

The Dazzling Darkness of God’s Triune Love: Introducing Evangelicals to the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar

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Jürgen Moltmann observes that Christian theology and the Church face “a double crisis: the *crisis of relevance* and the *crisis of identity*.” When theology and the Church endeavor to be relevant to the surrounding pluralistic culture, they face a “crisis of their own Christian identity” because they are confronted with conflicting viewpoints. Yet the more they “assert their identity in traditional dogmas, rights and moral notions, the more irrelevant and unbelievable they become.”¹ Some respond by capitulating to the cultural ethos of the day becoming indistinguishable from the culture while others isolate themselves and withdraw into Christian ghettos failing to engage the culture.² Such responses seem to indicate a bifurcation between theology and the Christian life, between the theoretical and the practical.

Hans Urs von Balthasar, a prominent twentieth-century Swiss Catholic theologian and contemporary of Karl Barth, similarly criticized the Catholic theology of his day. He argued that “not only the faith but the heart, too, is wrapped up in a spiritless, conscientious and ultimately Pharisaical practice, a religion of dogmas and an enthusiasm for dogmas (the more that are defined, the better), a zeal for everything that can be seen, that is limited, calculable, and controlled.”³ We should not understand such statements by Balthasar as anti-intellectual, a disdain for dogmatic theology, or a lack of concern for conceptual clarity in theological discourse as many of his critics maintain. Rather, his objections centered on contemporary theology’s assent to the false dichotomy between theology and the Christian life, for it is “contrary to the very conceptions of the Fathers to attempt to divide their works into those dealing with doctrine and those concerned with the Christian life (spirituality).”⁴ How, then, are we to connect orthodoxy with orthopraxy, right thinking about God with right action?

Balthasar maintained that this presumed bifurcation between theology and the Christian life “has sapped the vital force of the Church today and the credibility of her preaching of eternal truth.”⁵

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1974), 7.

² *Ibid.*, 8–15, 18–23.

³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Creator Spirit*, vol. 3 of *Explorations in Theology* (trans. Brian McNeil; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), 502.

⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Word Made Flesh*, vol. 1 of *Explorations in Theology* (trans. A. V. Littledale and Alexander Dru; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 121.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 193.

Professional theologians have unfortunately perpetuated this problem, according to Balthasar, since they pursue either a scientific dogmatic theology with the utmost precision or a spiritualized mystical theology characterized by platitudinous piety that lacks substance. Consequently, pastors and church leaders bear the brunt of this penury situation as they seek to address the concerns of their congregants with the truth of the gospel. Balthasar contended, though, that such matters could find resolution at the nexus of “wisdom and holiness.”⁶

Balthasar insisted, then, that we must reconsider the nature of theology in order to retrieve this unity between scholar and saint, between theology and the Christian life. Christian theology, according to Balthasar, “has always been, at its heights, a spiritual activity, aware not only of a rational and ethical but of an aesthetic responsibility to the relative proportions of the various parts of revelation.”⁷ Moreover, theology must have its center where revelation has its center, namely, in the living resurrected Christ mediated through Scripture and the Church. The pursuit of theology devoid of this Christological center is a bankrupt endeavor as theological discourse “draws attention to peripheral matters, or serves only human curiosity or vanity (and nothing is more vain than the human mind in its thinking).” Saints never lose sight of this fact, for “they give themselves to their work and world, while ‘praying at all times’ and ‘doing all to the glory of God’ (1 Tim 5:17; 1 Cor 10:31).”⁸ True theology, therefore, has the person and work of Jesus Christ at its center that brings together both wisdom and holiness in the spirit of prayer.

Balthasar endeavored to follow this prescription by identifying Jesus Christ, who is the distinct speaking and doing form of God’s self-revelation, as the Lord of Glory (*Herrlichkeit*) and the form above all forms (*Übergestalt*).⁹ His theological journey took him into the dazzling darkness of God’s triune love where “the splendor which breaks forth from this love of God . . . gives itself without remainder and is poured forth in the form of worldly powerlessness.”¹⁰ This inbreaking and self-presentation of God in the world was a supreme act of his freedom that necessitated human action thereby instituting the most prodigious drama—God’s drama of redemption. Within all this, we come to see the structure of truth, God’s theologic, “which can indeed be nothing other than the discernment of being in the freedom of its self-revelation.”¹¹

The preceding paragraph sketches the contours of Balthasar’s mature thought in the fifteen-volume English translation of his trilogy—*The Glory of the Lord* (7 vols.), *Theo-Drama* (5 vols.), and *Theo-Logic* (3 vols.). This essay can in no way articulate the complexity and nuances of his trilogy with any

⁶ Ibid., 187–94.

⁷ Ibid., 183.

⁸ Ibid., 195–96.

⁹ One of the key concepts for understanding Balthasar’s Christology is his non-platonic use of the term *Gestalt* or form, which he formulates by drawing from a variety of sources like Christian von Ehrenfels and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Balthasar understands *Gestalt* as the dynamic appearance that expresses a unified whole found in the interrelation of parts in an external medium. The splendor of the internal depths of reality radiates through the external such that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, producing a unified meaning inconceivable in the parts alone. This expression of the invisible in and through the visible not only reveals but also conceals such that the invisible is not exhausted in the appearing. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, vol. 1 of *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (ed. Joseph Fessio and John Riches; trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982), 30–31, 467. Subsequent references to *The Glory of the Lord* are abbreviated as *GL*.

¹⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Studies in Theological Style: Clerical Styles*, vol. 2 of *GL* (ed. Joseph Fessio and John Riches; trans. Andrew Louth, Francis McDonagh, and Brian McNeil; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982), 11.

¹¹ Ibid., 13.

degree of sufficiency. Although there are several gateways into Balthasar's theology, this essay seeks to explicate what I think to be one of the primary entry points, namely, what is meant by the dazzling darkness of God's triune love. Balthasar's theology is not systematic in the traditional sense where one can turn to a particular section and read his definitive take on a particular doctrine or issue (e.g., the Trinity, atonement, etc.). Rather, his theology is more symphonic in that he weaves together a variety of themes in order to demonstrate the interconnectedness of theology that results not simply in the mere contemplation of theology's object, namely, the triune God, but the actions required by those who properly perceive him in faith. The motifs covered in this essay resonate throughout his trilogy and even into many of his works beyond it, striking a prominent chord within the concerto of Balthasar's theology.

We begin, then, by providing a brief narrative context of his life that alludes to the impetus for much of his work, allowing us to frame the subsequent discussion on the dazzling darkness of God's triune love. The next section explicates Balthasar's notion of the dazzling darkness of God's triune love through what I call "divine eternal kenosis" that serves as the basis for all other kenotic movements, including Christ's decent into hell. Finally, we conclude by suggesting relevant points where evangelicals should critically yet charitably engage Balthasar's theology while offering resources in a postscript, both primary and secondary works, for further exploration.

