

# Supralapsarian Christology and Theological Grammar:

## *Exploring Speculative Tension Through Barth and Balthasar*

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Would the incarnation occur if the fall did not? Supralapsarian Christology has its roots in the Thomist-Scotist quandary over this question, perhaps unsurpassed in its speculative reach. Famously, Duns Scotus answers affirmatively, advocating a supralapsarian position where the incarnation's primary cause precedes the fall.<sup>1</sup> While infralapsarians like Aquinas do not deny this possibility, they contend that scripture's silence does not provide grounds for positing further motives in the incarnation than remedying the fall.<sup>2</sup> The background for this article is the considerable discussion on supralapsarian Christology that has followed Edvin Chr. van Driel's *Incarnation Anyway*.<sup>3</sup> Van Driel contends that only a supralapsarian affirmation can properly account for God's gratuitousness in creation. Incarnation is not God's 'plan B'; it is his original intention. In contemporary theology,

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<sup>1</sup> See John Duns Scotus, *Op. Ox.* III, d.7, q.3, n. 60–67. See also Marilyn McCord, *Adams Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 181–184, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511607585>.

<sup>2</sup> See Thomas Aquinas, *ST III*, Q.1.art 3, co. For a contemporary defense of Aquinas see Felipe Do Vale, 'On Thomas Aquinas's Rejection of an "Incarnation Anyway"', *TheoLogica: An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology* 3.1 (2019), 144–164, <https://doi.org/10.14428/thl.v2i3.15373>.

<sup>3</sup> See Edwin Chr. van Driel, *Incarnation Anyway: Arguments for Supralapsarian Christology*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

this position is taken up by the likes of Oliver D. Crisp,<sup>4</sup> and David Bentley Hart.<sup>5</sup> Rather than arguing for or against some variation of supralapsarian Christology, this article proposes that analysis thereof can serve as a resource for addressing speculative theological inquiry.

But why are such resources warranted? As the theologian aims to speak about a transcendent God, he or she inevitably encounters an axiomatic tension between human speculation and God's abiding mystery. Considering this, it is not self-evident how one should approach speculative theological inquiry like supralapsarian Christology. This calls for systematic reflection on theological speculation. To explore this axiomatic tension further, this article draws on Kathryn Tanner's concept of theological grammar.<sup>6</sup> Tanner posits that though there are various valid ways of speaking about God's relationship to creation, there are still universal 'rules' that must be followed. These rules function as grammar that allows one to speak the 'theological language' coherently. Tanner's theological grammar especially strives to maintain (1) God's transcendence and (2) the free agency of created actors.<sup>7</sup> To pursue 'good theology' and to speak the language of theology properly, one must maintain both aspects without playing them against each other. This article proposes that maintaining the axiomatic tension, between (1) human speculation and (2) God's abiding mystery, is another branch of theological grammar. I hypothesize that approaching doctrinal loci without deliberate theological grammar compromises either God's mystery or theological speech about God. To ground this hypothesis, this article will analyze the approaches toward speculative supralapsarian Christology in two of the most Christocentric theologians of the twentieth century: Karl Barth (1886–1968) and Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988). Besides their massive influence, what makes them promising candidates for this endeavor is that their Christocentric theologies provide strong motives for supralapsarian Christology. Nonetheless, both theologians attempt to overcome the medieval speculation on the matter, positing that the incarnation occurs

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4 Oliver D. Crisp 'Incarnation without the Fall', *Journal of Reformed Theology* 10.3 (2016), 215–233, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15697312-01003016>.

5 David Bentley Hart, *You are Gods: On Nature and Supernature*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022, 112.

6 Theological grammar is the driving concept in Tanner's *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005, esp. 8, 10–36. Cf. Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, esp. 6–11. In turn, a precursor of the concept can be found in David B. Burrell's *Aquinas: God and Action*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979. Burrell, inspired by Wittgenstein, proposes a non-metaphysical reading of Aquinas' philosophical grammar of the divine. In my estimation, Tanner's (and Williams's) considerable contribution lies in making available Burrell's sense of grammar for broader theological discourse.

