

**Note:** This Work has been made available by the authority of the copyright owner solely for the purpose of private study and research and may not be copied or reproduced except as permitted by the copyright laws of Canada without the written authority from the copyright owner.

Carter, Craig A. "The Recovery of a Sacramental Ontology as the Basis for Developing a Sacramental Theology of Baptism." In *Ecclesia Semper reformanda Est = The Church is Always Reforming: A Festschrift on Ecclesiology in Honour of Stanley K. Fowler on His Seventieth Birthday*, edited by David Barker, Michael Haykin and Barry Howson, 115-136. Kitchener, Ont.: Joshua Press, 2016.

# 6

## The recovery of a sacramental ontology as the basis for developing a sacramental theology of baptism

BY CRAIG A. CARTER

“Theology that refuses to address questions of ontology can never be more than mythology.”<sup>1</sup>

**S**tan Fowler has made many contributions to the growth of the church and to the progress of the gospel in Canada. One of his many contributions is his book, *More Than a Symbol: The British Baptist Recovery of Baptismal Sacramentalism*,<sup>2</sup> in which he calls for the recovery of a Baptist sacramental theology of baptism. I wish to discuss this book’s thesis in this essay because I believe that it is

---

<sup>1</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 213.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley K. Fowler, *More Than a Symbol: The British Baptist Recovery of Baptismal Sacramentalism* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2002).

one of the most significant works of theology produced in Canada in the past few decades, even though its impact has surely fallen short of what the author, and many of us who share his concerns, might wish. Why is Baptist sacramental theology so rare today? I want to suggest that we have lost not only sacramental theology, narrowly defined, but also a sacramental worldview—a sacramental ontology—broadly understood. What needs to change in Baptist theology (and in North American evangelical theology more generally) in order for a truly Baptist and evangelical sacramental doctrine of baptism to be developed is that we need to engage in a process of *ressourcement* and recover a sacramental ontology as the proper context in which a sacramental theology of baptism can be shown to make sense.

### **Recovering a sacramental theology of baptism**

In analyzing this book, one could say that its strength lies in chapters one, three and four, while its weakness lies in chapter two. In chapter one Fowler makes his greatest contribution by recovering the early, Reformed, Baptist theology of the sacraments held by seventeenth-century English Baptists. It is comforting, in an age of widespread semi-Pelagianism and ahistorical, experience-based theology, to know that the roots of our movement were catholic, reformed and biblical. In affirming the action of God in baptism, our Baptist forefathers were one with catholic tradition. Fowler summarizes the seventeenth-century Baptist view of baptism this way:

Some early Baptists spoke more strongly than others, but there is among them a recurring affirmation that the reception of the benefits of Christ is in some way mediated through baptism.... Christian baptism was for them a human response to the gospel, but this human act of obedience did not exhaust the content of the event.<sup>3</sup>

This kind of baptismal theology allows the Baptist theologian to affirm the heart of the entire orthodox tradition of Christianity from the apostles to the Fathers to the medieval schoolmen to

<sup>3</sup> Fowler, *More Than a Symbol*, 32.

the reformers, while simultaneously subjecting elements of that tradition to a scriptural critique. This makes the Baptist movement a valuable part of the “great tradition,” rather than a deviant or novel sect. It also enriches the entire Christian tradition by incorporating into the tradition the evangelical critique of mechanical grace without living faith imparted by a sacramental priesthood under the control of a politicized hierarchy. Was that not what the Reformation was all about? And was that not genuinely a call to *reform* of the catholic tradition rather than an innovation or departure from that tradition?

The weakness of the book, however, is found in chapter two. Fowler is, of course, correct in discerning that the twentieth-century British Baptists are the only significant group of Baptist theologians to put much effort into developing a sacramental theology of baptism in the past three centuries, so it is understandable that he would focus on them in this book. But, as Fowler notes, the majority of Baptists in the world live in the United States, and they have been unreceptive to the British attempt to articulate a sacramental theology of baptism. Why is this so? Perhaps the fault lies on both sides.

Fowler notes that the British Baptist effort was marked by a concern for Baptist identity in the context of the early twentieth-century ecumenical movement. This could be described as a concern over how to be good members of the ecumenical movement while rejecting infant baptism. However, as Fowler notes, these Baptist theologians showed only a limited knowledge of the early Baptist tradition and “were more concerned to interact with scholars of other traditions than to interact with earlier Baptist literature.”<sup>4</sup> This made it all too easy for other Baptists to dismiss their concerns as liberal and ecumenical, rather than biblical and orthodox. By the dawn of the twentieth century, as Fowler painstakingly demonstrates in chapter one,<sup>5</sup> Baptists gradually had lost contact with the sacramentalism of their founding fathers and increasingly had emphasized baptism as a human response to the gospel, rather than as a divine act of grace. As a result, by the beginning of the twentieth century,

<sup>4</sup> Fowler, *More Than a Symbol*, 155.

<sup>5</sup> See his summaries of these trends in Fowler, *More Than a Symbol*, 53–57 and 86–88.

