In the fervent discussions in recent decades regarding the public character of the church, the Eucharist is no longer considered merely as a private affair of Christians, or as a church service for the sake of the members of the community only. The emphasis is increasingly placed upon the participation of the eucharistic community in the missio dei. Beyond the efficacy of the elements in the Eucharist, this central ecclesial practice also gives shape to the whole Christian life, particularly in its ethical orientation towards the world. The eucharistic community, accordingly, cannot remain passive. It must actively engage itself in the dynamic love of Christ’s saving sacrifice. The dramatic or performative character of the Eucharist is considered essential to the very nature of the church.

John Milbank and William Cavanaugh, as thinkers associated with the Radical Orthodoxy movement, contribute significantly

1 Note that different Christian traditions would prefer to speak of the ‘Mass’, ‘Lord’s Supper’, ‘Holy Communion’ or ‘Divine Liturgy’. The term ‘Eucharist’ is used in this paper for the sake of convenience only.
3 Radical Orthodoxy is a theological movement embracing different Christian traditions and dialoguing with other non-Christian traditions. It also actively
to this kind of theological investigation. They advocate the engagement with other academic disciplines such as politics, economics, the natural sciences, social and cultural theories. “In what sense orthodox and in what sense radical? Orthodox in the most straightforward sense of commitment to credal Christianity and the exemplarity of its patristic matrix. But orthodox also in the more specific sense of re-affirming a richer and more coherent Christianity which was gradually lost sight of after the late Middle Ages. . . . Radical, first of all, in the sense of a return to patristic and medieval roots, and especially to the Augustinian vision of all knowledge as divine illumination—a notion which transcends the modern bastard dualisms of faith and reason, grace and nature. Radical, second, in the sense of seeking to deploy this recovered vision systematically to criticise modern society, culture, politics, art, science and philosophy with an unprecedented boldness. But radical in yet a third sense of realising that via such engagements we do have also to rethink the tradition.” See John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine Pickstock, “Introduction: Suspending the Material: the Turn of Radical Orthodoxy,” in Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (New York: Routledge, 1999), 2. For accessible discussions of this contemporary movement, see Laurence Paul Hemming, ed., Radical Orthodoxy?: A Catholic Enquiry (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000); James K. A. Smith, Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004); James K. A. Smith and James H. Olthuis, eds., Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition: Creation, Covenant, and Participation (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley, eds., Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric and Truth (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Adrian Pabst and Christoph Schneider, eds., Encounter between Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy: Transfiguring the World through the Word (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

I would like to thank Professor Joseph Mangina, Wycliffe College, Toronto, for his thoughtful comments on this essay. In his view, Cavanaugh’s theological thought comes closer to Roman Catholicism than the ‘school’ of Radical Orthodoxy. Mangina believes that Cavanaugh needs to resolve his christological deficit so that his theology will not collapse Christology into ecclesiology. The main reason for me to assimilate Cavanaugh to the Radical Orthodoxy movement is that some of his writings have been published under
social significance of the Eucharist and articulate a ‘eucharistic ecclesiology’ in which the church is constituted by the performance of the Eucharist.\(^5\) For them, a believing community centered on the Eucharist as practice and gift forms the body of Christ. In this communal reenacting of Christ’s saving presence, the eucharistic community can resist and react against worldly power by its alternative way of being-in-the-world. Understood by these authors as ‘counter-ethics’\(^6\) or ‘counter-politics’,\(^7\) the Eucharist is God’s transformation of social reality in and for the world.

While Milbank’s and Cavanaugh’s project seems to be a fascinating way to advance ‘Christian socialism’ and the ideal of a ‘real community’ as an effective critique of contemporary socio-political ideologies, we should not overlook how their christological position accounts for their version of eucharistic ecclesiology. How do Milbank and Cavanaugh define the church, the body of Christ and the Eucharist? What is the theological logic or methodology undergirding their thesis and arguments? I will argue that, in their emphasis on the creation of a new ecclesial, social reality through the Eucharist’s eschatological orientation, Millbank and Cavanaugh have the tendency to obscure the

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particular identity of Christ.\(^8\) Then, I will introduce Hans Urs von Balthasar’s and Karl Barth’s christocentric approaches to eucharistic ecclesiology based on Jesus’ unrepeatable history. With their theological logic, Balthasar and Barth come to an understanding of the meaning of moral space, moral freedom and responsibility different from the position of Milbank and Cavanaugh. These distinctions entail from the very outset underlying perspectives on theological ontology.