7 Tanner, *God and Creation*, 90–104.

in the world as we find it, which appears to introduce a tension with their Christocentrism. Consequently, I seek to show how their approaches fail to maintain the axiomatic tension, which conflicts with other central Christian doctrines.

To facilitate this analysis, I will begin by portraying Barth's and Balthasar's approaches to supralapsarian Christology. I will then show how ambiguity in their approaches amounts to veiled tensions in their doctrines of revelation, creation, and grace. Finally, I will bring these analyses together to show how reflection on supralapsarian Christology facilitates the development of a more expansive theological grammar. I conclude by proposing three theological grammatical rules of thumb.

### **Barth, Election, and Supralapsarian Christology**

Barth's mature approach to supralapsarian Christology proceeds from the *Church Dogmatics*'<sup>8</sup> treatment of election in Christ, which, as Balthasar puts it, 'is the heartbeat of his whole theology'.<sup>9</sup> Barth's stress on eternal election in Christ gives his approach a supralapsarian dimension where the incarnation precedes all God's decrees. Simultaneously, Barth construes the fall as necessarily correlated to election. Is this stress on Christ coherent with these negative correlates? To evaluate this, I believe Barth's approach becomes especially clear by first discussing his Christocentric construal of election, second, how election and rejection relate, and finally, how these ideas motivate his approach to supralapsarian Christology.

Barth begins delineating election by reacting against views where God eternally decrees to elect some humans to salvation and reject others.<sup>10</sup> The problem with such construals is that they presuppose some general picture of God before consulting revelation. Instead, Barth declares the doctrine of election determined by Jesus Christ as 'God's decree and God's beginning'.<sup>11</sup> Adopting this Christocentric orientation, Barth notably posits that 'from all eternity God is the electing God'.<sup>12</sup> By doing so, and by placing election in the *Church Dogmatics*' second volume, Barth places election within the dogmatic sphere of the doctrine of God. Election in Christ is therefore a prerequisite to understanding who God is. This reaches back to the most basic point of Barth's theology: 'A church dogmatics must, of course, be

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8 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols., eds. G. W. Bromiley & T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957–1975. Henceforth, referred to as CD followed by the specific volume and page number.

9 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation*, trans. Edward T. Oakes, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992, 174.

10 CD II/2, 13.

11 CD II/2, 95.

12 CD II/2, 76–77.

christologically determined as a whole and in all its parts.<sup>13</sup> What then does Barth's Christocentric construal of election and rejection entail? Barth's idea is that Christ takes humanity's place as the object of both election and rejection. Specifically, Christ takes fallen humanity's place. As Barth discusses the possibilities of an unfallen 'man', he writes that 'the man which the eternal will of God has to do is not this man; or rather, it is this man, not good as God had created him, but fallen away from God'.<sup>14</sup> Barth underlines that election is not concerned with various possibilities as God's eternal will determines Christ to take fallen humanity's place in actuality. Consequently, Barth renders rejection necessary to counteract humanity's inevitable fall. Election and rejection are necessary correlates where the light of election becomes visible by Christ dissipating the rejected darkness.

But what is the reason for God eternally electing (and rejecting) fallen humanity? Is election God's necessary manifestation or his response to humanity's fall? This brings us back to the supralapsarian question of whether the incarnation's cause precedes or follows the fall. Barth himself determines his position through engaging the 17th-century Reformed controversy between supralapsarians and infralapsarians. Barth perceives the supralapsarians as arguing that election's cause lay in God's glory. This entails that everything is intentionally ordered by God's eternal will, even God's permission of the fall.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, Barth viewed the infralapsarians as professing ignorance regarding God's motive for election. Thus, they did not consider themselves compelled to conceive of election as a necessary revelation of God's glory.<sup>16</sup> Evaluating this controversy, Barth concludes that God's glory must lie behind election so it cannot simply be a response to human action. Subsequently, Barth adopts a strong motive for supralapsarian Christology. While God only permits and does not cause the fall, the fall remains necessarily implied in election. Notwithstanding, as Christ determines election and rejection, Barth safely trusts in God's decree and characterizes his position as a 'purified supralapsarianism'.<sup>17</sup>

Importantly, however, there is a major problem with Barth's self-characterization. As Shao Kai Tseng has convincingly shown, the professed supralapsarianism of the Church Dogmatics is preceded by several other faces of Barth's thinking.<sup>18</sup> Yet, as Tseng shows, even this professed position depends

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13 CD I/2, 123.

