

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Answering Liberal Protestantism: Eric Mascall and Karl Barth

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## Abstract

Eric Mascall and Karl Barth shared a common concern with the influence of liberal Protestantism on their churches in England and Germany. They agreed this problem was best addressed through the lens of natural theology. Yet, while for Mascall a Thomistically informed understanding of natural theology was the best way to counteract liberal Protestantism's influence on the Church, for Barth, natural theology was to blame for the Church's confusion. The concern this paper raises was Barth's sharp delineation between human reason and divine revelation in the end, complicit with the ontological duality of modernity that was the basis of the liberal Protestantism he was rejecting? By dealing with modernity on its own terms, Barth undermined the capacity of the Church's ministry of Word and Sacrament to be effective agents of personal transformation. Whereas Mascall's realistic ontology not only repudiates the idealist foundations of liberal Protestantism but also offers the Church the necessary ontology foundation for understanding its ministry of Word and Sacrament as effective embodiments of God's transforming grace.

**Keywords:** Church; God; grace; natural; ontology; realism; reason; revelation

To introduce Eric Mascall and Karl Barth as conversation partners may appear odd to the reader. They certainly neither travelled in the same theological circles nor country, but they did share a common concern with the influence of liberal Protestantism on their respective churches and theology in general. Mascall feared the Church had 'insert[ed] Christianity into an intellectual framework derived from some contemporary understanding of reality which is secular . . . in origin, . . . an evolutionary theory of religious development, and a metaphysics derived ultimately from Kant'.<sup>1</sup> Barth feared neo-Protestantism had become '*religionistic, anthropocentric, and in this sense humanistic*'. This was because of the neo-Protestantism of his former professors, including Harnack and Herrmann, who had supported the German war policy of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Both Mascall and Barth blamed the church for accommodating its theology to the philosophies of Kant, Hegel, and

<sup>1</sup>Peter Webster, *Eric Mascall and the making of an Anglican Thomist, 1937–1945*, 222.

the methods and principles of historical and scientific research that were basically anthropocentric.

That said, their theological responses to Protestant liberalism were diametrically opposed to one another. Mascall believed a robust retrieval of Aquinas' natural theology and its underlying realist ontology was the best way to retrieve a 'specific Catholic doctrine of God, which differs in important ways from the doctrine taught by liberal Christianity'.<sup>2</sup> Barth regarded the *analogia entis* as the invention of Anti-Christ and blamed natural theology for the confusion of God with both nature and reason in liberal Protestantism.<sup>3</sup>

But was Barth's sharp delineation between human reason and divine revelation unwittingly complicit with the ontological duality of Modernity – the basis of liberal Protestantism he was rejecting?<sup>4</sup> By repudiating liberalism on its own dualist terms, Barth threatens the capacity of the ministries of Word and sacrament in the life of the Church to embody God's grace which is essential for individual Christian growth in holiness. Mascall's realistic ontology, however, not only repudiates the philosophical idealism that informed liberal Protestantism, but it also offers the Church the necessary ontological foundation for understanding its ministry of Word and sacrament as effective embodiments of God's transforming grace. We shall explore this problem, beginning by summarizing Barth and Mascall's respective argument against and for natural theology and concluding by considering the negative and positive implications of their respective underlying ontologies.

### Barth's Negation of Natural Theology

When Barth accepted the invitation to speak at the 'Gifford Lectures' on the topic of natural theology, he 'expressly reminded the Senatus at Aberdeen University that "I am an avowed opponent of all-natural theology."<sup>5</sup> He rejected the following two premises of natural theology.<sup>6</sup> First, that God's act of creation establishes a unity between Creator and creature that is distinct from the saving union God establishes with humanity in Jesus Christ. Therefore, second, humans possess a natural capacity to know God which, although limited, remains intact even though humanity has fallen into sin. In contrast, Barth believed (i) the only union between God and humanity comes from the saving union of God in Christ and (ii) because of sin, humans have no capacity to know God rightly apart from God's saving grace in Christ.

Barth developed and refined these two convictions throughout his career. In his early dialectical-shaped theology, Barth rejected the possibility that creaturely realities could be the basis for the knowledge of God because the reality of God would, inevitably, be determined by human ideals. He believed this is what

<sup>2</sup>*He Who Is*, 2.