1. Formative Influences in the Life of Hans Urs von Balthasar

Balthasar was born in Lucerne, Switzerland on August 12, 1905 into an aristocratic family of Hungarian descent. His childhood and early adolescent education occurred at a Benedictine abbey school in Engelberg, in the heart of the mountains, just outside Lucerne. While there, the influence of the Benedictine monks nourished his love of music, so much so that he published his first book at the age of twenty: *The Development of the Musical Idea: An Attempt at a Synthesis of Music* (1925).¹² Before finishing his secondary education in Engelberg, though, his parents moved and enrolled him in a Jesuit college in Feldkirch, Austria. Dissatisfied with his parents' decision, Balthasar finished his final examinations a year early and matriculated at the University of Zurich in *Germanistik*, an amalgam of German literature, philosophy, and linguistics, in 1923.¹³

Balthasar's studies, in pursuit of a doctorate, took him to important centers of learning such as Berlin and Vienna where he encountered the likes of Fr. Romano Guardini (Berlin), Rudolf Allers (Vienna), and Hans Eibl (Vienna). In October 1928, five years after enrolling, Balthasar completed his doctoral examinations and soon thereafter finished his final revisions on his dissertation entitled *The History of the Eschatological Problem in Modern German Literature*, which was published in 1930. Nearly one month later, he enrolled in the Jesuit novitiate where he studied the neo-scholastic manuals

¹² Balthasar's love of music is an important theme throughout his life as his affinity for Mozart becomes a central conversation piece with his dear Protestant friend Karl Barth. Moreover, the influence of Christian von Ehrenfels upon Balthasar's understanding of Form (*Gestalt*) appeals to a dynamic, melodic notion that considers the form of given experiences as unified wholes. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity*, vol. 4 of *GL* (ed. Joseph Fessio and John Riches; trans. Oliver Davies, Andrew Louth, Brian McNeil, John Saward, and Rowan Williams; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 30–31.

¹³ Peter Henrici, "Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Sketch of His Life," in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work* (ed. D. L. Schindler; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 7–44.

in preparation for ordination as a Jesuit priest.¹⁴ During this time of preparation, he embarked upon the thirty-day *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola with some friends under the tutelage of Fr. Friedrich Kronseder where he experienced an unmistakable divine calling that changed the course of his life.¹⁵

1.1. The Calling of God on His Life

Balthasar's decision to enter the priesthood did not come without serious consideration since his contemporaries during his study of *Germanistik* considered it "a misfortune if someone apostatized and turned to the study of theology."¹⁶ Furthermore, the Jesuit College at Feldkirch where he began his Jesuit studies was located in a predominately Protestant area hostile to the Jesuit cause. Yet, in an interview thirty years later, Balthasar recollected his "electing" experience that he described as "a kind of invisible theme of my life." He recalled his experience that day with a vividness not lacking in detail:

Today, thirty years later, I can still find the very tree along the lost path of a forest in the German part of the Black Forest not far from Basel under which I was struck by a sudden bolt of lightning. . . . It was neither theology nor the priesthood that forced itself at that time on my spirit; it was only this: You have nothing to choose, you are called. You will not serve, but others will make use of your service; you have no plans to make, you are only a small stone in a mosaic designed long before you. I had only to "give up all and follow," without making my own plans, without wishes or anticipations. I had only to wait there expectantly and look out for the way I would be used. And that is how it happened.¹⁷

In the midst of this experience, Balthasar began to realize the implications of this divine encounter for his life: "When I once thought: so, God has given me complete certainty and has provided for me an exactly outlined mission, it struck me that he was free to turn it all on its head—in fact in a moment and in spite of the views and habits of the tool that I was."¹⁸

The importance of this divine call on Balthasar's life cannot be overstated, for "the key to 'understanding' his person as well as his work is this obedient Yes to the call to follow Christ. . . . Whatever von Balthasar has done since then can be grasped only as an activity *within* this original Yes to the call God made to him," as Werner Löser notes.¹⁹ We see some of the implications of this experience when we compare the theses of the first of his major writings, *The Apocalypse of the German Soul* based in large part on his dissertation, and the aforementioned trilogy.

¹⁴ Aidan Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad: A Guide through Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press of America, 1998), ix–xv.

¹⁵ See Werner Löser, "The Ignatian Exercises in the Work of Hans Urs von Balthasar," in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work* (ed. D. L. Schindler; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 103–20, for details regarding Balthasar's experience as well as how the *Exercises* influence his theology.

¹⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Pourquoi je me suis fait prêtre," in *Pourquoi je me suis fait prêtre* (ed. Jorge Sans Vila and Rarnón Sans Vila; Tournai: Desclée, 1961), 21; quoted in Werner Löser, "Being Interpreted as Love: Reflections on the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Communio* 16 (1989): 479.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 479–80.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 480.

¹⁹ Löser, "Being Interpreted as Love," 482.

His first major work based on his dissertation sought to trace German thought, beginning with the German Idealism of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, examining German poets from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe to Rainer Maria Rilke, and culminating with the likes of Friedrich Nietzsche and other German thinkers of the twentieth century. He surmised that the German soul is anthropocentric; that is, it seeks to construct one's understanding of self and the world *solely* from the vantage point of human subjectivity. Humanity is the measure of all things.²⁰ In contrast, he based his trilogy on the premise that human beings find meaning only when they transcend themselves in order to participate in God's divine reality, namely, the drama of redemption. Key to understanding this contrast and much of Balthasar's life and work is his divine calling. To be sure, though, other important figures aid him in fleshing out his thoughts.

1.2. Significant Philosophical, Theological, and Spiritual Influences

Erich Przywara, a Jesuit theologian whom Balthasar encountered in Munich in the early 1930s, was one of the seminal figures in the 20th century debate regarding the *analogia entis* or the analogy of being—the idea that “between Creator and creature no similarity can be noted, however great it may be, without noting a greater dissimilarity.”²¹ Balthasar learned from Przywara how to analyze the history of philosophy using the doctrine of *analogia entis*. Consequently, Balthasar appropriated Przywara's ontological position stressing the ever-greater dissimilarity between God and humanity no matter the similarity thereby opening space for genuine divine/human interaction. This human participation in the divine life became the cornerstone for Balthasar's theo-dramatics.