14 CD II/2, 164.

15 CD II/2, 128.

16 CD II/2, 129.

17 CD II/2, 143.

18 Shao Kai Tseng, *Karl Barth's Infralapsarian Theology: Origins and Development, 1920–1953*, Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2016, esp. 83–212. Tseng brings to light

on a historical inaccuracy; the actual debate Barth enters concerned whether the object of election was fallen or unfallen humanity.<sup>19</sup> As discussed, Barth views the object of election as fallen humanity. Yet, on Tseng's reading, an infralapsarian could argue that creation is intentionally ordered by God with fallen humanity in mind. If this is correct, then one may characterize Barth's position as 'basically infralapsarian'.<sup>20</sup> This also corresponds with Bruce McCormack's view that 'the incarnation was necessary, in Barth's view, because of the fall'.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, renderings of Barth's theology, like van Driel's,<sup>22</sup> that only emphasize supralapsarian aspects, are lacking in analytical depth. In the end, Barth's theology refrains from further speculation on supralapsarian Christology. However, it seems to me that Barth's approach prompts further questioning. Is not his radical Christocentrism already speculative in its reach? Before picking up on this thread, I will delineate Balthasar's alternative approach.

### Balthasar's Supralapsarian Agnosticism

Balthasar's approach to supralapsarian Christology encompasses an interesting tension: on the one hand, the incarnation resolves the critical metaphysical problem of generals and particulars, which gives a strong motive for a necessary incarnation regardless of a fall. On the other hand, Balthasar opts for a 'supralapsarian agnosticism' to avoid construing a closed system. Can Balthasar's agnosticism cohere with the metaphysical significance he attributes to the incarnation? To analyze this matter, this section first introduces Balthasar's metaphysics, second, relates it to the doctrine of the incarnation, and finally, connects these ideas with his supralapsarian agnosticism.

Balthasar's metaphysics revolves around the analogy of being. God's being is neither identical to nor wholly different from created being but analogous to it. Balthasar repeatedly states that the basis for this is the Fourth Lateran Council's (1215) statement that 'between creator and creature there can

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the fact that Barth's position was in constant change before writing the *Church Dogmatics*. For instance, at a point in *Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1990, 155, Barth rejects supralapsarianism and perceives the incarnation as a vehicle to 'reverse the fall'.

19 See Tseng, *Barth's Infralapsarian Theology*, 41–61.

20 Tseng, *Barth's Infralapsarian Theology*, 292.

21 Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, Oxford, 1995, 360.

22 See especially van Driel, *Incarnation Anyway*, 63–81. Van Driel reads Barth as understanding the incarnation as God's initial plan prefiguring the eschatological consummation of creation. While van Driel does capture something essential, as the incarnation truly is God's intent with creation, I perceive Tseng and McCormack as convincingly showing that the incarnation must be perceived alongside the fall. Thus, van Driel fails to account for how Barth's eschatological horizon is contingent on the fall.

be noted no similarity so great that a greater dissimilarity cannot be seen between them'.<sup>23</sup> But how can both similarity and an ever-greater dissimilarity be affirmed? For Balthasar, the key lies in intra-trinitarian difference.<sup>24</sup> As he writes, '[t]here is an analogy between the Son's being begotten and the creatures' being freely and sovereignly created by God'.<sup>25</sup> Balthasar posits that the Son's begetting reveals a trinitarian difference in God that analogously becomes the space creation originates from: '[T]he trinity contains the purely positive archetypes of what, within creation, is reflected in potentialities and in the negativities that result from sin.'<sup>26</sup> Thus, everything in creation and (paradoxically) even sin, has its analogous ground in the Trinity.

