ABSTRACT: In recent years, Protestant theology—particularly of the Reformed and evangelical variety—has shown an increased interest in historical retrieval. Various theologians have engaged in the work of mining the Great Tradition of Christianity in order to resource contemporary theology with wisdom from the past. Presupposed in this work of retrieval is a claim that is by no means a foregone conclusion for Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox theologians: the notion that Protestants also lay claim to the Great Tradition of the ‘one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.’ Protestant theologians working on retrieval believe they are drawing from their own heritage, not the heritage of another. While it may appear counterintuitive to do so, this paper seeks to defend this notion by drawing together three terms commonly considered disparate: Christian Platonism, Reformed soteriology, and Baptist sacramentalism. It disputes two popular insistences: first, that Reformed soteriology depends on a nominalism that contradicts the realism of the Christian-Platonic metaphysical tradition; and second, that the Baptist view of baptism amounts to mere symbolism (and thus depends on nominalism in another sense). This paper therefore argues not only that Reformed evangelicals, broadly speaking, lay rightful claim to the Great Tradition (and specifically, its metaphysics), but also that Baptists in particular share this heritage.

KEY WORDS: Christian Platonism, metaphysics, Union with Christ, Credobaptism, Soteriology.

Introduction

In recent years, Protestant theology—particularly of the Reformed and evangelical variety—has shown an increased interest in historical retrieval. Various theologians have engaged in the work of mining the Great Tradition of Christianity in order to resource contemporary theology with wisdom from the past. Presupposed in this work of retrieval is a claim that is by no means a foregone conclusion for Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox theologians: the notion that Protestants also lay claim to the Great Tradition of the ‘one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.’ Protes-
tant theologians believe they are drawing from their own heritage, not the heritage of another. This paper seeks to defend this notion by drawing together three terms commonly considered disparate: Christian Platonism, Reformed soteriology, and Baptist sacramentalism. It disputes two assertions: first, that Reformed soteriology depends on a nominalism that contradicts the realism of the Christian-Platonic metaphysical tradition; and second, that the Baptist view of baptism amounts to mere symbolism (and thus depends on nominalism in another sense). This paper, therefore, argues not only that Reformed evangelicals lay rightful claim to the Great Tradition (and specifically, its metaphysics), but also that Baptists in particular share this heritage. I will advance this thesis in three stages. First, I will define and describe the Christian Platonic doctrine of the *analogia entes* (the analogy of being). Second, I will explain how this metaphysical doctrine harmonizes with a Reformed soteriology—specifically, a Reformed understanding of union with Christ, which includes a strong forensic component of justification. Third, I will demonstrate how both of these concepts harmonize well with a Baptist conception of baptism, historically understood. {The first two sections of this paper are largely reworked portions of my dissertation, *Irresistible Beauty: Beholding Triune Glory in the Face of Jesus Christ* (2021)}

**The Analogy of Being**

We begin with the oft debated doctrine of the *analogia entes* (the analogy of being). This is the doctrine that insists that all created life is derivatively participatory in God. Or, as Matthew Levering puts it, 'all finite beings theophanically disclose pure act as their glorious and incomprehensible source' (Levering 2017: 138). Although Christian Platonism is not exhausted with this doctrine of analogy, it is a useful doctrine to communicate the heart of the Christian Platonic tradition—it is difficult to imagine this tradition functioning without a conception of the *analogia entes*, and it is likewise difficult to make sense of the *analogia entes* outside of the Christian Platonic tradition (Davison 2019: 173-182; Morello 2020: 37-66; Tyson 2014: 132-134). Within the gratuitous metaphysic of this tradition, wherein the referent of any created thing is not the thing itself but its God, meaning transgresses the boundaries of all creaturely subjects and finds its home in the ultimate Subject. Everything is revelation, because everything reveals the Source in which it participates.

The language of 'participation' is sure to put some on edge, in fear of an impending blur of the distinction between Creator and creature. But Hans Boersma helpfully reminds us that 'the doctrine of analogy does not just argue for similarity but also insists on the infinite *difference* between Creator and creature. In fact, dissimilarity is the main point of the doctrine of analogy' (Boersma 2011: 71). John R. Betz makes a similar observation when he notes that in the Church's effort to 'defend its doctrine of creation, especially its ultimate goodness and peacefulness', it has typically 'presented
its doctrine of creation in terms of analogy’. This, argues Betz, ‘has the advantage of allowing the Church to speak of the being, goodness and beauty of creation as a positive participation in the being, goodness and beauty of God, while at the same time affirming God’s radical transcendence of creation and his abiding difference from it’ (Betz 2007: 51, emphasis original).

