
In this work, David Lauber, visiting assistant professor at Wheaton College, elaborates Karl Barth’s atonement theory of Christ’s substitutionary suffering by extending the discussion to Barth’s treatment of the often neglected or misunderstood seventh article of the Creed, the descent into hell. Lauber then situates Barth’s treatment in dialogue with Hans Urs von Balthasar’s theology of Holy Saturday. The result is not only a penetrating treatment of two of the twentieth century’s greatest theological minds on the single obscure article but a constructive invitation to explore how Christ’s descent into hell shapes our understanding of Scripture, the being and activity of the triune God that Scripture reveals, and the life of discipleship to which Christians are called by the definitive revelation of the triune God in the life and passion of Christ.

Lauber begins by locating Barth’s doctrine of reconciliation squarely within the tradition of [the] theologia crucis. The hidden God is most fully revealed by the cross of Christ, in particular the cry of dereliction, the God-forsakenness that is the hell Christ endures. Barth follows the Reformed interpretation of the descent as a status humilationis and rejects a “sequential” reading of the creed that would argue for the descent as some event that takes place between the crucifixion and the resurrection, such as a victorious journey to the realm of the dead to free its captives. With Calvin and the Reformed tradition in general, Barth regards the suffering, death, burial, and descent as descriptive of the ordeal Christ undergoes on the cross. This ordeal is entirely unique in the case of Christ, and he endures it alone. Christ does not simply undergo the punishment that humanity deserves; Christ becomes sin for humanity. He dies the “second death,” an eternal death, the utter annihilation of humanity as sinner. Only Christ experiences the descent into hell, the God-forsakenness, the nonbeing and nothingness, and the eternal death that all humanity as sinners rightfully awaits.

Throughout his prolific career, Balthasar developed an elaborate—and often provocative and controversial—theology of Holy Saturday. Influenced by Barth’s soteriology, Lauber informs us, Balthasar also adopts a strong substitutionary view of the atonement. As Barth also argues, the atonement is not the
punishment of an innocent human being meant to appease God’s wrath, and
the death of Christ is only efficacious because Christ is the eternal Son of God
incarnate. Lauber is particularly adept at elaborating the centrality of the Trinity
for Balthasar’s doctrine of the descent. The cross is first and foremost the defini-
tive expression of divine trinitarian love. For Balthasar, the descent into hell is
a trinitarian event precisely because it is the incarnate Son of God who is cruci-
fied and descends into hell. Balthasar insists that the possibility of the descent
into hell lies in God’s eternal triune life. The Father’s utter abandonment of the
incarnate Son in the cross and the descent into hell is the extreme expression
of the loving self-giving that is God’s very triune eternal identity.

Balthasar’s theological description of the descent is intended to convey the
salvific character of Christ’s passion. The descent signifies the reality of Christ’s
death and his solidarity with humanity in its sin. It is not, however, the descent
of a living Christ and certainly no victorious visit to the underworld. Nor is the
descent a final act of self-surrender. It is no activity of Christ at all. The descent
is something done to Christ in which Christ is entirely passive, capable of no
activities. In the descent, the Father sends the incarnate Son to hell where he is
subject to the eternal damnation and judgment of God upon sin. As with Barth,
the cross is the “second death,” the complete and utter reality of godforsaken-
ness for humanity’s sake. Balthasar, though, sequentially extends this “second
death” into Christ’s passive descent into hell on Holy Saturday. The cross is
marked by Christ’s willingness to undergo the crucifixion. On the cross, Christ
willingly gives up his life for humanity, but on Holy Saturday Christ’s solidarity
with the dead lies in his utter passivity. This, for Balthasar, expresses the radical
depth of God’s self-giving love and the supreme expression of Christ’s obedi-
ence to the Father and the redemptive mission upon which Christ was sent. It
remains always a trinitarian event, pro nobis.

Neither Barth nor Balthasar believes that the doctrine of the descent into
hell can be constructed through the exegesis of a few scattered and isolated
texts, Lauber explains, but both believe that the doctrine is demanded by a syn-
thetic reading of the biblical narrative of the history of Jesus Christ and serious
consideration of the pro nobis nature of the event of Christ’s passion. However,
the Roman Catholic Balthasar’s wish to extend the doctrine of the descent into
hell into a theology of Holy Saturday draws more freely from the extrabiblical
sources of sacred tradition and mysticism in so doing. This is not because
Scripture is wanting or incomplete. For Balthasar, the very silence of Scripture,
especially the manner in which the gospels move directly from Good Friday to
Easter, requires a theology of Holy Saturday. The silence itself is evocative of the
depths to which Christ experiences the godforsakenness of hell, demanding an
expansion of the narrative by speaking where Scripture is silent.

Both Barth and Balthasar, Lauber argues, not only appeal to the “history of
Jesus Christ,” by which they mean not only the scriptural narratives that record
and explain the history of Jesus Christ, but also to the historical events them-
selves. This raises hermeneutical issues concerning the descent into hell that
Lauber seems eager to engage. Scripture itself teaches little on the subject and even less on the time between crucifixion and resurrection, or Holy Saturday. Yet, the historical events themselves would dictate such a Saturday. Is there any sense in which the descent should be understood sequentially, as something that occurs after the crucifixion? Is a theology of Holy Saturday possible or permissible, at least for Protestants, given Scripture’s silence on the matter? Is the silence itself hermeneutically and theologically evocative, as the late Reformed theologian, Alan Lewis, attempted to argue in *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Eerdmans, 2001).

