

The Body of Christ: An Aligning Union Model

Rolfe King 
University of Aberdeen, UK

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Abstract

In the context of recent debate about whether “Reformed Catholics” and Protestants, more generally, should accept Augustine’s *totus Christus* Christological ecclesiology, I illustrate the notion of an asymmetric aligning union. This is a metaphysically real union, but not a substantial union. I suggest that Reformed catholic theology would be better served by deploying the notion of an asymmetric aligning union. It preserves the Reformation *solus* and is compatible with the notion of the mystical body of Christ, without the disadvantages of the *totus Christus* notion, if that is taken to involve a substantial union. This form of union should be of wider ecumenical interest.

Keywords

Aligning union, Augustine, body of Christ, ecclesiology, reformed catholicity, substantial union, *Totus Christus*

Introduction

In a recent thoughtful and constructive article in this journal, David Moser has argued that “Reformed Catholics” should accept Augustine’s *totus Christus* Christological ecclesiology, which Moser defended as involving a substantial union between Christ and the church.¹ I suggest here, in response, that Moser, as well as Kevin Vanhoozer who provided a critical response to Moser, both make the same assumption, that the only form of ontological union possible

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1. J. David Moser, “*Totus Christus*: A Proposal for Protestant Christology and Ecclesiology,” *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology*, 29/1 (2020): 3-30.

Corresponding author:

Rolfe King, The School of Divinity, History and Philosophy, University of Aberdeen, King’s College, Aberdeen AB24 3FX, UK.

Email: rking@abdn.ac.uk

between Christ and his church is a substantial union. I argue that this is incorrect: there is an alternative metaphysical model, an asymmetric aligning union between Christ and the church. This model coheres well with Reformed theology and deserves serious consideration.

Reformed catholicity, as a movement, aims to retrieve the Church's ancient teachings for the renewal of modern Reformed churches.² Moser noted, however, that

... Reformed catholics typically reject an ancient teaching on the identity of the Church, which has expressed the Catholic Church's self-understanding for hundreds of years: the teaching that Christ has formed a mystical union with his Church so that they are now one spiritual entity, the *totus Christus* ("the whole Christ"), Head and members.³

Moser then engaged with thinkers he identified as Reformed catholics, such as Michael Horton, Kevin Vanhoozer and John Webster, saying that these "have either identified as Reformed catholics directly or been associated with the title indirectly," but had rejected the *totus Christus*.⁴ Moser's first article defended the doctrine, aiming to deal with objections to it. This brought forth responses from Horton,⁵ Vanhoozer⁶ and Michael Allen.⁷ Both Horton and Allen made clear that they accepted the doctrine, with Horton protesting that he had been a strong supporter of it with the very provisos which Moser himself had defended. But Vanhoozer remained critical, affirming his agreement with concerns expressed by Webster.⁸ Moser then offered a further defence and clarification of his views.⁹

While responding to various objections to the doctrine, particularly those made elsewhere by Vanhoozer,¹⁰ Moser acknowledged that potentially the

2. A key text is Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015). See also Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (eds), *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), and the website: *A Reforming Catholic Confession* <<https://reformingcatholicconfession.com>> (1 March 2021).

3. Moser, "Totus Christus," 4.

4. Moser, "Totus Christus," 5.

5. Michael Horton, "Affirming Moser's Well-Qualified Totus Christus," *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology*, 29(1), 2020, 43–44.

6. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Hocus Totus: The Elusive Wholeness of Christ," *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology*, 29(1), 2020, 31–42.

7. Michael Allen, "Totus Christus and Praying the Psalms," *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology*, 29(1), 2020, 45–52.

8. Vanhoozer, "Hocus Totus," 41.

9. J. David Moser, "Corpus Mysticum: A Response to Vanhoozer, Horton, and Allen," *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology*, 29(1), 2020, 53–67.

10. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), 152.

most serious objection is that raised by Webster, which he also thought lay behind some of Vanhoozer's concerns.¹¹ It is this objection which I too will focus on. As Moser puts it, "This objection is the most serious, for it claims that *totus Christus* contradicts a basic principle of theology: God's distinction from creatures."¹² Moser cites Webster as saying that "The distinction between uncreated and created, expressed in the Son's transcendence of the flesh even in its assumption, is crucial to a theologically intelligent grasp of the historical forms and acts of the church."¹³ Moser then summarized matters by saying that for Webster,

God's perfection is his metaphysical greatness. God's metaphysical greatness is his ability to create *ex nihilo*. If God alone is perfect and creates *ex nihilo*, his creatures, imperfect and unable to create *ex nihilo*, cannot be ontologically united with him. *Totus Christus* collapses God into creatures and brings about what Calvin accused Osiander of creating with his doctrine of "essential righteousness": a *crassa mixtura* between God and human beings.¹⁴

In fairness to Webster, this was clearly a very significant concern, but he could be less assertive. For example, just before the quote above from Webster, he says that "this distinction which *may* be breached in . . . ecclesiologies organized around the concept of *totus Christus*, in which the full identity of the Son is achieved only as he takes the church into union with himself."¹⁵ That aside, it is obviously serious if God's distinction from creatures is threatened. And Moser links this to a point made by Vanhoozer (tied in also to worries about the idea of the church as a continuation of the incarnation),¹⁶ where Vanhoozer says, "the church is not constitutive of the Son's identity as are the Father and the Spirit; its relation to the Son is not substantial but covenantal, a matter of fellowship, not ontology."¹⁷

11. Moser, "*Totus Christus*," 10.

12. Moser, "*Totus Christus*," 10.

13. Moser, "*Totus Christus*," 11, citing John Webster, "'In the Society of God': Some Principles of Ecclesiology," in John Webster (ed.), *God Without Measure: God and the Works of God*, vol. 1 (London: Bloomsbury; T&T Clark, 2016), 185. Other works mentioned by Moser include John Webster, "The Church and the Perfection of God," in Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (eds), *The Community of the Word: Towards an Evangelical Ecclesiology* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 75–95; John Webster, "Ressourcement Thought and Protestantism," in Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray (eds), *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 482–494.

14. Moser, "*Totus Christus*," 12.

15. Webster, "'In the Society of God'," 185. Emphasis added.

16. Moser, "*Totus Christus*," 9–10.

17. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority After Babel*, 152, cited by Moser, "*Totus Christus*," 9.

Here Vanhoozer seemingly makes the same assumption which, I shall argue, Moser makes, that there can be no ontological union between Christ and the church which is not a substantial union. This assumption will be challenged here. Thus, my primary focus is on metaphysics; I shall generally not engage in exegetical issues, nor with whether Moser is right to claim that Augustine's *totus Christus* concept involves a substantial union. My aim is to illustrate a model of Christ's union with the church which fits well with the Reformation *solus*, and does not have the problems associated with a substantial union.