I. An Ecclesio-Centric Approach: Milbank and Cavanaugh

Milbank proposes a recovery of the patristic and medieval notions of gift as invariably involving divine-human reciprocation.\(^9\) A certain kind of exchange does take place in the divine economy of gift: “[G]ifts are always regarded as imbued with the persona of the giver, as ultimately inalienable from him and bound one day to return.”\(^10\) The giver is in the gift, goes with the gift. Although there is nothing external to God that could return to him, in the ‘purified gift-exchange’ we participate in the divine life so that the poles of giver and recipient are enfolded into God.\(^11\) Without this reception and this reciprocity, “the gift would be so

\(^8\) Thus, their Christology is not the basis for their other Christian teachings. Milbank’s and Cavanaugh’s christological positions reflect the trend of mainstream modern Christology, which is by and large drawn to moralist and exemplarist accounts of the saving function of Jesus. Human action threatens to become the real centre of gravity in modern Christology. I explore some features of this trend in “Two Catholic but Forgotten Christologies: Maximus the Confessor and Thomas Aquinas,” \textit{CGST Journal} 49 (2010): 139–64.


\(^10\) Milbank, “Can a Gift be Given?” 127.

\(^11\) Ibid., 134–16.
thwarted that it could not even begin to be *this* gift — the incarnate God.”¹² This shows that, for Milbank, Christ-became-flesh is characterized as the divine gift above all. Milbank’s theological vision is hence that of a *circle* of the divine gift embodied as Christ and of the human participatory response to him. Thereby this vision creates a changed social reality. How, then, does Christ, as the divine gift, produces liberating effects upon the world through our participation in Christ?

In developing his theology of participation, Milbank gives most of his attention to the humanity of Christ. While speaking of Christ as *homo sacer* in the discussion on forgiveness, Milbank gives a striking argument for understanding the suffering of Christ’s humanity as divine gift:

Such an eternal gift only becomes forgiveness when in Christ it is not God forgiving us . . . but humanity forgiving humanity. Therefore divine redemption is not God’s forgiving us, but rather his giving us the gift of the capacity for forgiveness. . . . [W]ith Christ’s humanity alone there arises a pure forgiveness, since this really surpasses forgiveness, and is rather the unbroken continued giving of the divine gift as also the offering of a suffering actively undergone.¹³

By Christ’s forgiveness, Milbank means Christ’s gift to us as the capacity to forgive one another. It is the trinity which offers ‘the gift of intrahuman forgiveness’ to Christ’s humanity, and this gift is then passed on by Christ to us.¹⁴ Christ’s forgiveness is “not reactive, since it is only the sustained giving of the original gift,

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¹² Ibid., 136.
¹⁴ Ibid.
despite its refusal.”\textsuperscript{15} Moreover, the suffering of Christ’s humanity as ‘counter-violent violence’ is “disclosed as consisting in utter self-giving which is immediately return, as resurrection, and therefore also gift-exchange.”\textsuperscript{16} In other words, the sacrifice of death always looks for the return of life in the resurrection. By offering himself up on the heavenly altar, Christ becomes the ‘gift-that-returns’,\textsuperscript{17} and as we offer ourselves in and with Christ, we also participate in the eternal process of gift-exchange.

Therefore, in living under our cruciform, “we do not really lose ourselves, but live in the genuine and eternal absolute life that returns as it proceeds outward.”\textsuperscript{18} Our participation in Christ is at the same time our imitation of Christ. By the gift of Christ we are caught up in the same gift-exchange process that his humanity has entered. Thus, by the imitation of the \textit{via crucis}, a non-identical repetition, we bring forth reconciliation and peace for the sake of the world. What really does this \textit{imitatio} (or ecclesial mediation) mean? In developing the relationship between Christology and ecclesiology, Milbank speaks of an ‘ecclesiological construal of Christ’s divine personhood’: Christ is ‘the total “context” of our lives’ and Christ’s personhood is in a ‘both already and not yet’ condition.\textsuperscript{19} In this sense, Christ’s personhood is still incomplete and is still taking shape through the life of the church. Christ “only arrives, from the outset, through the church.”\textsuperscript{20} Not only does the church continue the work initiated by Christ, but ecclesial practice is also the divine work of forgiveness and atonement. With his own ‘Chalcedonian logic’, Milbank identifies the life of the church as