<sup>3</sup>*C.D.*, I.1, xiii.

<sup>4</sup>J.A. Franklin, *Charles Taylor and Anglican Theology: Aesthetic Ecclesiology* (Pilgram Macmillan: Gewerbestrasse, 2024), 112.

<sup>5</sup>Karl Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God According to the Teaching of the Reformation* Translated by J.L.M. Haire and Ian Henderson (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1938), 26.

<sup>6</sup>I am indebted to Johnson for his excellent summary of Barth's rejection of natural theology in, Keith L. Johnson, *Barth on Natural Theology* in "The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth: Barth and Dogmatics", Vol. 1. Edited by George Hunsinger and Keith L. Johnson (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2019).

happened to his former professors who supported Germany's war effort during World War I. Their support was based on a theology that was shaped by a general account of human religious experience, an historical-critical method approach to Scripture and a perceived connection between culture and religion. Now that God was shaped by the ideals of the culture, idolatry followed.

In response Barth tried to explain how God can be known by humans while remaining beyond human manipulation and control. Barth explains, 'if I have a system, it is limited to the recognition of what Kierkegaard called the "infinite qualitative distinction" between time and eternity . . . God is in heaven, and thou art on earth'.<sup>7</sup> Revelation of God is a divine act that occurs as a 'pure absolute vertical miracle' and takes the form of a 'unidimensional line of intersection' between God and creation.<sup>8</sup> At the centre of this miracle is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. 'The resurrection is the revelation', Barth says, 'the disclosing of Jesus as the Christ, the appearing of God, and the apprehending of God in Jesus'.<sup>9</sup> The risen Christ exposes the unrighteousness of humanity and reveals the righteous God, who, at the same time, is totally distinct from creation and unknown by humanity. Human knowledge of God, Barth says, is an 'impossible possibility' that only 'exists as the possibility of God and his possibility alone'.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, there can be no union between God and humanity apart from God establishing it in and through the risen Christ who remains beyond creaturely history at every moment. 'There is no merging or fusion of God and man', Barth insists, 'no exaltation of humanity to divinity, no overflow of God in human nature' (Rom. p. 30). Barth's uncompromising rejection of natural theology left him open to criticism. The relationship God establishes with humanity does not take any material, historical, or tangible form. Furthermore, his theology was criticized for its dualism because it had no basis for making any positive claims about God.

In 'Gottingen Dogmatics',<sup>11</sup> Barth responded to his critics by demonstrating how God's revelation can occur within creation without being transformed into creation and a natural human apprehension of God (1990, pp. 58–59). He did this by utilizing the dialectic of veiling and unveiling that he derived from the *anhypostatic-anhypostatic* Christological formula.<sup>12</sup> This formula expresses the notion that the human nature of Christ has no personhood prior to the Incarnation when the Son of God assumed a complete human nature. Consequently, the person of the hypostatic union is one and the same subject as the Logos, the second person of the Trinity. Barth uses this formula to argue that although humans encounter the real, eternal and transcendent God as he unveils himself in Jesus Christ, they do so only indirectly because God remains hidden in the veil of Jesus' human flesh.

<sup>7</sup>Johnson, *Barth, on Natural Theology*, 98.

<sup>8</sup>Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*. Translated by E.C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 30.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>11</sup>Karl Barth, *THE GÖTTINGEN DOGMATICS: Instruction in the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1990).

<sup>12</sup>See Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936* (Clarendon: Clarendon Publication, 1997) for detailed understanding of Barth's use of this Christological formula.

This dialectic enables Barth to affirm God's revelation within creation while preserving God's distinction from creation.

Barth then, applies this doctrine of veiling and unveiling through the concept of the Word of God.<sup>13</sup> God's revelation is a Word-event, an address that occurs between one person and another.<sup>14</sup> And yet, 'even in the humanity of Christ', Barth says, 'the content of revelation as well as its subject is God alone'.<sup>15</sup> Although the Word became flesh, revelation is not the flesh but the eternal and transcendent God who speaks while hidden in the flesh. Thus, in whatever creaturely-historical means humans encounter revelation, they are encountering the eternal God who transcends creation and history. God's revelation stands in discontinuity with creaturely existence at every moment and can in no way be a constant feature of it.