Another significant contemporary, whom Balthasar lionized, was Henri de Lubac whom he met while studying near Lyons, France. Balthasar drew deeply from de Lubac's encyclopedic knowledge of the patristic fathers, going on to write several monographs on the likes of Origen of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor, Augustine, and others. His study of these Church fathers surfaced again in his trilogy as he drew upon their works to establish a historical basis for his theological aesthetics. More importantly, though, de Lubac's influence, as well as Przywara's, enabled Balthasar to alleviate an intense dissatisfaction he had with his studies while preparing to become a Jesuit priest. Balthasar remarked, “My entire period of study in the Society was a grim struggle with the dreariness of theology, with what men had made out of the glory of revelation.”²² This assessment of his Neo-Scholastic training along with his previous intuitions regarding his *Germanistik* studies became the impetus for his criticisms of Catholic theology mentioned at the outset of this essay. Yet he kept much of these thoughts to himself, becoming a Jesuit priest on July 26, 1936.

Balthasar's first assignment as a Jesuit priest came as a collaborator for the prestigious periodical *Stimmen der Zeit*, located in Munich near Ludwigstrasse where “the boots of the SS sounded ever more

²⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Geschichte des eschatologischen Problems in der modernen deutschen Literatur* (Zurich: University of Zurich, 1930), 7–9; *ibid.*, *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele: Studien zu einer Lehre von letzten Haltungen* (3 vols.; Salzburg: Pustet, 1937–1939). See also Edward T. Oakes's chapter, “Goethe, Nietzsche, and the Encounter with German Idealism,” in *Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 72–101.

²¹ Erich Przywara, *Analogia entis: Metaphysik, Ur-Struktur und All-Rhythmus* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1962), 251–54. See also Oakes's chapter “Erich Przywara and the Analogy of Being,” in *Pattern of Redemption*, 15–44, for a fuller survey.

²² Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Einleitung,” in *Erde und Himmel, Ein Tagebuch: Zweiter Teil II: Die Zeit der grossen Diktate* by Adrienne von Speyr (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1975), 195.

loudly . . . and no ear could escape the loudspeakers that were set up everywhere in the city.”²³ Shortly thereafter, Balthasar’s superiors offered him the opportunity to serve as a chaplain at the University of Basel or as a professor teaching theology at the Pontifical Jesuit University in Rome, the renowned Gregorian University. Given Balthasar’s relative disdain for professional theologians and the shallow neo-scholastic theology of his day, he opted for serving as a chaplain. This decision took him to Basel, where he encountered two other figures and arguably the most influential—Karl Barth and Adrienne von Speyr.²⁴

Karl Barth, acclaimed as one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century, expressed mutual admiration for Balthasar as the two engaged in critical yet charitable dialogue regarding a whole host of theological issues. Balthasar gave lectures on Barth, in Barth’s presence, and would later publish those lectures in a monograph entitled *The Theology of Karl Barth*. In this seminal work on Barth, Balthasar identified Barth’s theology as “beautiful” as it stressed the objectivity of divine revelation, namely, God’s self-revelation in Christ, and drew our attention to the aesthetic side of existence, including divine revelation.²⁵ This admiration, though, did not preclude Balthasar from vigorously opposing Barth regarding, for example, the analogy of being, the narrowness of Barth’s Christocentrism, or the nature of the Church. Thus, much of Balthasar’s later writings were in direct response to Barth’s work. To be sure, though, Balthasar saw Barth as an advocate, as one who could be “like a Trojan horse to bring about change in Catholicism,” the kind of change that breathed vibrancy and life into the arid neo-scholasticism of his day.²⁶

Both Balthasar and Barth possessed a profound spirituality evidenced by their commitments to overcome the bifurcation between theology and the Christian life. Balthasar seemed to take a more mystical approach, acknowledging that Adrienne von Speyr, a medical doctor and mystic whom he converted to Catholicism, had more of an impact on his life than any other.²⁷ More specifically, her terrifying visions of Christ’s descent into hell, which she received while taking the Eucharist, found their way into Balthasar’s theology of Holy Saturday.²⁸ Her visions and mystical writings, though, were not viewed by the establishment as authentic or worthy of publication. As such, Balthasar found these

²³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *My Work: In Retrospect* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), 13.

²⁴ Peter Henrici, “Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Cultural and Theological Education,” in *The Beauty of Christ: An Introduction to the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (ed. Bede McGregor and Thomas Norris; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 11–18.

²⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation* (trans. Edward T. Oakes; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992), 400. For a meticulous discussion regarding this important friendship, see either Stephen D. Wigley, *Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Critical Engagement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2007) or John Webster, “Balthasar and Karl Barth,” in *Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar* (ed. Edward T. Oakes and David Moss; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 241–55.

²⁶ Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (trans. John Bowden; London: SCM, 1976), 362. These remarks are Barth’s words that recount Balthasar’s personal comments to him regarding the value of his theology.

²⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *First Glance at Adrienne von Speyr* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1981). Some believe that Balthasar’s attribution of Speyr’s influence upon him is a “chivalrous overstatement” that stems from the dismissive treatment of her mystical experiences by ecclesiastical authorities and other Jesuit priests (Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad*, xvii).

²⁸ For Balthasar’s theology of Holy Saturday, see especially his *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter* (trans. Aidan Nichols; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990).

dismissive attitudes appalling and determined to publish her work. In 1945, Balthasar and Speyr, with the financial backing of a friend from Einsiedeln, collaborated to form the Johannes Verlag, a publishing house to print and distribute her writings.²⁹

Balthasar's Jesuit superiors did not approve of this endeavor, so they gave him an ultimatum to either abandon his pursuits or be disbanded from the Jesuit Society. After much prayer and consideration, Balthasar determined to leave the priesthood in February 1950, knowing the full ramifications of his decision. This decision caused him an immense amount of grief as he was further isolated from the ecclesiastical establishment and pushed to the margins.³⁰ From this point forward, though, Balthasar produced his massive trilogy, a work of enormous range and complexity that winds its way through the dazzling darkness of God's triune love. It is this motif to which we now turn.

2. The Dazzling Darkness of God's Triune Love

Balthasar, following his conviction that theology needs an objective center, identifies Jesus Christ as the Lord of Glory (*Herrlichkeit*) and the form above all forms (*Übergestalt*). These designations assume three things, according to Balthasar. First, God "is the infinitely free agent who, in his freedom, invents a world and, also in his freedom, creates that world." As Lord, God is Wholly Other than his creation thereby controlling the form and content of his communicative actions to his creation. In other words, God determines how and what he communicates of himself to his creation. Thus, "he is the triune God who in Jesus Christ becomes man."³¹

Second, while interpreting Rom 1:19–20, Balthasar underscores the utter dissimilarity between God and his creation (i.e., the Creator-creature distinction). In doing so, he stresses the importance of God's glory shining in and through the form of his creation so that his creatures might be able to see it. Further emphasizing this point, Balthasar remarks that the glory seen in creation "is the glory of *God* and not of the world, since it is precisely such confusion that at once leads to the terrible fall which results from confusing God's glory with the 'likeness' (*ὁμοίμα*) of the 'form' (*εἰκὼν*)."³²

