

D. Stephen Long, *Saving Karl Barth: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Preoccupation*

In *Saving Karl Barth*, author D. Stephen Long provides a landmark account of the longstanding theological and personal relationship between Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Barth. Balthasar's "pre-occupation" with Barth eventuated in an interpretative volume of Barth's theology, a work that established a paradigm of reading Barth for decades. As Balthasar's work is now under scrutiny, Prof. Long's work here reassesses the importance and significance of that volume, not only for our understanding of Barth, but its embodiment of fruitful, ecumenical intellectual, theological engagement. Even more, Prof. Long's new book presents for the first time a full-scale treatment of the course and contours of the dynamic friendship between these paramount figures of modern theology.

Prof. Long graciously agreed to talk with Fortress editor Michael Gibson about his innovative new volume.

MG: Barth studies is an active hub of scholarship—increasingly so in the last decade or more; von Balthasar's star appears to be in ascendance as well. What makes these figures so compelling to drive this kind of active engagement? Why do they tower over much of the 20th century and current theology?

SL: They were both unusual 'academics.' Barth, as is well known, was plucked from the pastorate. Balthasar turned down academic appointments to pursue his theological work through the secular institutes. Both had a different kind of vision, I think, because the context with which they did theology was different from a normal academic training. They could see things other theologians at the time were incapable of seeing. They brought together a vocation to be a theologian and a vocation to serve the church.

MG: It seems especially relevant today that you would bring these two thinkers together in such a unique framework – that of a longstanding theological friendship. What drew you, initially, to this story? What do you think is particularly salient about this relationship to how we relate theological dialogue and engagement today?

SL: Friendship. This may be the only work where I do not mention or reference Stanley Hauerwas by name, but this book has been largely influenced by him – not so much by anything he wrote but by the community of characters he created and the friendships they produced. Those friendships required me to inhabit two worlds: Catholicism and Protestantism. I am sure I do not inhabit either very well, but what generated the project was my own ecclesial dissatisfaction. When I attended Catholic conferences on Balthasar, I recognized how little time they seemed to have for Barth. It was as if Balthasar superseded Barth and left him behind. When I attended Protestant

discussions on Barth, it was as if he had only corrected Balthasar. The mutual influence I found in their two approaches was insufficiently acknowledged.

I was also surprised by recent 'retrenchments' in Catholic and Protestant positions – Catholics recovering the 19th century and Protestants always preoccupied with revising everything based on supposed ineluctable shifts in modernity. Both tend to be reactionary in mutually illuminating ways. Barth and Balthasar's friendship avoided these reactionary tendencies even though they were pressured from within their perspective churches to adopt them. They were, for all their inadequacies, courageous and daring theologians.

MG: What was it about Barth's theology, or Barth personally, that made him such a "preoccupation" to von Balthasar? Especially since, at that time, notably in the late '30s and into the '40s, Barth had greatly distanced himself – or appeared to – from Catholicism after the analogy controversy?

SL: *Beauty, or perhaps even better – Glory. Balthasar found in Barth a dramatic theology that recognized God's glory spoken in Christ and how it gave the "form" to dogmatics. Along with Glory, I would add "symphonic." Barth properly appreciated the breadth of the theological tradition -- the patristics, Scholastics and moderns -- without reproducing the errors in each epoch. Many readers forget that Balthasar praised Barth for returning to the Scholastics (Anselm and Aquinas) when everyone else, Catholic and Protestant, chased after modern modes of transcendentalism or existentialism. Yet Balthasar also affirmed Barth for avoiding the errors in the fathers and the scholastics that inhibited the proper form of theology – "Glory." The patristics emphasized human "ascent" without a sufficient descent of God's glory. The scholastics rightly emphasized reason, but often within an improper understanding of nature that was too indebted to modernity. The moderns were too willing to jettison what came before them. A third reason is Przywara. Balthasar saw in Barth something Barth never saw – an ally with Przywara, which is why he wanted to "save" Barth. Barth misidentified the error in Catholic theology. It was not the analogy of being or obediential potency, but a doctrine of pure nature. Barth never seems to have heard this criticism.*

MG: von Balthasar's interpretative reading of Barth stood as a paradigm for many decades, taken over by Protestant and Catholic interpreters alike. That reading, of course, has been contested in more recent years. Do you think von Balthasar's work here has been unfairly criticized or misunderstood? Does it still have something to say to those engaged in Barth studies?