Totus Christus

The central point, under the *totus Christus*, is that the union between Christ and the church constitutes one *persona* in a mysterious sense, uniting two subjects, Christ and the church, but in a way that Christ remains the Head and in himself complete, even though his body is incomplete. The defence of the one *persona* idea, as Moser describes it, comes down to Augustine's prosopological reading of the Psalms (discerning different "voices" or speakers in the same text),¹⁸ and passages such as Acts 9:4 ("Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?") and 1 Corinthians 12:12 (likening *Christ* to a body made up of many parts), in support of the claim that such texts show that Christ and the church form one *persona*. As Moser puts it,

In Scripture, Christ and the Church, Head and members, form the *totus Christus*, one "perfect man" (*vir perfecti*). But Christ and the Church are not united as one Christ in the same way that Christ's two natures are united in his person. Christ's union with the Church is not the same kind of union as the hypostatic union. Christ is complete, or perfect, as the whole Christ without the church.¹⁹

And later, Moser writes the following:

Augustine argues that this mystery, unfolded now at the end of the age, is that we have two distinct entities out of which one single entity, the *totus Christus*, comes to be: the Bridegroom and the Bride are also the *totus Christus*, Head and Body. This new creation is the "unity of person" (*unitatem personae*).²⁰

18. Here Moser drew, for example, on Michael Cameron, *Christ Meets Me Everywhere: Augustine's Early Figurative Exegesis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), chapters 5–6; and in his second article on Matthew Bates, *The Hermeneutics of Apostolic Proclamation: The Center of Paul's Method of Scriptural Interpretation* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012); Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and Spirit in New Testament and Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

19. Moser, "Totus Christus," 6.

20. Moser, "Totus Christus," 16.

What kind of union is this, which produces this “new creation,” this “unity of person”? Moser, as we shall see, takes this union to be a *substantial union*, one which produces a new substantial entity. That Moser is thinking in terms of a substantial union being a kind of fusing union, where Christ and the church are fused into a new substance, seems confirmed when Moser, claiming John Owen as a Reformed divine supporting the *totus Christus*, says the following:

It seems clear, then, that Reformed catholics do not need to reject *Christ's mystical body because it fuses Christ and the Church into the same thing*; many Reformed divines did not think so, and they held that the Holy Spirit is the principle of Christ's mystical union with his body.²¹

Moser takes it here that the notion of Christ's mystical body entails some form of *fusing* of Christ and the Church into *the same thing*. There is seemingly a mysterious, fusing union of Christ and the church into a new substance, albeit this union preserves key distinctives of both Christ and the church; Christ and each person in the body of Christ retain their identities as agents. For Moser, we come to participate *in Christ's substance* through being united to Christ in the *totus Christus*. Moser notes, for example, that “Calvin does not object to using substantial language to speak of our union with Christ; he regularly uses the term ‘*substantia*’ to denote that in which we participate: *the substance of Christ himself*.”²²

In his second article, Moser confirms that this is a substantial union, when he says that “I understand union with Christ to be a substantial kind of union: two or more things go together to make up one thing,”²³ a point he does qualify later (and I will comment on that), but for now, one can see this sense of two things *coming together* to constitute a new thing. And since the “two or more things” which go together are substances, it seems that Moser takes the new thing to be a new substance.

One might indeed ask, as Moser does, “But what about talk about Christ and the Church as ‘one mystic person’, the *totus Christus*?” Here is his reply:

Christ and the Church constitute one united “person” in the sense that Christ is the agent who animates his mystical body through the Holy Spirit. In other words, we can call Christ and the Church a “person” because it is *Christ* who gives it life. But this is mysterious, because even in this intimate union, the Church remains a collective subject distinct from Christ.²⁴

21. Moser, “*Totus Christus*,” 28. Emphasis added.

22. Moser, “*Corpus Mysticum*,” 56, n.10.

23. Moser, “*Corpus Mysticum*,” 56.

24. Moser, “*Corpus Mysticum*,” 60.

This new “person” is a *created entity* because it is given life. The “unity of person,” or the one *persona* is, as Moser takes it, formed by a substantial union, and a new substance comes into existence. It is distinct from Christ considered by himself as ontologically complete, yet this *persona* is still animated by Christ as its Head in union with the church.

That leaves another key feature of the concept: Christ not being complete. As Moser notes, under the *totus Christus*, Christ has also willed to unite himself to humanity in another way (other than the hypostatic union) such that Christ, in Augustine’s words, “deigned to be complete (*integer*) with us, he who without us is always complete.”²⁵ This is a notion that Horton, drawing on Calvin, has also emphasized, for example, where he points out that Calvin himself affirmed that it “is the highest honour of the Church, that, until He is united to us, the Son of God reckons himself in some measure imperfect,” and in that sense, according to Horton, “Reformed theology has always been happy to appeal to the Augustinian motif.” But Horton also notes that under Reformed thought, “this *totus Christus* is conceived in terms of eschatological rather than metaphysical foundations,”²⁶ by which Horton is referring to union with Christ through the Spirit.²⁷ Here, though, there seems to be the assumption of a contrast between a spiritual union and a metaphysical union, an assumption challenged, as we shall see, by the notion of an aligning union.

The Right Kind of Asymmetry

Such, then, is a sketch of the *totus Christus* understood as a substantial union according to Moser’s reading of Augustine. And it is, of course, true that *if* the substantial union of Christ and the church involved in the one *persona* does not *of itself* threaten the creator/creature distinction, then the fact that under the idea of the one *persona* Christ remains ontologically complete, and is the Head of this new entity, clearly would preserve the creator/creature distinction. However, that does not deal with the issue of whether the notion of the substantial union *itself* threatens the creator/creature distinction.

Moser, however, argued that the *totus Christus* notion does not necessarily involve a breach of the creator/creature distinction. He discussed Augustine,

25. Moser, “*Totus Christus*,” 7, citing Augustine *Sermo* 341.1 *Sermo* 341.1 in *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Latina* (PL), vol. 39, ed. J-P Migne (Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1844–1864), col. 1499.

26. Michael Horton, *Rediscovering the Holy Spirit: God’s Perfecting Presence in Creation, Redemption and Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 306, citing John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 218.

27. Horton, *Rediscovering the Holy Spirit*, 304–306.

von Balthasar and Barth on the *totus Christus*, arguing that each of these theologians found a way to defend the *totus Christus* while with preserving the creator/creature distinction. I cannot engage in detail here with Moser's commentary on these writers, for my primary aim is to illustrate a different model from the substantial union, one which I think has its own inherent light, so to speak. But the nub of Moser's discussion is that Augustine, von Balthasar and Barth each offered accounts of the *totus Christus* that did attend to the importance of retaining the creator/creature distinction. I shall limit myself to some brief points relating to Moser on Augustine, before making two wider points which I think impair his discussion of these writers.

On Augustine, Moser thinks that Augustine would have responded to the charge that the *totus Christus* elided the creator/creature distinction

by pointing to the biblical distinction between Christ and the Church as Bridegroom and Bride. If the Head and Body motif leads the mind to think of one person, the nuptial motif draws it to think of distinct persons.²⁸

In effect, these two motifs can be held in an appropriate tension (and this is basically also how Moser thinks von Balthasar succeeds in preserving the creator/creature distinction).²⁹ In a similar vein, here is a fuller excerpt of a passage from Moser on Augustine on the mystery of Christ and the church, which I briefly cited earlier:

Augustine argues that this mystery . . . is that we have two distinct entities out of which one single entity, the *totus Christus*, comes to be: the Bridegroom and the Bride are also the *totus Christus*, Head and Body. This new creation is the "unity of person" (*unitatem personae*). This united person forms one body, but one body that has distinct members, namely, two subjects. Christ and the Church are not ontologically equal or identical so that one collapses into the other; the Church neither becomes another person of the Trinity nor a part of the hypostatic union. Rather, as Augustine says, the Church depends on Christ, but Christ exists perfectly, even without the Church.³⁰

This illustrates the idea of holding the two motifs together. The one flesh imagery is used to establish the notion of coming together, and the Head and Body imagery is used to establish the "unity of person" idea, a "new creation" uniting Christ and the church. And the claim is made, based on the marriage imagery of distinct persons that Christ still "exists perfectly, even without the Church."

