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Gathering, Sacrament and Baptist Theological Method

ABSTRACT

This essay explores aspects of baptist theological method. These set it apart from the Great Tradition, which has claimed (or has been conceded) the right to define the shape of theological discourse. What emerges is an approach which eschews a linear progression of ideas, especially those driven by philosophical imperatives. At the heart of this 'Baptist way' is the dynamic presence of Christ in the gathered community. Doctrines emerge in centrifugal relation to that centre. Related understandings of sacrament and theological discourse are proposed. The event of gathering is advanced as the primary sacramental moment. The notion of 'consonance' with the Christ story is proposed as a means of evaluating the truth claims of theology.

Paul Fiddes describes baptist[1] theology in terms of 'tracks' and 'traces'. 'Tracks' are those well-formed, discernable lines tramped down through agreed use and delineating the journeys of the past. Of these traditions there are relatively few in Baptist theology. More important are the vaguer, less certain 'traces' which 'evoke the picture of a shadowy after-image, or a scarcely worked-out trajectory; [hinting] at uncertainty, at ambiguity in both knowledge and direction.'[2] Any student of the shifting sands of Baptist theological discourse over four centuries will recognize the usefulness of this second category. Our ability to morph the shape and emphasis of our witness has accorded us the potential to adapt quickly and respond authentically to changing contexts. Yet this has, arguably, been at the

[1] I follow the convention of using 'baptist' with a small 'b' to denote baptistic movements not limited to those who self-consciously claim the tag.
[2] P. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), 1.

cost of an obviously coherent theological voice. It is thus no mystery that anabaptist/baptist theology has struggled to maintain meaningful conversation in the theological mainstream. Indeed, there is a perception (often meekly shared by baptists themselves) that this line of radical Protestantism has produced few significant theologians with which to talk in the first place!

Baptists are found in all regions where there is a significant Christian population. We are numerically one of the largest communions in the world. We have achieved a certain profile, not to say notoriety, of which we are not always proud. In some places we have entered the folklore of hypocrisy, of puritanical attitudes and demanding moral codes. More positively, we have often exemplified an impressive activism. Who can describe the modern missionary movement without reference to William Carey? How may we ignore Charles Spurgeon, who sits at the centre of a web of Victorian developments which influence the Church today? No study of public religion in the United States can disregard the Southern Baptist Convention – effectively the established Church of the South.

Yet this vibrant, energetic communion *is* virtually ignored in the history of theology. If informed students are asked to rank the top one hundred theologians since the Reformation, it is very likely that not a single baptist would make the list. Baptists themselves have rarely demurred at the relegation. Keith Jones, although an enthusiast for the recovery of Anabaptist insights, is ready to concede:

> We have no great patterns or guides, nor many examples of baptistic groupings working at these issues in a systematic theological way. Unlike other parts of the Christian world family we appear not to have been good at systematic theology.[3]

Even such a significant thinker as James McClendon opens his three volume *Systematic Theology* with an analysis entitled 'Why baptists have produced so little theology.'[4]

Understood in conventional ways, there are undeniable limitations to baptist thought. Why might this be? There are some obvious historical reasons. As heirs to the radical reformation baptists

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[3] K.G. Jones, *A believing church: learning from some contemporary Anabaptist and Baptist perspectives* (Didcot, UK: Baptist Union, 1998) 51.

[4] J.W. McClendon, *Systematic Theology I: Ethics* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1986), 20-27.

in both Europe and Great Britain were, at least until the mid-nineteenth century, an oppressed minority. They were executed for their views by both Protestants and Catholics alike in the 16th century. In Britain, with other Nonconformists they were denied some civil rights, excluded from the Universities of England, their ministry ruled invalid. In such an environment, it is hardly surprising that baptist thinkers have not been admitted to the elite theological circles – nor, conversely, is it a mystery that many have declined to seek such status. The popular piety of baptists has been and remains frequently anti-intellectual, suspicious of learning.