So far, analogy answers how creation ideally relates to God. However, Balthasar argues that purely ideal metaphysics tends to undermine the world's particularity. A comment in the *Theo-Logic* captures Balthasar's point:

If each and everything were nothing more than an 'instance of...' or a kind of algebraic 'x' that could be exchanged for other entities without loss, then things would possess absolutely no intrinsic value of their own as individuals.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, Balthasar deems insufficient any metaphysics that is unable to protect beings from such instrumentalization. In response, Balthasar develops his metaphysics in a Christocentric direction. Most extensively, his *Theology of History* expounds upon the incarnation as the center where all ideals in creation are concretized.<sup>28</sup> Christ affirms the value of every particular being by gathering it into his historical life. Forcefully, Balthasar summarizes this by describing Christ as the 'concrete analogy of being'.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, Christ inaugurates a historical metaphysics. This entails that Balthasar's metaphysics has two guises: one ideal and one historical. At this point, the connec-

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23 Norman P. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, ii. Nicaea I to Lateran V*, London and Washington DC, 1990), 232.

24 Brendan McNerny stresses the pertinent nature of this motif for Balthasar's theology. See *The Trinitarian Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar: An Introduction*, Notre Dame, Ind, 59–83.

25 Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Vol. III: Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison, San Francisco, 1992, 229.

26 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Vol. V: The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison, San Francisco, 1998, 121.

27 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic, Vol. I: Truth of the World*, trans. Adrian Walker, San Francisco, 2000, 81.

28 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Theology of History*, San Francisco, 1994, 92.

29 Balthasar, *A Theology of History*, 69n5.

tion between Balthasar's metaphysics and supralapsarian Christology reveals itself. As Junius Johnson points out, '[i]f the incarnation was willed apart from human sin, then it was always God's plan for creation: one has succeeded in uniting the two metaphysics but in a supralapsarian affirmation'.<sup>30</sup> As the union of the ideal and historical metaphysics fits well with Balthasar's theology, this strongly motivates supralapsarian Christology.

Notwithstanding, Balthasar does not profess supralapsarian Christology to solve this 'metaphysical gap' necessarily. This is explicitly stated in Balthasar's appropriation of Bonaventure's concept of liberalitas. Liberalitas entails that 'God always wills to, indeed, must, give more, in excess of every 'proportionate' measure'.<sup>31</sup> Considering this:

On the hypothesis that God actually resolves to create a world, Bonaventure, thanks to his idea of liberalitas, transcends a priori the Thomist-Scotist controversy over the motive of the incarnation. However much the Logos may appear as the 'redeemer' from sin, his becoming man is ultimately conditioned, not by this motive, but by the free and generous love of God that transcends every worldly reality.<sup>32</sup>

Balthasar thus joins Bonaventure in affirming that God always gives liberally, gives 'more', so that the incarnation can never be reduced to a response to sin.<sup>33</sup> Still, this does not entail that we can predict what God's 'more' consists of. This turns on Balthasar's understanding of God's freedom, summarized well by one of his analogies:

Just as a man who sets off on a long journey does not know what will happen to him or how he will be changed when he returns after years of absence, so, too, the subject does not know what the adventure of knowledge will bring it.<sup>34</sup>

Analogously to the subject's journey, one cannot determine the content of God's freedom before it has actualized itself. And in the end, the only reliable source for perceiving God's freedom is God's historical revelation. Most

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<sup>30</sup> Junius Johnson, *Christ and Analogy: the Christocentric Metaphysics of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2013, 125.

<sup>31</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic, Vol. II: Truth of God*, trans. Adrian Walker, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004, 163.

<sup>32</sup> Balthasar, *Theo-Logic II*, 168.

<sup>33</sup> A further clarification of this point is offered in *Theo-Logic II*, 233. As Balthasar notes, there is primacy of the incarnation as 'the center and fulfillment of the universe' which cannot be separated from the motif of revoking sin in our actual world.

<sup>34</sup> Balthasar, *Theo-Logic I*, 62.

primordially, the incarnation shows us how God has determined to use his freedom. But as the incarnation is not reducible to the ideal metaphysics, it must depend on a historical contingency. Speculative supralapsarian positions therefore disregard actual history. Considering this, Balthasar's refusal of supralapsarian Christology thus aims to safeguard God's freedom.

