

Introduction

Hans Urs von Balthasar's presentation and interpretation of Karl Barth's theology has fallen on hard times. Once heralded as a landmark analysis of Barth's theology (even by Barth himself), and a breakthrough in ecumenical relations, Balthasar's interpretation finds fewer and fewer takers. Significant Protestant theologians charge him with an inaccurate periodization and understanding of Barth's conversion(s) from liberalism, as well as an inadequate recognition of Barth's central theological insight. Balthasar failed to see the radical implications Barth contributed to theology when he placed the doctrine of election within the doctrine of God. Significant Catholic theologians claim that Barth misled Balthasar. His preoccupation with Barth resulted in the loss of a robust doctrine of nature and a rejection of metaphysics, especially the *analogia entis*, as the condition for theology. The following work defends Balthasar's interpretation of, and preoccupation with, Karl Barth against these significant theological voices. The charges miss the heart of Balthasar's interpretation of Barth and divert attention away from the significant ecumenical and theological achievement their friendship and work produced. What follows is more than a defense of the specific argument Balthasar presented in his 1951 published work, *Karl Barth: Darstellung und Deutung Seiner Theologie* (*Karl Barth: Presentation and Interpretation of His Theology*); it defends the theological and ecumenical fruit of their friendship and conversation. Balthasar's preoccupation with Barth, beginning in the 1930s and extending until the end of his life, led to a remarkable theological achievement.¹

My argument does not defend Balthasar or Barth's theology per se; it defends Balthasar's preoccupation with understanding, presenting, and discussing the "enigmatic cleft" between Catholic and Protestant Christianity Barth identified. Balthasar acknowledged Catholicism lost something significant with this cleft, and he refused a self-satisfied Catholic theology that dismissed the Reformed Barth out of hand. His refusal brought attacks upon him from both Catholic and Protestant sides. A lesser person might have given up trying to present Barth to Catholics, and Catholicism to Barth, and thereby to Protestants in general. Some theologians think Balthasar did give up after Barth's death and turned away from the Catholic-Protestant rapprochement

1. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Karl Barth: Darstellung und Deutung Seiner Theologie* (Köln: Jakob Hegner, 1951).

present in his early work. But that too, I think, misstates Balthasar's post—Vatican II concerns. It was because of his engagement with Barth that he worried about Vatican II developments. Rather than dismissing him as a conservative reactionary who abandoned his earlier preoccupation, his preoccupation with Barth helps make sense of his later concerns. The following argument, then, is not an example of Barthian or Balthasarian scholasticism. Neither of them is innocent of theological and moral errors. It is, instead, a defense of the conversation between them and of a way of doing theology that involves friendship rather than conquest. Significant theological fruit came from their conversation. I fear that conversation is not being taken up and built upon by contemporary theologians. Instead, we find a retrenchment to positions prior to their conversation that now threatens their ecumenical fruit, a fruit that often occurred despite them.

In order to defend Balthasar's preoccupation with Barth and its ecumenical fruit, six steps are necessary. The first step is to tell the story of that friendship; it is not well known, largely because Balthasar never publicly acknowledged the difficulties he had in presenting and interpreting Barth's work.² Chapter 1, "An Unlikely Friendship: Balthasar's 'Conversations' with Barth," tells that story up to the publication of Balthasar's book on Barth in 1951 and a brief reaction to it in 1953. The history ends at that point because a second step in the story is necessary before properly situating their ongoing conversations in the 1950s and 1960s. The complexity of Balthasar's interpretation must be recognized in all its fullness, and this is what some of the charges brought against Balthasar neglect. Chapter 2, "Presenting and Interpreting Karl Barth," offers a careful analysis of Balthasar's published book on Barth, placing that book within its long and complicated history prior to its 1951 publication. Situating the book within that history results, I hope, in a different and more nuanced reading than interpretations that focus either on Balthasar's supposed twofold periodization of Barth's conversions (where Balthasar merely restates Barth's own words) or one that wrongly suggests Balthasar loses a Catholic understanding of nature. Only after these two steps are accomplished can the third be taken. Chapter 3, "Collapse of Balthasar's Interpretation," examines the reasons contemporary Protestants and Catholics critique and/or dismiss Balthasar's presentation and interpretation of Barth; it also questions, in light of chapters 1 and 2, if they

2. One significant exception is Manfred Lochbrunner's "Die Schwere Geburt Des Barth-Buches von Hans Urs Von Balthasar: Ein Betrag Zur Werkgenese," in Manfred Lochbrunner, *Hans Urs von Balthasar und seine Theologen-Kollegen: Sechs Beziehungsgeschichten* (Würzburg: Echter, 2009), 406–49. Although I was able to do some archival research in Basel that adds to his story, I remain deeply indebted to Lochbrunner's archival research published in this excellent book.

have taken into account the nuances of Balthasar's interpretation. The purpose of this chapter is primarily negative. It addresses the question if the new, modern interpretation of Barth's theology leads us toward the retrenchment and widening of the cleft between Catholic and Protestant positions that repeats where Barth and Balthasar began, but never arrives where they concluded.