SL: *Yes, and from two different sources. Barth researchers have been preoccupied with historical niceties – how can we trace the proper dates of Barth's conversion(s)? I don't think we need any more work on the history of Barth. It tends to focus more on Barth rather than what Barth was focused on. Because this was not Balthasar's concern, his*

work is required to answer questions he never would have asked. He presented his work on Barth, at a time when Catholics were very suspicious of him, as a “presentation and interpretation” of Barth’s work. It was not historical exegesis. He read Barth aesthetically. In fact, even at the end of his life Balthasar referred to himself as a Catholic barthian.

Another source of critique comes from Catholic circles who see Balthasar as a modernist unduly influenced by history, culture and Hegel – all the ‘bad’ modern moves that did away with the metaphysical foundation for theology. That too misreads Balthasar and makes Barth more modern than I think he was. Here I recognize I am in a distinct minority of Barth readers, but I do make the case that Barth said, with some humor, that if he could say it three times, he could take the Roman Catholic oath against modernity. That should at least be acknowledged.

MG: Relatedly, the book also ventures into some “hot” issues that continue to be controversial around Barth’s work, notably in regard to the doctrine of the Trinity and election. In what way(s) do you think this book might contribute to those discussions?

SL: The book adds something that almost never appears in interpretations as to why Barth did in fact bring the traditional distinction (at least since Aquinas) of the de deo uno and the de deo trino together. I learned this from Balthasar. Nominalism turned God into a sovereign Power existing behind the divine economy, which either through the Calvinist eternal decree or a neoscholastic rationalism, set God against God. I think those who read Barth’s doctrine of election as defining the Trinity are on to something, but they misidentify what Barth is doing and so lead Protestantism into a new doctrine of God that creates another barrier within the “enigmatic cleft” dividing Protestants and Catholics. Barth was not arguing for an innovative doctrine of God, but one that avoided either a nominalist overturning of the divine economy through a capricious god of sovereign power, or a Hegelian collapsing of eternity and time, the divine Processions and Missions. It is a delicate balance and easy to fall off on one side or the other. I would love for this work to change that debate, but if the “counters” that emerged from the 16th century remain decisive for theology then too much of Catholic and Protestant theology tends to get its identity from setting itself against the other – even if it is done irenically and relationally. This work is an intervention in those “counters,” but I’ve lived in both contexts to be sufficiently pessimistic it will accomplish much.

MG: *Saving Karl Barth* contains a lot of wonderful insights not seen before in English. What kind of archival work did you do for the book? What are some of your favorite discoveries from that research?

SL: First I read through Manfred Lochbrunner’s excellent work. He already went through the archives and published many of the letters between Barth and Balthasar.

Then I went to Basel for four weeks with many questions that came from the letters. They helped me know what questions to ask and what to look for. I was able to get the Protokolle from Barth's 1941 seminar on the Council of Trent that Balthasar attended. Reading through it was equivalent to listening to a conversation between them. Much of that material is in the concluding chapter. I was able to trace down why Balthasar left the Jesuits and why his book on Barth, originally published in 1941, was not published until 1951. I think that makes an important contribution. I was able to find out much more about their friendship from interviews, editorials and letters. I had no idea that Barth's closest friend was also the leading proponent of the "Jesuit paragraph" in the Swiss constitution that forbade Jesuits from teaching and preaching in church and school. It was regularly violated, but Barth's friend Frey wanted it enforced. I spent four glorious weeks in Basel riding my bicycle from the Barth archive to the Balthasar one, from library to Stiftung and around the countryside.

MG: In preparing this work, were there surprises or insights about von Balthasar and his theology that surfaced for you or that were new to you?