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 68.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 62, 100.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 101.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 102.
\textsuperscript{19} Milbank, \textit{The Word Made Strange}, 156–59.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 163.
\end{flushleft}
the realization of the true humanity in Christ’s divine personhood. Milbank’s account gives a certain primacy to ecclesiology, from which his Christology is derived and developed.\textsuperscript{21} It focuses on Christ’s continued presence “in the relations that he enters into with other people and the things of this world.”\textsuperscript{22} In such ‘social relations’, rather than in the historically specific life of Christ, is Milbank’s Christology fully displayed.

Elaborating Milbank’s theory of participation in gift, Cavanaugh believes that, to truly participate in the Eucharist, we need to “receive the gift of Christ not as mere passive recipients, but by being incorporated into the gift itself, the body of Christ.”\textsuperscript{23} To share in Christ’s gift, in other words, is to let our lives be taken into his conjoined body. For Cavanaugh, the church is the body of Christ, a public body that envisions the eschatological gathering of all in Christ and challenges present social divisions and dichotomies. What the church does in the Eucharist, therefore, is to enact Christ’s work of breaking down the barriers among people, to realize a new humanity, the social body of Christ based on reconciliation and not violence.\textsuperscript{24} While Milbank writes that Jesus “cannot be given any particular content,”\textsuperscript{25} Cavanaugh describes the reality of Christ in terms of the eschatological unity in Christ, i.e., the \textit{totus Christus}. The eucharistic community participates in this ‘content’ and makes Christ’s reconciling presence a social reality in the world. Thus, in each local eucharistic assembly the \textit{whole} body of Christ is present.\textsuperscript{26}

For Cavanaugh, the Eucharist is therefore “an ‘event’ in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 165.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 140.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Cavanaugh, \textit{Theopolitical Imagination}, 48.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 45–46, 49–52.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Milbank, \textit{The Word Made Strange}, 152.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Cavanaugh, \textit{Theopolitical Imagination}, 114–15.
\end{itemize}
the sense of an eschatological performance in time which is not institutionally guaranteed, but it is an event which is ontologically determinative.”

In other words, the gift of the Eucharist manifests the true body of Christ by making us ontologically and dynamically participate in the future fulfillment of his work. What is opened up in the Eucharist is not the once-and-for-all self-offering of Christ in the past, but “the whole Christ, the eschatological church of all times and places.” Thus, the present receives its significance and continuity primarily from the future, rather than from the past. Thereby the church shares the gift of ontological participation in Christ’s totality within the eucharistic drama of salvation. Meanwhile, Christ is present through the enactment of his social body. This gift-exchange in the Eucharist establishes the ontological bond between the church and Christ (i.e., the totus Christus) and hence embodies Christ’s presence in the reconciling sacrifice of the eucharistic community. In this sense, the Eucharist constitutes and performs the church.

Arguably, the primacy of ecclesiology over Christology in Milbank’s thought formally sets up a stage for the church to ‘extend’ the saving presence of Christ. On the other hand, Cavanaugh’s focus on the Eucharist as the dynamics of building up the body of Christ materially determines the very way of life that the church ought to pursue on earth. If Milbank’s theology of participation in gift weakens the ontological difference between Christ and the church, then Cavanaugh’s theology of body as gift posits the church as an alternative society through the sharing of the gift of Christ’s consummated, social body. In short, the gift of the Eucharist ‘socializes’ the reality of Christ’s presence in the world. The proper response of the church is thus to embody the social and reconciling reality of the whole Christ, as she is filled with

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27 Cavanaugh, Torture and Eucharist, 270.
28 Ibid., 234.
the vision of the eschatological unity through the performance of the Eucharist. In this way, the mission of the church is to make Christ’s forgiveness and reconciliation present in society as fully as possible. Through the empowerment of the Eucharist, the church becomes, more than represents, the whole of Christ’s own life.