Third, the revelation of God in Christ is not the "prolongation" or "intensification" of his revelation in creation. Rather, it brings together the "heavenly and earthly, which is thus endowed by grace with a crown, the radiance of whose glory belong[s] to the *Kyrios* of the world." God's revelation in creation prepares the way for his self-revelation in Christ such that Christ is the "perfection of the form of the world."³³ This perfection, though, is seen only by faith "as the appearing of the triune God" and "is the

²⁹ Johannes Verlag was created as part of The Community of St. John, which Balthasar and Speyr founded in 1945 as "a secular institute or society of consecrated life for lay people living the world as also for diocesan priests. The Community of St. John became more widely known three years later when Balthasar produced a theology for secular institutes, the first book published by Johannes Verlag" (Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad*, xvii). For an intimate glimpse at the inner workings of this community, see Maximilian Greiner's interview, "The Community of St. John: A Conversation with Cornelia Capol and Martha Gisi," in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work* (ed. D. L. Schindler; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 87–102, with two of its founding members.

³⁰ Henrici, "Hans Urs von Balthasar," 19–28.

³¹ Balthasar, *GL*, 1:429.

³² *Ibid.*, 1:430–31.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1:431.

crowning recapitulation of everything in heaven and on earth.”³⁴ Therefore, Jesus Christ, not humanity, is the measure of all things.

Building upon these presuppositions, Balthasar answers the question, “why is there something rather than nothing,” theologically, giving a *theological basis* to the transcendentals of being (i.e., the true, the good, and the beautiful).³⁵ In doing so, he subdivides objective revelation into two related yet distinct parts, revelation in creation and in Christ.³⁶ The first, revelation in creation, manifests God’s glory in and through the created order such that our existence is to be understood as a gift. The glory of God in creation anticipates and foreshadows the second, the manifestation of God’s glory in the incarnation where the Word of God comes in the form of a human being (Phil 2:6). What appears, then, in the hypostatic union of Christ, according to Balthasar, is “the becoming visible and experienceable of the God who is himself triune” whereby the Christ-form (*Gestalt Christi*) manifests the form of God (*Gestalt Gottes*) in the glory of the triune God.³⁷ What, though, does Balthasar mean by divine glory?

2.1. Balthasar’s Theological Interpretation of Scripture

Balthasar remarks that the “Bible is full of statements about God’s glory, and the passages and vistas are far more numerous than most believers realize: glory is a fundamental statement that leavens all of Scripture.”³⁸ That being the case, Balthasar connects the glory of God’s revelation in creation and in Christ via the tabernacle and the temple: “In this way the form of the world itself, which as such already was the revelation of the divine δόξα, in Christ and in the Holy Spirit poured out through him becomes a temple which, like the tabernacle and Solomon’s edifice, harbors within and above itself the *kâbôd* of God.”³⁹ By typologically connecting the *כְּבוֹד־יְהוָה* with the δόξα-Χριστοῦ, Balthasar begins to illumine what he means by the dazzling darkness of God’s triune love.

This *כְּבוֹד־יְהוָה* to which Balthasar refers, is also the same glory present in the cloud and fire that leads the nation of Israel both day and night through the wilderness (Exod 13:21; 40:38). Balthasar sees a

³⁴ Ibid., 1:432.

³⁵ Though the concept has roots prior to the Scholastics, Thomas Aquinas brought theological weight to the notion of the transcendentals of being by elevating God over all being. Aquinas distinguished between two different types of properties, namely, categories and transcendentals. Categories are predicated of certain kinds of being while transcendentals are predicates of all being. Umberto Eco states that the transcendentals “are a bit like differing visual angles from which being can be looked at. This is why they differ from one another conceptually But each transcendental is nonetheless the whole of being and is found in everything that exists” (*The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas* [trans. Hugh Bredin; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988], 21). Thus, for Aquinas, the real was a multifaceted existence consisting of unity, truth, goodness, and beauty, unlike Hume and Kant, who *projected* these on to being via the human mind. Aquinas’s development of the transcendentals was significant for Balthasar as he christologically appropriated them, thereby enabling him to distinguish between God’s glory and earthly beauty.

³⁶ Balthasar, *GL*, 1:429–33.

³⁷ Ibid., 1:432. Christ is not an instance of some “general class” of *Gestalt* under which Balthasar subsumes the incarnation. Rather, he employs an amalgam of concepts to explicate God’s divine revelation in Christ. John Saward makes the point: “A *Gestalt* is something concrete and objective, with a unity that is more than the sum of its parts. Applied Christologically, it signifies the incarnate form, the real flesh and blood figure of Jesus as expressing the inexhaustible glory of God’s triune love (*The Mysteries of March* [London: Collins, 1990], xix).

³⁸ Balthasar, *GL*, 4:11.

³⁹ Balthasar, *GL*, 1:439.

dialectic between the deep and threatening darkness of the cloud and the blinding and consuming light of the fire. Consequently, “if the first sort of appearance has on the people the effect of the absolutely *tremendum*, then the second sort is the *fascinosum*.”⁴⁰ We see both of these phenomena in the life of Moses. First, the Israelites trembled with fear at the thunder and lightning emanating from the thick dark cloud on Mt. Sinai when Moses receives the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:19–21). Second, Moses is consumed with the fire of the unconsumed bush that draws him to it, piquing his interest in this marvelous sight (Exod 3). These phenomena converge, according to Balthasar, to form the *כְּבוֹד־יְהוָה*, which is the manifest presence of God “in the form of fire and wrapped in ‘the’ cloud” that fills the tabernacle and establishes the covenant cultic practices of Israel (Exod 40:34–38).⁴¹ Therefore, within the *כְּבוֹד־יְהוָה* a dazzling within the darkness exists that allures yet humbles.

Balthasar identifies these same themes typologically in the *δόξα-Χριστοῦ*, revealed definitively when God the Father glorifies his Son on the cross. The Christ-form integrates the darkness of the cross and descent into hell with the trinitarian love of God such that “the form which gives expression to the meaning of a radically sinful existence which yet stands under the sign of the hope for redemption . . . takes the modalities of fallen existence upon itself so as to transvalue them by redemptive suffering.”⁴² In other words, the *awful* suffering of Christ on the cross not only indicates the radical nature of our sin but also indicates the *awe-full* hope of redemption.