Is this a satisfying conclusion? As I have framed Balthasar's metaphysics, its coherence is dependent upon the incarnation's historical instantiation of the ideal metaphysics. Therefore, Balthasar's deep Christocentrism stands in tension with his rejection of supralapsarian Christology. Is referring to God's freedom a way out? I will now discuss this in connection with Barth.

### Veiled Tensions

Having delineated Barth's and Balthasar's approaches, we can observe a common feature in their radical Christocentrism. While their emphases appear quite different with respect to election for Barth and creational metaphysics in Balthasar, for both, the stress on Christ moves from unspecified generality to God's concrete revelation. Both their theological methods are thus wholly determined by Christological claims. I will now begin evaluating these theologians' approaches to supralapsarian Christology from this deeply Christocentric vantage point. Interestingly, both theologians seek to overcome speculative supralapsarian Christology. Barth does so by fixing God's eternal will upon fallen humanity whereas Balthasar remains agnostic regarding the incarnation's necessity. However, this raises a crucial question: can these approaches be upheld in connection with such radical Christocentrism? I will argue that their attempts at doing so end up inviting (at least) three veiled tensions that complicate central Christian doctrines. The point of this is to show how it is their lack of adequate theological grammar that leads to these complications, but more on this later.

The first of these veiled tensions concerns the doctrine of revelation. For both Barth and Balthasar, revelation depends on God's innermost transcendence. In fact, in the writings of the mature Barth and Balthasar, there is a trajectory in their Christology away from a more negative view of revelation towards an affirmation of revelation's beauty.<sup>35</sup> We might construe this emphasis as a positive view of revelation, which depends on the ontological difference towards God. In other words, revelation is not simply a response from God due to the fall but depends on something more fundamental,

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<sup>35</sup> See e.g., Barth, CD II/1. 647–663 and von Balthasar's positive reception of Barth in *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, Volume I: Seeing the Form*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009, 52–55. See also Stephen D. Wigley's fruitful discussion in *Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Critical Engagement*, London: T&T Clark, 2007, esp. 49–87.

namely God's transcendence. This can be contrasted to a negative view of revelation, where the need for revelation is brought on by a contingent human lack of capacity caused by the fall. But what is one to make of a positive view of revelation without a supralapsarian horizon? Suppose the incarnation was merely a response to the fall. It then follows that the incarnation serves to overturn the human lack that the fall brings about. I imagine such a view would be easier to reconcile with Barth and Balthasar's approaches to supralapsarian Christology. However, as both theologians favor a positive view of God's self-revelation in Christ, this introduces a tension with their broader theological visions. If such revelation requires the fall to occur, then revelation logically consists of a negative response rather than a positive encounter. However, as revelation becomes tied up with the positive horizon of the incarnation for Barth and Balthasar, it seems implausible to abstract from it. Thus, I argue that they both reap fruits that only an import of a more speculative supralapsarian Christology has on the doctrine of revelation.

The second veiled tension concerns creation. Barth builds the coherence of his theology upon eternal election in Christ. Everything we perceive, both election and rejection, light and darkness, finds its place therein. Part of Balthasar's understanding of creation lies in how Christ overcomes the metaphysical tension between the general and particular inherent to creation. The underlying Christo-logic in both theologians entails that without Christ creation is not yet complete. Is this view coherent with their approaches to supralapsarian Christology? For Barth to achieve this cohesion, he strongly motivates the incarnation in God's eternal will, making the fall inevitable in the process. There can be no alternative possibility to God's actual election of fallen humanity. On this construal of creation, Barth necessitates the incarnation before all else, yet at the cost of necessitating the fall. As Balthasar notes, Barth's theology hinges upon making God 'the author and conqueror of sin'.<sup>36</sup> Thus, making the fall necessary is a price Barth pays to achieve coherence in the doctrine of creation. On the contrary, Balthasar's approach to supralapsarian Christology forfeits coherence in the doctrine of creation. By not necessitating the incarnation, the metaphysical relation between the general and particular hangs in deep tension. Note that not specifying the resolution to the general and particular without the fall does not entail God would not bring about a resolution. While this may be true, there remains tension in Balthasar's speech. Is it Christ that creation points towards, or the metaphysical resolution of the general and particular? Without a supralapsarian affirmation, does not Christ become a means

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36 Balthasar, *Theology of Karl Barth*, 230.

rather than an end? Thus, it seems to me that Balthasar's approach gives him difficulties in accounting for Christ as creation's ultimate horizon.