These are undoubtedly important factors. Yet to understand baptist theology only in such terms would be subtly to reinforce the prejudices of the past. Is there not something beyond mere circumstance, something natural to baptist method which adds another level of explanation to the apparent primitiveness of baptist theology? I suggest that, rather than baptist theology 'failing' to reached the highest levels of Christian thought, it is actually a distinct *way* of doing theology; and that, when it is true to its own lights, this way generates its own articulation of the faith. This articulation does not, perhaps, always adhere to the 'rules'. But then, those are other people's rules.

McClendon, who made more effort than most to address the nature of baptist method, put the problem this way.

> The truth, I believe, is this; The baptists in all their variety and disunity failed to see in their own heritage, their own way of using Scripture, their own communal practices and patterns, *their own guiding vision*, a resource for theology unlike the prevailing scholasticism round about them. Some were attracted to current fashions and tried theologizing in those fashions. The results were seldom good, and the consequence was further distrust of theology in baptist ranks.[5] (emphasis original)

What McClendon in his generalization refers to as 'scholasticism' – and what I (in equally sweeping terms) name the 'Great Tradition'- is a dominant model of theological method that sets up a series of expectations by which baptists have often been found wanting. This tradition, representing the mainstream of 'orthodoxy' for centuries, found a natural conversation partner in philosophy. Metaphysical problems are the expected foundational

[5] McClendon I, 26.

elements in the theological discourse. It has often been just those questions which baptist theologians have ignored or treated lightly – not always, I suggest, because they couldn't cope with them, but principally because these are *not* key questions in a baptist theology.

Augustus Strong at the turn of the twentieth century and Stanley Grenz at the turn of the twenty-first were baptists who produced significant systematic theologies. But they are exceptions which tend to prove the rule. Whilst they maintain standard baptist views on church government and baptism etc, their method is not distinctly baptist at all. This is particularly evident in Grenz. Although he spent the better part of his career at baptist institutions, Grenz primarily addressed the questions of *evangelical* theology, rather than baptist thought. Although it is certainly arguable that Grenz had an understanding of and vision for evangelicalism which reflected his baptist assumptions, his principal methodological interest was the search for ways in which evangelical theology might be 're-visioned' in a postmodern age.[6]

Where then might we look for an authentically baptist style of theology? I suggest that, rather than the paradoxes of metaphysics, the beating heart of baptist theology is heard in our views of church and sacrament.

Ecclesiology can be seen to underlie what are sometimes described as the 'pillars' of baptist theology. There have been numerous attempts to define 'being baptist' in terms of content - to suggest that there are a number of 'baptist distinctives' which uniquely combine to build the baptist vision. Among the main candidates are

1. Baptism of believers only

2. Congregational responsibility

3. Separation of Church and State

4. Freedom of conscience (or 'soul competency' in American baptist parlance)

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[6] This is most acutely demonstrated in Grenz' essay 'Conversing in Christian Style: Toward a Baptist Theological Method for the Postmodern Context'. (*Baptist History and Heritage*, Vol. XXXV, Winter 2000, No.1., 82-103). The title clearly contains some promise. In fact, however, the essay makes virtually no comment on 'Baptist … method', being primarily interested in the 'postmodern context'.

The last is problematical. It is derivative of the other three, with the addition of enlightenment ideas of the autonomy of the individual. It is, as such, an unfortunate distortion of the baptist way. As for the first three, each may be seen to be an ecclesiological position – determining in turn, membership of the body, relationships to other parts of the body and the relationship of the body to civil authorities. These key stances on the nature of the church are obviously fundamental to baptist communities. I contend, however, that their significance for baptist theological method lies in what they *signal*, rather than what they contain.

So what is the *guiding vision* that is signaled? What is the essence of a baptist way? McClendon identifies it as a sense of immediacy – the sense that the church now *is* the primitive church – it is being created anew in every moment, that each generation stands with the apostles at the dawn of the new day. It is a vision 'neither developmental nor successionist, but mystical and immediate…better understood by the artist and poet than by the metaphysician and dogmatist.'[7]

Underlying traditional baptist distinctives, then, is an understanding of the dynamics of being church, or, better, the dynamics of *becoming* church. The essence of the baptist theological style is to be found at this level. I intend to enter it through a theological reflection on Matthew 18.