28. Moser, "*Totus Christus*," 16.

29. Moser, "*Totus Christus*," 18.

30. Moser, "*Totus Christus*," 16.

All of this *assumes*, however, that there is no *inherent problem* with defining the one *persona* in such a way that Christ is defined as being ontologically complete, and the Head. But defining matters so that there is a substantial union is fine *if* there is no inherent problem in the notion of a substantial union. Defining matters so that the asymmetry in the creator/creature distinction is seemingly preserved does not entail that it is appropriately preserved. That Christ is always the Head, or that God is always the giver, does not of itself yield the required asymmetry for grace.

From a Reformed perspective, I suggest, the right account of grace involves a continuous flow, with us being *continually dependent on God being a continuous giver*, where there is no handing over of Christ's substantial powers to us, or to the church. For example, if I give you an annual sum to spend on your needs, there is asymmetry. But if I pay your expenses every day to meet your needs (without handing over any money to you), that is a very different kind of asymmetry, akin to the idea of grace as a *continuous* fountain. Affirming that Augustine gives attention in his definition of the "unity of person" to the asymmetry between creator and creature does not *of itself* establish whether the substantial union yields the *right kind of asymmetry* to preserve *sola gratia*, a point I shall return to.

The same problem, in my view, applies to Moser's comments on von Balthasar. As regards Barth, it seems implausible that Barth, espousing an actualist ontology, would be supportive of any reading of the union being one that produced a new substance, or a fusing union. More broadly, that there is a union is not in dispute here. But is it a substantial one? One can, of course, say, we need to hold in tension the imagery of the Head and the Body, and the nuptial imagery; there is something ontologically real here, and yet there is also distinction between persons. Such comments could apply to each of the readings Moser offers – of Augustine, von Balthasar and Barth. But, first, this does not resolve the question of whether the union must be a substantial union if another form of union is possible. And second, what Moser says regarding these writers still does not clarify if there is an *inherent problem* in the notion of the *totus Christus* being a substantial union. Thus, Moser may not have gotten to the heart of the problem.

A Focus on Metaphysics

Vanhoozer's response to Moser shows, I think, that he too thought this. Vanhoozer, however, did accept that "Moser convincingly shows that Augustine, Balthasar, and Barth deploy the *Totus Christus* in ways that do not violate the Creator/creature distinction."³¹ But Vanhoozer remained concerned that the *totus Christus* may not "have the wherewithal adequately to

31. Vanhoozer, "Hocus Totus," 38.

distinguish between Christ and the Church,” noting that “the church is a creature of the Word,” a concern immediately linked by Vanhoozer to the importance for the Reformed tradition of the principles of *finitum non est capax infiniti* and the *extra Calvinisticum*.³² Vanhoozer also noted his concerns about misuse of the *totus Christus* as he saw it within Roman Catholicism,³³ and the lack of evidence for the *totus Christus* being part of the faith once for all delivered to the saints, including lack of credal support for it and its lack of prominence in church history.³⁴ Vanhoozer issued a plea for more analytic clarity about the metaphysics involved,³⁵ while indicating his ongoing support for Webster’s position.³⁶

This article is in part a response to Vanhoozer’s plea; hence my focus on metaphysics, since I think this is where the nub of the problem is. Vanhoozer’s instincts clearly were that a significant problem remained. But given that Vanhoozer accepted that Moser had shown the *totus Christus* concept did not breach the creator/creature distinction, which was the primary ground for concern, this left matters unresolved. Moser aimed to deal with Vanhoozer’s point about the lack of wider church warrant, arguing that because “the Church confesses faith in the communion of saints [this] indirectly warrants belief in the *totus Christus*,”³⁷ due to the union with members of the body implied in that. And Moser also argued that “the mystical body of Christ is endemic in the catholic theological traditions of the Church. Others beyond the Reformed tradition affirmed this doctrine, including Cyril of Alexandria and Martin Luther,”³⁸ before citing further support from various Reformation thinkers such as Turretin and Ames,³⁹ among others. But note that, as with the point about the communion of saints, this *assumes* that support for the mystical body is support for the *totus Christus*, when it could be support for another metaphysical model of the mystical body.

Moser drew his second article to an end by querying, as part of his response to Vanhoozer, what criteria should be deployed within Reformed catholicity,⁴⁰ before saying the following:

Though Augustine’s performative version of the *totus Christus* may be slightly distinct from other accounts of Christ’s mystical body . . . the basic judgment is the

32. Vanhoozer, “*Hocus Totus*,” 41.

33. Vanhoozer, “*Hocus Totus*,” 32–33.

34. Vanhoozer, “*Hocus Totus*,” 42.

35. Vanhoozer, “*Hocus Totus*,” 39–41.

36. Vanhoozer, “*Hocus Totus*,” 41.

37. Moser, “*Corpus Mysticum*,” 65.

38. Moser, “*Corpus Mysticum*,” 65.

39. Moser, “*Corpus Mysticum*,” 66.

40. Moser, “*Corpus Mysticum*,” 65–67.

same: Scripture teaches that Christ is really united to the Church, the elect, so that one “mystical Christ” results. If Reformed evangelical catholicity is going to be an ongoing theological project, we need to have some basic agreement about the criteria for assessing doctrine going forward.⁴¹

I think, though, that Vanhoozer was incorrect to accept that the creator/creature distinction is not breached. Thus, that distinction and the related Reformation *solus* remain as “criteria for assessing doctrine going forward.” The *totus Christus*, if taken as a substantial union, is more than “slightly distinct” from the notion of the mystical body, and textual support from the Christian tradition for the latter cannot be assumed to be support for the former.

An Asymmetric Aligning Union

We are now ready to discuss the notion of an asymmetric aligning union. In my view, there are two main types of metaphysical or ontological union that are of interest in regard to the union between Christ and the church.⁴² The first is a substantial union where two or more substances are joined or fused, from which *another substance* is formed, the *totus Christus* (which is seemingly Moser’s understanding). The second is an asymmetric aligning union. This is not a substantial (fusing) union.⁴³ This union is *where two or more substances are aligned, but not joined or fused, and where the power which brings about the alignment flows from one substance*. The asymmetry with regard to the flow of power is critical. But for the sake of convenience, I will sometimes just refer to an aligning union.

To consider this, imagine some iron filings on a piece of paper: they are loosely spread and pointing in various directions. Now imagine a magnet being brought nearer and nearer to them under the piece of paper. They begin to align in line with the magnetic field produced by the magnet. All the filings are still separate filings, they are not *fused* together, but there is now an order generated by the magnet coming near to them. The filings are not physically united to the magnet (and certainly not fused with it). The magnet may remain at a distance from the paper, but the magnet coming near produces a unifying effect.

There is clear asymmetry: the magnet is not acted on by the filings (this is obviously a simple visual illustration rather than a precise account of physics); their movement and their alignment are due to the coming near of the magnet.

41. Moser, “*Corpus Mysticum*,” 67.

42. There are, of course, many other accounts of union, but I cannot engage them here.

43. From now on, I shall generally use the phrase “substantial union” instead of “substantial (fusing) union,” but the latter should be taken as read.

There is a form of real union, but the two kinds of substance, the magnet and each filing, remain distinct. They are *not fused* in some physical, substantial union.