Barth believes he is now on firmer theological ground in his opposition to natural theology's first premise, that God's being is utterly distinct from creaturely being and the only union between God and humanity is the union established by God in Jesus Christ. But he is still left struggling with how to discount natural theology's second premise. How can humans receive this revelation of God who remains distinct from creation and history? For a solution, Barth appears to open the door to a natural capacity in humanity to receive God's revelation. Human knowledge, Barth says, is 'capable of participation in God's self-knowledge, of standing in the relation of revelation, of indirect knowledge of God'.<sup>16</sup> But Barth then quickly closes the door on any such possibility when he denies that the actual content of the knowledge of God is the same with divine revelation. He continues to insist there can be no union between God and humanity apart from the one established in Jesus Christ. Although he now affirms that humans possess the innate capacity to reflect on the mystery of God, it is strictly negative in character.<sup>17</sup>

Barth's rejection of natural theology changes again after his encounter with Roman Catholic theologian, Erich Przywara who argues for a doctrine of *analogia entis* based on Aquinas' account of the distinction between essence and existence. Like God, the creature has a unity of essence and existence, but unlike God, the creature's unity is one of tension rather than identity. This tension stems from the fact that the creature's essence is realized over and above its existence. Therefore, the creature cannot be considered a creature apart from its relationship with God. Humans are like God because they possess a unity of essence and existence. But even in this similarity, their dissimilarity is maintained because there is tension in the unity of essence and existence in humans.

The implication of this analogy is that human relationship to God is 'open upwards'.<sup>18</sup> The fact of human existence testifies to God as its source. And yet, this testimony indicates that God is utterly distinct from humans because they remain dependent on their existence for every moment. Humans can reflect on their being and know that God is both within and distinct from creaturely existence. Therefore,

<sup>13</sup>Barth, *GÖTTINGEN DOGMATICS*, 45–69.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 340–41.

<sup>17</sup>Johnson, *Barth*, 98.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 98.

grace does not destroy nature but supports and perfects it. God's grace in creation allows humans to derive knowledge of God through philosophical reflection, although humans cannot know God fully except that received from revelation in Christ.

Barth realized he could no longer defend his rejection of natural theology based on the distinction between God and creation because Przywara used the same distinction to support his natural theology. In response, he rejects Przywara's assumption that God's revelation in Christ confirms and reinforces a 'presupposed human capacity . . . given with our existence'<sup>19</sup> because it misunderstands both the content of divine revelation and the effects of sin on the knower. God's revelation in Christ does not reveal to humans something they already know because sin makes that impossible. Thus, something new, 'as light in darkness must come to them as sinners, as forgiving and thus as a judging grace'.<sup>20</sup> According to this grace, sin does not merely cause a 'disturbance' that limits our capacity to know God, but an 'irreconcilable contradiction' between God and humans.<sup>21</sup> God's grace in Christ does not perfect and fulfil creaturely being but instead 'cuts *against* the grain of our existence all through and is never at all to be comprehended or apprehended by our existence'.<sup>22</sup>

Barth further develops his rejection of natural theology by appealing to the concept of faith which he develops in *Church Dogmatics* I.1.<sup>23</sup> The true knowledge of God occurs when God speaks His Word to whomever receives it through faith. Barth appeals to the concept of *analogia fidei* as an alternative to *analogia entis*. Faith 'has its absolute and unconditional beginning in God's Word independent of the inborn or acquired characteristics and possibilities of man'.<sup>24</sup> For Barth, 'I can only believe that my existing-in-faith is God's work not mine'.<sup>25</sup> Only the event of God's revelation can give humanity this faith that can then serve as a 'point of contact' between God and humanity. The possibility of faith must be 'understood only as one that is loaned to man by God' not 'as a possibility which in some sense is man's own'.<sup>26</sup> In faith, Barth concedes humanity does 'conform to God' but it has nothing to do with 'deification'. The faith God loans to humanity must not be 'contemplated but simply used in faith, [as] an aptness to receive the Word of God'.<sup>27</sup> Barth rejects the 'image of God' in humanity as a point of contact because 'the image of God is not just destroyed, . . . , but completely annihilated because of sin [and] completely lost the capacity for God'.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>19</sup>K. Barth, "Fate and Idea in Theology," in *The Way of Theology in Karl Barth*. Edited by M. Rumscheidt. Intro. by Stephen Sykes (Pickwick Publications: Allison, 1986), 38.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>21</sup>K. Barth, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life* (John Knox Press, Louisville, 1993), 24.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>23</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I.1. Edited by G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975).