To sum up, Milbank and Cavanaugh emphasize the social and eschatological dimensions of the Eucharist. Through eschatological imagination, the Eucharist provides a paradigm for social relationships. This emphasis on eschatological expectation and social change may, however, diminish the respect for the historical particularity of Christ. The language of participation in gift and gift-exchange rules out the personal aspect of Christ’s atoning work. What is encountered in the Eucharist, for Milbank and Cavanaugh, is not the presence of Christ as a unique person, but the ‘impersonal’ power of gift which undergirds the ever-differing practices of the church. The ‘function’ of Christ is only to provide the ‘source’ or ‘general norms’ for ecclesial practice. In their ecclesiological reshaping of Christology, Milbank and Cavanaugh lack any serious motive to assign a determinate meaning to Christ’s incarnation, passion or resurrection. The past event of Christ is relevant to our present situation only when it is re-enacted through the church’s repetition. Without some consistent effort being put into making room for the indissoluble and revelatory character of Christ, the divine subject and agency are in turn swallowed up by their human counterparts. As a result, Milbank’s and Cavanaugh’s christological position amounts to a ‘monophysite’ absorption of Christ’s personhood and life into the earthly life of the church. Their language of participation, which does not support any form of personal encounter between Christ and us, fails to lead us into

30 For instance, Milbank says that in Christ’s “historical, eucharistic giving he opens himself out to re-crucifixion” (Ibid., 141, emphasis mine).
union or communion with Christ. Their approaches to eucharistic ecclesiology can be combined and summarized in the following diagram:

Eucharist → Church → Christ

II. A Christo-Centric Approach: Balthasar and Barth

Balthasar gives us an alternative way of correlating the Eucharist, the church and Christ. He also employs the languages of participation and gift but develops them within a robust christocentric framework. Through Jesus’ flesh, God disposes himself to be taken and incorporated into the church and the whole humanity. God’s sharing of his divine life with us, in terms of the outpouring mission in Christ, ‘depends’ on the free human self-giving of Christ for its accomplishment. This full, dynamic participation of Jesus’ humanity in God not only “calls for the yet deeper descent of God himself, his humbling, his *kenosis*,” 31 but it also draws people to share in the divine glory by being finally opened to all in the Eucharist. 32 By the exchange of gifts, thus, what has been offered is given back in order that the gift can be consummated. Here we are faced with the deepest mystery of revelation in its salvation-historical reality — inasmuch as, by sharing his humanity with us through the gift of the Eucharist, Christ transforms us into the ecclesial community by ingrafting us into his body. In other words, through Christ’s eucharistic event we are incorporated into Christ’s assent to the Father and at the


same time caught up in the reciprocal love of the divine and the human in Christ, thereby we are drawn into communion with God and with other human beings. Balthasar assigns the priority in the Eucharist to the action of Christ: He alone has accomplished the redemption on the cross. Balthasar here leads us to reconsider the unrepeatability and irreplacability of Jesus’ historical existence, and from this point of departure we come to understand our participation in the gift of the Eucharist and the reality of the church.

From the very first moment, the whole historical life of Christ is a ‘thanksgiving’ (eucharistia) directed to the Father. For this reason, the gift of the Eucharist encompasses the temporal history of the incarnated Word:

Christ, in surrendering his sacrificed flesh and shed blood for his disciples, was communicating, not merely the material side of his bodily substance, but the saving events wrought by it. . . . The fundamental presupposition is that the person of Jesus is really present; but along with the person comes his entire temporal history and, in particular, its climax in cross and resurrection. 33

Thus, to receive the Eucharist is to participate in the Son’s eucharistic response to the Father, the existential mission of Jesus in terms of every particular aspect of his historical existence. With respect to the unity of Christ and the church, ecclesial participation in Christ’s redeeming mission for the world lies at the heart of Balthasar’s eucharistic ecclesiology. We will now consider the role of the church in the Eucharist in Balthasar’s vision. In particular, does the church participates in Christ’s self-offering in such a way that the church’s offering forms part of Christ’s own sacrifice?