We should by no means conclude, at this point, that Balthasar is glorifying suffering. Rather, Balthasar is drawing our attention to that fact that Jesus Christ radiates the splendor of God's glory because he is perfectly in tune with the Father's will, obeying the Father even unto death and thereby fulfilling his mission to the world (John 17). *This is the beauty of Christ's holiness*. There is, thus, a dazzling within the darkness of the *δόξα-Χριστοῦ*, something that is alluring within the tragic, when the Father through the Spirit glorifies the Son in his death and descent into hell that reveals the triune love of God for us in Christ's glorious resurrection. In turn, God draws humanity to himself in the humbleness of faith.⁴³

We have mentioned on several occasions that God's triune nature is manifested in and through the Christ-form. Yet what does Balthasar mean by this? To be sure, Jesus Christ, who makes the invisible God visible, “appears in such a way that this polarity reveals itself to us as a personal relationship within God's very nature,” manifesting a dialogical I-Thou relationship characterized by lordliness and holiness in the bond of love.⁴⁴ According to Balthasar, though, the kenosis evidenced by Christ (Phil 2:6) also reveals a primal *eternal* kenosis within the Godhead that “makes possible all other kenotic movements of God into the world.”⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theology: The Old Covenant*, vol. 6 of *GL* (ed. Joseph Fessio and John Riches; trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis and Brian McNeil; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 42.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 6:43.

⁴² Balthasar, *GL*, 1:460.

⁴³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theology: The New Covenant*, vol. 7 of *GL* (ed. Joseph Fessio and John Riches; trans. Brian McNeil; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 264–317.

⁴⁴ Balthasar, *GL*, 1:610; 7:115–61, 439.

⁴⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Action*, vol. 4 of *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory* (trans. Graham Harrison; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994), 331; subsequent references to *Theo-Drama* are abbreviated as *TD*. The consequent kenotic moments that Balthasar understands as proceeding from this primal moment are creation

This intratrinitarian kenosis is the total self-giving of the Father where “the Father strips himself, without remainder, of his Godhead and hands it over to the Son” (John 14:26; 16:13–15).⁴⁶ The Son’s response is one “of eternal thanksgiving (*eucharistia*) to the Father, the Source—a thanksgiving as selfless and unreserved as the Father’s original self-surrender.” The Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son such that he is “common to both as the essence of love . . . maintains the infinite difference between them, seals it and, since he is the one Spirit of them both, bridges it.”⁴⁷ This infinite distance within the Godhead serves as the basis for the *possibility*, not only of other kenotic events within the economy, but also of “every other separation—be it never so dark and bitter.”⁴⁸ What might be the significance, then, not only of the dazzling darkness of God’s triune love but also of this “divine eternal kenosis” for Balthasar’s theology?

2.2. Importance to Understanding Balthasar

It may seem that the preceding paragraphs are rather esoteric. To be sure, Balthasar’s theology has its own rhythm and style that requires diligent study; “for those up to the challenge, von Balthasar’s theology points the way up a steep path.”⁴⁹ Yet Balthasar knows this, expecting much from his readers: “The most demanding thing of all is also the loveliest. The hardest thing turns out to be—because it is love—an ‘easy burden and a yoke that is light.’ Finally . . . in God’s eyes, love has become the manifestation of divine freedom, proven in the fusion of claim, Cross and Resurrection. Only here can Being itself be loved as love.”⁵⁰

That being the case, Balthasar likens the “begetting” within God’s triune life as the “absolute self-giving,” providing explanation for what it means to say that God is love.

Its result can only be the total acceptance of, and a total responding gift to, the origin. The “love” of giving back in return can never be less than that of the begetting. From this we conclude that the interpenetration of love elicits that identity of love, equally powerfully in all three Persons, [for] God is love and nothing else.⁵¹

God’s revelation of himself to Moses in the burning bush as the identity of being finds its fullest expression in Jesus Christ who reveals God’s triune life as love, which would otherwise not be known. God unveils in Jesus Christ “an inner vitality in which the transcendentals are identified with his identity,” for “there is no possibility of separating the life of the three Persons from God’s essence. This essence is no fourth element, [though,] something common to the three Persons. Rather, it is their eternal life itself in its procession.”⁵² For Balthasar, then, God’s *esse* is his *essentia*, affirming God’s divine simplicity such that God *is* true, good, and beautiful.

and incarnation, which culminates in the ultimate kenotic event—Christ’s death on the cross and descent to hell (see *TD*, 4:317–61 and *Mysterium Paschale*, 23–36).

⁴⁶ Balthasar, *TD*, 4:323.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 4:324.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 4:325.

⁴⁹ Löser, “Being Interpreted as Love,” 489.

⁵⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Warum ich noch ein Christ bin,” in *Zwei Plädoyers* (ed. Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Rahner; Munich: Kösel, 1971), 52; quoted in Löser, “Being Interpreted as Love,” 489–90.

⁵¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Epilogue* (trans. Edward T. Oakes; San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004), 93.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 92–93.

Christ, for Balthasar, is the one who integrates and unveils the true, the good, and the beautiful so that he can communicate to us God's life of love found within the eternal processions of the Godhead. God's giving of himself, then, becomes the focal point of the divine being since his self-showing and self-saying culminate in his self-giving. On this basis, Balthasar asserts, "Being itself here unveils its final countenance, which for us receives the name of trinitarian love; only with this final mystery does light fall at last on that other mystery: Why there is Being at all and why it enters our horizon as light and truth and goodness and beauty."⁵³

Is Balthasar's understanding of kenosis and subsequent extrapolation back into the eternal life of God consistent, though, with his own claims regarding divine simplicity? Can he maintain the distinction between the immanent and the economic Trinity as he so desires? And is his understanding of kenosis consistent with the biblical testimony? These are the kinds of questions that probe the depths of the dazzling darkness of God's triune love in Balthasar's theology, raising important questions for evangelicals.

3. Engaging the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar

There is much that evangelicals can affirm with Balthasar. For example, evangelicals can concur with Balthasar's Christocentrism as a proper theological starting point for attending to God's divine revelation because Christ is the exegesis of the Father, for "no one has ever seen God; it is only the Son, who is nearest to the Father's heart who *autos exegēsato*" (John 1:18).⁵⁴ Evangelicals can also echo Balthasar's high regard for the biblical text: "Scripture is the Word of God and not the word of the Church, but it is the Word which the Church, by her meditation in faith, carries in her womb and really brings forth, giving it birth in the world."⁵⁵ Moreover, Balthasar's commitment to the Creator-creature distinction, the goodness of creation, the ontological priority of the immanent Trinity, and Chalcedonian orthodoxy all harmoniously resound within the halls of evangelicalism.

3.1. Critical Analysis

Evangelicals, however, should also have some reservations. To date, there is a lively and ongoing debate regarding Balthasar's understanding of Holy Saturday—Christ's descent into hell—where questions about Christ's purpose in descending and whether Balthasar's theology of Holy Saturday is heterodoxy or a new development in theology are vigorously debated.⁵⁶ Most troubling, in my estimation,

⁵³ Balthasar, *GL*, 1:158.

⁵⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, "God Is His Own Exegete," *Communio* 4 (1986): 280.