This picture gives a glimpse of Christ and the church ontologically united in an asymmetric aligning union. Christ, like the magnet, exerts through the magnetic field, akin to the Holy Spirit, a unifying power, so that the members of his body are *aligned* with his will. The deep-down orientation of each person is now holy. We can ignore here resistance by the church to Christ's will, for in Reformed theology, a notion of regeneration through the Spirit ensures that the fundamental orientation of each Christian is towards holiness. Berkhof, for example, writes of a new governing disposition: "Regeneration is the act of God by which the principle of the new life is implanted in man, and the governing disposition of the soul is made holy."⁴⁴

This picture is, of course, imperfect and needs the additional *personal* element of the Spirit being active *in us* as well as holding us in a right orientation. There is a real union of intimacy because Christ is *in us* by his activity through his Spirit, and because he *embraces the church*. For one can think here of Christ's arms, so to speak, as the outer edge of the magnetic field. Furthermore, the union has a legal reality in that we are now declared to be God's people, when before we were not.

That is one form of orientation. Another relates to Christians being moved in a unified way over time. Under a Reformed theological understanding, the risen Christ is Lord over the church and can, by the secret influence of the Spirit, move a group of Christians in a particular way in line with his purposes. A notion of non-competitive dual agency seems necessary for this, with God shaping the desires of his people over time so that they freely choose in line with his overall plan. The Christians on board the *Mayflower*, for example, may have been moved by God, according to God's purposes for the wider church in America, to leave Holland and seek a new life in America.

If we grant this for the sake of argument, this illustrates the risen Christ moving a group of Christians in a unified way, despite their different notions of their own purposes. This adds a corporate, providential aspect to the notion of alignment. There is both an alignment relating to holiness and an alignment of a chosen group being moved through time (and space) to fulfil the purposes of the Word of God.⁴⁵ And one can scale this up to the whole church, with Christ moving his people towards ever greater inward alignment towards God, as well as moving them collectively so that the church moves through time in line with his purposes.

44. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1996), 469.

45. One might also think of God leading the people of Israel from Egypt through the wilderness and bringing about the return of the Jews after the Exile. But I cannot explore here differences between the Old and New Testament *ecclesia*.

Is, however, the church here a kind of substance? Is not an ordered entity, particularly one through which an agent as “head” can exert causal powers, some form of substance? Imagine the magnet moving in a particular direction with such magnetic power that the filings move along the page in line with the moving magnetic field (perhaps a more slippery surface than paper will be required for this). One could imagine, in a much larger version of this experiment, that the whole “body” could now significantly impact various physical bodies.

The body of Christ is not, however, a new substance. Intrinsic powers are critical here, for substances have intrinsic powers. The magnet and the filings retain their own intrinsic powers, so no new substance is formed, for a new substance would have new and distinct intrinsic powers. We are assuming a non-competitive dual agency account here which preserves the priority of grace: Christ aligns the church through the Spirit by virtue of his intrinsic power. This is *gift*, but it is not a handing over of powers or a fusing of substance, for the *continuous* holding of the church’s members at the depth of their being towards holiness is a *continuous act of grace*. The “substance” of each member is given a deep inward alignment at regeneration, which is never lost (on a Reformed account): it is continuously held in place by the Spirit.

Christ’s intrinsic powers are what move the church to align with his purposes. Christ’s intrinsic powers are not given to the church. If they were, the creator/creature distinction would be breached. And the intrinsic powers of each member of Christ’s body remain their own created, intrinsic powers. There can be no mixing of these powers, and thus, no new substance can be formed. For otherwise the creature/creature distinction would be breached. *Thus, given a non-competitive dual agency account of how Christ, through the Spirit, continually upholds and moves the church, a substantial union between Christ and the church is ruled out.* If then, we take it that Reformed catholic theology depends on such a notion of continuous non-competitive dual agency, then Reformed catholic theology is incompatible with a substantial union. Grace is a continuous movement whereby our creaturely substance is held in a deep, holy inward orientation. There is a direct link between *sola gratia* and the creator/creature distinction, one in which the right kind of asymmetry between the creator and the creature is preserved, which involves no gift or transfer of God’s substance into our possession.

When the risen Christ moves the assembly of saints on earth both towards greater holiness and in line with his providential purposes, he can exert causal influence through his “body.” But under an asymmetric aligning union, Christ and the members of his Body are not fused together to form a new substance. Christ’s intrinsic powers remain Christ’s own, and the intrinsic powers of each member remain their own. Instead, the Spirit quickens our natures. As they are increasingly oriented towards God’s purposes, we become more full of life,

that is, created life. Our intrinsic powers are animated and eventually brought to their full potential.

Even so, an asymmetric aligning union is a form of union of substances, of Christ and each individual member, albeit not a fusing union. There is something ontologically real about the aligning union; it has “weight” in that it can impact other substances. However, an aligning union neither is, nor does it produce, a new substance. It is an aligned union of separate substances, an entity, but not a new substance.

Here, I take the word “entity” to broadly mean something real, which does not need to be a substance, just as the solar system, for example, in my view, is something real, but is not one substance. It is an aligning union, with planets aligned to the sun’s gravitational field. Another imperfect but still helpful illustration is of an older brother pushing his sister on a sledge over the snow. The forward movement is all due to him. The brother, the sister and the sledge are not substantially united, but they are *aligned* towards moving forward, and can impact other substances and produce causal effects, even though they are not one substance. Like the magnet and filings, the union can impact other substances without *becoming or being* one substance.

When Vanhoozer affirms his continuing acceptance of Webster’s position, which I mentioned earlier, he comments on Webster saying that the church has been made alive with Christ (Eph. 2:5), and raised up with him, where Webster “admits this ‘with Christ’ has ontological weight.”⁴⁶ Vanhoozer says,

With Webster, I want to put the ontological weight on *with* rather than *whole* Christ. The “with” indicates “an intimacy of relation between Christ the Lord and those whom he exalts to share his location, but one in which he retains his free, sovereign incommunicable identity.”⁴⁷

An asymmetric aligning union gives this sense of *weight*; it is an ontologically real union that brings about causal effects, one which, as Webster puts it, has ontological weight. But this is a *spiritual union*, brought about by the Spirit so that our created substance aligns with God’s purposes. Nevertheless, there is a spiritual body constituted by this union, an ordered union which produces effects on other substances. As such, the church can be an instrument through which Christ moves, albeit that it is an instrument which is not a substance.⁴⁸

46. Webster, “In the Society of God,” 185.

47. Vanhoozer, “*Hocus Totus*,” 41, citing Webster, “‘In the Society of God,’” 186.

48. A reviewer notes that “instruments can themselves be substantial (e.g., a building contractor-carpenter relation) and they can participate by way of resemblance in the efficient cause,” and wonders if my wider proposal is more a Reformed Barthian than a Reformed catholic proposal, if participation in Christ as the efficient cause is not to be allowed for.

The combined entity, the body of Christ, is holy. But it is only holy by virtue of its Head being intrinsically holy. Christ possesses holiness because as the Son of God he is intrinsically holy. He pours out the Spirit of holiness who orients the church towards holiness and maintains that deep-down orientation in each believer. But the church itself, as the assembly of redeemed saints, never *possesses* holiness. *Only Christ*, its Head, possesses holiness by virtue of who he is.

