

An Evangelical Response to Thomas Baima's "The Prolongation of the Incarnation"

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unique and unrepeatable divine events in salvation history. We need language that distinguishes the Incarnate Body of Christ, the Risen Body of Christ, and the Mystical Body of Christ in a way that shows their uniqueness and their relationality.

I am sincerely grateful to Fr. Tom Baima for his outstanding paper. A couple of preliminary points need to be made. First, the *Mundelein Encounter* is a conversation between Catholic and Evangelical Christians. I am an evangelical,¹ and, specifically, an evangelical who is ecclesially located in the Reformed tradition. I can speak only from within my own tradition, and in this response, I do not pretend to represent all evangelicals.

Second, and this is surely more than merely a preliminary point, I would like to express my wholehearted agreement with Baima's exegetical work in his paper.² He does a masterful job of demonstrating the scriptures's clear teaching of a correlation between Jesus, the Incarnate Word, and the church, which *is* the Body of Christ! The question before us, having conceded this major point, is this: If the church is the Body of Christ, how can anyone object to calling the church a prolongation of the Incarnation? With this question in mind, let me respond to some specifics of Baima's paper.

1. The following should go without saying, but, alas, here in the United States it must be said: I am using the term "evangelical" in its theological/historical sense, not in the political (mis)understanding that is so common in this nation's media, where evangelical means "white religious conservative." The most widely accepted evangelical statement of faith would be the Lausanne Covenant of 1974.

2. As an evangelical, I also feel compelled to point out that I wholeheartedly agree with Baima's preliminary statements on the authority and interpretation of Scripture.

Abstract: *The author expresses agreement with Thomas Baima that scripture is clear in teaching a correlation between Jesus the Incarnate Word and the church as the body of Christ. He expands on the areas of agreement and proposes Acts 9:4–5 as strongly making this same point. Then he presents why Evangelicals might "express discomfort" with the phrase used by Pope Francis and introduced into the dialogue at Mundelein by Robert Barron: "the prolongation of the Incarnation." To overcome this discomfort, certain qualifications need to be made. The primary one is to distinguish the Incarnation and the Ascension as*

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First, we are in substantial agreement on the nature of the church. “According to Catholic ecclesiology,” he says—and evangelicals would certainly agree—“the mission is to bring people in contact with Jesus as Lord.” In fact, we would emphasize in the Reformed tradition that the goal of this mission is to see people *united* to Christ. Indeed, “union with Christ” is a central concept in Reformed soteriology. Union with Christ, moreover, is multi-valent—a core theological concept that touches upon our theological anthropology, our sacramental theology, and our ecclesiology. Baima’s paper outlines these overlapping connections well. It is to this overlap, however, that we will return. Because it is in the articulation of this overlap that our principal concerns lie.

Baima first turns to the writings of St. Paul, and again I have no substantial disagreements with his exegetical work there. While the phrase “participatory mediation” is rarely heard in Reformed circles, Baima’s conclusions regarding Colossians 1.24 and 1 Corinthians 12.26 would not be controversial. In fact, while Baima restricts his exegetical work at this point to the Pauline corpus (he later interacts very helpfully with Hebrews), other New Testament passages make the same point at least as strongly. In what might be the most powerful example, we read in Acts 9:4–5 the account of the conversion of St. Paul:

He [Saul] fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

Of course, Saul of Tarsus was traveling about persecuting the church. Yet, the Lord answers him not, “I am Jesus, whose people you are persecuting,” but “I am Jesus, *whom you are persecuting*.”

Baima then proceeds to a theological discussion, interacting primarily with Caesarius of Arles and St. John of Damascus. He suggests “that we may find guidance to our question of how to discuss the nature of the church by looking to the Second Council of Nicaea and its decrees on the veneration of images.” It is at this point, however, that I must register my disagreement with Baima in that I think this misses the point that we Reformed evangelicals are seeking to make when we express discomfort with the phrase “prolongation of the Incarnation.”