Lauber turns to Michael Root’s interpretation of soteriology and atonement theories as “narrative redescriptions” in order not only to compare Barth and Balthasar’s theories but also to demonstrate that Barth’s “canonical construal” also “expands” or “augments” the biblical narrative, as any atonement theory must—albeit with considerable restrictions demanded by the Scriptures themselves. Barth grounds the descent into hell in Christ’s cry of dereliction but refuses to employ the few biblical passages that seem to refer to a descent (including 1 Peter 3:18-22) as springboards for theological reflection, as Balthasar allows. Rather, Barth’s description of the descent into hell as an intensification of the ordeal Christ undergoes on the cross is itself such an augmentation, Lauber claims. Balthasar’s more explicit augmentation, though drawn in part from the history of interpretation and from mysticism, is normatively rooted in Scripture, particularly a synthetic reading at the center of which is the hermeneutically unifying theme of the history of Jesus Christ. Lauber concludes that for both Barth and Balthasar, or by implication any responsible atonement theory, the doctrine of the descent into hell “need not be explicitly grounded upon specific biblical texts; rather, it must rely upon a reading of Scripture as a whole” (112). Keeping his exegesis of Barth and Balthasar strictly historical, Lauber does not address whether this necessary doctrinal augmentation of Scripture would allow for a Protestant theology of Holy Saturday.

Lauber continues by turning our attention to the crucial question of the relationship of the descent into hell and the Trinity. Here, Lauber utilizes Moltmann on the subject to draw a continuum that places Balthasar between Moltmann and Barth but that also serves to distinguish Barth and Balthasar from Moltmann and Lewis. Balthasar, like Moltmann, wants to argue that the descent into hell affects the inner-trinitarian relations, especially in a way that allows us to affirm divine suffering. However, unlike Moltmann, God is not affected in such a way that is necessary or determinative of the “actualization” of God’s triune being. Moltmann, Lauber argues, introduces a rift or rupture into the Trinity by opposing the will of the Father and the incarnate Son (Gethsemane) in such a manner that the godforsakenness of the cross is conceived as Christ’s ultimate act of acquiescence to the will of the Father. For Moltmann, this act introduces a transformation, change, or becoming into God, that according to Barth and Balthasar violates the divine unity. Both Barth and Balthasar acknowledge that Christ willfully undertakes the atonement in
loving obedience to the Father, an obedience rooted in God’s very identity as triune; both wish to affirm God’s utter self-sufficiency and freedom; and both warn against any notion of divine involvement in creation and history as necessary to satisfy a deficiency in God’s eternal identity as trinitarian love.

Likewise, Lauber continues, Barth and Balthasar affirm the distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity, while Moltmann (like Lewis and Rahner) confuses the two and thus compromises divine freedom and immutability. The collapse of the immanent into the economic forces Moltmann to attribute suffering univocally to humanity and God. For Barth and Balthasar, the distinction between the immanent and economic allows suffering to be attributed to God only analogically, though Barth, rejecting an analogy of being, is more cautious on the subject than Balthasar. “Balthasar. . .ventures to describe how the events of Jesus Christ’s passion really affect God’s internal trinitarian life, and he does this by attempting to walk along the narrow way between, on the one side, baldly asserting that God suffers, and on the other side, maintaining a philosophically precise definition of God’s apatheia, which neglects the depiction of God in the biblical text” (143). Balthasar wishes to uphold the ideal of divine immutability, but at the same time urges that historical events of the passion of Christ must be taken seriously enough to allow for the possibility of a suffering God. According to this reviewer, Balthasar’s narrow way defines the parameters of an orthodox elaboration of the doctrine of God, also with respect to the descent into hell. Though Lauber’s insights into these dynamics are not novel, he is to be credited with elucidating them with sharp precision.

Lauber concludes with a treatment of the descent into hell and the life of Christian discipleship as “non-violent enemy-love.” For both Barth and Balthasar such selfless love is rooted in God’s identity as absolute love, vicariously enacted in the passion of Christ and the descent into hell. Working from an ecclesiology of herald and witness, Barth, however, tends to emphasize the dissimilarity of Christ’s atoning love and his disciples’ love. Christ bears his own cross; he alone accomplishes salvation. His disciples follow from a distance, bearing their own crosses. Balthasar also affirms the unique sufficiency of the cross of Christ, but owing to a more sacramental ecclesiology, tends to emphasize the communion of the disciple with Christ and thus with the trinitie life of God. Both theologians, Lauber observes, move the discussion in the direction of the genuine possibility of universal salvation.

Lauber’s book is a revision of his doctoral dissertation (Princeton Theological Seminary, 1999) and is the third of six volumes in Ashgate Publishing’s Barth Studies. The price is prohibitive, but other volumes in the series have appeared in paperback. It is accessible to theologically oriented seminarians and pastors and especially to academics who work in soteriology and atonement theory.

—Arie Griffioen