This insistence goes all the way back to the church fathers who, contrary to popular opinion, were ‘not naïve about what to accept and what to reject from the Platonic heritage’ (Boersma 2011: 33). While they rejected outright Platonism’s antipathy for creation, they critically appropriated its concept of ‘Forms’ and ‘Ideas’. It may be tempting to assume that this also was a mistake, destined to jeopardize the Creator-creature distinction. Indeed, this seems to be the suggestion from some evangelical quarters (Johnson 2021). But to assume as much is misguided for two reasons. On the one hand, it need not jeopardize the Creator-creature distinction, as we will show. On the other hand, forfeiting such critical appropriation actually (ironically) jeopardizes crucial doctrines like the doctrine of Scripture itself, a cherished doctrine for many who might be inclined to criticize the patristics for their apparent insufficient emphasis on biblical authority. ‘The Platonist-Christian synthesis,’ notes Boersma,

made it possible to regard creation, history, and Old Testament as sacramental carriers of a greater reality. Creation, history, and Old Testament had significance throughout most of the Christian tradition precisely because they pointed to and participated in a greater reality: what the Platonists called “Forms” or “Ideas,” and what Christians insisted was the Word of God himself (Boersma 2011:38-39).

In other words, we forfeit the Platonist-Christian synthesis to our detriment. With that caution standing, let us delve a bit further into the analogia entes. This doctrine traffics in the Platonic distinction between ‘to εἶχον’ (‘having’) and ‘to μετέχειν’ (‘participating’) (Gerson 2020: chapter 4). One may have a personal beauty, but not in an atomistic, nominalist fashion. Rather, one has beauty to the degree that she reveals or reflects or materializes the Form of Beauty. This seems to be what Aquinas is getting at when he insists that

the beautiful and beauty are distinguished with respect to participation and participants. Thus, we call something ‘beautiful’ because it participates in some way in beauty. Beauty, however, is a participation in the first cause, which makes all things beautiful. So that the beauty of creatures is simply a likeness of the divine beauty in which things participate (Aquinas 1988: 27).
This emphasis particularly shines through in Aquinas's interactions with Pseudo-Dionysius. In his *Commentary on the Divine Names*, Aquinas makes great use of the transcendental equality of goodness and beauty. Their distinction is conceptual, and not substantive. ‘Although the beautiful and the good are the same in subject’, writes Aquinas, ‘because both clarity and consonance are included in the nature of the good—they are conceptually different. For beauty adds something to the good, namely an order which enables cognition to know that a thing is of such a kind’ (Aquinas 1988: 27). The substantive equality of beauty and goodness is not merely owing to their transcendental quality in the abstract (though we may say at least this much); we may go even further and say that their equality is owing to the fact that their archetypal form is found in the God who is simple. ‘Everything is good according to its function. It is the nature of God, however, to be what he is; and so, he alone is his own goodness’ (Aquinas 1988: 29). Which is to say, God is goodness (and beauty) in Himself, while everything created is good (and beautiful) in relation to itself (i.e., its own telos instituted by God) and by derivation. In a particularly clear passage along these lines, Aquinas writes,

> Everything that exists comes from beauty and goodness, that is from God, as from an effective principle. And things have their being in beauty and goodness as if in principle that preserves and maintains . . . And all things are and all things become because of beauty and goodness, and all things look to them, as to an exemplary cause, which they possess as a rule governing their activities (Aquinas 1988: 28–29).

When Aquinas writes that ‘God is in all things; not, indeed, as part of their essence, nor as an accident; but as an agent is present to that upon which it works’, he is talking about this same all-good, all-beautiful God. The God who is Beauty is He who ‘causes this effect in things not only when they first begin to be, but as long as they are preserved in being; as light is caused in the air by the sun as long as the air remains illuminated’ (Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* 1, 8, 1).

In this way, Aquinas stands ‘firmly in the Greek intellectualist tradition, extending from Plato through Aristotle and Plotinus, and mediated to Aquinas principally by Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius’ (Perl 2020: 70) Within this tradition, Beauty was considered not simply in an aesthetic category, but rather in an ontological or metaphysical one. ‘Clearly’, writes Betz, ‘for the Platonic tradition and its assimilation by the Church – from Augustine to Dionysius to the Chartres Platonists to Thomas – metaphysics and aesthetics go together, to the point of implying one another’ (Betz 2007: 61). ‘Beauty’ was a concept convertible to being itself (Perl 2020: 70–71), and therefore, created beauty—and indeed, the created order—‘receives its being and significance from its participation in the eternal Word’ (Boersma 2011: 50).
defense on Aquinas’s place as a summative figure in this Christian Platonist tradition, contra the common misconception of Aquinas as anti-Platonic, see Morello (2020).

But this participation is, as Boersma puts it, a ‘mere’ participation. Thus, as Steven Duby summarizes the point,

Thomas’s deployment of the analogy of attribution . . . (1) precludes any common factor in which God and creatures alike might participate, (2) assumes that the referring of created perfections back to God entails the presence of each perfection in a “preeminent” or “superexcellent” manner in God’s own being, and (3) is built, at the predicative level, on the ontological relationship of creatures to God, a relationship explicative in terms of causality and participation (Duby 2019: 250).