British Baptist theologians were cut off from the great tradition by their ignorance of their own Baptist roots in Reformed theology and by their preoccupation with dialogue with the liberal theology of the ecumenical movement.

The leaders of the ecumenical movement never managed to extract themselves from the liberal project, that is, the attempt beginning with Friedrich Schleiermacher to restate Christian doctrine within the narrow metaphysical constraints of Enlightenment naturalism. The liberal project involves the rejection of the theological metaphysics of the great tradition in the belief that Christian doctrine can be restated without its metaphysical substratum. The history of the twentieth century, however, demonstrates that the liberal project degenerates into relativism and unlimited pluralism in doctrinal matters coupled with an increasingly myopic preoccupation with the secular and material world in ethical matters. Although the liberal theologians with whom the British Baptists were in dialogue may have come from denominations shaped by sacramental theology, their investment in the liberal project meant that their own sacramental theology was in the process of being undermined by modern historicist and idealist ideas that were inconsistent with the theological metaphysics of the great tradition on which all sacramental theology depends.

Modernity can be defined concisely as the rejection of Christian Platonism.<sup>6</sup> Western modernity can be defined as a movement of thought that began with the rise of *nominalism* in the fourteenth century and then influenced the development of modern science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in a *mechanistic* direction. In the Enlightenment, a philosophical natu-

---

<sup>6</sup> Ancient Platonism can be defined broadly as the movement of philosophy that (1) began in response to the dilemma of being and change posed by Parmenides and Heraclitus; (2) achieved classic expression in the dialogues of Plato; and (3) constituted a tradition in which there was considerable debate within certain defined limits from Aristotle to the Old Academy to the Academic Skeptics to the Middle Academy to Plotinus. See Lloyd Gerson, *Aristotle and Other Platonists* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005) and especially *From Plato to Platonism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013). Augustine was a certain kind of Platonist, namely a *Christian Platonist*, and his version of Christian Platonism summed up the fourth century pro-Nicene position and became the basic Christian theological metaphysics of Christendom for a over a millennium.

ralism triumphed among the intellectual elites of Western Europe. This rejection of the rich tradition of Christian Platonism and the embrace of ancient *materialism* instead led to *skepticism*, *relativism* and eventually *nihilism*.<sup>7</sup> The culture of death in twentieth-century Western Europe and North America is the bitter cultural fruit of this philosophical and spiritual malaise.

While Christianity still exercised a healthy influence over certain parts of Western culture during the nineteenth century, the nihilism of modernity remained largely concealed from view like a cancer growing but not yet manifested by obvious symptoms. The popularity of modernity grew from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries as it wrapped itself in the garb of science, technology and reason using the rhetorical techniques of sophism, while rejecting true philosophy. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, this revival of ancient paganism had seized cultural dominance from Christianity, and Christian theology was in danger of being driven out of the universities and reduced to the status of astrology.

The response of major European theologians from Schleiermacher on was to engage in what can be called “the liberal project.” This project was an attempt to carve out a space in which Christianity could continue to exist without accepting complete exile from the commanding heights of culture. The essence of the liberal (or revisionist) project is the acceptance of modern philosophical critiques of the great tradition and the attempt to re-state the essence of Christianity in terms of the metaphysical assumptions of modernity. There was much talk in the nineteenth century about separating the “essence” of Christianity, that is, the indispensable kernel, from the dispensable “husks.” Specifically, this meant abandoning the “Hellenistic” theological metaphysics forged in the fourth-century Arian controversy, delivered to the Middle Ages by Augustine and refined by Thomas

---

<sup>7</sup> Gerson defines “Ur-Platonism” (that is, the views held in common by all Platonists regardless of their many disagreements on the details, justification and implications of these views) as: anti-nominalism, anti-materialism, anti-mechanism, anti-skepticism and anti-relativism. Note that modernity rejects all five of these positions. (See Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism*, 9–19). “Christian Platonism” is a variation within this general tradition with significant modifications resulting from the incorporation of biblical revelation into the system.

Aquinas. The hope was that perhaps the dogma could be salvaged if the metaphysics was sacrificed. Adolf von Harnack's attack on the ontological implications of creedal orthodoxy was styled as a "de-Hellenization" of the gospel.<sup>8</sup> But the acids of modernity, once unleashed, did not stop with the metaphysics underlying the Trinitarian and Christological dogmas. They quickly began to threaten central doctrines such as biblical inspiration and the virgin birth, sinless life, miracles, atoning death, bodily resurrection, ascension and personal return of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This led to the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversies of the early twentieth century as orthodox theologians like J. Gresham Machen attempted to resist the seemingly inexorable march of heresy. The battle was often waged at the level of exegesis and doctrine, however, without consideration of the philosophical assumptions being presupposed by both sides. For example, arguments over whether Genesis could be reconciled with science failed to be critical enough of the bad metaphysics underlying the conception of "science" shared by all sides in the debate. The liberal project has a conservative as well as a liberal wing, with the primary difference being a judgement as to how much of orthodox dogma can be shoehorned into the narrow space permitted by modern, neo-pagan metaphysics. But as long as the debate is conducted in terms of seeking to determine what can be dispensed with as not essential to Christian faith and as long as the deficient metaphysical dogmas of the Enlightenment itself are not challenged, the long-term outlook for orthodox Christianity in the West is dim. The growth of the nihilistic culture of death in tandem with the decline of Christian faith is the story of the twentieth century in Western culture.