Theologians from all traditions have acknowledged Matt 18:20 to be a powerful statement of how and where the church is constituted, but none has placed more importance on it than baptists. Indeed, Miroslav Volf notes that it has 'shaped the entire free church tradition'.[8] However the implications for theological style are not so evident. I contend that the dynamics signaled in this key ecclesiological passage both explain and sustain an authentically baptist way of doing theology.

Matthew 18:20 is far too often shorn of its textual context, particularly the preceding verses (15-19) which discuss a case of discipline exercised by the community. Issues of insight, discernment and authority thus lie deep within this portion of scripture. Whatever

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[7] McClendon, I, 33.

[8] M. Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 135.

its history,[9] baptists have always cited the first part of the passage as a model of community life in action. The development of ideas is crucial. In vss 15-18 a relational problem is progressively taken to the wider community. This process draws its logic from the extraordinary statement on authority in vs. 19: 'if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.' Crucially, this is not the end of the *pericope*. The promise of divine response to agreed requests is not an indication of any power inherently possessed by the gathered community. Rather, it in turn depends on the familiar words of vs 20. Community discipline may be exercised *because* - 'where two or more are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'

'*I* am there among them.' The authority is Christ's authority, discerned and made visible in the gathered church. Christ's presence constitutes the church. This much we have always recognized in the verse, a view we share with other traditions. But the presence of Christ at this moment of gathering also gives form to the church's community life and self understanding. As Fiddes suggests, 'human authority consists in the responsibility of all the church members, gathered in church meeting, to find, to find the mind and purpose of Christ for their life and mission.'[10] The mystical presence of Christ in the gathered community generates the church's theologising.

In order fully to appreciate this dynamic we must wrestle with our understanding of sacrament. Indeed I suggest that sacramentality lies at the heart of Matthew 18:20. In the event of gathering in his name, Christ is present. There is surely no greater promise of grace than that. And of this grace the gathering itself is the visible sign.

As Paul Fiddes in another place, discipline, discernment and sacrament often come together at the centre of baptist church life.

> In [the Church] meeting, members of the church gather together to find the mind of Christ. They vote on issues, not to impose a majority view but to find the purpose of the risen

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[9] There are notable historical/critical issues surrounding this passage in Matthew, particularly the use of *ecclesia* in vs 17. For the purposes of this discussion it is immaterial whether Jesus himself spoke these words or if they reveal an early self-understanding of the church.

[10] Paul S. Fiddes, 'Baptism and Creation' in Fiddes (ed) *Reflections on the Water: Understanding God and the World through the Baptism of Believers* (Regent's Study Guides, 4; Oxford: Regent's Park College/Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1996), 47-67, 63.

> Lord for their life and mission. Because Christ is embodied among them through the meeting of their bodies, they expect to be able to discern his mind for them. In the seventeenth century it was common practice for members to hold the church meeting either immediately before or after the Lord's supper. So the church book, which recorded the names of the members, the church covenant and all the decisions taken in the church meeting, was kept in a drawer in the bench behind the Lord's table, or in the 'table pew'.[11]

The gathering is thus both the occasion of Christ's presence and the means of discerning his will. The life of the congregation is the visible centre of the faith. Moreover the gathering itself must be seen as the key sacramental moment.

Baptists have been somewhat uneasy about sacraments, historically being reluctant to too closely define the field. Despite his high place for experience, the liberal American baptist William Newton Clarke (1841–1912) does not deal with sacraments at all in his influential *Outline of Christian Theology* (1898).[12] A generation later, the Southern Baptist E.Y. Mullins (1860-1928) did not leave such an obvious gap. However, he was uncompromisingly direct in his view that Baptism and the 'Lord's supper' 'are not sacraments but ordinances; they do not confer or communicate or impart grace in and of themselves.'[13]

In Britain in the twentieth century an interesting story unfolded.[14] H. Wheeler Robinson, Neville Clark, and George Beasley-Murray called for a greater emphasis on sacramentality built on a reexamination of key New Testament texts. In 1959 Clark asserted that 'Baptism in this normative period, implies, embodies and effects forgiveness of sin, initiation into the church and the gift of the Holy

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[11] P. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000) 283.