This, again, is why Boersma describes creation as ‘merely a sacramental participation in the divine life’ (Boersma 2011: 70). On the one hand, unless we are to swallow the reductio of nominalism and univocism, and conclude that God and creation exist on the same—or parallel—plane of being, we have to affirm that between creation and Creator there remains some participatory relationship. Creation and Creator do not relate to one another as independent modes of being. The former derives its being in some way from the latter. On the other hand, unless we are to swallow the reductio of pantheism and deny either the infinite nature of God or the finite nature of creation, we must conclude that this ‘participation is strictly a gift of grace and in no way erases the Creator-creature distinction’ (Boersma 2011: 71). Indeed, Scripture itself confirms this notion. Levering helpfully gives us an example:

As an example of all created things’ theophanic analogicity, consider the praise that, according to Psalm 148, all the beings of the world offer to God. Angels and humans, of course, should praise God freely and intelligently, and Psalm 148 does not leave this out. But Psalm 148 also exhorts the sun, moon, stars, highest heavens, sea monsters, fire, hail, snow, wind, mountains, trees, beasts, insects and birds to praise the Lord. How could these irrational things praise God? The answer seems to be by simply existing, as actual things, in their wondrous diversity. Their praise of the creator is joined to the praise offered by ‘all peoples, princes and rulers of the earth’ (Ps 148:11) (Levering 2017: 138).

To affirm this much is to join Aquinas, and his classical Platonist-Christian synthetic heritage in affirming the analogia entes in general.

Still, we must determine the nature of this participation. Already, some might have anticipated a tension. How are we to conceptualize the Platonic relationship between ‘Matter’ and ‘Forms’ or ‘Ideas’ with the ‘Good’? As Edward Feser points out, there are key distinctions between Plato, Aristotle, and the Medieval scholastic theo-
logians on the matter of realism (Feser: 2017: 95-110). For Plato, ‘Forms’ or ‘Ideas’ are not identical to the ‘Good’, nor are they an intrinsic part of ‘Matter’. They exist in a third realm, somewhere between the ‘Good’ and ‘Matter’. This ethereal third realm did not work for Aristotle, who insisted instead that ‘Forms’ existed within their material manifestations in the world. The Scholastic theologians of the Medieval era said, ‘yes and no’ to both Plato and Aristotle. ‘Like Aristotelian realism’, says Feser, ‘Scholastic realism affirms that universals exist only either in the things that instantiate them, or in intellects which entertain them. It agrees that there is no Platonic “third realm” independent both of the material world and of all intellects’ (Feser 2017: 102). They did, however, recognize the limitations of Aristotle’s view, acknowledging the necessity of some universals which do exist outside of human and other contingent intellects. So, they said, ‘yes’ to the Aristotelian denial that universals exist outside of either material things or in the intellects that entertain them. But they said, ‘no’ to the Aristotelian failure to account for a realm ‘distinct both from the material world and from human and other finite intellects’ (Feser 2017: 102, emphasis original). Instead, the Scholastic tradition, following in the footsteps of Augustine (see Augustine Confessions books XI and XII), relocated this realm of ‘Forms’ or ‘Ideas’, so that it no longer occupied a place of independent abstraction, but rather existed in the mind of God. ‘In particular’, Feser notes, Scholastic realism ‘holds that universals, propositions, mathematical and logical truths, and necessities and possibilities exist in an infinite, eternal, divine intellect’ (Feser 2017: 102, emphasis original).

But at this point another tension develops. How is one to conceive of these ‘Forms’ or ‘Ideas’, which are in the mind of God? The patristics had the instinctual move to associate Platonic ‘Forms’ with the divine Word—the Logos, the Son Himself (see Boersma 2011: 38-39, 47-51). This is fitting insofar as it goes, since the mind to which these ‘Forms’ belong is the Triune God’s, wherein the divine life is ever from the Father, through the Son, and in the Spirit. But to make these ideas out to be identical with the Logos is less preferable than to conceptualize them as the Logos’ ideas—He thinks them. Thus, it is right for our understanding of creation’s mere participation in the divine life to be shaped by our understanding of divine ideas and the Logos as the Word who speaks creation into existence: creation reflects His ideas.

In discussing ‘divine ideas’, we are coming into contact with Aquinas and his exemplarism. For Aquinas, exemplar ideas are ‘the forms of things existing apart from the things themselves’, and thus there is ‘a distinction between the substantial form that is intrinsic to a thing and the form that is the thing’s exemplar’ (Doolan 2008: 25, emphasis original). It is not far from the truth to say (albeit in a simplified manner) that divine ideas are the blueprints for creation (Levering 2017: 70). It is through the imitation of divine ideas that a finite being participates in God. ‘Because a finite es-
sence is not its own act of being’, says Doolan, ‘it exists only by participating in being (esse)’ (Doolan 2008: 237. Cf., Anselm Proslogion, chapter 34). Creation participates in God by virtue of its reflection of divine ideas.