---

<sup>8</sup> This attack continues today. See Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2010), 38ff and N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, and Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008), 88-91. For some inexplicable reason, the nineteenth-century theories of Harnack, which are increasingly seen as outdated and incorrect by serious patristic scholarship, have been discovered by left-wing Evangelicals as if they constituted a set of new and daring ideas. Hans Boersma discusses this unfortunate aspect of Wright's thought and says: "N.T. Wright associates Platonism with Gnosticism without wondering why it is that Christian tradition carefully distinguished between positive and negative elements in the former, while vehemently opposing the latter" [Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 33].

The theological metaphysics of the great tradition is a sacramental ontology in which the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is central to a Trinitarian account of how God and the world interact. Basically, the sacramental ontology of the great tradition of Christian orthodoxy consists of the metaphysical presuppositions that were found necessary to articulate the Christian doctrine of God in such a way as to be faithful to the biblical witness and to rule out the neo-Platonism of Arius and the rationalism of Eunomius during the fourth century struggle that produced the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity. The Fathers adopted some aspects of Platonism, modified others and rejected still others outright. But at least Platonism was worth dialoguing with, unlike the nominalism and materialism of the philosophical naturalists, the skepticism of the Epicureans and the irrational relativism of the Sophists.

In the rest of this essay, I wish to describe this sacramental ontology as the coherent set of metaphysical beliefs that developed out of the Nicene doctrine of God and as the framework in which the exegesis of Scripture needs to be done. Fowler's chapter three deals competently with a large number of the most important biblical texts relevant to the discussion of the sacramental nature of baptism, but the metaphysical assumptions of modernity and its rejection of the sacramental ontology integral to the great tradition are not challenged radically enough.

This leads to a number of problems in modern critical interpretation of the Bible, such as a concept of causation in that whatever is caused by man is not caused by God as if causation were a zero sum game, which in turn leads to a dichotomy between divine action and human action and between grace and faith. It then appears that one must sacrifice grace to retain faith or make baptism a mechanical and automatic impartation of grace, if it is to be a matter of grace at all. But sacramental grace need not be conceived as separate from human faith in a sacramental ontology in which human actions can be taken up into, and participate in, divine actions. Modern philosophy begins with a Cartesian dualism between divine and human action and ends by obliterating divine action altogether and Christian theology cannot resist it merely by insisting that both divine and human action should be retained (which is what conservative modernism

does). What needs to be affirmed is a different and more biblical kind of relationship between divine and human action, a relationship that is only thinkable within a sacramental ontology.

### Recovering a sacramental ontology

Christian sacramental ontology is a view of reality (that is, of *being* or *what is*) that grows out of the attempt to describe the triune God of the Bible and answer questions about how God is known, the divine nature and God's relationship to the world.<sup>9</sup> Any Christian theology proper must deal with the knowledge of God, election, God's attributes, God's triune nature, and God's transcendence, immanence, creation, providence and incarnation. Such issues are not matters of idle speculation; rather, they arise inevitably out of the proclamation of the Christian gospel and the exposition of God's Word. So they are not illegitimate, but necessary, questions, the answers to which inevitably involve the affirmation of certain metaphysical doctrines and the denial of others. Any Christian doctrine of God that does not make explicit the implicit ontological assumptions required to answer these questions coherently is either irresponsible or incomplete.<sup>10</sup>

The deepest and finally authoritative source of a Christian, sacramental ontology is, of course, Holy Scripture. But like the doctrine of the Trinity itself, the elaboration of sacramental ontology was the work of centuries of prayerful reflection on the biblical gospel in conversation with the best of philosophical thought in the culture. Lewis Ayres offers a salutary warning against thinking of individual pro-Nicene theologians as constructing "Christian ontologies" in the sense of proposals grounded in particular philosophies, which take the form of

---

<sup>9</sup> Hans Boersma has explored the concept of sacramental ontology in two important books: *Nouvelle Theologie & Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) and *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry*. On pages 47–51 of the latter book, Boersma gives a concise example of the sort of thing I am talking about. He shows how Gregory of Nyssa drew on Christian Platonism's account of the relationship of universals to particulars in order to argue for the unity of the triune God, rather than tritheism. Boersma calls for a recovery of the Platonist-Christian synthesis through *ressourcement*.