[12] W.N Clarke, *An Outline of Christian Theology* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898).

[13] E.Y. Mullins, *Baptist Beliefs* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1925) 67.

[14] Much of what follows in this paragraph is derived from Stan Fowler's analysis of British sacramental developments in relation to Baptism. See Stanley K. Fowler, *More than a Symbol: The British Recovery of Baptismal Sacramentalism*, (Carlisle, Paternoster, 2002). See also Anthony Cross 'Baptists and Baptism – A British Perspective' *Baptist History and Heritage* 35, no.1 (Winter 2000: 107) and Cross, *Baptism and the Baptists* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000).

Spirit'.[15] This vigorous, New Testament-inspired sacramentalism - interpreted by some as tantamount to baptismal regeneration – was highly provocative. It is worth noting however, that although in baptist terms Clark and Beasley-Murray in particular represented a shift in a sacramental direction, the focus of this new thought was never on the physical elements, water, bread and wine. Consistently the debate was cast in terms of trying to understand (particularly baptism) as a graced *event*. Robert Walton added a crucial ecclesiological connection. The sacramentality of baptism attends on its role as initiation into the Church. The Spirit is 'the gift…to the Christian community, in which a man shares because he has entered that community through baptism.'[16]

More recently, baptist discussion of sacraments has flourished.[17] Among the most interesting contributions is the work of John Colwell of Spurgeon's college in London.[18] At the heart of Colwell's view of the sacraments is his insistence on the personhood of the Spirit – a personhood which he sees downgraded in Augustine's famous description of the Godhead as lover, beloved and love. 'Lover' and 'beloved' – Father and Son – have personhood inherently inferred; 'love' does not.

One realizes that what has been deduced is a duality or 'binity' rather than a Trinity; there are but two 'persons' here; the Spirit, as love, has been depersonalized. And in this implicit depersonalization of the Spirit, one suspects, lies the root of much that has proved problematic in Western theology.[19]

Rather than *deducing* the Trinity from the proposition 'God is love' (as he suggests Augustine does) Colwell calls for us to travel in the opposite direction, that is: to *infer* that God is love 'from the Trinitarian shape of the Gospel story.'[20] Picking up on ideas from

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[15] N. Clark in A. Gilmore ed. *Christian Baptism: A Fresh Attempt to Understand the Rite in Terms of Scripture, History and Theology* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1959) 308.

[16] Robert C. Walton, *The Gathered Community* (London: Carey Press, 1946) 30.

[17] See particularly Fiddes (ed) *Reflections on the Water* and A.R. Cross and P.E. Thompson (eds) *Baptist Sacramentalism* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003).

[18] J.E. Colwell, *Promise and Presence: An Exploration of Sacramental Theology*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2005).

[19] Colwell, 21.

[20] Colwell, 22.

Jurgen Moltmann and Tom Smail, as well as from the Puritans John Owen and Richard Sibbes, Colwell holds that the gospel story narrates 'not just the story of Jesus, but rather the story of his relatedness to the Father through the Spirit and of the Father's relatedness to the Son through that same Spirit.'[21] Thus 'in every respect and in every instance the relatedness of the Father to the Son and the relatedness of the Son to the Father as narrated in the gospel story is a mediated relatedness; it is never unmediated.'[22]

If as Colwell (following such as Rahner, Barth, and Moltmann) affirms, the very structure of the gospel story is revelatory of God in eternity (accepting Rahner's influential maxim that 'the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity') then mediation lies in the very nature of the Godhead and this in turn preserves the true personhood of the Spirit.