With this all-too brief foray into metaphysics, let me offer this summary of the analogia: What Plato means by ‘the Good’ is who Christians worship as the Triune God—He is the archetypical standard and source of Being; He is the ultimate True, the Good, the Beautiful. What Plato calls ‘Forms’ or ‘Ideas’, Christians call essence, which is in-and-beyond creation, and is ultimately present in the divine intellect. Created essences find their archetypical exemplars in the form of ‘divine ideas’, which are thought and spoken by the Logos. The free, gracious, and benevolent expression of these ideas is creation—which is teeming with being that is by virtue of its imitation of the divine ideas, and by virtue of imitation of them, it is a ‘mere’ participant of the Divine.

All of this, of course, gets at only one aspect of ‘participation’: the ontological aspect of derivative, creaturely being. There is another crucial aspect of ‘participation’ that remains to be discussed, which is at the very heart of Reformed soteriology. In regeneration the Spirit communicates—or, sovereignly brings the regenerate into participation with—the glorious a se beatitude of the Trinity, mediated through Christ (Parkison 2021). This is doxological, communal participation. It is the soteriological participation the Holy Spirit facilitates via union with Christ. And to this kind of participation, we now turn our attention.

**Reformed Soteriology**

So much for our description of the Great Tradition’s metaphysical framework as presented in the analogia entes. Now the question we are faced with is whether this metaphysical framework has a natural place in the Reformed tradition. According to Hans Boersma, the answer is, ‘not comfortably’, especially when soteriology is concerned. The Reformed forensic account of justification by faith alone, and the Reformed conception of depravity’s totality, Boersma has said, is out of step with the Great Tradition’s ‘sacramental tapestry’ (Boersma 2011: 92). He blames the ‘cutting’ of the sacramental tapestry—the Christian Platonic metaphysic described above—in the mind of the Church on the High Middle ages’ two scissor-blades: Duns Scotus’s univocism, and William of Ockham’s nominalism (Boersma 2011: 68-81). Whether one rejects creation’s analogous participation with the Creator by elevating it to the same plane of existence (Scotus), or by obliterating the concept of the universal (Ockham), the result was the same: from a historical point of view, the analogia entis, and therefore the sacramental tapestry of the cosmos, was effectively torn in the Church’s imagination. And while Boersma grants that the reformers made a valiant effort at re-weaving the tapestry (Boersma 2011: 91), he maintains they ultimately fell short.
In fact, Boersma will go so far as to indicate that Calvin's commitment to the Great Tradition's 'integrated cosmos' is internally inconsistent with his soteriology, when he says that 'this positive view of God's presence in and guidance of nature does not fit well with other elements of Calvin's thought' (Boersma 2011: 92). Among these 'other elements' are his 'emphasis on the pervasiveness of sin', and his 'teaching of justification by faith alone', which he attributes to a 'great deal of continuity with the nominalist tradition' (Boersma 2011: 92). Since anti-nominalism is an essential feature of any strand of the Platonic tradition (see Gerson 2013: 9-19), if Boersma is right, then the exclusion of the Reformed tradition in Christian Platonism is a foregone conclusion. There is no marrying anti-nominalism with an essentially nominalist soteriology.

So, is the option truly that stark? Must we decide between embracing the metaphysics of the Great Tradition, consequently owning a Roman Catholic (or even an Eastern Orthodox) soteriology, or embracing the Reformed soteriology and, with a heavy and reluctant heart, bid farewell to the gorgeous metaphysic of Christian Platonism and settle in with the drab and colorless metaphysic of nominalism? Answering this question clearly is certainly not made easier by the fact that some within the Reformed camp agree with Boersma about the harsh choice between the metaphysic of the Great Tradition and the soteriology of the Reformed tradition (e.g., Frame 2015: 86-153; Johnson 2021). Fortunately, no such choice is necessary, because Boersma and others who would have us choose are mistaken to do so. It is, for one thing, a historically novel choice, since 'the early Reformed certainly drew on the resources of medieval philosophy and theology in an eclectic manner', but 'essentially stood in continuity with Thomas's approach [to metaphysics] and criticized Scotus's doctrine of univocity' (Duby 2019: 257), and, we might add, Ockham's nominalism. But even if this were not the case, Reformed theology is in no necessary conflict with the Christian-Platonist metaphysic, whether the doctrine of sin, sola fide, or its conception of union with Christ is concerned.