<sup>10</sup> Recall the quotation at the head of this essay: "Theology that refuses to address questions of ontology can never be more than mythology" (Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 213).

systems created by individual authors.<sup>11</sup> He argues that, instead, we should look for “fundamental orientations towards complex ontological questions and at the strategies used to negotiate complex inherited traditions.”<sup>12</sup> This is a salutatory warning. What we need is not so much a single, detailed, philosophical system, as a shared tradition of strategies by which trinitarian classical theism is allowed to shape the philosophical and world-view assumptions that drive the process of intellectual life and culture-formation. What I mean by sacramental ontology is actually a shared vision of some key ontological implications of the doctrine of the Trinity, a vision that took shape in the fourth century and grew from there as a living tradition in which there was enough agreement to allow for interesting debates.

There are three main strategies by which trinitarian theism shaped trinitarian ontology in the great tradition. These strategies are visible in fourth-century pro-Nicene theology and they came to flourish in medieval Christendom. They are: metaphysical realism, a sacramental view of creation and the use of analogical language to speak about the mystery of the triune God. Let us briefly consider what each one means.

### Metaphysical realism

First, trinitarian ontology rests on the foundation of a realist metaphysics. It recognizes the existence of universals, although it is not wedded to the details of any particular metaphysical system.<sup>13</sup> Individual entities in the world are what they are, and remain what they are, by participating in some way in the *Logos* of the triune God. The flux of historical existence is anchored in the realm of unchanging being where universals exist; the universe is not merely a free-flowing stream of meaningless matter

---

<sup>11</sup> Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 312. The work of John Zizioulas would be an example of the danger against which Ayres is warning here. See John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985) and his many works since then.

<sup>12</sup> Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 313.

<sup>13</sup> To affirm metaphysical realism is not necessarily to take a position on the classic debate between Plato and Aristotle on the nature of universals and the various historical attempts to find compromise positions between the two. There is much debate with the Platonist tradition on this point, even among Christian Platonists.

behaving randomly or individual entities that have no shared essences. The adoption of this metaphysical position was the result of a conscious, considered decision on the part of the Fathers that the biblical worldview is expressed more faithfully by utilizing certain Platonic concepts (with revision and re-definition as necessary) and decisively rejecting Stoic pantheism and philosophical naturalism. The fourth-century church Fathers did not know very much of Aristotle's philosophy; the Thomistic integration of Aristotelian insights into this picture would come later, but it would be a development not a revolution, an enhancement not a deconstruction.

It should be recognized that Platonic concepts were employed by the Fathers in the service of biblical theology to explain in coherent, philosophical terms what the Bible itself proclaims in narrative, pictorial terms. Their authority for doing so was the example of the apostles themselves in the New Testament.<sup>14</sup> For example, consider Augustine's distinction between the meaning of the word "heavens" in Genesis 1:1 and the meaning of the word "heaven" in Genesis 1:8 in Book XII of *The Confessions*. Augustine thinks that the statement in Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," is describing the creation of all created reality including both the physical universe, "the earth," and the spiritual realm, "the heavens."<sup>15</sup> He refers to this spiritual realm described in verse 1 as the "heaven of heavens,"<sup>16</sup> and he describes it as "a kind of creation in the realm of the intellect."<sup>17</sup> The word "heaven" in verses 8–9, however, refers to the expanse that divides the waters below from the waters above and which is contrasted with the earth and the sea. Clearly it is what we call "the sky" and is part of this

<sup>14</sup> It should also be noted that this move begins, not in the Fathers, but in the Bible itself. The prologue to the Gospel of John interprets Christ using the Stoic term *Logos* and immediately re-defines this term in personal terms, which makes it mean some of what the Stoics meant but also much more.

<sup>15</sup> Book XII, ix, 9, in Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, Oxford World Classics, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 250.

<sup>16</sup> "Heaven of heavens" is Chadwick's translation. The latest and best translation of *The Confessions* by Sister Maria Boulding has "heaven's heaven." See Saint Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the Twenty-First Century* (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1997/2012), 317.

<sup>17</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions*, 317.

physical universe, whereas the heavens contrasted with the earth in verse 1, the “heaven of heavens,” is the spiritual realm of created reality—the place where the angels constantly worship the slain Lamb in the presence of the church triumphant. The “heaven of heavens” contains something like Plato’s forms or ideas, which are universals, that is, the ideas in which created objects participate and by participating are what they are.<sup>18</sup> Augustine here employs Platonic concepts in his biblical exegesis to assert something rather startling in a Greek context: both the realm of spirit and the material world were created *ex nihilo* by God and continue to exist only by participating in the divine being. So much for a dualism in which God is merely part of the spiritual world! Augustine’s God is as closely related to our material world as he is to the spiritual world because both subsist in him and he is transcendent over both. Plato’s philosophy as corrected by biblical revelation helps to explain how this is so.

