Dan Treier’s Sacramental Participation in Truth—A Response to His Review of *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry*

By Hans Boersma

Dan Treier’s perceptive analysis and helpful interaction with my book touches on a number of important points. From my perspective—and I recognize that this is not the way Treier himself would want to put it—I would even say that his fine review sacramentally participates in eternal truth! I am certainly grateful, therefore, for the review itself, and I also appreciate the editors of CSR asking me to respond to it. The overlap between Treier’s approach and mine is really quite substantial. After presenting an accurate and helpful summary of my book, Treier insists that “we should affirm most or all of what Boersma aims to promote in each case.” I gratefully note the large—perhaps complete—agreement on matters of substance. At the conclusion, he writes that he shares “most of the author’s aims and many of the book’s affirmations,” for both of which, again, I am grateful.

To be sure, Treier and I have our minor issues, two in particular. First, he takes issue with a sin of omission on my part: I fail to discuss, really, the Great Schism between East and West, a point of some significance, because Treier believes that Orthodoxy has never abandoned what I call a “sacramental” worldview. He is wondering why one would remain Protestant. Of course—let me be cheeky here—I cannot answer that question on his behalf. If we agree on “most or all” of the book’s aims, and if Treier believes this to reflect an Orthodox mindset, he may want to ask himself this question. For my part, the reason I am not Orthodox is that it is precisely my high view of the church that prevents me from moving elsewhere simply because there may be certain attractions there. My book is purposely addressed to Evangelicals in the hope that I might make some small contribution to the tribes where I believe God has placed me. (Besides, I am not convinced that Orthodoxy has no shortcomings, but I will not discuss those at this point.) I quite agree with Treier that evangelical-Orthodox dialogue can be beneficial for evangelicals; *Heavenly Participation* just is not about that.

Second, Treier questions the propriety of grand narratives. I must confess I am slightly puzzled by that. I honestly do not know how one would engage in historiography without the generalizations of grand narratives. Treier focuses in

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particular on the inadequacy of “woe-is-nominalism (and so on) narratives.” And he is right to suggest that in this connection the particularities of historical details matter. Yet he himself rightly acknowledges Henri de Lubac’s care in dealing with historical sources, to which we might add the tremendous historical work done in terms of “archaeological” detail by theologians such as Yves Congar, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Marie-Dominique Chenu. All of them pointed to major (problematic) developments in the late Middle Ages. Meticulous contemporary scholars such as Michael A. Gillespie and Louis Dupré come to quite similar conclusions, and in my own description I borrow from most of these authors to depict a late medieval change from a participatory, sacramental universe to one that is essentially nominalist and secular in character. To my mind this particular grand narrative—while I readily acknowledge it is not complete by itself—does explain many of the data in proper fashion. It would seem difficult to deny that a large shift in worldview has taken place between the Middle Ages and contemporary western culture. Perhaps Treier wants to trace back this shift to a yet earlier period (the Great Schism?). Either way, some grand narrative seems unavoidable and, to my mind, is helpful and necessary.

So much for the small potatoes. Treier has a more serious concern with my use of the terms “sacramental” and “participation.” He says that it is merely a “linguistic” disagreement. Perhaps, but it nonetheless makes me hesitate to reciprocate Treier’s kind comment—which perhaps contains an unintentional exaggeration—that he affirms “most or all” of what I aim to promote. I think he slightly exaggerates here; I am not quite convinced that his “linguistic” disagreement with me about the use of the term “sacrament” is just that—a linguistic quibble. If the point were merely that, one would not need a fairly long review of the book to make it. I suspect that underneath the linguistic quibble lies a relatively important point.

I take Treier’s main issue to be that “if everything becomes ‘sacramental,’ then nothing is sacred.” It is an objection that a sacramental ontology often faces, and on the face of it, it would seem to be persuasive. After all, if I refer to Treier’s review as a sacrament because it participates in truth, then what makes his review different from Baptism or from the Eucharist? Rather than elevate Treier’s review, what such universalizing of sacramental discourse would appear to do is downgrade the ecclesial sacraments. It seems to me, however, that this objection overlooks one crucial point: sacramental participation, as understood throughout much of the tradition, is a matter of degrees. Put differently, there are varying intensities in participation. While I really do appreciate Treier’s insightful review, I would never equate reading his essay with the reading of Holy Scripture or with the celebration of the Eucharist.