Holiness is not *transferred* to the church, a point made by Webster in his claim that the holiness of the church is “an *alien* sanctity, a non-possessable holiness.”⁴⁹ Sanctifying powers flow from Christ, the Head, to the church. A movement of power *from his substance* takes place, but that does not entail a transfer of Christ’s *intrinsic holiness* to the redeemed saints. Calvin, as we saw Moser pointing out earlier, can use the language of substance about Christ and the church, but we need to be clear: there can be an impartation of sanctifying powers, which produces *benefits* for our natures, but without a substantial union. Christ can impart the vivifying power of the river of life from his substance to us, but that does not require a substantial (fusing) union between us and Christ. Christ’s holiness as a man is imparted to us. But in this, we do not literally participate in his soul or body, just as we do not literally participate in other people’s souls or bodies. Nor do we participate literally in his divine nature.

Under the alignment account, we have holy dispositions, but if the Spirit were withdrawn, such dispositions would wither and die, as happened to Adam. There is real, created and holy fruit in our lives. But at their root, our holy dispositions always need the fresh water of the Spirit. Our natures do have created powers to sustain many dispositions, but they do not have powers to sustain our dispositions towards holiness and love of God. We cannot sustain or increase our holiness. It is sustained by the power of Christ flowing into us, a power which we can resist in some measure, but which remains a power whose exercise is not under our control and thus is not *ours*. We are holy *in Christ*, by being members of his body, *aligned by his power*.

We can now refine Vanhoozer’s comment, quoted earlier, that “the church is not constitutive of the Son’s identity as are the Father and the Spirit; its relation to the Son is not substantial but covenantal, a matter of fellowship, not ontology.”⁵⁰ It is correct that the church is not constitutive of Christ’s identity because Christ’s intrinsic powers flow from his identity as the Son of God, and these

I take a broad view of “Reformed catholicity,” as in my introductory comments. Given, though, that God can use an aligning union of substances as an instrument, if there are valid arguments for such participation they should seemingly hold for an aligning union. However, I cannot discuss such arguments here, nor their compatibility with my account. The *totus Christus*, however, does not appear to be a claim about a union based on such participation. I briefly comment on participation in the next section.

49. John Webster, *Holiness* (London: SCM Press, 2003), 56. Webster’s emphasis.

50. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority After Babel*, 152.

powers never become the church's own intrinsic powers. Nor do members of the church *personally* become *intrinsically* holy. However, although the relationship between Christ and church is not "substantival" (not a substantial, fusing union), there is an ontologically real alignment of substances brought about by Christ the Head. Therefore, there is a *form* of ontological union between Christ and the church. Vanhoozer was thus incorrect to say that the church's relation to the Son is not a matter of ontology. Because of the covenant, there is a real ontological union by grace. In that sense, there *is* a union of substances, a real ontological union, but an aligning union, not a substantial (fusing) one.

In Christ

We have yet to consider what being "in Christ" means under this model; similarly, about Christ being "in us." I suggest that to be "in Christ" under this model is to be a member of his body, one brought into his body by God's power alone, one who benefits from Christ's saving and sanctifying power. It seems we "live in God" (1 Jn. 4:16) under this model by living enclosed within a movement through time into eternity of love and grace; we are *immersed* in a river of divine life. This is partly what baptism signifies.

The other side of the relationship, Christ "in us," relates to the indwelling of Christ in us by the Spirit. The Spirit is continually active in us, extending the "areas" of our souls which are being aligned towards holiness, aiming to *form the character of Christ* in us. In sending the Spirit, Christ is aiming to "imprint" an image of himself in us, that is, an imprint of his humanity is to be "reflected" in us as expressed and refracted through our own unique personality, the unique "word" God breathed into us at our creation (note the asymmetrical features of the imagery of "imprinting," "reflecting" and "being an image"). The person we become is someone formed through this imprint of Christ's character being united with our own unique character or personality. We will become Christlike in our own unique way. Christ will be formed in us.

None of this, however, requires a substantial union; an asymmetric aligning union suffices. Under such an account, we "participate" in Christ by being a member of his body, receiving vivifying life from him as he imparts sanctifying powers to us from his substance and by increasingly sharing in his holy character. This is, admittedly, what some would consider a minimal account of participation, but importantly, it allows for sharing, in an appropriate way, in the intimacy of Christ's relationship with God,⁵¹ as well as his love for people and God's creation.

51. However, it does not clarify how the imprint of Christlikeness relates to the Christian's love of Christ himself. This would seem to be due to a specific work of the Spirit, but this cannot be explored here.

Alignment or *Totus Christus*?

We can now reflect further on Moser's proposal that "Reformed Catholics" should accept Augustine's *totus Christus* Christological ecclesiology, while comparing this to the alignment model. Moser proposes, in line with his reading of Augustine, for which he cites considerable support, that there is a sense in which Christ is identical to Christ plus the church. Moser suggests, drawing from Tarsicius van Bavel, that Augustine got the *totus Christus* idea "directly from the words of Paul,"⁵² and that Augustine thought the imagery of Paul identifying the body and its members with *Christ* himself (as in 1 Cor. 12:12) should be taken literally. Moser sees Augustine as holding that

the biblical language, especially its predicative (the *is* of identity), should lead us to think that Christ and the Church, Head and members, are one spiritual entity, *totus Christus* . . . the statement "the Church is Christ's body" cannot be a weak or empty metaphor. If it were, the Church's relation to Christ would be utterly dissimilar to how a natural body relates to its head. But this is exactly the opposite of what Paul flatly says: the Church *is* Christ's body in some real way. As Kimberly Baker observes, "[T]o say that Christians are incorporated into the one body of Christ is much more than a symbol or metaphor; it describes the reality of a transformed relationship between Christians and God." This transformed relationship must be a real, spiritual union.⁵³

Augustine, therefore, if Moser's understanding is correct, thinks that there must be "the *is* of identity" between Christ and the Church. The choice, in effect, is between "the *is* of identity" and "a weak or empty metaphor." However, the choice is not one between a substantial union and no union. For under an asymmetric aligning union, there *is* an ontological union between Christ and the church; the language of Christ's body has ontological weight. There is a real ontological relationship, and *not* one which is "utterly dissimilar to how a natural body relates to its head," in Moser's words. Moser, in line with the quote from Kimberley Baker, seems to make the same either/or assumption: either some form of weak or empty metaphor of a union that is not ontologically real or an ontologically real union

52. Moser, "*Totus Christus*," 7, citing Tarsicius van Bavel, "The "Christus Totus" Idea: A Forgotten Aspect of Augustine's Spirituality," in Thomas Finan and Vincent Twomey (eds), *Studies in Patristic Christology* (Dublin: Four Courts, 1998), 84–94, here, 85.

53. Moser, "*Totus Christus*," 8; citing Kimberley Baker, "Augustine's Doctrine of the *Totus Christus*: Reflecting on the Church as Sacrament of Unity," *Horizons*, 37(1), 2010, 7–24, here, 9.

for which the only option is a substantial union. But as we have seen, we do not have to make this choice.

Moser goes on to helpfully summarize four basic characteristics of the *totus Christus*, on his reading of Augustine:

First, *totus Christus* denotes a spiritual union between Christ and the Church so that, out of the two, one spiritual entity, Head and members, comes to be. The union is spiritual because the Holy Spirit brings it about. Second, *totus Christus* is a metaphysical union between Christ and the Church. Third, the metaphysical union in the *totus Christus* is qualitatively distinct from the hypostatic union and from the unity of the three divine persons. The Logos is hypostatically united to his flesh so that his flesh truly is his own, that is, it belongs to his person. But his union with his Church, though metaphysical, is decidedly different and non-hypostatic. Fourth, *totus Christus* denotes a kind of metaphysical identity between Christ and the Church, such that the “whole thing” (*totum*) is Christ.