But is it *exegesis* or *eisegesis*? That may depend on whether or not one thinks, as Augustine and all orthodox exegetes in the patristic and medieval eras did, that it is proper to interpret the meaning of a particular biblical passage in the context of the entire canonical witness as a whole. Heaven (Augustine’s “heaven of heavens”) is not merely a figment of the imaginative speculation of Platonic philosophers and neither is it just a bit of philosophy read into the text by Augustine. Rather, it is a reasonable way of interpreting Genesis 1:1 as teaching the creation of something that the rest of the Bible clearly assumes to exist (and therefore must have been created at some point). For example, when Satan presents himself before the LORD with the sons of God in Job 1, where did that occur? It was not on earth. Was it on another planet? Or is it just a story with no correspondence in reality at all? Well, what about Isaiah’s vision of the heavenly throne room in Isaiah 6 or John’s vision of heaven in Revelation 4? Are they just mythical stories, made-up tales with a moral? It is apocalyptic language, some say, as if that explained everything.

---

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Aquinas would later strengthen this point by mounting a convincing argument that these ideas actually are in the mind of God. See Gregory T. Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

But if there is no heaven, where did the body of Jesus go in Acts 1? Interestingly, we are told that it went up from a mountain and was hidden by a cloud leaving the disciples gazing up into "heaven" (Acts 1:9). The angel (apparently possessed of no Bultmannian sensibilities whatsoever), tells them, "This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come again in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). For better or worse, the Bible seems to teach clearly that the space-time continuum we inhabit is not the totality of created reality. In fact, the ancient/modern view that the space-time continuum we inhabit *is* the totality of created reality is a doctrine called philosophical naturalism, which is clearly incompatible with the Biblical doctrine of creation: note, not merely with Platonic metaphysics! There is more than what we can access by means of our five senses; on this point the overwhelming majority of Christians for 2,000 years (and Jews for 2,000 years prior to Christ) are agreed. Shakespeare inhabited this worldview and has Hamlet express it: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."<sup>19</sup> To read philosophical naturalism into one's interpretation of the Biblical text, as Bultmann does, is a highly intrusive and radical example of eisegesis, but to read the text as requiring some sort of metaphysics that makes room for a dual creation with both physical and spiritual realities is to submit to the "plain sense" of the text.

But the exact nature of this spiritual reality is confusing. On the one hand, it appears to be immaterial, which makes perfect sense in that created reality consists of two levels: the material and the spiritual. Of course, these are nice, tidy (and very separate) compartments and modern atheists are eager to keep them as separate as possible while waiting for people to give up believing in the spiritual realm altogether.<sup>20</sup> But just as the human creature is unique in consisting of a mysterious union of the material (the body) and the spiritual (the soul), so there are hints scattered everywhere in the canonical Scriptures that the

<sup>19</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, Act I, Scene V, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (London: Abbey Library, 1974), 854.

<sup>20</sup> In the meantime, they propagandize ceaselessly insinuating that immaterial = unreal, which from a biblical perspective is complete nonsense.

current rift between the material and the spiritual aspects of created reality is not entirely normal; that interaction between the two realms is actually far more common than we might suspect, and that such interaction would be even more common if it were not for the occurrence of a catastrophe of cosmic proportions in the distant past. In fact, the movement of Jesus' resurrection body from this realm to the other one (and its promised return again) suggests that the spiritual realm is not entirely without a material aspect, just as prayer suggests that this material world is not entirely bereft of the influence of the spiritual world. If philosophical naturalism is a clumsy and hopelessly inadequate philosophical tool for interpreting Scripture, the modernist hard and fast 'nature versus supernature' distinction is only marginally better. Neither materialism nor magic can do justice to the ontology generated by the God of the Bible, and the nature-supernature dualism roams uncomfortably close to mere magic.

As human beings—ensouled bodies/embodied souls—we are the point of contact and conflict between the two aspects of God's creation. We have a consciousness of being more than animals, yet we are not simply angelic spirits. It is for us to discover via biblical revelation that the connections, in fact the *interdependence*, between the two realms is vast, complex and integral to the existence of both. A key insight is gained when we come to understand that both are part of created reality and distinct from the Creator. This was a key point in Athanasius' argument against the Arians. God is not a part of the spiritual realm, as opposed to being a part of the material realm. Instead, God is utterly *transcendent* over both the spiritual and the material realm and directly present to both; this is the reason why the Arian idea of Christ as the first created being whose role was to mediate between God and the material world was not only wrong but unnecessary.<sup>21</sup> It is not that God is spirit and therefore in need of a mediator to connect with the material. God actually is transcen-

---

<sup>21</sup> Christ is primarily a moral/spiritual mediator—Redeemer—rather than an ontological mediator. Angels can go back and forth between the two ontological spheres of creation, but only Christ is able to overcome the division introduced into creation by the Fall and thus unite sinful humanity and the holy God. Arius conceived of Christ as a kind of "super angel" with a primarily ontological mission rather than as fully divine and one with the Father.

dent and not merely a part of either the spiritual or the material realm; both are his creation, and he is present directly to both. God's *immanence* is the other side of the coin of his transcendence. Transcendence is not merely a cipher for immaterial, but is rather a declaration of the divine freedom, that is, the divine independence of creation (*aseity*). Platonist ideas are used to make this point, but the biblical doctrine of God is very different from the idea of the One in neo-Platonism. The disagreement between Plotinus and the Fathers is conducted within the general range of the Platonic tradition but involves very serious differences, as the Arian debate demonstrates.