⁵⁵ Balthasar, *GL*, 1:539.

⁵⁶ Much, of course, has been made of his controversial theology of Holy Saturday and Christ's descent into hell found in his work, *Mysterium Paschale*. See Alyssa L. Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); Edward T. Oakes, "The Internal Logic of Holy Saturday in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9 (2007): 184–99; and David Lauber, *Barth on the Descent into Hell: God, Atonement and the Christian Life* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2004). See also the rather lively exchange between Oakes and Pitstick in "Balthasar, Hell, and Heresy: An Exchange," *First Things* (December 2006): 25–32 and *The Scottish Journal of Theology* 62 (2009): 195–216, where John Webster and Lauber charitably engage with Pitstick, seeking to frame the discussion dogmatically. Pitstick continues the conversation with Gavin D'Costa in the following two articles: Alyssa Pitstick, "Development of Doctrine or Denial? Balthasar's Holy Saturday and Newman's *Essay*," *International Journal of*

is Balthasar's version of kenotic theology (which is at the heart of this debate) that has divine eternal kenosis as its central tenet. This core element of his kenotic theology seems to undermine God's unity of action, misappropriate the biblical understanding of Christ's kenosis, blur the distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity, and purport a synergistic understanding of salvation that precludes the evangelical notion of *sola gratia*. Before elaborating on these concerns, we need to know in brief how Balthasar explicates the relationship between divine and human freedom.

3.2. God's Unity of Action

Balthasar's notion of infinite difference within the eternal Godhead entails an infinite mutual freedom—what he calls the *Urdrama* of the Trinity—so that the Father and the Son have the freedom to be who they are. Human freedom within the world drama presupposes and finds its basis in this *Urdrama*. In short, God is free necessarily while humans are free contingently. Balthasar surmises: “Unlike God, the world, and finite freedom within it, will not have its ground in itself, not even in an ‘idea’: its ground is exclusively in God's freedom.” That being the case, “being totally dependent on divine freedom, the world can receive its possibility and reality nowhere else but in the eternal Son, who eternally owes his divine being to the Father's generosity.”⁵⁷ In contrast to the solipsistic freedom found in modern Western societies today, which understands freedom as freedom *from* some constraint or authority, Balthasar's notion of human freedom is contingent upon divine freedom and is best understood as freedom *for* something or someone.⁵⁸ Such a notion of freedom is commendable as human freedom takes shape in the relational and personal, exhibiting its humble, servant orientation as a gift from the triune God.⁵⁹ Yet what shape does divine freedom take?

Balthasar's notion of divine eternal kenosis, which is the basis for the possibility of creation and human freedom, seems to undermine his trinitarian theology as he struggles to maintain God's unity of action (Deut 6:4–5). Recall Balthasar's description of the Father's freedom whereby “the Father strips himself, without remainder, of his Godhead.”⁶⁰ In doing so, the Father divests himself of his “entire substance,” handing it over to the Son. This creates what John Milbank calls a “suspended middle” such that “the personal character of the divine essence . . . is forgotten when von Balthasar so reduces the Trinitarian persons to free centers of being.”⁶¹ Consequently, Balthasar struggles to articulate “what it means to think of one act of love throughout the dramatic processes he evokes,” moving toward

Systematic Theology 11 (2009): 129–45 and Gavin D'Costa, “The Descent into Hell as a Solution to the Problem of the Fate of Unevangelized Non-Christians: Balthasar's Hell, the Limbo of the Fathers, and Purgatory,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11 (2009): 146–71.

⁵⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 2 of *The Dramatis Personae: Man in God* (trans. Graham Harrison; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), 261.

⁵⁸ Servais Pinckaers gives a helpful description of this solipsistic freedom found predominately in Western societies, labeling it as “the freedom of indifference” (*The Sources of Christian Ethics* [trans. Mary Thomas Noble; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995], 327).

⁵⁹ For further discussion regarding this view of freedom, see the essays in Colin Gunton, ed., *God and Freedom* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1995) and Alexander J. McKelway, “The Freedom of God and Human Liberation: The Structure of Divine Freedom,” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 9 (1988): 197–210.

⁶⁰ Balthasar, *TD*, 4:323.

⁶¹ John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 74.

“something a bit like tritheism (the mutual worship of persons as Balthasar proposes)” thereby implicitly questioning God’s divine simplicity.⁶² Moreover, this eternal and complete divestiture initiated by the Father, received and responded to by the Son, creates an infinite difference between them held together only by the bond of the Spirit. Such a notion not only borders on the precipice of incomprehensibility but also further questions how the triune God can act as one.

3.3. Christ’s Kenosis and the Immanent/Economic Trinity

Turning to the relationship between the immanent and economic Trinity, Balthasar rightly affirms the ontological priority of the immanent Trinity in his kenotic theology. In doing so, the immanent Trinity, understood as “that eternal, absolute self-surrender whereby God is seen to be, in himself, absolute love . . . explains his free self-giving to the world as love, without suggesting that God ‘needed’ the world process and the Cross in order to become himself.”⁶³ Such an assertion presumes Balthasar’s commitment to the distinction between the immanent and the economic Trinity whereby “we know about the Father, Son, and Spirit as divine ‘Persons’ only through the form and disposition of Jesus Christ. Thus we can agree with the principle, often enunciated today, that it is only on the basis of the economic Trinity that we have knowledge of the immanent Trinity and dare to make statements about it.”⁶⁴

Balthasar surmises, though, that “a way must be found to see the immanent Trinity as the ground of the world process (including the crucifixion) in such a way that it is neither a formal process of self-communication in God, as in Rahner, nor entangled in the world process, as in Moltmann,” if we are to retain our commitment to divine impassibility. His solution is the aforementioned notion of divine eternal kenosis whereby “the Father’s self-utterance in the generation of the Son is an initial ‘kenosis’ within the Godhead that underpins all subsequent kenosis.”⁶⁵ Yet his notion of divine eternal kenosis, drawn from Phil 2:5–8, seems to go beyond the biblical witness that speaks only of the Son’s self-emptying and not the Father’s, thereby equivocating on the meaning of kenosis and confusing the particularity of the Son with the Father. What, though, might the apostle Paul mean by the Son’s self-emptying?

The meaning of the Son’s self-emptying is a rather contested notion where some interpret Christ’s kenosis as a complete divestiture of his divinity while others see an abdication of only some of his divine attributes.⁶⁶ Gordon Fee contends, though, that Paul’s use of the term *μωρφή* in Phil 2:6–7 provides us

⁶² Rowan Williams, “Balthasar and the Trinity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar* (ed. David Moss and Edward T. Oakes; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 50.

⁶³ Balthasar, *TD*, 4:323.

⁶⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, vol. 3 of *TD* (trans. Graham Harrison; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 508.