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>25</sup>Barth, *Holy Spirit*, 33.

<sup>26</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I.2. Edited by G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 238.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 238.

Barth's rejection of natural theology faced one more obstacle from Catholic theologian Gottlieb Söhngen's insightful criticism of his *analogia fidei*.<sup>29</sup> Söhngen maintains that Barth's point of correspondence that is based on the analogy of faith in Christ rather than in human being sets 'faith against being'.<sup>30</sup> This opposition undermines Barth's affirmation that believers participate in Christ,<sup>31</sup> because it is a participation in *being*, namely God's being, in and through Christ.<sup>32</sup> Unless Barth accepts there already exists an analogy of being, his claims about the analogy of faith and participation in Christ will not work. Thus, Barth's account of divine revelation still operates under the assumption that humans possess a natural capacity to receive God's revelation.

Barth concedes Söhngen's point that 'participation in being is grounded in the grace of God and therefore faith'.<sup>33</sup> Even so, he insists the insights of natural theology cannot be brought together with the knowledge derived from God's revelation in Christ because this last is fundamental to practicing theology faithfully: 'As God in Himself He is what He is as God in His revelation – the Lord and Creator and Judge and Redeemer from all eternity and in His essence as the triune God. How can this being, which is the origin and boundary of all being, have only a part as we do in some being in general'.<sup>34</sup> But how can Barth accept Söhngen's argument yet offer an explanation as to how humanity can possess the capacity to receive God's revelation without us also having the capacity to consider God's revelation in the created order?

Barth responds to this challenge by developing his doctrine of election in *Church Dogmatics* II.2. He claims that both the created order and human beings are determined by God's decision to reconcile the world in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is both the object and subject of election, and thus the beginning of all created works. Every created thing is determined in its fullness by God's decision to enter a covenant with humanity in Christ. 'There is no such thing', Barth says, 'as a created nature which has its purpose, being or continuance apart from grace, or which may be known in this purpose, being or continuance except through grace'.<sup>35</sup> The created order is intrinsically defined by the covenant of grace because it exists as the space where this covenant is executed. Likewise, human being is defined by the covenant because Jesus Christ is the ontological ground of human existence, and, thus, where the true human being is found.<sup>36</sup> Humanity is determined by its relationship to Christ, who as the fully human and fully divine mediator, who also remains distinct from them<sup>37</sup> in his unique relation to the Father. Human beings have a created

<sup>29</sup>Gottlieb Söhngen, 'Analogia Fidei: Gottähnlichkeit allein aus Glauben' *Catholica* 3(3), 1934: 113–136 quoted in Johnson, *Barth's Natural Theology*, 104.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>31</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II.2. Edited by G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 82.

<sup>32</sup>Söhngen, 'Analogia Fidei', 104.

<sup>33</sup>Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II.2, 82.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>36</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.2. Edited by G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 132–202.

<sup>37</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV.1. Edited by G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 9.

capacity to receive the revelation of God but do not hold it as a human possession. It resides in Christ Himself as Christ relates to humans in grace to bring them to the destiny for which they were created.

### Mascall's Realistic Natural Theology

Mascall's natural theology assumes a traditional assessment of the doctrine of God. Logically and essentially it is the starting point for Christian theology. But '[t]he order in which things exist, the *ordo essendi*', Mascall says, 'is usually the precise opposite of the order in which we come to know them, the *ordo cognoscendi*; and this is especially true of that which is of all beings the most fundamental, God himself'.<sup>38</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that 'all human beings, unless they are blinded by prejudice or sophistication, have a conviction, though often a very obscure conviction, of the existence of something which as a matter of fact is God'.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, natural theology's responsibility is to address not 'whether' we can naturally have a conviction that God exists, but why we already do so.