Augustine was simply being a typical, biblical Christian in believing that the meaning of this material world is tied up with and, in the end, incomprehensible apart from the spiritual realm of pure spirits, ideas and the divine intellect (referred to in Scripture as the *Logos* or *wisdom* of God). He made use of an existing, more or less philosophically coherent account of the relationship between divine ideas (universals) and particular things in this world to explain the existence, nature and continuation in being of the things of this world; that is, he posited the truth of the Platonic concept of universals. It must be understood, however, that his decision to utilize Platonism was also, at the same time, a decision to *reject* the philosophical naturalism of the Epicureans and the pantheism of the Stoics, which means that he rejected far more Greek philosophy than he ever accepted.<sup>22</sup> And he certainly rejected a good bit of Platonism as well, as the reader of Book VII of *The Confessions* soon learns. This world is radically dependent on God, rather than being autonomous, and Platonism helps us specify something of the nature of this dependence. How can this be regarded as illegitimate unless one proves that every single aspect of Greek philosophical thought—including both sides of contradictory schools of thought—are all false? Are we expected to believe that the Greeks, alone of all the cultures of the world, failed to understand even one single truth

---

<sup>22</sup> One fears that the commonly encountered horror at any sort of hint of "Hellenistic metaphysics" is not really a rejection of *all* Greek philosophy, but rather of certain currently unfashionable Greek views. Regrettably, this usually amounts to embracing the Greeks precisely where they were wrong from a biblical perspective.

about the nature of reality? To argue on exegetical grounds that Augustine was mistaken in accepting this or that particular tenet of Greek philosophy is perfectly legitimate and, in fact, necessary in testing his theology against the standard of Scripture, but to argue that he should have used nothing whatsoever from his culture is to impose a standard on him that no contemporary theologian would be willing to accept. To insist that using an idea from Plato is necessarily selling out the gospel and then to fall on one's face in obeisance to Kantian epistemology or Humean skepticism reflects a disturbing lack of self-awareness, not to mention a need for a remedial course in logic.<sup>23</sup>

Certain Platonic ideas proved to be useful to the Fathers in explicating the gospel and, because of the massive influence of Augustine, continued as a component of orthodox Christian thought well into the middle ages and beyond. Thomas Aquinas summed up the patristic tradition and integrated certain ideas from Aristotle into the basic Christian Platonism of the great tradition. But others in the high middle ages did, in fact, call the "Platonist-Christian synthesis" into question and thereby participated in precipitating a massive cultural crisis known to us as the breakdown of the medieval synthesis and the rise of early modernity. This breakdown involves the rise of nominalism and voluntarism and has been analyzed by many historians.<sup>24</sup> But for well over a thousand years there stood at the heart of the great tradition one kind or another of realist metaphysics for the very good reason that it seemed incontrovertibly to be required by the biblical doctrine of the triune God as Creator.

### **A sacramental view of creation**

Second, a sacramental ontology has a sacramental view of nature. By this I mean what Thomas Howard means in his excellent little book contrasting the medieval and modern worldviews

---

<sup>23</sup> The idea that Plato and Aristotle are mostly wrong and that Hume and Kant are mostly right is an astonishingly indefensible position, which explains why it is often presumed but seldom argued. For a sustained argument for, and explanation of, this point see: Edward Feser, *The Last Superstition: A Refutation of the New Atheism* (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Louis Dupre, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

when he refers to how, in the medieval worldview, it is only natural for one thing to stand for another. Describing the medieval mind, he writes,

Nature and politics and animals and sex—these were all exhibitions in their own way of the way things are. This mind fancied that everything meant everything, and that it all rushed up finally to heaven.... So this mind handled all the data of experience as though they were images—cases in point, that is, of each other and of the way things are.<sup>25</sup>

In a sacramental ontology there is a hierarchical unity to reality. A sacramental ontology is not one in which the seven sacraments of the medieval church are the sole means of grace and mediated through a sacramental priesthood, which is itself under the control of the church hierarchy. We must work hard to keep separate in our minds the idea of sacramental ontology from the idea of a hierarchal, sacramental priesthood.

What I mean by a sacramental ontology is that *meaning is inherent in the universe because the universe has been infused with meaning by the Creator and continues to be infused with meaning at every moment*. For Christianity, metaphysical realism makes the world sacramental because the ideas (or universals) posited by the great tradition are not, as in Platonism, impersonal entities existing independently, but rather are ideas in the mind of a personal God who, by his Word, creates all things, upholds all things in existence, preserves the nature of all things, and guides all things to their appointed end.<sup>26</sup> God's Word has ontological reality, not merely an ephemeral, passing, fleeting reality. As the prophet Isaiah puts it, "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God will stand forever" (Isaiah 40:8). Without metaphysical realism, the doctrine of the preservation of creation (a sub-section of the doctrine of divine providence), is conceptually incoherent. The point here is simply to emphasize that sacra-

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Howard, *Chance or the Dance? A Critique of Modern Secularism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1969), 13.