> It is not sufficient…to refer to the Spirit as the (impersonal) love uniting Father and Son; he is rather the (personal) mediator of that love; he is the one who mediates the love of the Father to the Son and love of the Son to the Father….Moreover…it is only because this absolute love and self-giving is mediated, rather than unmediated, that the persons of the Trinity remain distinct, that the Trinity does not collapse into an indistinct monad.[23]

This trinitarian insight provides the foundation of Colwell's view of sacrament. Mediation – in particular the Spirit's mediatory role - lies in the very Divine nature. Moreover, as with the Divine nature, so with God's relatedness to creation. Colwell goes on to discuss the Spirit's role in creation, asserting it to be entirely continuous with the gospel insight into the nature of the Trinity. Following Irenaeus, he emphasizes the teleological and mediated nature of divine engagement with the world.

> There is…no unmediated presence or action of God within or towards creation; the relatedness of God to creation is mediated in the Son and through the Spirit…. God relates to creation as the One that he is, as the Father, the Son and the

[21] Colwell, 37.
[22] Colwell, 38-39.
[23] Colwell, 39.

> Spirit, as the One whose free, loving relatedness is itself mediated.[24]

Such divine action is continuous and teleological. 'Christ is the source, goal and therefore the ultimate significance of every particular of creation.'[25] Moreover, this relational, trinitarian vision forbids any mechanistic account of the universe. Colwell here takes up the ideas of Jonathan Edwards and George Berkeley (he might also have engaged William Temple[26]) which ground all reality in the 'perception' of God. This is not a mere 'watching' of course. 'Divine perception is both active and creative'.[27]

This is the crucial sacramental point in Colwell's approach: we too may perceive. Humans also may glimpse the *telos*, meet Christ in creation. 'Truly to know any particular [of creation] is to know that particular in relation to the Son as its source and goal, is to know that particular as that which is loved in the Son by the Father.'[28] This of course, is not our own native ability, but a gift. By the action of the Spirit we may participate in God's perception. To perceive in this way is both to know and be changed. In this understanding, Colwell argues, all particulars of creation are potentially sacramental – from Moses' burning bush to Leonardo Boff's father's cigarette butt – but this should not be taken to posit a sacramental universe as such. Sharing in the divine perception is not automatic. It is gift, mediated in the sovereign action of the Spirit. To make all things signs would be to make nothing significant.[29]

Here Colwell turns to a classic reformed definition of sacramental signs, introducing the necessary aspect of promise. The Spirit can bestow sacramental perception of any particular of creation but *promises* to do so only in some special cases – those things traditionally called 'the sacraments'.

Whilst there are clearly helpful elements in Colwell's argument, I contend there is a more natural and useful 'baptist" application

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[24] Colwell, 48.
[25] Colwell, 56.
[26] See Temple's discussion of "The Immanence of the Transcendent" in *Nature Man and God* (London: Macmillan, 1934), esp. Lectures XI, XII and XIX.
[27] Colwell, 52.
[28] Colwell, 54.
[29] Colwell, 55.

which may be made, one which has profound implications for baptist theological method.

In Colwell's schema, the following logic seems to apply.

- Mediation lies at the heart of the Divine nature.
- This same trinitarian mediation constitutes the relation of God to creation.
- Mediating in this way, the Spirit may give insight into the *telos*, the purpose and goal of creation through the particulars of creation. Such are sacramental moments.

It is in this third aspect that questions arise. Colwell has not allowed a strong enough link between the mediatory nature of the Divine life and the granting of perception, the sacramental moment. If the trinitarian model Colwell posits is helpful, it is so to the extent that it establishes mediation through *persons*, rather than objects. (Indeed Colwell would argue that personhood itself is bound up with mediation.) This is not to deny that sacramental perception of objects may be given by the Spirit but it does in my view suggest that the most essential glimpses of the *telos* will be in the particulars of creation called 'person' - quintessentially in Christ, the God/Man, the 'total person', but derivatively in humans and particularly in the Church.

Interestingly, Colwell's first chapter after establishing his theory is on 'the sacramentality of the church'. However, he is uncomfortable with the inherently 'localising' tendency of a gathered ecclesiology, which he sees as undermining catholicity. He is also concerned at the potential vagueness of the concept of 'church', especially as developed by that closet baptist Karl Barth. 'An unmediated act of the Spirit is, by definition, invisible and indeterminate. A church constituted by such an unmediated act would consequently be invisible and indeterminate.'[30] (72) The church must take visible form - a form, for Colwell, defined by the presence and exercise of the traditional sacraments.