Mascall turns to Thomas Aquinas' proofs for the existence of God or 'Five Ways' to develop his cosmological theism, which is also informed by modern Thomists, especially Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain. Aquinas assumes a realist theory of knowledge in which the human intellect by its nature is capable of apprehending beings as existing, even though it may misunderstand their natures. In contrast to the idealism of Descartes and Kant in which the object we perceive are simple *ideas* inside our minds, we can perceive *real beings* outside ourselves.<sup>40</sup> Aquinas' realist epistemology is not concerned with essences and substances as composed of matter and form, but rather with 'actual beings, the *ens* the actual concrete existent'.<sup>41</sup> What is given to us in the finite world is not a realm of essences, some of which exist, but a realm of existential acts, each of which, in view of its determinative character, gives rise to a particular essence.<sup>42</sup> To ask what being is, therefore, is simply to ask how it exists, for its essence is nothing but the mode of its existence.

Our knowledge of extra-mental realities as 'indeterminate beings' is acquired through the medium of the senses that is apprehended by a mental act of judgment. '[T]he human soul', Mascall says,

operates on the twofold level of sense and intellect. The sensible species is not the *objectum quod* but the *objectum quo* of the whole perceptive act; it is indeed an impression received by the sense, an impression which the intellect uses as its instrument to grasp, admittedly obscurely and imperfectly and under the mode in which the sensible species presents it, the actually existing extra subjective being or *ens*.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>38</sup>Eric Mascall, *He Who Is* (Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2023), 1.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>40</sup>Eric Mascall, *The Openness of Being: Natural Theology Today* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1971), 92.

<sup>41</sup>Eric Mascall, *Existence and Analogy*, (Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2023). 48.

<sup>42</sup>Mascall, *Existence and Analogy*, 48.

<sup>43</sup>*Existence and Analogy*, 53.



Mascall recognizes the primacy of experience as a starting point for knowledge but insists that along with sense experience humans also have the mental faculty of judgment that can grasp, in a direct but mediated way, an extra-mental reality, which is a being, a real thing. To be clear, he does not mean that 'I necessarily perceive it *as* extra-mental [but] simply *as a being*, as something existing, as something *in itself*, as an *in-se*'.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, when the intellect apprehends a being for what it is, it 'achieve[s] a real union with the being [and] becomes identified, however imperfectly, with it'.<sup>45</sup> The highest activity of the mind is not detachment from the object perceived, as idealists would argue, but involvement with it. By contemplating finite being with humility and wonder and accepting it for what it is in its finitude, the mind can 'penetrate beneath it to its intelligible metaphysical being'.<sup>46</sup> Mascall acknowledges his claim is 'highly mysterious'.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, the mind's capacity to penetrate other beings, although not physically, is nonetheless real.

What characterizes the sheer *givenness* of any extra-mental being which we perceive through our senses is its contingency. There is nothing in its essence or nature that can tell us why it should exist. Since the ground of its existence cannot be 'in itself, the logical consequence of this proposition is that a 'necessary self-existent Being exists'.<sup>48</sup> To suggest 'self-existent necessary being' refers to God does not tell us *what* God is, but only how he is related to his creatures. Since creatures despite having no reason to exist according to their own essence, do in fact exist, they must be objects of a self-existent Being. Furthermore, because contingent finite beings are metaphysically incomplete, they are objects of the ongoing creative activity of God<sup>49</sup> which makes finite beings inherently open to him.<sup>50</sup>

At this point of his argument, Mascall is faced with two problems he must resolve. If he asserts the existence and causality of God in the same sense it is asserted of finite beings, he renders God incapable of fulfilling the function for whose performance God is necessary. If he asserts the existence and causality of God in an altogether different sense from that which is asserted about finite beings, statements about God are empty of intelligible content. But if in saying 'God exists' there is no reference to a particular concept of God, neither of these assertions are problematic. All that is being asserted is (1) that God exists and (2) that God causes the existence of finite beings. Existence is not contained in a concept but is affirmed in a judgment.

But if the natural theologian can only assert that God is *ipsum esse subsisten*, does the word 'God' merely refer to an intelligible principle of the world? The answer is no because this same notion of God is revealed by God himself in the Old Testament, especially in Exodus 3:14, where God reveals himself as, 'I am who I am'. Of course, the Bible tells us much more about God than this truth. But that does not

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<sup>44</sup>Mascall, *Openness*, 99.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>46</sup>Eric Mascall, *Words and Images: A Study in Theological Discourse*, (London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1957), 65.