<sup>26</sup> For a study of universals as ideas in the mind of God in the thought of Thomas Aquinas see Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas*.

mental ontology, with its realism, is not specifically Roman Catholic in character but rather part of “mere Christianity.”<sup>27</sup> The meaning built into the universe by the all-wise Creator means that Christians who study nature and culture can be assured that nature is not merely random chance occurrences of matter and energy of unknown origin, as it is for the ancient and modern atheists,<sup>28</sup> and history is not merely “sound and fury, a tale told by an idiot signifying nothing,”<sup>29</sup> as it is for the postmodern nihilists. But should the meaning inherent in the universe be considered to be natural or supernatural? The sacramental implications of trinitarian ontology make this question difficult to answer in a straightforward manner.

To claim that this meaning is either merely natural or totally supernatural seems to be a case of being asked to choose between two inadequately phrased extremes. Alasdair MacIntyre, in *After Virtue*, argues that modern secularism is nihilistic because it evacuates the material world, including human nature, of all meaning by denying that anything, including human nature, has a *telos* (or end or purpose).<sup>30</sup> Aristotelian teleology can be understood as an implication of a sacramental view of creation and that is why Thomas Aquinas was able to weave it into his theological and philosophical synthesis. MacIntyre concludes that we have a choice between Aristotle and Nietzsche. I would state the dilemma by saying that the nihilism of modernity cannot be escaped without embracing Christ and the spiritual realm as the source of our *telos*; therefore, it is a choice between Nietzsche and Christ.<sup>31</sup> MacIntyre, in *After Virtue*, could be read as implying that there would be no need to recover the Christianized

<sup>27</sup> The phrase, of course, is that of C.S. Lewis, who borrowed it from Richard Baxter. The fiction of Lewis and Tolkien is incomprehensible apart from the assumption of a sacramental ontology.

<sup>28</sup> See Christopher Hitchens, ed., *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Non-believer* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2007).

<sup>29</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, Act V, Scene V, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (London: Abbey Library, 1974), 843.

<sup>30</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), especially chapters 9 and 18.

<sup>31</sup> I am not sure that MacIntyre would disagree very strenuously with my way of stating the dilemma. See MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988) and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

Platonism of the great tradition in order to avoid nihilism—so long as one has Aristotle. I would suggest, however, that Aristotle integrated into the Augustinian neo-Platonism of Thomas Aquinas is an adequate alternative to nihilism, but that the pagan Aristotle by himself is too slender a reed on which to lean. I could accept gladly the assertion that the choice is between Nietzsche and Thomas.<sup>32</sup>

The Augustinian interpretation of the great tradition that I am promoting here is more in line with the *Nouvelle Theologie's* contention that man's *telos* is ultimately the beatific vision and that even our natural end, when understood in the light of our ultimate end, is directed toward God. As Augustine put it: "You have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it rests in you."<sup>33</sup> Undoubtedly, we have a natural *telos* as neo-Thomism asserts (for example, to reproduce or to grow to maturity) and we also have a supernatural *telos* (for example, to glorify God and enjoy him forever), but what I am resisting is the temptation to keep them in airtight compartments so that the latter can never affect the former. Thus, I am arguing for a relaxing of the stringent division of reality into material and spiritual (natural and supernatural) that has been accepted by both neo-Thomism and Protestant fundamentalism under the secularizing pressure of modernity.<sup>34</sup> In a sacramental ontology it simply is not possible to clearly mark off an area of creaturely autonomy that derives its meaning from human will alone, rather than from divine design. Yet, there is no reason to deny the existence and essential goodness of a purely natural human *telos*. We can have a natural *telos* without having nothing but a natural *telos* and also without our natural *telos* being unaffected in any way by a higher, supernatural *telos*.

<sup>32</sup> Of course, I interpret Thomas as a Christian Platonist. So, an Augustinian Christian like me, therefore, does not have to become a "card-carrying Thomist," that is, Thomistic on every single point, in order to say that Thomas can represent the great tradition in this way.

<sup>33</sup> Book I, i, 1, in Augustine, *Confessions*, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Those who are familiar with the work of Henri de Lubac will recognize that I am, at least partially, siding with him in the debate between the neo-Thomists and the adherents of the *Nouvelle Theologie*. Those unfamiliar with this debate would do well to start with two books by Hans Boersma: *Nouvelle Theologie & Sacramental Ontology* and *Heavenly Participation*.