The first three features are compatible with the union being an asymmetric aligning one. There is a new entity which comes into existence, a union of “Head and members”; it is a spiritual union, and it is a metaphysically real union (but not a substantial union). It is different from the hypostatic union. All these are compatible with the notion of the mystical body and can gain support from the many citations Moser gives in support of the mystical body. But the problem is with the fourth feature, the idea of the *totus Christus* denoting “a kind of metaphysical identity between Christ and the Church, such that the ‘whole thing’ (*totum*) is Christ.”

We have a kind of equation here: Christ = Christ + the church. But if this is so, then it seems that something is added to the identity of Jesus Christ, and it is here that the *Christ alone* theme of the Reformation seems at risk. But we do not need to take this risk, if instead the notion of an asymmetric aligning union is used for the ontologically real union between Christ and the church. There is still a real union, but one where, as Webster puts it, “The church adds nothing to the identity of the exalted Son.”⁵⁴ Webster also goes on to say the following: “‘By grace’ (Eph. 2:5,8) is not merely the means of entry into the union with Christ but the permanent characteristic of that union,”⁵⁵ which retains the asymmetry of the continuous flow of grace referred to earlier. The alignment model seems sufficient here from a Reformed perspective.

Ian McFarland makes a helpful point in discussing the notion of the body of Christ in relation to both Robert Jenson and Karl Barth, that there is a

54. Webster, *God without Measure*, 186.

55. Webster, *God without Measure*, 186.

fundamental disanalogy between the incarnation and the life of the church . . . For while all the acts of the human being Jesus are *eo ipso* acts of God, there is no parallel relation between the acts of the church and the acts of Jesus.⁵⁶

The notion that Jesus Christ's acts are *eo ipso* the acts of God, is in step with our earlier discussion of Christ's intrinsic powers. The argument there can be rephrased: Christ's own acts can never be the acts of the church acting with its own intrinsic powers. If our wills align with Christ's purposes, as, for example, by the Spirit he influences our desires, then Christ can achieve his purposes through us, including speaking through us. But our acts are *ours* and never *his*.

McFarland then presents a picture of the body of Christ which would cohere with the alignment model of union. His comment above was part of a wider point about coming to know a person, which we can do through their communication with us or simply by observing their body – where we will gain far less knowledge, but still some knowledge, about them.⁵⁷ Put simply, because of the union between Christ and the church, people can know something of Christ when his church communicates something of who he truly is, but church members are still members of his body anyway, even if they do not always convey his life as they should. Importantly,

All the body's members are distinct persons, and Jesus is to this extent one member among others. Nevertheless, the fact that within the body Jesus is the head establishes a certain analogy of relation with the incarnation. Even as Christ's human nature receives its (hypostatic) identity from the second person of the Trinity, so the church receives its (corporate) identity from the Word incarnate Jesus. And just as one who touches Jesus of Nazareth touches the Word, so one who touches a Christian touches Christ's body.⁵⁸

This fits well with the asymmetric alignment model. When our lives, by the power of the Spirit, sufficiently align with Christ, then he can sometimes speak through us and show (at least glimpses of) aspects of his character through us. When Christ elects to set us apart to act through us, then through his own powers, he aligns us (by the Spirit) so that he acts through us, as we use *our own intrinsic powers* in surrendered service to him. Being *yoked* to Christ (a clear image of alignment) in this way is how we are holy, as the Spirit aligns us with Christ's holy purposes. And because Christ is active by the Spirit in the members of his body, if people touch a Christian, they touch Christ's body.

56. Ian A. McFarland, "The Body of Christ: Rethinking a Classic Theological Model," *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 7(3), 2005, 225–245, here, 245.

57. McFarland, "The Body of Christ," 240ff.

58. McFarland, "The Body of Christ," 244.

Further Concerns

Moser at one point approvingly draws on David Meconi, a recent defender of the *totus Christus*,⁵⁹ specifically because Moser sees Meconi as clarifying how clear conceptual boundaries between Christ and the church can be retained within the *totus Christus*.⁶⁰ But looking at Meconi's exposition of the *totus Christus* raises further concerns.

Meconi does helpfully stress that the *totus Christus* is for Augustine a union "with Christ in his humanity and not in his divinity,"⁶¹ and that, as Moser summarizes it, "the Church participates in Christ by derivation only."⁶² Such participation by derivation involves the claim that we do not share in Christ's identity, but still participate in him, in the *totus Christus*.⁶³ But this contravenes receiving benefits from Christ as from a fountain, where the flow is one way only and continuous. The only seeming alternative is a transfer from Christ's substance to our substance. However, if the *totus Christus* only relates to the substance of Christ's humanity, then how do we participate in him? Something from his soul may be *replicated* in us, or *imprinted* onto us, by the Spirit's power, but that involves no literal participation in his soul or transfer of his soul. Christ's soul is united with his body, not with each of our bodies. If we accept a Reformed perspective that Christ is in heaven in some sense, or at least *not here*, then neither his soul nor his resurrected body are here. If so, there is no literal transfer of the substance of his humanity to us.

Participation in Christ in the *totus Christus* seems connected to a particular interpretation of the assumption of human nature at the incarnation. The *totus Christus*, as Meconi presents it, seems linked to the idea that in assuming flesh, the Word took the church to himself. Meconi writes the following:

let us first examine what Augustine means by the *totus Christus*. Although the Son's union with humanity is dissimilar to the way the church is joined to God, this is not to say that the Son does not bring all of humanity to himself. This is one of the most important formulations of Augustine's ecclesiology. The church is best understood as the result of the unique assumption of humanity to divinity achieved in the Son's descent.⁶⁴

Later, pointing out how Augustine taught that by taking on flesh Christ took the church to himself, Meconi says that assumption language for Augustine

59. David Vincent Meconi, S.J., *The One Christ: St. Augustine's Theology of Deification* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2013).

60. Moser, "*Corpus Mysticum*," 56, n. 9.

61. Meconi, *The One Christ*, 211.

62. Moser, "*Corpus Mysticum*," 56, n.9. See Meconi, *The One Christ*, 210.

63. Meconi, *The One Christ*, 211.

64. Meconi, *The One Christ*, 202.

“characterizes both the incarnation *and the relationship between the church and Christ.*”⁶⁵ According to this reading of Augustine, then, when the Word assumed human nature, “all of humanity [was] assumed by the divine Word.”⁶⁶ Thus, Augustine’s notion seems to be that we are united to God through our humanity being united to Christ’s *at the incarnation*. That is, at the incarnation, our humanity is *in his*. His humanity is united by the Word to the divine nature, with our humanity being in him. This understanding of the assumption of human nature at the incarnation, at least according to Meconi’s reading, seems to be at the root of the *totus Christus* idea.

That Christ assumed our human nature does not, however, entail that he assumed all of humanity. There was *only one soul and one body* assumed by the Son of God. It is not true to say that the whole church, or indeed all humanity, was assumed at the incarnation.⁶⁷ *Our* souls and bodies were not assumed when Christ assumed human nature. It may, of course, be that the idea here is that when we are regenerated, *then* something from Christ’s *risen humanity* is substantially united to us, something which was *in Christ* when he assumed human nature. But this would not entail that the church was assumed when Christ assumed human nature. And, importantly, the point above still holds: if Christ’s soul or body are not here (as is so, under a Reformed perspective), then there is no transfer of the actual substance of his humanity to us.