<sup>47</sup>Mascall, *Openness*, 100.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>49</sup>Mascall, *Openness*, 145.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 146.



deny the bible rests upon a metaphysical assumption namely that of the absolute transcendence and independence of God. When Aquinas gave the name 'He who is' to God and describes him as *ipsum esse subsistens*, he was expressing the fundamental metaphysical truth about God to which the Bible bears witness'.<sup>51</sup>

Here we conclude Mascall's cosmological argument for God's existence. It assumes we can perceive extra-mental material beings as both real and contingent. Its character demands for its explanation the existence of a transcendental self-existent ground who is the same God of the OT and can be described as 'He who is'. The question must now be asked, 'How is it possible for us to talk about God?' The answer is the doctrine of the analogy of being. Let us first consider how this doctrine functions for Mascall. It does not explain how we can talk about God, but instead, explains how it is that we have been able to talk about him already. Furthermore, the problem of analogy is prior to every type of revelation, not just natural theology. For any revelation must be thought about to be received and can be thought about only by the aid of words or finite images. These words cannot signify God unless the appropriate mode of signification functions in our minds.<sup>52</sup>

If we are to speak affirmatively about God, we have two choices. We could apply terms univocally or equivocally. If we choose the former, God's life and love in specifiable respects would be identical with finite life and love. But to assert this would necessarily imply that in some respects God is finite, contingent and lacking in self-sufficiency, thus undermining natural theology's possibility. If we apply concepts to God equivocally, no aspect of their meaning in one context could be carried over to the other. Since the meaning of concepts is derived from the finite sphere, we would be forced to acknowledge that the use of these concepts for God would be meaningless. The only possible way of maintaining Mascall's argument is a third way, doctrine of analogy.

Any discourse about God employs two kinds of analogy that must be tightly connected: the analogy of attribution and the analogy of proportionality. The analogy of attribution is that of attributing to God as cause whatever perfection is found in the world as effect. But taken on its own, the analogy of attribution tells us nothing about God except that he is cause of this effect. Hence, we need to supplement this with the analogy of proportionality. It asserts that the relation of such perfections of God as life and love to God's existence resembles the relation of the finite perfections to the finite existents that participate in them. This allows us to speak formally about God. But the resemblance between the two pairs of concepts cannot be one of equality. We cannot say that God's life and goodness is related to his existence just as our life and goodness is related to our existence. Mascall concludes, 'without the analogy of proportionality it is very doubtful whether the attributes which we predicate of God can be ascribed to him in more than a merely virtual sense; without the analogy of attribution, it hardly seems possible to avoid agnosticism.'<sup>53</sup> However, when the analogy of proportionality and the analogy of

<sup>51</sup>Mascall, *Existence and Analogy*, 17.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 113.

attribution are tightly interlocked, we can speak of God both meaningfully and formally.

The crucial point in Mascall's discussion of analogy is that at the level of concept we have no real alternative to use univocal and equivocal modes of discourse, but because our thought about God consists in judgments about his existence rather than concepts, we do. Mascall is 'not merely instituting comparisons between two orders of concepts but considering created and uncreated being as the former actually exists in dependence on the latter'.<sup>54</sup> The purpose of the doctrine of analogy is not to allow us to form concepts of divine essence, but to allow us to affirm divine existence; not to compare God's features with those of finite beings, but to allow us to assert that he exists when we can identify him only by describing him in terms derived from the finite order. All our assertions about God are grossly inadequate regarding concepts about him. But we can attribute to God, by our affirmative judgment, the name that denotes the perfection corresponding to the cause.<sup>55</sup>

We shall conclude with some reflections on what Mascall's natural theology tells us about the nature of the relation between God and his creature. In humanity, there is *potential oboedientialis*, some receptive capacity, however minimal, for the supernatural. It is because finite beings are dependent upon God's incessant activity to exist that they are 'open to fresh influxes of creative activity from God'.<sup>56</sup> If at some level of humanity's being there is no point of contact with God, not only will natural theology be impossible, but so will the theology of revelation be as well. That humanity has this capacity does not mean it can actualize it by its own powers. Only God can do this. And yet, it is precisely because we are metaphysically incomplete beings, that we are open to the possibility of new influxes of the incessant creative activity of God.