### Analogical language for God

Thirdly, because of the realism of sacramental ontology, the method of analogy is the only proper way to express our knowledge of God. To affirm the doctrine of analogy is to say that human language is fit for purpose when it comes to speaking of God. In a sacramental ontology human words about God are not *univocal*, which is to say that there is no one-to-one, exact equivalence in speaking, for example, of a human father and God as our heavenly Father. The meaning of the word “father” applied to God and man is, thus, not identical. But human words about God also are not *equivocal*, which is to say that there *is*, in fact, something common in the concept of a human father and the concept of our heavenly Father. There is some overlap of meaning, which there would not be if they were equivocal. The two concepts (human father and God as Father) are thus neither exactly equivalent nor totally dissimilar. To say this is to say that there is an analogy between the two concepts, which means that we can speak of God analogically. However, in any analogy between the creaturely realm and God the dissimilarity is always greater than the similarity. So we can speak truly about God but not exhaustively. Our statements can be partial truths without being untruths. As T.F. Torrance puts it in a description of how Athanasius conceived of the knowledge of God: “in the very act of *apprehending* something of God, faith is bound to confess that it is incapable of *comprehending* him.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, one fact we can apprehend about God is that it is impossible for any finite being to comprehend God. But knowledge of this fact is itself valid knowledge of God.

If the world had not been created the way it was created by God, analogical knowledge of God would not be possible. But given a realist and sacramental ontology, analogical speech about God is, in fact, possible and meaning is not only inherent in the universe but is also at least partially accessible to the human intellect.<sup>36</sup> Giles Hibbert points out that, in order for human

<sup>35</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 26.

<sup>36</sup> The unredeemed human intellect, of course, is much more limited in its ability to apprehend truth than the intellect informed by revelation and guided by the Holy Spirit.

language to function analogically, words “must have the possibility of being open, being able to point beyond themselves, beyond the sphere and context of their own immediate origin; or in other words by way of analogical predication they must have the possibility of metaphysical realization.”<sup>37</sup> Matthew Levering cites Hibbert in the context of arguing that metaphysics is necessary to a Christian theological description of God.<sup>38</sup> I would argue that some sort of realist metaphysics is necessary to sustain analogical talk of God, a conclusion with which I believe Levering (and the great tradition generally) would agree. A certain account of creation (which, I contend, needs to be described in metaphysical terms as the Augustinian-Thomist tradition does) also is necessary for a coherent doctrine of analogy.

This, however, does not mean that human beings always interpret the knowledge of God that they have correctly. Although Paul says that non-Christians *have* knowledge of God apart from special revelation, he explicitly denies in Romans 1 that they use it to form a true knowledge of God. Instead, they “suppress” the truth (Romans 1:18–24). This is significant because you cannot suppress what you do not in some sense have and, in order to be able to do what Paul says the pagans do, one obviously must be able both to perceive and distort the truth simultaneously. This paradox is what one would expect if we were sinners who inhabit a sacramental universe that “declares the glory of God” (Psalm 19:1).

The great tradition thus has room both for apophatic theology that proclaims that God is ultimately unknowable in the depths of his being and also for creeds making true statements about God’s nature (for example, that the Father, Son and Spirit are *homoousios*). Is this contradictory? Not at all, for a statement may be true while failing to be exhaustively true. What we know, we know in part; “we see in a mirror dimly” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Because of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, we can share in a limited and creaturely way in God’s own self-knowledge

<sup>37</sup> Giles Hibbert, O.P. “Mystery and Metaphysics in the Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 31 (1964):187–188.

<sup>38</sup> Matthew Levering cites it in the context of making a similar argument to mine in *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 5.

and thus we can be sure that we know God truly, that is, we can know that the tiny bit we know about God is true knowledge of God.<sup>39</sup> This is the significance of the incarnation for the knowledge of God.

### Conclusion

I have now described the meaning of the phrase “sacramental ontology” by speaking of this ontology as having three characteristics: (1) metaphysical realism; which leads to (2) the universe having a sacramental character; and therefore, (3) the method of analogy being both possible and necessary in speaking truly about God. I hope it is clear that only such an ontology can undergird and make conceptual sense of a sacramental theology of baptism, although space does not permit the development of a theology of baptism here.

I wish to conclude with a quotation from John Webster, who was Stan Fowler’s and my *doktorvater*, a theologian whom both of us respect as one of the most insightful and faithful theologians at work today:

First, however disapproving its postmodern neighbours may be, however sheerly atavistic it may seem, a Trinitarian dogmatics of the holiness of God will be an exercise in ontotheology. For its concern is—with fear and trembling—to give a conceptual depiction of the Church’s confession of the works and ways of the Holy Trinity. *And such a depiction necessarily requires an ontology.* This ontology must certainly be resolutely dogmatic, that is, governed by the gospel’s annunciation of the history of God with us; and it must, therefore, of necessity, be engaged in a dispute with metaphysical theism about the nature of God. But dogmatics ought to be unpersuaded that Christian theology can long survive the abandonment of ontotheology and ought to think long and hard before it hands over the doctrine of God for deconstruction. *The undeniably corrosive effects of*

---

<sup>39</sup> Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 54.

*certain traditions of metaphysics are best retarded, not by repudiating ontology, but by its fully Christian articulation.*<sup>40</sup>

The “fully Christian articulation” of a sacramental ontology is the great need of the present day for those who wish to be evangelicals in the great tradition of Christian orthodoxy.

---

<sup>40</sup> John Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 32–33. Emphasis mine.