⁶⁵ Balthasar, *TD*, 4:322–23. See also Balthasar’s *Mysterium Paschale*, where he gives a fuller account of his kenotic reasoning regarding Christ’s death on the cross and its link with the incarnation (11–48).

⁶⁶ For a survey of the relevant issues surrounding Kenotic Christology, see the essays in C. Stephen Evans, ed., *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) and R. P. Martin, *Carmen Christi: Philippians 2:5–11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

with an important clue to understanding not only “the real act of the Son,” as T. F. Torrance remarks,⁶⁷ but also Christ’s self-emptying. The term μορφή, according to Fee, does not denote “the external features by which something is recognized, but of those characteristics and qualities that are essential to it. Hence it means *that which truly characterizes a given reality*.”⁶⁸ Paul’s use of the word in this context connotes metaphorically, then, the reality or essential quality of the mind of Christ (2:5) both as God and as man. Thus, Christ expresses in becoming a human being an essential quality of being God, namely, the giving of himself for the sake of others.⁶⁹

The incarnate Son’s kenosis discloses the very identity of God, the fact that the triune God is not selfish; and as such, we should emulate his humble attitude. God “as love . . . is pure altruism, looking not on (or at) his own things, but at the things of others. From this point of view, the idea of *kenōsis* is revolutionary for our understanding of God.”⁷⁰ Therefore, with Balthasar, we can concur that God is self-giving love, but it seems best to demur from attributing eternal kenotic moments to all the trinitarian Persons to delineate such love. Otherwise, the economic Trinity, as the summary of the gospel, seems to be *constitutive* rather than *communicative* of God’s eternal identity, calling into question Balthasar’s adherence to the distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity.

3.4. Sin and Grace

Evangelicals should also demur from Balthasar’s doctrine of sin and understanding of prevenient grace. Balthasar submits to traditional Catholic dogma, noting that though our “turn toward God can have various levels, it always occurs *praeveniente gratia* [with God’s prevenient grace]” as Vatican I affirms: “For the most merciful Lord stirs up and helps with his grace those who are wandering astray, so that they may be able to come to a knowledge of the Truth.”⁷¹ This notion of grace presumes that sin has brought spiritual sickness to humanity rather than death as Paul says in Eph 2:1. Humanity, according to Balthasar, has the ability to cooperate with God (i.e., synergism) or resist him, for “prevenient grace certainly is not lacking to man even in a single moment of his life.”⁷² If God’s grace works in this way, to whom does the apostle Paul refer when he speaks of being enslaved to sin in Rom 6:16–23?

⁶⁷ Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* (ed. Robert T. Walker; Downers Grove: IVP, 2008), 75.

⁶⁸ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 204.

⁶⁹ See Richard Bauckham’s *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), where he argues that Jesus belongs not only to who God is by being equal but expresses such equality “in service, obedience, self-renunciation and self-humiliation for others.” Consequently, “this radical self-renunciation was his way of expressing and enacting equality with God, and *therefore* (v 9) it qualified him to exercise the unique divine sovereignty over all things” (58).

⁷⁰ Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 215.

⁷¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation* (trans. Edward T. Oakes; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992), 261–63, henceforth abbreviated as *KB*.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 263. My critique follows an Augustinian and Reformed understanding of sin and grace, parsing divine and human freedom in light of God’s covenant with humanity. See Michael Horton’s *Covenant and Salvation: Union with Christ* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007) and *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002). Balthasar’s notion of prevenient grace is akin to Arminian and Wesleyan understandings operative among evangelicals today. However, evangelical Arminians and Wesleyans may differ with Balthasar on how such grace is administered. No matter, this may well be an important point of engagement by evangelical Arminians and Wesleyans, which deserves further exploration.

Balthasar is correct in noting that the Fall does not erase or remove the image of God in human beings. Natural acts of morality are possible; yet, as a consequence of the Fall, they remain off the mark (i.e., in an Augustinian sense) because the depravity of humanity inhibits such actions from reaching their supernatural end, namely, the glory of God (Gen 6:5; Ecc 9:3; John 8:34; Rom 1:24; 2 Cor 4:4). Humanity, then, even with its natural faculties, is unable to direct its faculties and actions to their created end such that no one is able to do anything to please God—*non posse non peccare*—for sin deforms the very heart of human beings. It is precisely at this point that the deleterious effects of sin contaminate our natural faculties, causing us to twist and deny reality such that no amount of “natural” beauty, truth, or goodness can satiate us. Sin distorts and contorts our limited understanding of God, ourselves, and the world, for we see only a poor reflection and know in part what will be understood wholly only in the eschaton when we see God face-to-face (1 Cor 13:9–12).⁷³ What, then, of our sinful condition?

Balthasar contends for a prevenient grace that enables humanity to cooperate with God, leaving “room for all real events and phases that make up man’s way to God.”⁷⁴ If prevenient grace operates in the manner Balthasar suggests, allowing humanity a kind of autonomous freedom to say yes or no to the light of God’s divine revelation, why do some reject God and others do not? Is God’s glory not efficacious to transform the deformed heart of humanity such that humanity responds in faith (Eph 2:8–10; Heb 11)? The crux of the matter, for Balthasar, hinges on *humanity*, not God, for God has done his part and humanity has failed to do its. Such notions subvert the evangelical commitment to *sola gratia* and diminish God’s freedom.

Nevertheless, Balthasar’s theology deserves a hearing among evangelicals as his symphonic approach to theology invites readers to view old and current theological impasses in new ways. Let us conclude, then, by suggesting several implications of Balthasar’s thought for evangelical theology that might spur further engagement with Balthasar and perhaps enrich evangelical theological discourse.

4. Conclusion

Balthasar has much to offer evangelicals. His theological aesthetics, which primarily appropriates aspects of Goethe’s notion of form (*Gestalt*) for theology, emphasizes the inseparable nature of form *and* content such that content is indiscernible without form and form is indiscernible without content. In other words, the “how” or manner in which God communicates himself becomes important for theology rather than simply the content or the “what” of God’s self-revelation. Balthasar advocates such a notion primarily on the basis of the Word taking on flesh, accentuating the trinitarian basis of his proposal, the freedom and wholly otherness of God, and the goodness of creation. Numerous implications ensue from this conclusion. For example, biblical genre becomes essential to discerning the meaning of a biblical text; the manner in which we do theology (i.e., the intellectual virtues) says volumes about our understanding of God; and present human existence, as devilish as it may seem at times, is not to be discarded in an ascetic lifestyle in favor of some otherworldly disembodied reality. Rather, human existence, with its tragic and idyllic moments, should be lived with joy in relationship with others, all to the glory of God.

⁷³ See Stephen Moroney, *The Noetic Effects of Sin: An Historical and Contemporary Exploration of How Sin Affects Our Thinking* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 1999).