The final tension regards grace. While I have not explicitly discussed grace, an inherent logic of grace can be perceived in the elements discussed. If we understand grace as God's loving intervention in the world, then the speech about grace is dependent on Christ for both Barth and Balthasar. Yet, here we encounter a tension with how their approaches to supralapsarian Christology conceptualize Christ. As Barth has it, rejection is a necessary correlate to election. Alongside God's rejection of human fallenness the primacy of election becomes apparent. But is this a plausible way to understand God's gratuity? This turns on whether Barth's view of evil is coherent. At the very least, Barth seems to pay a price as the incarnation gets entangled in negative aspects. In Balthasar's metaphysics, we can perceive how Christ comes to safeguard and complete creation. In the figure of Christ, this act of grace becomes very concrete and embodied. As Balthasar's theology moves in the direction of such concreteness, not specifying the form of grace without the fall means that this concreteness gets lost. In this sense, Balthasar's view of grace pays a significant price of clarity by rejecting supralapsarian Christology.

Having in no respect extensively discussed any of these doctrines, I do contend that these tensions prompt several questions about how Barth's and Balthasar's theologies relate to a supralapsarian affirmation. While they think they have transcended the issue, their approaches leave them with unarticulated tensions or prices to pay due to their radical Christocentrism. Considering this, the next section will argue that the underlying ambiguity stems from Barth's and Balthasar's insufficient speculative grammar.

### **Towards a Theological Grammar for Speculation**

What I hope to have made apparent is how Barth's and Balthasar's theologies depend upon the incarnation. The preconditions for speaking about God are found in their Christology, particularly in the centerpieces of their visions: election in Christ and the analogy of being. As they bring their Christocentrism further than most theologians, it becomes increasingly relevant for them to answer the supralapsarian question reflectively. However, as I have argued, their answers stand in tension with affirmations in other central doctrines. On the one hand, Barth's approach to supralapsarian Christology necessitates the fall to make his theology of revelation, creation, and grace cohere with his Christocentrism. It is because his theology centers on the incarnation that he presents the fall as necessary. Considering this, Barth protects himself from further speculation by referring to the wall that

is God's eternal will. However, to me, it seems that due to Barth's radical Christocentrism, he ends up overcompensating. To ensure this Christocentrism, he ends up fixing reality so that no other scenario is possible. God did not only choose this actual reality, but he had to as he is the electing (and rejecting) God. On the other hand, Balthasar gives up coherence of doctrine due to his approach to supralapsarian Christology. Balthasar finds himself with a too 'perfect' system in a necessary unity of the ideal and historical metaphysics that would reduce history to something determinable. To compensate, he dismisses supralapsarian Christology as it would tie together the loop of his theology too perfectly. However, as his metaphysics wholly depends on Christ, this means that his doctrine of revelation, creation, and grace risks becoming disengaged from Christ. If Christ is not necessary, he becomes instrumental to these doctrines rather than being their end.

Altogether, Barth and Balthasar reflect two sides of the same coin: to avoid speculative supralapsarian Christology, Barth clenches harder unto his Christocentrism, whereas Balthasar loses his grip. It is this that gives rise to the veiled tensions. At this point, Tanner's concept of theological grammar can be greatly elucidating. I contend that the veiled tensions appear because of Barth's and Balthasar's lack of adequate theological grammar. If we return to the terms I initially put forth, then an insufficient theological grammar ends up playing off (1) human speculation, against, (2) God's abiding mystery. In what sense do Barth and Balthasar end up doing that? Both their approaches are keen to ensure that speculative theology does not undermine God's mystery. Because of this, they both shrug back before supralapsarian Christology as it implies inquiring too deeply into God's mystery. Barth backs off from such speculation by arguing that to respect God's eternal will, one cannot imagine unfallen humanity as a possibility. Meanwhile, Balthasar refuses further speculation to perfect his metaphysics as he takes it to undermine the untraceable nature of God's freedom. Consequently, by motivating why further speculation might endanger God's mystery, both theologians proceed as if they have overcome supralapsarian Christology.