Another concern about the notion of the assumption of human nature operative here, at least as Meconi presents it, is that while the account obviously precedes later Chalcedonian debate, it seems that the enhypostatic element of the incarnation is obscured. Webster’s remark, cited earlier, about the significance of “the Son’s transcendence of the flesh even in its assumption,”⁶⁸ is critical here, for it implies that no union of created natures can incorporate the person of Christ. This echoes Vanhoozer’s concern that the *totus Christus* may breach the principles of *finitum non est capax infiniti* and the *extra Calvinisticum*.⁶⁹ I will return to this point. At the very least, further research is called for here.

Another concern is that despite Moser’s clear intention to avoid the notion of the church being an extension of the incarnation,⁷⁰ it seems difficult to avoid that notion if the substance of Christ is in some way now part of the church, which it

65. Meconi, *The One Christ*, 214–215. Emphasis added.

66. Meconi, *The One Christ*, 206.

67. On this, see Rolfe King, “Assumption, Union and Sanctification: Some Clarifying Distinctions,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 19 (1), 2017, 53–72, here, 64.

68. Webster, “In the Society of God,” 185.

69. Vanhoozer, “*Hocus Totus*,” 41.

70. Moser, “*Corpus Mysticum*,” 53.

seemingly would be if our humanity were somehow included in, or substantially united to, Christ's humanity. Meconi confirms, for example, that he sees Augustine's sacramentalism "in terms of an extension and prolongation of the Word's own incarnation,"⁷¹ surely a troubling thought for Reformed thinkers as they reflect on the *totus Christus*. And Meconi can say that "the holiness of Christ and of the Christian are not separated,"⁷² and "it is ultimately Christ's sanctity now alive in the created soul which renders that creature godly."⁷³ By contrast, in the aligning union model, the holiness of Christ and the Christian is of a different order: in his person, Christ's sanctity is intrinsic and is always distinct from our sanctity.

These are significant issues not explored by Moser. Interestingly, though, Moser uses the notion of alignment when he discusses the parable of the sheep and the goats, when he says that Christ

reveals there that when they care for the sick and imprisoned "who are members of my family," they did it "to me" (Matt. 25:40) . . . in some way, Christ is really present when his disciples' actions align with his purposes, and their actions and sufferings will affect him ("Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?" Acts 9:4).⁷⁴

Here Moser says that "Christ is really present when his disciples' actions *align* with his purposes." This fits with the aligning union model, where Christ is present in us through the Spirit's activity in us. And he owns us as his; he counts us as his. Therefore, when we are persecuted, Christ's own body is persecuted. When we are fed, Christ's own body is fed. These scriptures, so important for Augustine and the *totus Christus*, seem compatible with the aligning union model since Christ is present by his Spirit in the members of his body.

Moser grants that, for Augustine, Jesus Christ in heaven is complete; he does not suffer, literally speaking.⁷⁵ This, of course, does not rule out Christ regarding his corporate body as incomplete, for he has chosen to unite us to him, as our Head, by the Spirit. And Christ's body is indeed incomplete; the Spirit's work is not yet finished. But an aligning union suffices here, as it is compatible with the idea that Christ's body is incomplete.

One persona?

The alignment model yields a notion of the church moving in a corporate and directed way, distinct from, but directed by, the risen Christ, where this corporate

71. Meconi, *The One Christ*, 217.

72. Meconi, *The One Christ*, 207.

73. Meconi, *The One Christ*, 207.

74. Moser, "*Corpus Mysticum*," 58. Moser's emphases.

75. Moser, "*Totus Christus*," 15.

movement is due to God's Spirit moving people through dual agency. The work of the Spirit is sufficient: there is no need to posit a new substance, or a new "persona" with new intrinsic powers. Moser does, though, make a thoughtful case, in defending the one *persona* idea, that Christ can pray through us when the Spirit inspires us to pray with the words given us in the Psalms (and, surely, other words), and this can be transfigurative prayer.⁷⁶ But this is a matter of dual agency and grace, and thus, if my earlier arguments are correct, it cannot be about Christ being one substance with us.

Surely, though, from a Reformed perspective, the primary way Christ washes or transfigures the church is when we *hear* his word in scripture through the Spirit, and faith arises in us, the kind of faith that is linked to our wills and an intention to grow in holiness. But the church must be distinct from Christ to respond to his voice with such faith. To use McFarland's idea, we cannot know the identity of this divine "Word" unless the Word discloses himself to us. I may see a person's body, but without being told who the person is, I may remain in ignorance of their identity.

Under this trajectory of thought, *sola fide* is impossible if Christ's voice is identified with the voice of the church: the church of the redeemed could not exist without faith in Christ's voice, a voice which is distinct from that of the church. While, of course, the church can speak Christ's words (as he permits and brings about), our intrinsic voice is never the intrinsic voice of the risen Christ.

The notion of the one *persona* speaking with one voice therefore seems problematic. One point that Vanhoozer helpfully makes is that if Christ speaks directly to the church by way of command, then that involves a different voice from the church's. As Vanhoozer puts it,

Augustine insists that we hear Head and Body as one: "The body of Christ is speaking as one with its Head. How can they speak with one voice? Because, says Scripture, *they will be two in one flesh*" (Gen. 2:24).⁷⁷ I can think of at least one counter-example to this hermeneutical rule of thumb. In Revelation chapters 2-3, the risen Lord speaks *to* the seven churches in a way that cannot be reversed. This irreversibility captures one of the Reformers' chief concerns. The Lord's command is not equivalent to the servant's response.⁷⁸

One can extend this to the whole ministry of the risen Christ as prophet, as he continues speaking his word to the church. These are Christ's own prophetic acts, addressing the church, and they cannot be identified with the voice of the church.

76. Moser, "*Corpus Mysticum*," 63–64.

77. Citing Augustine, Sermon on Psalm 37, in *Expositions of the Psalms*, vol. 2 (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2000), 151.

78. Vanhoozer, "*Hocus Totus*," 34–35.

This would be to take away from Christ's glory and his reign. For his prophetic commands reflect his kingly rule. Note that in the Acts 9 passage, so important for the *totus Christus* concept, Christ *commands* Saul, and then *commands* Ananias. Christ's word is "external" to the church here, not enfolded into it.

Moser does respond to this point, noting that Augustine does affirm Christ as Lord over the church, which should meet the concerns of Webster and Vanhoozer.⁷⁹ But affirming this does not show whether the point is adequately dealt with if one also affirms a substantial union. Christ's voice in Acts 9 to Saul was not the voice of the church; it was that of the Son of God, whose agency existed *prior* to the church, prior to any "decision" to create the world or to bring redemption. The voice of the Son of God entirely precedes the church and is forever distinct from the church's creaturely voice.

Imagery is best interpreted in line with ontology. From a traditional Reformed perspective, the asymmetric alignment model is powerful because it reflects the providential control exerted by Christ as the head of the church, and his control of all things. We cannot dispense with the imagery of Christ as Lord because that is what he is. The nuptial imagery is, of course, beautiful, but it is *Christ* who washes the church *by his word* and *presents the church to himself* (Eph. 5:26). The church has no intrinsic power to wash itself, and since Christ cleanses the church through his word, there is always a distinction between his word and the church. As Lord, he is forever distinct from us, and so is his voice.

A traditional Reformed perspective would surely not permit the one-flesh marriage imagery, however significant, to become so emphasized that this distorts or obscures the offices of Christ. Regarding the prophetic office, Christ partly governs through his continuing prophetic word. His prophetic office is not compatible with the notion that Christ's voice and the church's voice are one voice. And the same applies to Christ as king. Christ has authority over the church, and issues commandments to the church. In exercising that authority, Christ's royal word is never to be identified with ours.