I do not think the problem is that we, in a manner akin to the iconoclasts of the ancient church, see the material as insufficient to convey the spiritual.³ In the Reformed tradition, we emphatically do *not* see the church, as Baima suggests we might, as “a mere human institution.” The *Westminster Confession of Faith* calls the church “the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that fills all in all” (25.1). In fact, we would wholeheartedly agree with his statement at the end of his section on the letter to the Hebrews that the uniqueness of Jesus’s priesthood “is not compromised by the participation which the church has through her union with Christ.” In fact, I prefer the term “union” to “participation”! What, then, are our objections?

Our objections—better, our discomforts—are hinted at in Baima’s proposal that Pope Francis’s description of the church

3. I must grant, of course, that Baima is not entirely off course here. There is a strong element of iconoclastic theology in historic Reformed theology, perhaps evidenced most clearly in the prohibition in the mid-seventeenth-century *Westminster Larger Catechism*’s prohibition against *any* visual image of the Incarnate Christ (question #109). Few Reformed theologians today agree with this prohibition. Many would find it docetic! For a conservative Reformed view, see the discussion of the Second Commandment in John M. Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008).

as a “prolongation of the Incarnation”⁴ can be used “with proper qualifications” by both Catholics and Evangelicals. Simply put, we want to ensure that these “proper qualifications” are met. To Reformed evangelicals, speaking of the church as a “prolongation” or an “extension” of the Incarnation seems inadequate, too easily misunderstood. To Reformed ears, it is too easy to obscure a core doctrine of the Christian faith, held by all participants—the doctrine of the Ascension. In other words, we want to stress that the human body of the Incarnate Christ is alive and well, for Jesus has been raised from the dead and is now enthroned as King of kings and Lord of lords. Our desire is to preserve the uniqueness, the unrepeatability (*hapax!*) of the Incarnation and the Ascension as events in redemptive history.⁵

Referring to the church as a prolongation of the Incarnation strikes us as a potentially dangerous minimizing of the Ascension and ongoing life of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. The Incarnation is not merely a past event. The *Logos*, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, not only became a human being “for us and for our salvation,” but he is a human being *today*. He is “seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” Of course, we must acknowledge the mystery in these words of the creed, but we must not compromise their truthfulness.

Baima has spoken about the dangers of being trapped by our “old codes,” our old ways of speaking. Perhaps that is what is happening here. But for several of us Evangelicals, certainly

4. *Evangelii Gaudium* (Joy of the Gospel), 179.

5. In fact, some Reformed Christians have, along these lines, raised objections to the common evangelical language of “incarnational ministry.” See J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

for those of us in the Reformed tradition, we do feel we need new ways of speaking, fresher language, and new “codes” for this issue. We need language that *distinguishes* the *Incarnate* Body of Christ (resurrected and ascended), the *sacramental* Body of Christ (the Eucharist),⁶ and the *ecclesial/mystical* Body of Christ (the church)—while also wholeheartedly *affirming* the ways in which all three *participate* in one another. How do we *distinguish* these without *separating* them? That is our question—and the language of “prolongation” seems imprecise and unhelpful.

Perhaps a way forward is found in Baima’s own words: “The Christian is united to the Redeemer and participates in a *real, though subordinate*, way in the mediation of grace to the world” (emphasis added). Could that phrase, “real, though subordinate,” be a solution? Can we simply say there is a real, though subordinate, relationship of the church to the Incarnate Christ? Both can be called the Body of Christ, yet only one is the incarnate, crucified, resurrected, and ascended Savior of the world. The ecclesial body, the church, mediates this salvation, proclaiming the gospel in Word and sacrament, pointing the world to Jesus.

In conclusion, I sincerely believe that this discussion is an excellent example of Ecumenism 2.0. It has revealed substantive agreement on key issues. I would go so far as to suggest that our disagreements here are—at least to a large extent—not about core theological convictions but about how best to express these agreements. And in a divided church, that is encouraging news.

6. Reformed Christians—at least those who know their theological heritage—should have no problem affirming the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. See *Westminster Shorter Catechism* #92, teaching that in the sacraments, “*Christ*, and the benefits of the new covenant, are signified, *sealed*, and *applied* to believers” (emphasis added).

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