However, is there not something quite ambiguous with how they end up backing off from speculation? From their initial Christocentrism, both posit that the only way to say anything substantial about God is through Christ. Yet, their initial Christocentrism is already highly speculative, regarding the incarnate Christ as determinative of all claims about who God is and what he does. This is certainly not a given theological fact. Even if one were to argue that there is a scriptural warrant for such a notion, one would still have to connect this with some overarching theological hermeneutic. Consequently, Barth's and Balthasar's approaches to speculation encounter a consid-

erable predicament: if the initial Christocentrism that their theologies revolve around is already highly speculative, then their positions change from being highly speculative to becoming much less so regarding supralapsarian Christology. When they turn away from a speculative supralapsarian Christology, they are thus left with uncomfortable compensations, rather than logical consequences of their radical Christocentrism.

At this point, we may note that for Barth and Balthasar, there may be a larger price to pay in venturing beyond scripture into theological speculation. For both, there is a theological warrant to respect scripture rather than achieving perfect logical stringency. Yet, as I have argued, the ambiguity between, on the one hand, their radical stress on Christ, and on the other hand, their fear of speculation, entails that both theologians' visions end up entangled in veiled tensions. What would happen with their visions if the incarnation was less connected to the fall? Speculating in that direction could be a way to free them from such entanglement. Doing so might even be warranted, as Barth and Balthasar end up compromised in their ability to speak about God. Still, I am not making the point that a more speculative supralapsarian Christology would be without complications. Trying to enter God's mind may very well risk undermining his mystery. But what I do hope to have demonstrated is the probable nature of my hypothesis that neither Barth's nor Balthasar's Christocentric approach to supralapsarian Christology manages to bring about coherent speculative speech about God. The reader is of course welcome to defend either theologian; but if he or she agrees that I have struck a nerve, then how can this assessment be useful moving forward? I believe that their failure brings three interconnected gaps to the surface that a more adequate theological grammar of speculation could help fill.

The first gap concerns Barth's and Balthasar's grand Christocentric visions of reality, which are not controversial by themselves. However, when they later compensate to maintain God's mystery, they are faced with the veiled tensions. Evidently, the splendor of their initial Christocentrism shares a vulnerability that must be handled with great care. However, Barth's and Balthasar's grandiose approach need not be the only one desirable. If one is not intent on formulating a more speculative theology all the way, then one should refrain from doing so. There are good reasons not to pursue a more speculative theology to uphold God's mystery more responsibly. While the theologian should not cease to speak about God, there is a grammatical warrant for being cautious in making grand claims. This leads us to a second gap regarding speculative coherency. As I have shown, the major problem with Barth and Balthasar is that their speculative Christocentrism

does not correspond to their approaches toward supralapsarian Christology. If one construes a similarly grand theological vision, I suggest that such visions should follow their speculative logic all the way. One ought not to begin with a speculative claim to then abandon it halfway through. In that case, one is basically admitting that the original claim is not grammatically attuned to God's mystery in the first place. Thus, to not risk having one's theology fall apart, a firm speculative approach should strive to be coherent all the way through. Finally, we come to a third gap concerning transparency. As I have characterized Barth and Balthasar, their incoherent speculative approaches lead to a variety of veiled tensions. If their theology would have been more transparent in striking a balance between their speculative claims and maintaining God's mystery, they might have undertaken to account for these. My point is that theologians should indicate more clearly that there are prices to be paid for holding various positions. While such prices, like the veiled tensions I have discussed in this article, do not entail that one should necessarily change one's mind on a matter like supralapsarian Christology, bringing them to the surface may facilitate a more transparent discourse. If one does not sufficiently account for such tensions, as I contend Barth and Balthasar do not, then this becomes a problem. Considering this, one way to understand what a transparent discourse entails is that it operates according to a more expansive theological grammar of speculation that brings (1) human speculation and (2) God's abiding mystery into balance. By operating under such a theological grammar, one might be more attuned to how tensions tend to reveal themselves in theological matters with a speculative reach. While such tensions need not be detrimental, approaching them thoughtfully is crucial to bring about grammatically attuned theology. Consequently, this article's suggestion is that the theologian should be transparent with tensions that inevitably arise from theological speculation.