In truth, the Reformed tradition has always had a category for soteriological participation, which comfortably harmonizes the forensic character of justification by faith alone with the metaphysic of the Great Tradition discussed thus far in union with Christ. It is true that the believer's union with Christ and Christ's forensic imputation of righteousness are often pitted against one another as irreconcilable concepts. {David VanDrunen puts his finger on several figures for whom this bifurcation functions: 'I consider, first, those who use union with Christ to jettison the substitutionary atonement as the ground of justification, as represented by Daniel Powers; second, those who use union to jettison the solely forensic character of justification, as represented by Michael Gorman; and third, those who use union to jettison or at
least enervate the imputed active obedience of Christ as an aspect of justification, as represented by N. T. Wright and Michael Bird’ (VanDrunen 2019: 471).

But in reality, there is no need to reconcile one to the other because ‘they are mutually determining and illuminating’ (VanDrunen 2019: 469). This point becomes clear once one grasps that justification is included in ‘every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places’, which belong to all those whom the Father has blessed ‘in Christ’ (Eph 1:3–10). Tensions arise when Christ’s benefits are abstracted from His person. With regard to this debate, this abstraction happens (a) when justification is depicted as a benefit that might be received outside of—and apart from—union with Christ, (b) when union with Christ is depicted in a purely mystical and existential way, and (c) when the relationship with these realities are strictly related on existential terms on the one hand or strictly logical terms on the other. These mistakes are understandable, as they are misled by genuine truths about both doctrines. Justification is a forensic benefit that has implications beyond existential, felt realities, and union with Christ is certainly no less than mystical and experiential. Yet neither is complete without the other.

While it is true that ‘in some texts, Paul speaks about believers becoming righteous ‘in Christ’ without mentioning imputation explicitly’, and ‘Paul speaks of God imputing righteousness to believers without using language of union or participation’, VanDrunen points out how ‘neither set of texts should control the other. They are rather “mutually defining and illuminating’ (VanDrunen 2019: 496).

Without union with Christ, the active obedience of Christ offers little comfort for the believer. What good does it do a guilty sinner to know that someone else has achieved perfection? The success of the former means nothing to the latter until it is somehow imputed thereunto. Conversely, union with Christ, abstracted from the forensic dimension of imputed righteousness, offers little solace to the covenant breaker. He may hope to enjoy unprecedented communion with Christ in present, existential ways, but it is groundless without imputation. Calvin makes this point well: ‘We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body—in short, because he designs to make us one with him’ (Calvin 1960: 3.11.10). Likewise, Turretin makes this point powerfully. We quote him here at length:

As long as Christ is outside of us and we are out of Christ, we can receive no fruit from another’s righteousness. God willed to unite us to Christ by a twofold bond—one natural, the other mystical—in virtue of which both our evils might be transferred to Christ and the blessings of Christ pass over to us and become ours. The former is the communion of nature by the incarnation. By this, Christ, having assumed our flesh,
became our brother and true Goal and could receive our sins upon himself and have the right to redeem us. The latter is the communion of grace by mediation. By this, having been made by God a surety for us and given to us for a head, he can communicate to us his righteousness and all his benefits. Hence it happens that as he made of God sin for us by the imputation of our sins, so in turn we are made the righteousness of God in him by the imputation of his obedience (2 Cor 5:21) (Turretin 1997: 2.647).

Forensic imputation brings weight to the promise of union with Christ. It communicates that when a person is united to Christ by faith, they are united to rock-solid hope: a real, perfect, active and passive obedience, which guarantees propitiation and righteousness, i.e., full justification. Further, union with Christ personalizes imputed righteousness. It communicates that the perfect active and passive obedience of Christ is not an abstract garment that Christ weaves and the Father drapes onto the believer—Christ himself is the garment. There is no receiving Christ’s robes of righteousness without being received into Christ himself. ‘The fact that imputation occurs through union with Christ,’ observes VanDrunen,

indicates that the righteousness imputed is not abstract or impersonal but a personal righteousness that guarantees God’s justice when he justifies… Believers are personally united to the one whose righteousness appears in their account… There is no fiat money or debased currency involved. This is a real righteousness that believers claim as their own through an everlasting union with the one who was obedient unto death. (VanDrunen 2019: 496).

To put matters more concisely, union with Christ is how the great exchange happens (2 Corinthians 5:21). When Paul asks the Church in Rome, ‘Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?’ (Romans 6:3), he expected his readers to remember what he just said about this Christ in the preceding sections of his letter. Christians are baptized into Christ, the Second Adam who succeeds where the first Adam failed. Just as Adam’s failure was accounted to his posterity by virtue of their being in him, Christ’s obedience is accounted to His posterity by virtue of their being (baptized) into Him. The forensic nature of justification cannot then be at odds with the participatory nature of union with Christ. Paul’s discussion on union with Christ in Romans chapter 6 does not merely root sanctification in union with Christ (though it certainly does not do less than that); it roots the application of the justification of chapter 5 in union with Christ as well.