Although the initiative must come from God, our part is not simply passive but indeed 'receptive'. We can be truly receptive to God's grace because humanity is made in the **image of God**, so that as 'personal creature[s] we are open to the personal Creator'.<sup>57</sup> Recalling Aquinas' realist epistemology that says the knower, albeit in a mysterious way, can intentionally become the object known, surely when God reveals himself to us it is not just a matter of the transfer of information but a taking up of man into God's divinity. Mascall does not fear any such union of God and humanity will lead to pantheism because the comparison is not between the natures or essences of God and humanity but instead the concrete existential activity uniting them. Since the mutual otherness of God and humanity consists in humanity's total dependence for his existence on the incessant creative activity of the self-existent God such a fear is unnecessary. It is logically possible to hold that humankind can be raised by God to a supernatural union with him and, at the same time maintain on a natural level that man is entirely isolated from God. In this way, 'the creature finds its own activity not by-passed or suppressed [by grace], but on the contrary liberated and enhanced'.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>56</sup>Mascall, *Openness of Being*, 145.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>58</sup>*The Importance of Being Human*, 61.

## The Ecclesial Implications of Barth and Mascall's Ontologies

This last section will consider the underlying ontologies of Barth and Mascall's respective approaches to natural theology and their implications on the life of the Church, especially its ministry of Word and Sacrament. Barth's sharp delineation between human reason and divine revelation is unwittingly complicit with the ontological duality of Modernity that is the basis of the liberal Protestantism he was rejecting.<sup>59</sup> By repudiating liberalism on its own dualist terms, Barth threatens the capacity of the ministries of Word and Sacrament in the life of the Church to embody God's grace which is essential for individual Christian growth in holiness. Whereas Mascall's realistic ontology repudiates the philosophical idealism that informed liberal Protestantism and offers the Church the necessary ontological foundation for understanding its ministry of Word and Sacrament as effective embodiments of God's transforming grace.

Barth's notion of the Word of God maintains a clear distinction between reason and revelation, grace and nature, and thus between God's revelatory acts and the words which communicate these acts of God. In other words, there seems to be no ontological connection between revelation and words. Words have no natural capacity to communicate the reality they name as they do in Mascall's realist epistemology. For Mascall, the intellect can apprehend – sensory representations – which we perceive through our senses *as a being*, as something *in itself*, as an *in-se*. In this act of intellectual apprehension, a real union is achieved between the knower and the known, not physically, but none the less real.<sup>60</sup> Whereas Barth's dualist epistemology undermines the capacity of human language to describe God and thus the capacity of the human mind to apprehend God. Mascall quoting Austin Farrer says,

This problem of analogy is in principle prior to every particular revelation. For the revelation has to be thought about to be received and can be thought about only by the aid of words or finite images; and these cannot signify of God unless the appropriate 'mode of signification' functions in our minds.<sup>61</sup>

Mascall agrees with Barth that only God can make Himself known to us. But unless there is some receptive capacity, however small, in us, how can we apprehend what God is saying in the words he is using to communicate with us? This radical opposition between revelation in terms of acts and revelation in terms of words, Mascall says, 'is perverse [because] it consists in an impact rather than in an intimate transformation and vivification'<sup>62</sup> of the recipient so she can apprehend God.

A similar problem arises regarding the capacity of the sacraments to convey spiritual reality in Barth's thinking. His assumed dualist ontology between nature and grace empties the capacity of Holy Communion and Baptism of any sacramental embodiment of God's presence and thus, turns them into simply

<sup>59</sup>Franklin, *Charles Taylor and Anglican Theology*, 112.

<sup>60</sup>Mascall, *Openness*, 100.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, 143. Mascall cites Farrer, *Finite and Infinite* (London: Dacre Press, 1943), 2f.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, 149.

memorials of past acts. If words have no capacity to embody and communicate divine realities, neither can the natural elements of bread and wine in the Eucharist or water in Baptism. Barth admits that this is the case later in his life,

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are not events, institutions, actualizations, emanations, repetitions, or extensions, nor indeed guarantees and seals of the work and word of God; nor are they instruments, vehicles, channels, or means of God's reconciling grace. They are not what they have been called since the second century, namely, mysteries or sacraments.<sup>63</sup>

For Barth, the one and only true sacrament is Jesus on the Cross (CD IV.2, 55). Jesus Christ is the only means by which God makes himself known and only in Him that God and humanity are united in a hypostatic union. Thus, Barth empties the sacraments of all divine activity because he fears their performance to be necessary for salvation. Hence, traditional realist accounts of baptismal regeneration and Eucharistic participation must be rejected.