## Conclusion

In summary, these gaps suggest what we may call three grammatical rules of thumb for theological speculation. These are (1) to be cautious in construing grand theological visions; (2) to find coherence between various speculative claims; and (3) to be transparent with the tensions that reveal themselves in speculative inquiry. Precisely by being cautious in grand claims, ensuring coherence in one's speculation and by making this transparent, one has clarified much in theological discourse. While these do not solve the axiomatic tension between human speculation and God's mystery, by being aware of and attending to these in theological inquiry, one might more readily perceive what kinds of gaps lead to inconsistencies. Still, a worry might remain.

Does not such theological grammar constitute a threat to the theological enterprise? As I have presented such theological grammar, tension becomes a primary frame for theological inquiry. One can never escape this tension without further complications. Does not constant tension make theological inquiry arbitrary so that one never approaches anything approximating substantial claims? On the contrary, I propose that to navigate such tension, one needs familiarity and discipline with substantial rules that can encompass that tension. This article has argued that one such rule aims to balance speculation in accord with God's mystery. As Tanner stresses, many different theologies can become coherent under a certain set of rules. For instance, the theological grammar this article proposes does not specify whether one ought to bring back one's speculative claims or strive to make speculative claims coherent all the way down. Still, this does not mean that one cannot be critical of a certain theology. This entire article has attempted to show how it is possible to criticize two brilliant theologians under this axiomatic tension. Consequently, even the most dazzling of theological minds require a greater awareness of such theological grammar as the theologian's demanding task is to remain within similar tensions without dissolving them.

To summarize, this article has advanced the view that reflection on supralapsarian Christology brings to the surface the need to facilitate a theological grammar of speculation. But, once again, why is such a grammar important? Let me answer by returning to Tanner's picture of theology as a language. In her view, proper grammar is the prerequisite to speaking the wonderfully complex language of theology with fluency, intelligibility, and transparency. Such 'speech' is a desirable end, as in the hands of proficient language users, language becomes increasingly flexible, complex, and beautiful. Such a proficiency is profitable not least because it might inspire others to master it more fully. And mastery of the 'theological language' is, I propose, what dogmatic theologians should set out to attain. That which benefits such an endeavor must therefore be of paramount importance. And if this article's basic contention is correct, then engaging supralapsarian Christology is a fruitful way to develop a sensitivity to the grammar of this language. ▲

## SUMMARY

This article engages with supralapsarian Christology, that is, the idea that the cause of the incarnation precedes the fall, to actualize the axiomatic tension between speculation and God's abiding mystery. Taking a cue from Kathryn Tanner, I present the maintenance of this tension as an instance of theological grammar. I initially hypothesize that approaching supralapsarian Christology without adequate theological grammar plays God's mystery and theological speculation off each other. The article then grounds this hypothesis by inquiring into Karl Barth's and Hans Urs von Balthasar's approaches to supralapsarian Christology. While they aim to overcome supralapsarian Christology, I contend that both fail to maintain this axiomatic tension. The reason is that both theologians are radically Christocentric to the degree that their theologies fall apart without the incarnation. Consequently, their attempts to overcome speculative inquiry stand in tension with their doctrines of revelation, creation, and grace. Considering these areas of conflict, I argue that reflection on supralapsarian Christology might help bring greater awareness of this axiomatic tension in contemporary theology to the surface. I conclude by giving three theological grammatical rules of thumb that show how supralapsarian Christology might help to develop this theological grammar.