This does not mean, however, that union with Christ has logical priority to the forensic realities of justification and imputation. It is true that the believer has no justi-
fication outside of Christ, but the forensic reality of justification is logically and legally prior to the believer’s union to Christ. The believer’s union to Christ is not a-legal. This, of course, thrusts us into a debate between those who would affirm the importance of a logical ordo salutis that roots sanctification and the relational dynamics of mystical union in the legal verdict of justification logically and those who would (in some cases) minimize the importance of a logical ordo salutis and would instead put union with Christ as the ‘basis’ for justification. {The former group would include J. V. Fesko, J. Todd Billings, Michael Horton, Geerhardus Vos, and Louis Berkhoff. In the latter group we might place N. T. Wright, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Richard Gaffin Jr., Sinclair Ferguson, and David B. Garner.}

Though there is much we could say to sort this debate out, we might benefit by looking at the issue from two separate vantage points: the man’s-eye perspective and the God’s-eye perspective. From the man’s-eye perspective, justification seems to come by virtue of union with Christ. Union with Christ is where justification is experientially appropriated. This is because, while justification is by faith alone, it is not merely faith in a proposition. Justification is by faith alone in Christ alone. He is the object of the believer’s faith. But the object of the believer’s faith is not Christ unaccompanied by propositions. The reason he is a saving object of faith is that he has objectively achieved justification outside of the believer’s union with him. The believer has faith alone in Christ, who accomplished redemption with his passive and active obedience, substitutionary death, etc. It is upon the basis of this legal work—the work the Son was sent to accomplish—that the believer finds in Christ a justifying object of faith. This is the God’s-eye view. The Father sends the Son to legally purchase the right for the believer to cling to him by faith in union. Thus, Fesko is right to summarize,

To say, then, that union with Christ is the basis for a person’s justification lacks specificity and is misleading. If basis means that one cannot be justified apart from union with Christ, then such a statement is true. Justification requires faith in Christ, and only one who is in union with Him can exercise faith. But if by basis the legal ground for justification is intended, then, no, union with Christ, the personal in dwelling, is not the legal basis of justification (Fesko 2016: 299, emphasis added).

While the man’s-eye perspective views justification as that which is rendered his through Christ—and therefore, seemingly by virtue of his union with Christ (i.e., justification received; redemption applied), the God’s-eye perspective—the perspective of the logical priority of the ordo salutis as rooted in the pactum salutis—places justification as the legal grounds for the believer’s union with Christ (i.e., justification achieved; redemption accomplished).
Thus, it is the *historia salutis* that grounds the *ordo salutis*. Christ accomplishes redemption with his perfect life, death, resurrection, and ascension. This accomplished redemption is applied to the believer in Christ through the ministry of the Holy Spirit when he unites the believer to Christ. While the *ordo salutis* does not necessarily imply hard and fast time distinctions in the application of redemption, it does nevertheless imply a causal or logical order (Fesko 2016: 338). Because of the objective judicial work that Christ accomplishes on behalf of the elect, the legal stage is set for the Holy Spirit to apply the work of redemption to the believer in time.

Let us now explicitly tie the above discussion back to the earlier inquiry about the language of ‘participation.’ Critics of Reformed theology in general, and Calvin in particular, are not lacking in their claim that Reformed soteriology neglects this participatory element of Christ’s person and work, which seems to be so clearly central for so much of the Church’s history (Billings 2011: 64).

J. Todd Billings has convincingly argued, however, that this narrative is profoundly misguided (Billings 2011: 63-75; Billings 2008: 68-104). Rather, ‘the images of union with Christ, ingrafting into Christ, partaking of Christ, and adoption were drawn from Paul and Johannine writings in the New Testament and were deeply woven into the fabric of [Calvin’s] soteriology’ (Billings 2011: 65).

Billings does acknowledge that ‘while the critics . . . are mistaken in thinking that Calvin does not have a theology of salvation as restoration, communion, and union with God’, differences do remain between Calvin and other theologies of ‘participation,’ namely and chiefly the fact that ‘Calvin’s account of justification is deeply forensic in orientation’ (Billings 2011: 66). This, however, is a *feature* of Calvin’s notion of union with Christ, not a bug. Rather than conflating justification with sanctification—i.e., conflating the root with the fruit—Calvin and other Reformed theologians distinguish between the two, even while both are connected intimately to the believer’s union with Christ. ‘Reformed theology has generally used the term *union with Christ* to refer to this comprehensive sense of salvation,’ notes Letham, ‘taking the form of both forensic and transformational elements’ (Lethem 2011: 102). In Christ, the believer is legally justified—by the Spirit, he *already* participates with God in Christ; he is seated with Christ in the heavenly places (Ephesians 2:6), and he sits there *legally*. And in Christ, by the Spirit, the believer is progressively becoming on earth who he is in heaven. In Christ, he is justified; in Christ, he is sanctified.