The next three steps in the argument are more constructive. They address the question of what positive theological gains arose from Balthasar and Barth's theological friendship. Balthasar identified the essential issue between himself and Barth as the "realm" within which theologians pursue knowledge of God and ethics. He was both for and against Barth in identifying the proper realm for theology and ethics. He learned from Barth's christological renaissance even when he critiqued him for a christological "constriction." Because of the latter, Balthasar argued, Barth failed to take into account ecclesial agency. The advances occurring from their friendship, then, are found in the doctrine of God, theological ethics and—to a lesser extent—ecclesiology, each of which is discussed in the final three chapters.

Balthasar's preoccupation with Barth did not end with his 1951 publication. In some sense, it only began. They continued to discuss theology, vacation together, and address the perplexing division between Protestants and Catholics. Their ongoing friendship in the 1950s and 1960s will be taken up in the final three chapters. However, Balthasar's preoccupation with Barth did not end with Barth's death in 1968. Toward the end of his life, Balthasar was still presenting Barth's work and arguing that his doctrine of God set forth God's glory better than most theologians ancient or modern. Chapter 4, "The Realm of God," explains what Balthasar saw in Barth: the overcoming of a nominalist doctrine of God that could not adequately express God's glory. Balthasar found Barth's doctrine of the divine perfections in *Church Dogmatics* 2.1 beautiful; that he did so is unsurprising. Anselm's aesthetic approach to theology appealed to Barth, and he cited its beauty as essential for understanding his dogmatic turn. Balthasar took Barth at his word. Chapter 5, "The Realm of Ethics," shows how Barth offered something of a theological revolution, or perhaps retrieval, in Christian ethics. What Balthasar does to moral theology is similar. Because theology is no rigid system with carefully ordered propositions based on an adequate method, but an endeavor to set forth the proper form and tone of God's address to creation in Christ, any sharp distinction between theology and ethics is rendered problematic. No neutral realm of nature exists where ethics can be done as if God had not spoken in Christ. Barth's putative opposition to natural theology presumes a rejection of a doctrine of pure nature. He did not oppose natural theology; he thought it didn't exist. One may as well oppose

flying pumpkins. If everything is created in, through, and for Christ, then there is no independent nature that can assess his claims on creation, as it were, from the outside. Where would such an outside be?

Protestant and Catholic approaches that recover a christological ethic owe a great debt to Barth and Balthasar's friendship. Their friendship began with some initial meetings that culminated in Barth inviting Balthasar to attend his 1941 seminar on the Council of Trent. It ended with Barth's last lecture in 1968 on the unity of the church, which was delivered in tandem with Balthasar. The "Protocols" from the 1941 seminar set the stage for an intriguing discussion on the ecclesial differences between them, a discussion to which they returned again and again during their twenty-seven-year friendship. It bore, and still promises to bear, ecumenical fruit. Central to what follows is a presentation of that fruit. Although it will be implicit throughout, the final chapter, "The Realm of the Church: Renewal and Unity" addresses it explicitly. The final chapter does not resolve the key differences between Barth and Balthasar on the relationship between Christ and his church for the simple reason that such differences have not been resolved. It does assist, I hope, in highlighting those differences and exploring what is at stake in them. For Balthasar, Christ and the church constitute a single, albeit differentiated, reality. For Barth, Christ always stands over and against his church, even though he too will call the church Christ's flesh. This difference remains irresolvable, but highlighting the reasons for it and posing critical questions about it might prove salutary.

Balthasar remains, I am convinced, an excellent guide through Barth's theology, both in how he interprets and presents Barth's work as well as how he developed and supplemented it with his own. Contemporary criticisms of Balthasar's reading of Barth are insufficiently patient with it. Sometimes they come from a deeply committed Protestant theology that is incapable of hearing well theological voices outside our tradition, which is understandable. It was Barth's initial approach to Catholics and ecumenical dialogue. Ecumenical dialogues are to be engaged, he said in 1931, with "dogmatic intolerance."³ Barthians like to adopt Barth's *enfant terrible* disposition (the ascription comes from Balthasar). Dogmatic intolerance is where he began his ecumenical engagements, and oddly enough his approach bore fruit, but it is not where he concluded. We should neither begin nor conclude with dogmatic intolerance. It would not be Barthian in the best sense, for it would deny the considerable ecumenical gains he accomplished, surprising as that was to him.

3. Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 215.

If an entrenched Protestantism critiques and dismisses Balthasar's reading of Barth, a reactive Catholicism accuses Balthasar's preoccupation with Barth's theology of significant errors. A similar reactive Catholic theology prohibited Balthasar's Barth book from being published for over a decade. I suspect, and worry, that current trends in Protestant and Catholic theology may be repeating the entrenched Protestant and Catholic positions that made Barth and Balthasar's friendship so unlikely and yet theologically necessary. They were always puzzled by the "enigmatic crack" that separated Catholics and Protestants for five hundred years. Although both eschewed any liberal sentimentality for healing this rift—"what's five hundred years of anathemas among friends"—they nonetheless were drawn to each other's work because that rift was theologically unintelligible and unsustainable. Telling the story of their friendship might offer a witness that prevents Catholics and Protestants from once again merely repeating, and thereby widening, that "enigmatic crack."

This book has been a long time in preparation. It began during my graduate studies in the late 1980s when several Protestant colleagues formed a Barth reading group: Willie Jennings, Charles Campbell, and David Matzko McCarthy (who since became Catholic); and several Catholic colleagues formed a Catholic reading group: Frederick Bauerschmidt, Michael Baxter and William Cavanaugh. These were never competing reading groups. We were and remain friends listening to and appreciating the distinct tones found among the different theologies. For us theology was always a practice of friendship. These friendships initiated me into the massive works of Barth and Balthasar, which I read over several decades—first at the Jesuit St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia and then at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. When the latter hired me I was asked to teach the "dead white theologians." I was told at the time that the seminary students knew the criticisms of that generation of theologians, but did not know those theologians, so I was encouraged to teach a course comparing and contrasting Barth, Tillich, Rahner, and Balthasar, and tracing their lineage through James Cone, Elizabeth Johnson, Rosemary Ruether, Gustavo Gutiérrez and others. I also taught a graduate seminar on Barth and Balthasar. For all the students who worked through that material with me, I remain indebted.

Through friendship, courses taught and the insurmountable task of reading the volumes Barth and Balthasar published I became increasingly fascinated with their friendship. My appointment at Marquette University gave me the opportunity to pursue this interest at a deeper level. I am grateful to my friend Sven Grosse, who was a visiting scholar at Marquette, and encouraged

me to apply for a grant from the *Schweizerischer Nationalfonds zur Förderung der Wissenschaftlichen Forschung* (SNF), which I received. Sven introduced me to Georg Pfeleiderer, professor of theology and ethics at the University of Basel, who graciously agreed to host my research. Although neither of them is responsible for what follows, this work would not have been possible without their hospitality. I remain in their debt. Hans Anton Drewes assisted me at the Barth archives in Basel and offered invaluable suggestions. I am grateful to him for conversation and for providing a copy of Barth's 1941 Council of Trent protocols. Reading the students' handwritten German from those protocols was laborious. My colleagues Ulrich Lehner and Lyle Dabney assisted me in that task, for which I remain grateful. Ms. Claudia Capol welcomed me to the Balthasar archives and arranged a meeting with Bishop Peter Henrici. I could not have discovered much that is in this work without them. Their kindness and warmth remain much appreciated. I have never met Manfred Lochbrunner, but his own archival work and publications made my efforts much more manageable. Many others read the manuscript and provided wise counsel. I'm grateful to Rick Barry, David Luy, Joseph Mangina, Chad Pecknold, John Wright, and Kenneth Oakes. I am especially grateful to Anne Carpenter who read the manuscript with a discerning Catholic eye and saved me from several misstatements.

Barth and Balthasar have been constant companions to me as a theologian. Their work appears in nearly everything I've done. I am somewhat embarrassed to confess it, for it is cliché, but a copy of Grünewald's crucifixion, picked up in Colmar, hangs above my desk. How else could one be inspired to write on Barth and Balthasar's friendship and its theological significance? Balthasar was called the most cultured man in Europe. Barth's knowledge was encyclopedic. I am neither cultured nor possess that breadth of knowledge. For that reason I always felt, and still feel, inadequate to this project. I'm sure much more needs to be done, but I remain grateful for the little I have seen they tried to declare and show to us and hope some of that is present in what follows.