33 Ibid., 391–92.
Here Balthasar carefully spells out a union-in-distinction between Christ and the church in order that he can avoid an ecclesiology that portrays the church as a mere human society or univocally posits the church as Christ.\textsuperscript{34} What is encountered in the Eucharist is the presence of the “personal, temporal-historical reality which is thrown open to the recipient, offered to him, made available for his participation, assigned to him personally.” \textsuperscript{35} The principal reality in the Eucharist is Christ’s self-gift and his making himself present, and the church’s activity is to be taken up into this act of Christ. Christ’s unique, personal mission thus becomes universal and shareable with the church. The church can offer to the Father not only herself but the Son as well.\textsuperscript{36} Christ and the church, in this sense, forms one, undivided reality.

The union between Christ and the church is at once so intimate that Christ fills us with his ‘historicity’ in the Eucharist; yet there is a distinction “so real [that] Christ remains transcendent over the church no matter how immanent his presence within it.” \textsuperscript{37} This distinction presupposes the church to be fundamentally receptive. Balthasar unpacks the meaning of this union-in-distinction in his theo-dramatics: through his all-embracing mission Christ becomes a stage for the church to play its respective part within the drama opened by him. “Incorporated into Christ’s obedience, we become obedient with him; but, incorporated into his freedom,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{35} Balthasar, \textit{A Theology of History}, 96. See also idem, “The Mass, the Sacrifice of the Church?” 231–33.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Balthasar, “The Mass, the Sacrifice of the Church?” 241–42.
\end{itemize}
we also become truly free.”  

Just as Christ’s thanksgiving to the Father consists in his obedience and willingness to let himself be offered as the Father’s self-giving love for the sake of the world, so the church is also made genuinely free for Christ in the service of ecclesial love. Here Balthasar, like Milbank and Cavanaugh, develops the patristic notion of the *totus Christus*, but he insists that the ‘subject’ of the whole Christ or the church is Christ himself who dwells within the church and in turn shapes her ecclesial character and identity.  

Through the gift of the Eucharist, as Balthasar reminds us, what is fully brought about is the presence of Christ’s salvific drama, the interplay “between the priority of the divine action and man’s subsequent ‘letting be’, which is both active and free.”  

Milbank, Cavanaugh and Balthasar all echoes Henri de Lubac’s idea that the Eucharist makes the church. However, Balthasar’s eucharistic ecclesiology produces a different kind of eucharistic space from that of Milbank and Cavanaugh. Rather than construing a purely socio-political space, Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, for Balthasar, opens up a concrete acting space for the interaction of God and humanity, an area of Christian mission in which we are “automatically allotted a combat role

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38 Balthasar, *The Action*, 406. Balthasar also says that, “Through his Eucharist, his brethren are made free, having been endowed with his Spirit of freedom. Together they form a common ‘We’ on the basis of their interrelated and interpenetrating missions, and so, in the same Spirit, they can express their gratitude and indebtedness to the Son and, with him, to the Father” (idem, *The Dramatis Personae: The Person in Christ*, vol. 3 of *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, 350).


in the task of world liberation.” 41 Christ, the primary subject of the eucharistic action, “embodies mankind’s whole dramatic situation in its relationship to itself and to God,” thus taking up the world drama into his theo-drama.42 In this sense, the community gathered by the Eucharist does not aim to create a social space in which a kind of eucharistic, non-violent economy can take place, but it finds its ‘authentic personal being’ through the ‘wondrous exchange’ between Christ and his community in the eucharistic space.43 Here Balthasar distances himself from Milbank and Cavanaugh by the fact that the leading motif of his eucharistic ecclesiology is Christ’s real presence in terms of his historical life, the salvific drama. Through the gift of the Eucharist, we are free to imitate Christ by offering ourselves up as he did in the Eucharist. Since Christ, whose presence always comes first and is greater than the Eucharist and the church, our union with Christ, or our participation in Christ, takes place within the divine drama. The interplay of the divine and the human freedom has an asymmetrical-mutual relation. Throughout the discussion above, we can understand Balthasar’s account as follows:

\[
\text{Christ} \rightarrow \text{Eucharist} \rightarrow \text{Church}^{44}
\]