The Protestant Reformed (and, we may be so bold as to say, *biblical*) imperative associated with sanctification, can be summarized as ‘be who you are’ (e.g., Romans 6; Galatians 6; Colossians 3). Within this framework, the communal participation believers enjoy with God in Christ is *legal*; it is purchased by the blood of Christ, and is enjoyed (a) *already*, (b) in a *progressively increasing* sense on this side of the believ-
er’s resurrection, and will be enjoyed (c) in a consummated way in the beatific vision on the other side of the believer’s resurrection.

In describing the believer’s union with God in Christ in this way, we are not turning away from the Christian-Platonist metaphysic of the Great Tradition. In fact, what other metaphysic could possibly account for a mystical union that bridges so many metaphysical gaps than that of the Great Tradition? The temporal gap of now and then; the cosmological gap of a corrupt creation and a glorified creation; the anthropological gap of a sinful humanity and a resurrected humanity—all of these are traversed by the believer’s union with Christ. In Christ, he is then and now, there and here, already sanctified and becoming sanctified. Only the thick realism of a Christian-Platonist metaphysic has room enough for such a splendid depiction of salvation, and the forensic element strengthens—rather than contradicts—this vision. There is nothing nominalist about this arrangement: to distinguish Adam and his posterity from the Second Adam and his is to distinguish one humanity from another, both of which make sense only within a Christian Platonic metaphysic, wherein participation in archetypes is real.

**Baptist Sacramentalism**

The above is a defense against the claim that Reformed soteriology—with its richly forensic understanding of justification by faith—necessarily relies on a kind of nominalism, and thus precludes the Reformed tradition from rightly living in the Christian Platonic metaphysic. Similarly, this section is a defense against the claim that Credobaptism—with its insistence on the marriage between profession of faith and baptism—necessarily relies on another kind of nominalism, which thereby precludes Baptists from living in the Christian Platonic tradition.

The charge is that the Baptist view on baptism is ‘mere symbolism’—or, ‘an empty sign’. Since the Baptist view essentially conceptualizes baptism as a form of personal self-expression (so the argument goes), it stands in stark opposition to the Great Tradition, which, although incredibly diverse with how the particulars work together, has always insisted on layers of meaning in baptism. Though there has not always been complete agreement on how, to what degree, and what kind of divine grace is communicated to the baptizand in the physical act of water baptism, the Great Tradition is uniform in at least this much: whatever constitutes as baptism, God uses it as an effective means of grace. This very broad sacramentalism draws from the kind of Christian Platonic metaphysic described above, wherein meaning transgresses the boundaries of material form. The cosmos and actions within it mean more than their physical dimensions. In this participatory metaphysic, Christians have nearly always insisted, God has ordained to sovereignly administer a certain kind of gracious blessing on the right administration of baptism (whatever constitutes as ‘right adminis-
tration' and 'baptism' in this schema). If this is the case, baptism as mere symbolic, individualistic self-expression assumes a very different kind of metaphysic, and therefore has no place within the Christian Platonic tradition.

So goes the argument against the notion that Credobaptists can be metaphysically catholic. And to the degree that such a formulation exhausts the credobaptist position, I would agree. Fortunately, such a reductionistic view of baptism is not necessarily the Baptist position. To be fair, critics of Baptist ecclesiology and the Baptist tradition have a point when they argue along these lines. It is not difficult to find voices to enthusiastically confirm such a stereotype, and though such a point would be difficult to substantiate, I think it is fair to assume that this view is at least dominant—if not default—for most self-identified Baptists on the planet. But the mere, self-expressive view of baptism is historically and theologically accidental to the Baptist tradition. It is not an essential Baptist distinctive. ‘Baptist sacramentalism’ is no oxymoron, historically or theologically.

From a historical perspective, Baptists have a long heritage of pastors and theologians who were at least vague on sacramentalism, and in many cases were explicitly sacramental (Cross and Thompson 2003: 8-20). Not only were some of the earliest Baptist confessions rife with language of the 'sacraments' of baptism and communion (Fowler 2002: 11-20), many of the early particular Baptists bespoke sympathies for what many evangelicals might consider a high sacramentalism today.

For example, the seventeenth century Particular Baptist, Robert Garner, was ‘clear in his assertion that forgiveness [of sins] becomes an experiential reality through the confession of faith in baptism,’ a point that should not be easily overlooked, since ‘this sealing and assuring function of baptism’ which was ‘the essence of Calvin’s view of baptism and the Reformed sacramental tradition,’ is ‘seen here in a representative Baptist author’ (Fowler 2002: 24). Even for Benjamin Keach, whose ‘primary concern was to argue that baptism does not accomplish regeneration in any mechanical way and is thus of no value in the case of purely passive infants,’ nevertheless maintained that baptism is ‘by the work of the Holy Spirit an effective sign, instrumentally conveying what it signifies,’ and is thus ‘a sign, but not merely a sign’ (Fowler 2002: 30).