SL: I think I was surprised how indebted to Barth he was, even though he did his own variation on Barth's work. Balthasar's unusual role as an academic also struck me. He was not taken by academic prestige. I was also surprised at how much he could cajole young people into secular institutes.

MG: These two theologians are obvious "giants" in 20th century theology, especially in terms of academic theology and systematic or dogmatic scholarship. But did they have impact in a more official – or ecclesial – sense, such as the theology present in Vatican II?

SL: Yes. I think they did indirectly. Balthasar was, after all, to be made cardinal at the end of his life. He presented Barth's work to Pius XII in 1952. Barth, of course, is not the only reason for the Christological renaissance that occurred at Vatican II, but he is undoubtedly one source for it. He influenced some of its most important architects. Balthasar, however, feared that the aftermath of Vatican II was not the Christological renaissance he had anticipated. It produced a misuse of the analogia entis that Barth had identified in the 1930's.

MG: There is much symmetry and common ground between Barth and von Balthasar, but as two distinctly Protestant and Catholic theologians, who were strongly committed to their respective traditions, ecclesiology, seems to remain as a rather profound area of difference. Are there places or pressures in that area of their thought that might be fruitful for engagement in ecumenical discussion? Do you think they might have been able to overcome those differences?

SL: No. I don't think they could or did overcome those differences. They both admitted that only the Holy Spirit could accomplish that. Balthasar early, and Barth later, did acknowledge there is still much that we can do. First we can learn to read each other well. Second we can seek to see Christ in each other and present and interpret each other to our own tradition. I find that to be Balthasar's greatest achievement. He took a great risk to explain Barth's work to his Catholic confrères whom he found misrepresenting what Barth was doing. In other words, sometimes our task is less to speak across ecclesial divisions and instead speak within them. We are often trained in Catholic and Protestant "ghettos" that produce a kind of sectarianism where we can make easy judgments that reflect more the sectarian nature of our training – even if it is in ecumenical theology. Third, we can never be content with ecclesial divisions. What they refused to do was render them intelligible. They arise from an "enigmatic cleft," which is what prompted Balthasar's preoccupation with Barth in the first place. If we render the split intelligible, then we have made evil itself reasonable. That will not make us Christian; it makes us at best Manichean.

MG: While preparing this book were there any particular influences for you? Did you have opportunities to showcase any part of the book? How did those conversations shape the final outcome?

*SL: I was hired at Garrett-Evangelical Theological seminary to teach the "dead white theologians." I was told by the president that their students knew the critiques of the tradition, but did not know the tradition. My task was to teach the tradition so the critiques would make more sense. So I regularly taught a course on Barth and Balthasar. I also taught a graduate seminar on their work back in 2004 (I think) that originally gave me the idea for the book. They have accompanied me in most of what I have done up till now, which can be seen in my *The Divine Economy, The Goodness of God and especially Speaking of God*. In it I tried to bring together what appear to be contradictory claims: Barth's claim, "the great temptation and danger consists in this, that the theologian will actually become what he seems to be – a philosopher," and Balthasar's claim, "without philosophy there can be no theology. After writing *Speaking of God* I was convinced I needed to make more evident my indebtedness to Barth and Balthasar's friendship and work. When I arrived at Marquette in 2007 I found myself in a theology department whose self-identity was "classical and ecumenical." It was a very good place for me to explore the friendship with Barth and Balthasar with colleagues and students. I was able to give lectures on my discoveries in Basel at both the evangelical seminary and Basel University. I am also grateful for the Karl Barth society and the several opportunities they provided me for my work.*

MG: We [Fortress] are incredibly pleased and proud to be publishing this significant, and quite groundbreaking, work. Are there ways that you see this book as synching with a larger tradition at Fortress?

SL: I am delighted to publish this work with Fortress. To be honest, I did not originally consider Fortress Press. I did not know if it would be interested in this kind of work. After realizing how cost prohibitive a few other presses would be, someone told me that Fortress Press was taking very seriously the kind of classical and ecumenical theology this book represents – and that they would bring it out so that readers might be able to afford it. I am delighted that my book is coming out with a really new interesting line of books from Fortress. It stands in good company.