It is precisely at this point that I want to depart from Colwell, suggesting a reconsideration of two crucial aspects of the gathered ecclesiology he questions.

Firstly, it is the inevitably local, gathered community which is the focus of the promise Christ makes in Matthew 18:20. The

[30] Colwell, 72.

language there attached to gathering is far stronger than any attached in the New Testament to baptism. It is more direct, I would argue, even than the 'this is my body/blood' declarations at the last supper. If 'real presence' is sought then surely it is here, where two or three gather in his name.[31]

Secondly, in the anabaptist/baptist tradition 'gathering' is the highest form of visibility. It is more than coincidental presence together in one place. It is a gathering as a covenanted community in the name of Christ with all that that entails. It is a gathering of disciples who walk the road of suffering. It is an enactment of the Gospel and, in the committed, covenanted relationships of real, named, flesh and blood persons, it is a glimpse of the reconciliation God is bringing about for the universe. In general baptists have been happy to agree with Karl Barth on baptism and Zizioulas on eucharist that these practices are not in themselves sacramental but that they obtain iconic significance as eschatological events in the gathered community.

So, Zizioulas:

> The eucharist, as distinct from other expressions of ecclesial life, is unthinkable without the gathering of the whole Church in one place....consequently, it manifests the Church not simply as something instituted, that is, historically *given*, but also something, *con-stituted,* that is, realized as an event of free communion, prefiguring the divine life and the Kingdom to come...In this way the eucharist is not a 'sacrament,' something parallel to the divine word: it is the eschatologization of the historical word, the voice of the historical Christ, the voice of the Holy Scripture which comes to us, no longer simply as 'doctrine' through history, but as life and being through the *eschata.*[32]

Robert Walton, mentioned earlier, suggested for Baptism that 'it is an act of God through his Church; it is a sacrament of the community.'[33] This I propose is a 'trace' of an authentically baptist

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[31] Jesus' Matthean promise at 28:20 "I am with you to the end of the age" obviously also implies presence, indeed continuous presence. This too is, arguably, ecclesiological, being linked to the departing commission to make disciples.

[32] J.D. Zizioulas, Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and Church (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press) 21-22.

[33] Walton, 167.

sacramentality. The most truly sacramental moment is the gathering itself. It is about persons and it is here that the greatest possibility exists for the perception of the *telos*. "The whole universe is waiting with eager expectation for the unveiling of the Children of God.', (Romans 8:19). All other rites gain their sense and validity from their exercise in that context, rather than the community gaining its visibility and form from the rites, as in Colwell's view. Indeed, the gathering *is* the sacrament, the moment of Christ's presence, the *telos* at once for the church and for the world.

The implications of this understanding are huge. Most importantly, it identifies the life of the congregation as the visible centre of the faith. All theological questions are thus ecclesiological questions. Baptists have little incentive to establish abstract progressions of ideas or to begin their efforts to understand their faith with other people's issues. Everything derives from the dynamic experience of Christ in the community. Doctrines are of significance only for what they add to or draw from an understanding of that event. Baptist theology is 'systematic' only in the sense of being a 'centred set' of concepts. Doctrines proceed not by philosophical logic but as radiating spokes from the centre.

So baptist theology will look different. For instance, how life is lived in the Christian community is of great interest. In colonial New Zealand this was certainly the case. The principal questions, debated endlessly through the pages of the *NZ Baptist* in the 1880s and 1890s were 'How do we organise ourselves? How are we to become church? There were the occasional derived debates over questions current in Britain but even here the interest lay in the effects on evangelism and conversion – securing the future gathering. Something of the like is observable in recent baptist theological expressions. McClendon pioneered the notion of biography as theology. The first instalment of his *Systematic Theology* is a volume on narrative ethics. Doctrine is second and foundational theory is in volume three. Paul Fiddes' work shows a parallel approach. His 2000 volume on the Trinity is intentionally a '*Pastoral* Doctrine of the Trinity'. Fiddes, reflecting what I suggest is an authentically baptist method, asserts

> this is no new venture, for the doctrine of the Trinity has been a pastoral theology from its formulation. The Christian idea of a personal God begins historically in pastoral experience, that is, in the experience of the Christian congregation.[34]

[34] Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 8.