These are by no means idiosyncratic examples from the seventeenth century; Steven Fowler traces noteworthy examples of figures all throughout the history of the Baptist tradition as we know it (i.e., the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries) who consistently contradicted the common notion that credo-baptists view baptism as mere sign and self-expression (Fowler 2002: chapters 1 and 2). Fowler summarizes:

In summary, although there is diversity of expression, and some of the exegetical details do not allow for dogmatism in interpretation, the New Testament constitently
views baptism as a means of entrance into the eschatological salvation wrought by Jesus Christ. Although the crucial factor from the human side is penitent faith in Christ, this faith is not normally thought of as fully formed apart from baptism. However laudable may be the common Baptist insistence on salvation by faith alone, the idea of faith apart from baptism with its corollary of baptism as merely a symbolic testimony to a past experience of salvation is foreign to the New Testament (Fowler 2002: 164).

Some of these figures had more to say on the relationship between faith, water baptism, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and the role of the local church than others, but they all affirmed that more was happening than the mere individual declaration of faith. They insist, for example, that at some level, the baptizand, the baptizer, and the church into which one is baptized are not the only parties present or active in the baptismal rite. On some level, these sacramental Baptists would insist that, as a sacrament and a means of grace, baptism is an act of God himself. He administers his grace through this sacred act.

Further, even if one is not willing to embrace, what we might call, the ‘high sacramentalism’ of figures like David F Wright, George Beasley-Murray, and Everett Ferguson (see Wright 2006, Beasley-Murray 1960, Ferguson 2013) who argue for a kind of ‘credobaptismal regeneration’, one is not necessarily consigned to a merely symbolic notion of baptism. To assume as much is to assume that the only kinds of grace God grants through his sacraments are regenerative. But this is an unnecessary leap; ‘regenerative grace’ and ‘means of grace’ are by no means synonyms. Bobby Jamieson, for example, offers a formidable argument for what he calls, baptism as ‘the initiating oath-sign of the new covenant’ (Jamieson 2015: 80). It is a grace in the sense that through it, God offers all kinds of assurances to the believer, as he legitimizes the believer’s inclusion in the New Covenant by offering his stamp of approval through his earthly emissary: the church. The grace of baptism need not be regenerative to be real. Jamieson goes on to say,

It is an enacted vow whereby a person formally submits to the Triune Lord of the new covenant and pledges to fulfill the requirements of the new covenant... The new covenant creates a visible people, and one becomes a visible member of that people through baptism. One may not be counted among the people of the new covenant until one has undergone its initiating oath-sign (Jamieson: 2015:80).

In Jamieson’s view, baptism is not simply the act of indicating invisible realities with a visible sign, rather, the visible sign effects the visible manifestation of the invisible reality.
Put in Platonic dictum, the universal Form or Idea of the Church is, in part, made manifest in this-worldly term fashion through the sacrament of baptism. This is how the church uses the keys to the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 16:18-19; 18:18; 28:19) to bind on earth that which is bound in heaven. There is only one institution on the planet that has been so deputized by divine order to manifest those heavenly realities in their earthly form, and that is the local church (Leeman 2016: 73-78). God, through the deputized local church sacrament of baptism, formally ushers his elect into the local expression of Christ’s Body, whereby he feeds, spiritually, on Christ himself. When the new believer comes to Christ by faith, he feeds on Christ in a sense—but God feeds Christ to the believer in quite another, more tangible sense, after he has been baptized into his earthly Body. For there, in that local expression of the universal Body of Christ, the believer’s faithful feasting on Christ is punctuated in a physical dimension; he is spiritually nourished with real bread and real wine as he continues to feed on Christ by faith (Barcellos 2013: 55-71).

There is something to be said about the fact that some of the most crucial New Testament passages describing union with Christ are draped in baptismal language (e.g., Romans 6:1-11; Galatians 3:27-29) (see Fowler 2002: 170-174). Some have understandably taken these tight connections to mean that the Spirit’s regenerative baptism and the church’s water baptism are at least coterminous, if not synonymous. While I do not share this view, I do agree with its central insistence that Spirit baptism and water baptism are inextricably related. To be united to Christ but separated from his body—or baptized into Christ by the Spirit, but not baptized by water into Christ’s earthly body (the local church)—is a foreign category to the Scriptures. These earthly signs are divinely ordained signs and seals of heavenly realities. To insist on having heavenly realities apart from their earthly manifestations is to attempt to tear asunder what God has joined together. In other words, it is not as if the ordinary means of grace are mere earthly responses to heavenly realities, they are rather the earthly windows into heavenly realities. Heaven and earth meet, for those who are in Christ, here: at the proclamation of the Word, the administration of water, and the consumption of bread and wine. By faith (and never without it), Word and Sacrament are true meeting places for communion with the Trinity.
Bibliography


