation of theological insights since 1938.

When I began to study Barth's writings, especially the early ones, in the later 1950s, I was prepared by the theology of the Blumhardts, who had influenced Barth and his friends. In 1971 I was together with Nelly, Barth's widow, assigned to edit Barth's sermons of 1913. In 1982 I edited the first volume of Barth's *Christian Dogmatics in Outline* (1927). The lively

dialogue with Traub and Hinrich Stoevesandt, the archivist of Barth's work in Basel, led me to revise some of my earlier difficulties concerning dialectical theology (Barth, Emil Brunner, Rudolf Bultmann, Friedrich Gogarten, and Eduard Thurneysen). It intensified my doubts about the criticism initiated, for instance, by Paul Tillich and Wolfhart Pannenberg, and it helped me to understand dialectical theology both in its own period and in its continued value. Besides these and other editions, I served as one of the editors on the journal *Evangelische Theologie*, where I still am a member of the editorial board, as well as the editor of *Verkündigung und Forschung* and of the series *Theological Library*.

An area of doing theology that always stimulated me is to write 'sermon-meditations' as developed especially by Hans Joachim Iwand, one of my predecessors in Bonn and a Lutheran theologian leading in the Confessing Church. Sermon-meditations are a link to the life of the church. They follow the lectionary and combine the exegesis of biblical texts with examples of the history of interpretation, theological reflection, and homiletic suggestions. From this task results a project that I hope soon to accomplish: a theology of the church year. The main dogmas of the early church were directed to the sequence of the ongoing story of Jesus Christ and to the structure of worship. They must be interpreted within this context. In celebrating the great acts of God through the church year we experience an awareness of time that is different from our adaptation to the cycle of the seasons. The rhythm of the church year permits us constantly to begin once again and yet to move forward, although even step-by-step we can never catch up with the fullness of God's acting. Therefore, the church year nourishes dogmatics. It invites us to accept God's creative acting and thus to be attentive to God's promises and their fulfillment. It trains us in memory and hope.

Source: *Shaping a Global Theological Mind*, ed. Darren C. Marks (Aldershot-Burlington: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 145-152.