There are implications, too, for our understanding of the veracity of theology. In what sense can theology be 'true'? Certainly a simple correspondence theory does not sit comfortably with the dynamic, non-linear picture of baptist theology I propose. That both McClendon and Grenz made significant contributions to post-foundationalist debates is no mystery. But does the usual proferred alternative to correspondence theories, coherence, serve us any better? Are we consigned to a post-Wittgensteinian communitarian relativism? McClendon seems almost to suggest so, defining theology as 'the discovery, understanding, and transformation of the convictions of a convictional community'.[35] Yet there is a crucial qualification to McClendon's view: his sense of immediate identification with the primitive church. The local 'convictional community' is not merely self-referential but is inextricably bound with the first disciples, and, more importantly, with the One they follow. This is already loaded into our key text. Matthew 18:20 denies the local story a primary value in and of itself. The gathering, the local, is valued out of the conviction that Christ is present in the community of those 'gathered *in his name*'. This essential rider enables us to build a more explicit picture of the baptist theological style.

The church experience is never just local, never just one story. Rather it is the dynamic interplay of *two* stories – the contemporary, local, 'gathered' one, and the Christ story as revealed in scripture. These stories are not equal partners. As the church gathers 'in his name', it is seeking to align its story with Christ's story in all its scandalous particularity. Thus, in this dialectic, the Christ story is primary and normative. There are important implications for how we understand the nature of theology and in particular its claims to be 'true'.

We must assert that absolute truth is not some *thing* that we know, share or experience, but a *person* we meet. Christ is truth. Theology can be 'true', but in the sense that a builder's set square or spirit level, the sights on a rifle, or a compass can be 'true' - that is, they indicate a proper alignment, direction or bearing. None of these instruments is ever *perfectly* true, but good ones indicate measurements or bearings within acceptable tolerances. Theology similarly can be better or worse, depending on whether it aligns the church more or less well to the normative Christ story. The truth of theology therefore is not primarily that of correspondence, which arrogantly claims an unmediated grasp of reality. Neither is it merely one of self-

[35] McClendon, *Systematic Theology* I, p 23.

referential coherence. Both understandings remain necessary and useful, but closer to the heart of a baptist approach to theology is an understanding of theological truth better described as 'consonance'. In this concept, drawn from music, theology's task is to establish and enable the harmony of the local story with that of Christ, so that the church truly gathers 'in his name'.

Consonance with the Christ story transcends mere imitation. Theology is more than determining 'what would Jesus do?' or simply cataloguing scriptural concepts. The story itself calls us forward and outwards rather than backwards or inwards. The local community is rightly concerned with how it is to live in its real time context. Gathered in Christ's name it seeks to harmonises its own with his story and, thus, with the Kingdom of God. Theology's task is to facilitate this harmonisation, to bring us into consonance with Christ.

In terms of theological method, the role of tradition takes a particular form in this baptistic approach. McClendon's stress on the primitive immediacy of the church's connection to Christ might imply the simple dismissal of tradition as a resource for contemporary theology. Certainly in baptist theology tradition cannot be authoritative. Neither do baptists accept that the Christ story may only be viewed through the infinite interpretative accretions of the intervening centuries. This would be a too linear approach.

Nevertheless we cannot deny the reality of history and its influence on us. A metaphor may be helpful here. In train travel one's vision is generally limited to the scenes to the side of the carriage. When the stretch of track (and hence the train of carriages) is straight, the field of view is surprisingly restricted. One cannot see far ahead or behind. However, when the train enters a sweeping bend in the line, the other carriages, the engine itself (or the rear of the train if one looks behind) become suddenly visible. At such moments, often the most memorable of the journey, the travelers can see where they are going, and where they have been. Other carriages are (albeit briefly) in plain sight. Instead of an envelope of forty or so passengers, one realizes the presence of perhaps hundreds more.