If, as Barth says, the sacraments are mere memorials of the one and only true sacrament, Jesus on the Cross, what purpose do they serve? In the case of the Eucharist, it would seem the elements are 'nothing more than visual stimuli'<sup>64</sup> to remind us of the 'one act and revelation of salvation that has taken place in the one Mediator between God and man'.<sup>65</sup> Somehow, once we are visually stimulated by Eucharist, Barth claims 'Jesus Christ makes his people free and responsible'.<sup>66</sup> But he does not explain how this can happen, nor why we need the Eucharist for this to happen? We certainly do not need to celebrate Holy Communion to help us recall the once and forever sacrifice of Christ for the sins of the world. The ministry of the Word can suffice in this function as we see in non-sacramental Protestant liturgies.

Mascall's realist ontology with its central affirmation that even at the level of nature, there is an intimate union between the Creator and the creature, without which there could not be any existence of the latter, offers a more robust understanding of the sacraments as effective communications of God's grace. For Mascall, the sacraments do not merely *declare* the imputation of God's righteousness, they also *impart* it to us so that a real change can be brought about in us at the ontological depth of our being.<sup>67</sup> In the reception of the sacraments there is, Mascall says, 'a real communication of the life of God to the human soul'. In this way, God does not impute without imparting or account a man righteous without re-creating him'.<sup>68</sup>

But how does Mascall respond to Barth's concern that any such real communication of God to humanity, a real elevation of humanity into the life of God would blur the distinction between the Creator and the creature and slip into pantheism? Mascall believes Barth falsely sees this relation between God and

<sup>63</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.4* Trans. by G. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981), 46.

<sup>64</sup>Franklin, *Charles Taylor and Anglican Theology*, 130.

<sup>65</sup>Barth, *Dogmatics IV.4*, 46.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>67</sup>*Christ, The Christian, and the Church*, 81f. See also, E. Mascall, *The Importance of Being Human* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 68.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, 114–125.

humanity in terms of their respective natures or essences rather than on the level of existence that unites them. If he had recognized the concrete existential activity uniting them, Barth would realize that this relation is not a problem, but, in fact, essential. The mutual otherness of God and finite beings consists of finite beings totally dependent for their existence on the incessant creative activity of the self-existent God, the same God who is revealed to us in Exodus 3. In this way, a clear distinction between God and creature is maintained while simultaneously placing them in the most intimate connection. ‘As I see it’, Mascall says, ‘[it is] logically possible to hold that man is raised by God to a supernatural union with him and to hold at the same time that on the natural level man is entirely isolated from God, for grace must have some foothold in nature to act at all’.<sup>69</sup> Despite the limitation of language, we not only can have knowledge about God, but also know God.<sup>70</sup> Although our capacity to know God must be initiated by God, nevertheless, ‘the creature finds its own activity not by-passed or suppressed, but on the contrary liberated and enhanced’.<sup>71</sup>

There is much more that can be said about the implications of Mascall’s natural theology on the life of the Church and on other doctrines, especially the Incarnation that he argues elsewhere is the centre of Christian faith.<sup>72</sup> Hopefully, this paper’s introduction to his natural theology and the implications of its underlying realistic ontology on the Church ministry of Word and Sacrament will encourage clergy, theologians and lay leaders in the Church to consider Mascall as a resource for equipping the mission of today’s Church. For if it is true that ‘Christ came not to replace ‘matter’ with some ‘supernatural’ and sacred matter, but to restore it and to fulfil it as the means of communion with God’<sup>73</sup> Mascall’s voice cannot be ignored.

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<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>72</sup>Mascall, *Openness*, 155. See especially *Christ, the Christian, and the Church*.

<sup>73</sup>BarryHarvey, *Taking Hold of the Real. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Profound Worldliness of Christianity* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2015) cite in James Lawson, *Loving and Hating the World: Ambivalence and Discipleship* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2021), 179.