I will grant that my book does not highlight clearly the difference between the sacramentality of “ordinary” objects and ecclesial sacraments, and considering Treier’s correct insistence on such a differentiation, I wish I had made clearer that I think there is an important distinction to be made between the two. In fact, it is a
distinction that we could call qualitative rather than just quantitative, since it is the
distinction between non-ecclesial and ecclesial life, between being without Christ
and being in Christ, or, we might even say along with Saint Paul, between death
and life. So, I suspect that, although I failed to highlight this point in my book,
Treier and I agree on the newness that regeneration and new birth—our faith, our
baptismal incorporation in Christ, and our feeding on him—brings to our lives.

But there is an underlying issue. If we reserve the language of “sacrament”
and “participation” to ecclesial matters (our spiritual renewal in Christ), what
does this do to the relationship between creation and redemption? It seems to
me that we inevitably end up separating the two in unhelpful ways. First, if we
insist that sacramental discourse only applies to ecclesial sacraments—separating
them from the rest of life in ways that the pre-modern tradition never did—we
imply that whatever truth, goodness, and beauty non-Christians come up with
does not participate in God. If it does not, we either have to deny that such truth,
goodness, and beauty exist at all (which would be such a radical form of total
depravity as to be almost obviously problematic), or we have to maintain that
they exist by themselves, apart from Christ (which would mean a radically non-
Christological view of creation). Should we not recognize a differentiation in
intensities of participation, which allows us to recognize the radical significance
of conversion and entry into the church, and at the same time to acknowledge
truth, goodness, and beauty outside the church? Such differentiation leaves plenty
of room for the use of covenantal language. But we should use such language
not to shore up a nominalist separation between Christ and his creation. While I
happily use biblical “covenant” language, such discourse needs to be embedded
within a sacramental framework that acknowledges Christ as the one in whom
all things hold together.

Second, if we restrict sacramental language to certain ecclesial rites, we
need to ask not just how non-Christians relate to Christ, but also how the rest of
the animate and inanimate world relates to him. Modernity’s objectification of
creation—regarding the material world as nothing but quantifiable objects for us
to analyze and dissect—is precisely the result of the removal of mystery from the
created order. (And I mean “mystery” here in its pre-modern sense of the reality
behind the appearances, and in which they participate.) The only way to deal
with the “nothing buttery” of modernity is to recognize that God speaks creation
into being through his Word, in which all of creation participates—albeit only in
a remote fashion. Treier is right to suggest that more ontological detail about how
to understand this participation is required (though I had difficulty enough as it is
to keep the book relatively popular), but to give up on the notion of participation
would be to submit to the vacuous nominalism of modernity, something I would
not be prepared to do. I am unconvinced, therefore, of the claim that my use of the
term “sacramental” would undermine the Christ-centeredness of my approach, a
claim defended with the argument that the Incarnation is more than a principle of
affirming embodiment. Of course, I agree with the latter claim: precisely because
the Incarnation is not just a principle, and because in actuality everything holds together in Christ, we have to say that there is no truth, goodness, and beauty except by way of participation in him. Christ is both our redeemer and our creator. Since participation comes in varying intensities, I do not see why, if everything becomes “sacramental,” nothing would be sacred.

Treier is probably right to point to the terms “sacramental” and “participation” as key to some kind of difference between us. But it seems to me that he needs to make a choice. The one possibility is that he does not actually accept the argument of the book itself (that is, the reality of what I am aiming at). In that case, we would have to resign ourselves to continuing our conversation some other time. (Not a bad prospect at all, really.) The other possibility is that he really does agree with “most or all” of what I aim at in my book. In that case, he would acknowledge—linguistic objections notwithstanding—a real sharing of created existence in divine truth, goodness, and beauty. (I would not want to argue about mere words, though I cannot think of a better way to speak of this than by talking of “sacramental participation.”) Of course, I hope the latter is the case. Either way, Treier’s review makes clear that we have a great deal in common, and so I will continue to praise it for its sacramental participation in eternal truth.