Barth, in line with Balthasar, initiates and integrates his eucharistic ecclesiology within a doctrine of Christology (or reconciliation). While Balthasar agrees with Milbank and Cavanaugh that the Eucharist is constitutive of the church’s

42 Ibid., 201.
43 Ibid., 231–32.
44 I am deeply thankful to my friend, Carolyn Chau, a PhD candidate at Regis College, Toronto, whose fruitful insights shared in our conversations challenge and deepen my understanding of Balthasar’s theology.
being and mission, Barth diametrically opposes their ‘common view’. In the context of Barth’s ethics of reconciliation, prayer or invocation is characterized as the central feature of Christian life as a creaturely response to divine grace. With prayer as given by Christ’s command and permission, Barth regards the Eucharist as the ‘conclusion and crown’ of his divine command ethics.\footnote{Karl Barth, \textit{Church Dogmatics}, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–74) [\textit{CD}]; here \textit{CD IV/4}, ix. Unfortunately, Barth’s treatise on the Eucharist in \textit{CD IV/4} was never written.} Understood as a creaturely moral action of prayer, the celebration of the Eucharist is nonetheless rooted in his ecclesiological vision which draws the church away from herself but towards Christ her head and the world.

Insisting on the inseparability of ethics and dogmatics, Barth regards the doctrine of resurrection as the key to understanding how the presence and coming of Christ is both a past and present (or future) event. He draws on the temporal juxtaposition of Good Friday and Easter to underscore the presence of the \textit{Crucified} to every human life:

\begin{quote}
[Christ] not only did represent us, he does represent us. He not only did bear the sin of the world, he does bear it. . . . He not only went the way from Jordan to Golgotha, but he still goes it, again and again. His history did not become dead history. It was history in his time to become as such eternal history – the history of God with the men of all times, and therefore taking place here and now as it did then.\footnote{\textit{CD IV/1}, 313–14. See also Joseph Mangina, \textit{Karl Barth on the Christian Life: The Practical Knowledge of God} (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 64.}
\end{quote}

There is a ‘togetherness of time’ in which God’s new time comes to fulfill our historical, present time and opens up the time of
community. The center of Barth’s approach to the concept of *totus Christus* is therefore the living presence of Christ. By the fact that “Jesus lives,” the church is called into being and its historical existence as the body of Christ. Since Barth by no means explains away the lordship of living Christ upon the earthly church, his language of ‘body of Christ’ avoids any conception of the church as a vicar for Christ; rather it always refers to a reality beyond the church herself, to Christ her head. Thus, instead of making effective Jesus’ reality, the task of the church is defined as one of bearing witness to his accomplished work and of attesting to its inherent effectiveness. Because the church exists as the body of Christ which unites with him and serves him without reserve, to bear witness to Christ does mean to live in active and full responsibility in and for the world. Barth’s argument as such is distinctly uneasy about thinking of created reality as having any mediating function. He prefers to talk of the church as witness to, not bearer of, the prevenient reality of the *totus Christus*, i.e., Jesus’ history which includes the history of the church (hence indirectly includes the history of the world) in him and affirms the ontological relationship between the church and the world.

Within this christo-ecclesiological framework, Barth addresses the ethical aspect of the Eucharist. As neither Christ’s living presence obliterates our historicity and human freedom, nor do the children of God add to the being and work of the living savior, we are genuinely God’s human partners in the covenant of grace. The celebration of the Eucharist is a corresponding moral action elicited by the prior divine action in Christ (i.e., his history). Far from offering a purely substitutionary atonement,
Jesus’ history generates imitation: it “takes place here and now, in nobis, in the life of the many.” 48 The Eucharist, thus, is not merely a commemoration of Jesus’ death, but “the solemn Christian act in face of its divine renewal” in Jesus’ eternal history. 49 As a human response of obedience to this one saving and illumining work done by God in Jesus Christ, the Eucharist has “the promise of the divine good-pleasure” and is “well done as a holy and fruitful act” which sustains us in the fellowship of Jesus Christ and therefore in calling upon God. 50 Since the power of resurrection renews the Christian life and it is “not a demonstrable substance immanent in the church,” the Eucharist, as a human response, means an act of thanksgiving to God’s accomplished salvation. At the same time, it is an invocation of God’s promise and assurance.

