

Saving Karl Barth: Hans Urs Von Balthasar's Preoccupation. By D. Stephen Long. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014. 304 pages. \$49.00 (paper).

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In this model of theological scholarship and ecumenical pursuit, D. Stephen Long has written a landmark book that contextualizes the relationship between two of the twentieth century's leading theologians, illustrating how their friendship led to genuine ecumenical engagement at great cost to both. Balthasar's Roman Catholic superiors and colleagues suspected that he was unduly influenced by Barth's Protestant thinking, and Barth was suspected by some Protestants of being a bit too Catholic. Further, Long develops key aspects of their theology, showing exactly where their agreements and differences could be seen and understood with a view toward greater church unity in the future. Many fascinating historical details make this book an invaluable resource as well.

Long helpfully illustrates exactly how Balthasar conceived the *analogia entis*, how and why he held dogmatics and ethics together, and how he consistently sought to be a Catholic theologian while accepting Barth's primary insight that the center of Christian dogmatics and ethics must be dictated by Jesus Christ himself in his uniqueness as recognized decisively by the Council of Chalcedon. Balthasar thus opposed any sort of anthropological or philosophical starting point, which could end with the idea that we might affirm God "by affirming ourselves" (277). On the one hand, Long brilliantly illustrates exactly why attempts by Catholic theologians to return to a type of neo-Scholastic theology, or what Balthasar once called "sawdust Thomism," under the conditions of modernity, will not lead toward unity between Catholic and Protestant Christianity—which was the goal of both Barth and Balthasar, since they both saw church division as unacceptable in light of the reconciliation accomplished in Jesus himself. On the other hand, Long clearly and accurately demonstrates why contemporary Protestant theologians fail in their attempts to repriminate a kind of modern theology that is built on a reconstructed version of Schleiermacher's anthropocentric approach.

Long demonstrates with profound analysis and critical insight just how two inadequate approaches to Balthasar and Barth lead modern theology in the wrong direction. On the one side, a number of contemporary Roman Catholic theologians oppose Balthasar's Christocentric approach with a view of the analogy of being that requires that philosophy must dictate one's understanding of theology. On the other side, a number of Protestant theologians claim that Balthasar misread Barth by failing to see that he was

a “postmetaphysical” theologian who, in light of his revised doctrine of election, was attempting to be modern by historicizing Christology and the Trinity with an “actualistic” ontology in such a way that the economic Trinity was thought to be somehow constitutive of the immanent Trinity. Long rightly insists that if this reading of Barth is correct, and Balthasar’s reading, which presented Barth as a more traditional theologian whose thinking often approached the Catholic position, even if he did not always see it that way, was wrong, then the prospects for ecumenical agreement become much less likely.

The basic theme running through the book is that, despite their differences (and there were and are real differences regarding how to understand analogy, nature and grace, the sacraments, and Mary and the saints, for instance), Barth and Balthasar were one in realizing that the only possibility for genuine ecumenical unity between Catholics and Protestants was a unity forged in the union of God and creatures in the Incarnation. Neo-Scholastic theology did not respect the fact that ecumenical unity could be achieved only in and through Christ himself. Its idea of “pure nature” discounted the economic Trinitarian self-revelation as the determining factor for theological anthropology and for ecumenical relations. Protestant liberalism in its nineteenth-century and early twenty-first-century forms does not respect this Christological center (the Incarnation) as a free miraculous act of God, with its historicist tendency to envision a God who is somehow dependent on history (creation) and a corresponding view of humanity conditioning the divine being.

This book is a must-read for anyone interested in serious theology today. It will be very useful in graduate courses focused on Barth and Balthasar and Catholic/Protestant dialogue. Some may wonder whether or not Long has undercut key aspects of Barth’s theology by accepting Balthasar’s idea that the church should be understood as a prolongation of the Incarnation and accusing Barth of “bordering on the seminominalism he usually rejects” for disallowing this idea (217). Barth consistently and unequivocally rejected that idea because he believed it made it impossible to distinguish Christ from the church, leaving the door open to the church’s domesticating revelation by confusing its earthly authority with the authority of the Lord himself. Additionally, Long’s generous reading of Balthasar does not really address the problem with Balthasar’s critique of Barth for promoting a so-called Christological constriction with his rejection of the *analogia entis*. These questions aside, this book is highly recommended and deserves to be widely read and discussed.

PAUL D. MOLNAR
St. John’s University