In baptist theology time is similarly to be imagined as curved. Freed from the restricting straight lines of authoritative tradition, baptists claim the right to look across the curve, to look directly to the Christ story for our reference. Just as in the train journey the other carriages swing into view at such moments, earlier generations may be seen more authentically as what they truly are - fellow travelers, fixed to the same engine but not of themselves giving us

either motion or direction. Of course, if not for these carriages our connection to the engine would be threatened. The generations similarly provide continuity and a profundity of experience and discovery from which any contemporary theology constantly draws. They bequeath 'traces' of baptist thought. In Fiddes' terms such 'traces' will constantly enrich us, but (acknowledging the potential for confused metaphors) more formed 'tracks' will rarely direct us. The reference point remains the vision of Christ himself, forever renewed in his presence among us.

What then of scripture? An exploration of theological method, which centres the truth of theology on the Christ story, must define the role of the normative documents of the faith - the access, after all, to the very story which has formed us. In a consonance approach to theology Scripture is released to be used in genuinely canonical terms - as a measure, enabling our discourse and lives to be 'true'. Barth's description of the theological task is apposite.

> Dogmatics as such does not ask what the apostles and prophets said but what we must say on the basis on the apostles and prophets….As the church accepts from Scripture, and with divine authority from Scripture alone, the attestation of its own being as the measure of its utterance, it finds itself challenged to know itself, and therefore…to ask…what Christian utterance can and should say today. '[36]

This is potentially problematic. The church's sense of its identity does not hinge solely on the attestation of scripture, resting more fundamentally on the dynamic presence of Christ. But scripture is indeed properly understood as challenging the church to 'know itself' better and to guard its utterance.

And its acts. Kevin Vanhoozer suggests that

> the canon's primary role is to cultivate good theological judgement so that it functions not so much as a script to be memorized and repeated verbatim but as a guide for learning one's role as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Rethinking doctrine as dramatic direction encourages us to think in terms of *doing* the truth.[37]

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[36] Barth ***CD*** I.1.16. I am indebted to my former Principal Brian Smith for reminding me of this reference.

[37] K.J. Vanhoozer, 'The Voice and the Actor: A Dramatic Proposal about the Ministry and Minstrelsy of Theology' in J.G. Stackhouse (ed), *Evangelical*

Grenz, from a different starting point, argues similarly.

> Through the Bible, the Spirit orients our present on the basis of the past and in accordance with a vision for the future. The Spirit leads the contemporary hearers to view themselves and their situation in the light of God's past and future and to open themselves and their present to the power of that future, which is already at work in the world. Thereby they are drawn to participate in God's eschatological world. The task of theology in turn, is to assist the people of God in hearing the Spirit's voice speaking through the text so that we can live as God's people – as inhabitants of God's eschatological world – in the present.[38]

Both Vanhoozer and Grenz are anxious to hold a firm, if redefined, authority of scripture. A baptist theological method will be similarly concerned. However, it will add the sacramental mystery of Christ's presence in the gathered community as the essential concomitant of scriptural reading, however dramatic or Spirit-led. The church, in all its contextual specificity, finds itself above all Christ's story because he is there among them.

Baptists need confidently to celebrate their own unique theological dynamic. In Aotearoa-New Zealand such identity questions are often explored through the Maori notion of *tikanga*. This rich concept can mean method, custom or approach, but it is broader than those terms imply, encapsulating also senses of 'culture' or 'way'. Neither Catholic nor Protestant, the baptist *tikanga* is a way of its own, a culture of church and theological discourse which looks expectantly to the Spirit's work in creating anew as the body of Christ those who gather in his name.

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Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 61-106, 100-101

[38] S.J. Grenz, 'Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic: Theological Method after the Demise of Foundationalism' in in J.G. Stackhouse (ed), *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 107-136, 125.