⁷⁴ Balthasar, *KB*, 377.

Balthasar's emphasis on the sovereign freedom of God and humanity's relative freedom casts new light on the dramatic covenantal relationship between God and humanity. Typically, God's freedom is juxtaposed to humanity's freedom, usually in an adversarial relationship. Many theologians opt to frame the parameters of the discussion using the analytic philosophical categories of determinism, libertarianism, and compatibilism. To an extent, these categories allow theology to parse the relationship between divine and human freedom with a measure of perspicuity. Yet these analytic categories inherently presume an Enlightenment conception of the individual and a scientific notion of causality. Balthasar, on the other hand, seeks to reframe the discussion with a dramatic metaphor such that the triadic relationships between playwright-actor-director apply to the Trinity as Father-Son-Holy Spirit, respectively. Such notions maintain the contingency of human freedom upon God that takes shape within the relational and personal, exhibiting a humble servant-orientation to human freedom as a gift from the triune God.

Balthasar's dramatic metaphor also insinuates that our understanding of the truth, in part, requires a performative element, which reveals an inherent connection between aesthetics and ethics, thereby dissolving the dichotomy between theology and the Christian life. In his biblical theology of the *gloria Dei*, Balthasar examines numerous theophanic manifestations of God's glory, concluding that God's giving of himself in his self-showing precedes his speech. This self-showing is the beauty of God that demands action, "for God's revelation is not simply an object to be looked at: it is his action in and upon the world, and the world can only respond, and hence 'understand,' through action on *its* part."⁷⁵ Yet, within God's self-showing of his glory, "there appears [God's] holiness and sinful man falls to the ground, only then does the contradiction between light and darkness, holiness and sin, come into full view, and *the drama is begun*."⁷⁶ No one can perform his or her part in God's drama of redemption without knowing this fact first. Therefore, God gives life within this dramatic covenantal moment such that our participation in the living resurrected Christ by the Spirit transforms our understanding of God, the world, and ourselves, tethering together theology and the Christian life.

Finally, Balthasar's theology also brings other important questions into the purview of the evangelical conscience that deserve further exploration. For example, how should evangelicals construe the God-world relationship? How does God's trinitarian nature shape our understanding of his actions in the world and hence influence our conception of other doctrines (e.g., the nature of Scripture, ecclesiology, etc.)? And, what are the implications of Balthasar's view of the atonement for the doctrine of justification? These kinds of questions can only intimate at the potential fruitfulness of interacting with Balthasar's thought. Thus, it is my hope that they spur evangelicals to consider one of the most prominent Catholic theologians of the twentieth century who can help evangelicals sharpen their theological discourse and perhaps move beyond current impasses regarding the doctrine of God, the nature of Scripture, and the doctrine of justification, to name a few.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prolegomena*, vol. 1 of *TD* (trans. Graham Harrison; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), 15.

⁷⁶ Balthasar, *GL*, 4:13.

⁷⁷ I am grateful for comments made by Jonathan King, Hans Madueme, and James R. A. Merrick on a previous draft of this essay as well as to Charles Anderson and the reviewers who asked probing questions and offered constructive suggestions, all of which sharpened my thinking and rhetoric. Nevertheless, any errors in judgment are solely my own.

5. Postscript

In what follows, I offer a succinctly annotated sketch of the prominent primary and secondary sources regarding Balthasar's life and works that may prove useful in exploring the previously mentioned questions. It is a meager offering of literature designed to spur the reader towards engaging Balthasar's theology and is not intended to be exhaustive. Any engagement with Balthasar, though, will have to wrestle with these works, depending upon the reader's interest. No matter I trust that the reader will identify a resounding theme, which strikes a prominent chord within the concerto of Balthasar's theology and is necessary for discerning much of his writings, namely, his notion of the dazzling darkness of God's triune love.⁷⁸

Balthasar's *Epilogue* (Ignatius, 2004) to his trilogy provides readers with the most succinct work on how and why he moves from the transcendentals of being to divine revelation in his trilogy thereby detailing his symphonic methodology. Other one-volume primary sources that touch on Balthasar's major themes include *Mysterium Paschale* (Ignatius, 2005), which expounds his theology of Holy Saturday, his work on Karl Barth entitled *The Theology of Karl Barth* (Ignatius, 1992), which outlines his position on the analogy of being, *Heart of the World* (Ignatius, 1979), which details Christian theology's love affair with modernity and sketches the theological solution in the love of Christ, and his work on encouraging contemplative prayer entitled *Prayer* (Ignatius, 1986). Two relatively short works, *Love Alone Is Credible* (Ignatius, 2004) and *Engagement with God: The Drama of Christian Discipleship* (Ignatius, 2008) offer succinct entry points into his *magnum opus*, namely, his trilogy. The first articulates the necessity of a theological aesthetic for a proper rendering of theology's object, namely, the self-showing glory of God's triune love for the world, which provides a rudimentary sketch of *The Glory of the Lord*. Similarly, the second aids readers in discerning the essence of his *Theo-Drama* by detailing the biblical basis for God's divine involvement in the world through his electing purpose of Israel and Christ that elucidates the dramatic interplay between God's sovereign freedom and humanity's relative freedom. Finally, his book *My Work: In Retrospect* (Ignatius, 1993) is a concise retrospective sketch of his oeuvre, laced with several historical anecdotes, that provides a broad context for each of his major writings.

Significant secondary works that also help navigate Balthasar's theology include Edward Oakes's *Pattern of Redemption* (Continuum, 1994), the finest single volume work that provides an overview of Balthasar's trilogy and the prominent influences on his thought. David Schindler's edited volume entitled *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work* (Ignatius, 1991) provides numerous essays that explore many of the biographical details of Balthasar's life and pertinent themes of his trilogy. Aidan Nichols's five-volume *Introduction to Hans Urs von Balthasar* is also commendable as he guides readers not only through Balthasar's trilogy but also his earlier writings and all other major works beyond the trilogy. *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, edited by Edward Oakes and David Moss, is also notable in that many of the essays attempt to discern Balthasar's thinking on the traditional categories of theology like revelation, Christology, and the Trinity. Finally, three works that explore specific aspects of Balthasar's theology that may be of interest are Gerard O'Hanlon's *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge, 2007), Stephen Wigley's *Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Critical Engagement* (T & T Clark, 2007), and W. T. Dickens's book detailing

⁷⁸ For a more detailed overview of Balthasar's vast oeuvre explained using a cathedral typology, see my essay "Glancing into the Cathedral of Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theology: A Bibliographic Tour," *Christian Scholar's Review* 39 (2009): 91–105.

Balthasar's biblical interpretation entitled *Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics: A Model for Post-Critical Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame, 2003).