The priestly office is clearly most closely attended to in the one *persona* idea. Christ can indeed intercede through us when we speak to the Father in Christ's name. Perhaps we can even say that he moves us to pray prayers that he would otherwise make. Many voices are then a kind of "one persona" moved by the Spirit. But an aligning union suffices here. The intrinsic voice of the Son of God remains his alone: it is never substantially united to our voices. Even if Christ authorizes a person to pronounce forgiveness in his name, there is still no substantial union between Christ's voice and that person's voice.

Critically, there are priestly requests we cannot make: "Father, please forgive *them* on the grounds of my sacrifice." This is never *our* voice. Nor is "Father,

79. Moser, "*Corpus Mysticum*,"

forgive me,” spoken in a literal way, ever *his* voice. This is a prayer we must pray literally, and one Christ cannot pray literally. It seems difficult to disentangle such prayers if Christ is substantially united to us. Our salvation depends on Christ being the person whose unique identity, unique intrinsic powers and unique work enable him to pray the first prayer, and on his having no part of our identity and our intrinsic powers as we pray the second prayer. It seems hazardous to think of there being any substantial union, for Christ’s unique priesthood seems imperilled. We do not share in Christ’s once-and-for-all offering of himself. In that offering, he does (wonderfully) identify himself with us, acting in our name. But it is Christ’s obedience alone that secures our salvation (Rom. 5:19). His offering is only saving because we add nothing to his identity.

Thinking of Christ’s priesthood and the mystical union, Moser writes that “In that union, Christ is not distant or alien to our fears and sufferings. He remains present with us through the love of the Holy Spirit.”⁸⁰ Here, Moser is thinking of the mystical union as identical to the *totus Christus*. However, the same could be said about Christ under the aligning union. The aligning union gives the benefits of the mystical union without the troubling additional claims regarding the *totus Christus*.

The aligning union, I suggest, keeps the right distinctions. It secures the fact that there are fundamental features of Christ’s priestly ministry, above all his pleading for our forgiveness in his name and on the grounds of his work, which we do not participate in. Christ’s own voice is never the voice of his creatures, even though he may use us to speak his words. The voice of the Lord is inherently majestic (Ps. 29:4); ours is not.

A Final Comparison

I noted earlier that Moser does qualify his understanding of the substantial union involved in the *totus Christus* idea. He does this in his final summary, where he says that

Augustine’s *totus Christus* . . . is a *single ordered complex entity ruled by Christ the Head* . . . It consists of Christ the Head in heaven, and his body, his members, joined to him by his Spirit . . . It is *single* since Christ is its one and only Head, and thus, it is his one and only mystical body. It is *ordered* because Christ is the Head who orders and directs his body . . . We are his members, distinctly “his own.” It is *metaphysically complex* . . . since it is made up of Christ, his members, and the Holy Spirit. This complex metaphysical constitution ensures that the Church is not conflated with Christ *simpliciter* . . . the mystical body of Christ is *like* a mereological part-whole union where two or more things go together to make up one thing: Christ. However, it is *not* this type of union because distinct persons remain. Thus, this

80. Moser, “*Corpus Mysticum*,” 63–64.

union is *sui generis*, like the union of three persons in one God and the union of two natures in Christ. To say much more would be to violate its mystical character.⁸¹

The qualification Moser makes seems to relate to the *sui generis* and mystical nature of this union. He cannot be saying that there is no union where “two or more things go together to make up one thing: Christ,” for that has been his claim throughout. He is saying that this union is unique.

Of itself, that is reasonable. We are not talking of a part-whole union of two ordinary created things, for example. But problems remain. One problem is that Jesus Christ is *incorporated* in this union. But the *person* of the risen Christ is the eternal Son of God. Thus, we have a union producing “one thing,” the *totus Christus*, which incorporates both the church and the person of the Son of God. A new thing, which seemingly must be a substance, and a created one (because it is new), now incorporates the created and the uncreated. But if so, this surely breaches the principles of *finitum non est capax infiniti* and the *extra Calvinisticum*. Similarly, Moser’s qualification does not alter the problematic idea of a created *persona* which subsumes the voice of the risen Christ. The asymmetric aligning union, by comparison, does not have these problems.

Even with the claim that the *totus Christus* only includes Christ’s humanity, the problem remains. One can *claim* this, but the problem is that the person of Jesus is the Son of God, who transcends his humanity. How can a union of created natures *contain* his person? The problem of a new, created substance containing both the created and the uncreated remains. If, though, one says that the substance does not contain Christ, then how is he included in this body? Perhaps one may say the following: there is no new substance. The “new thing” is not a substance. But that seems to entail that the union between Christ and his body is an aligning union, for that is an entity which is not a substance.

Another problem is that the troublesome issue of holiness is not averted by this *sui generis* qualification. Is the *totus Christus*, even as qualified by Moser, intrinsically holy or not? If it is not intrinsically holy, then Christ cannot be part of it, for in his person he is intrinsically holy. So, the *totus Christus* must be intrinsically holy. Thus, the church is now part of an intrinsically holy entity, seemingly involving a transfer to the church of intrinsic holiness. Members of the church were not holy before, but now they become, at least in part of their being, intrinsically holy. But that is incompatible with the continuous flow of grace required for the right kind of asymmetry in the creator/creature relationship. The creator/creature distinction seems breached if we become intrinsically holy. The aligning union model compares better here: the problem of the church being a *part* of a substance which includes the intrinsically holy Son of

81. Moser, “*Corpus Mysticum*,” 59–60. Moser’s emphases.

God is avoided, for Christ and the church do not constitute a substance. But the church is part of an asymmetric aligning union, and in that sense, we are part of the body of Christ.

Finally, one might argue that there is a substantial union, but one that does not involve any fusing of Christ and the church, akin to taking the hypostatic union as a substantial union with no fusing of the divine and human natures of Christ. But the hypostatic union ensures that Jesus Christ is the *only* intrinsically holy human, holy by virtue of who he is. That is a critical difference which the union effects. Our holiness, by contrast, is not intrinsic to us. It comes through our being continuously held by the Spirit in a holy orientation: holiness by adoption. What difference to our humanity does the *totus Christus* bring about? If there is no difference, there is no union. How do we become holy through the *totus Christus*? A continuous orientation by grace does not involve a substantial union, so the only option left would seem to be a transfer of Christ's substance to us, which contravenes grace as a continuous fountain, seemingly also threatening the creator/creature distinction.

In conclusion, there are significant issues I have not considered, including whether Moser is right to read the *totus Christus* as involving a substantial union, and how an aligning union fares as regards prosopological readings. I have also suggested that further work is required on the notion of the assumption of human nature involved in the *totus Christus*. My primary aim, however, has been to illustrate an alternative metaphysical model of the union between Christ and the church. I have indicated a variety of reasons for concern about the *totus Christus*, if understood as a substantial union. That there is an alternative model, and one which fits well with the Reformation *solus*, should itself provoke further caution as Reformed theologians evaluate the *totus Christus* concept. I suggest, then, that the notion of an asymmetric aligning union deserves serious consideration within Reformed theology. And it should, I hope, be of wider ecumenical interest.⁸²

ORCID iD

Rolfe King  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3611-9663>

Author biography

Rolfe King is an honorary research fellow at the University of Aberdeen. His current research mainly focuses on connections between dogmatic theology and philosophical theology.

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