In this sense, Barth considers the Eucharist as a moral response following upon a saving encounter with God. As a free human act of invocation, the Eucharist shapes the Christian life as a life of freedom and moral responsibility in correspondence to divine grace. The participants, as moral agents, respond to the presence of Christ in his self-sacrifice with confidence, gratitude and joy. They look forward to his future return. Moreover, since what is seen in the world is “the disorder and unrighteousness which corrupt human life and fellowship,” the participants pray with their zeal for the coming of God’s righteousness and the eschatological re-ordering of human existence. 51 The Eucharist, as prayer, is “not mere consent, not simply calling upon the strengths

the action of sinful man is determined, ordered, and limited by the free grace of the faithful God manifested and operative in Jesus Christ” (Karl Barth, The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics Volume IV, 4, Lecture Fragments, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981], 3).

48 CD IV/4, 22.
50 Ibid, 45–46, 288.
of Another, but that which actualizes the will and energies of the Christians and sets them upon specific paths.”

On the one hand, Barth is in accord with Balthasar in the understanding of Christ’s real presence as his personal, saving act. On the other hand, Barth’s reticence with respect to sacramental mediation paves the way for a purely ethical exposition of the Eucharist. Thus it is distinct from Balthasar’s approach to the Eucharist as participating in Christ’s sharable mission. For Barth, the Eucharist is an act of moral obedience to God undertaken with human freedom. It is a specific, concrete human response to God’s eschatological action which both relativizes and establishes human ethical reality. This implies that God’s saving work is independent of human will and act. It is different from all the human works, even as it enters into the sphere of human works. It is “God’s own independent action which limits all human history from outside, which is sovereign in relation to it.”

Therefore, in Barth’s ethical vision, the eucharistic celebration is a visible, free and distinctive witness to the prior divine action upon the church and the world through the history of Jesus Christ:

Christ → Church → Eucharist

III. Concluding Remarks

Recent theological research is notable for its concern with the ethical and social significance of the Eucharist. Since the Eucharist is celebrated by the ecclesial gathering in the name of Jesus Christ, human agency and social influences should not be so singled out

from the work of Christ so that the being of the church comes to dominate the discussion. On the basis of the doctrines of Christ’s presence and the participation of the eucharistic community, we have examined three models of eucharistic ecclesiology (Milbank/Cavanaugh, Balthasar, and Barth) and have explored the logics of these theological discourses. Among these three models, we find distinct patterns of human participation (imitation) with respect to distinct understandings of Christ’s presence, the ontological preponderance and inclusiveness of the totus Christus. The Eucharist pattern of the ‘radically orthodox’ paradigm is in principle opposed to what we find in Balthasar and Barth. The ontological-metaphysical approach of Radical Orthodoxy outlined in this paper renders the person and work of Christ as resolvable into the church, with the result that the church and its mission could be substituted for Christ without significant loss.  

To what degree are human beings allowed to participate in the history in which the being of God is realized? An ‘autonomy versus determinism’ debate reflects a question of theological ontology, a question of how God becomes in and through the historical process (divine ontology) and hence how human beings correspondingly and freely engage in an act of self-determination through which true humanity is actualized (human ontology). A discussion of theological ontology also includes an account of the relationships between history and eschatology, nature and grace, as well as the human and divine agency. Moreover, human ontology is also moral ontology, an account of the moral space in which the human

54 A further explanation of the theological difference between Balthasar and Barth, especially between the former’s dramatics of ecclesial mission and the latter’s ethics of reconciliation, is beyond this paper’s discussion. In short, the Protestant theologian sets forth his understanding of the Eucharist as the ecclesial response of a dependent partnership. The Catholic theologian roots his eucharistic ecclesiology in a theo-dramatics, thereby offering a richer view of the relation between divine and human agency.
agents with their moral freedom exist and act as recipients of, and respondents to, the grace (gift) of God in Christ. Therefore, the differences and contradictions we find among the three models of eucharistic ecclesiology stem from a basic difference in their theological ontologies. However, further explanations and comparisons are beyond the scope of this paper.