JAMES WM. McCLENDON, JR.'S NARRATIVE CHRISTOLOGY IN ECUMENICAL/ECCLESIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE[1]

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ABSTRACT

The reception of Baptist theologian James Wm. McClendon, Jr.'s proposal of a "two-narrative" Christology has focused on its relation to the Chalcedonian "two-natures" Christology. While not ignoring this question, this article addresses the ecumenical and ecclesiological implications of McClendon's Christology by turning to a pair of different questions. First, what does McClendon's seemingly non-Chalcedonian Christology look like when viewed through the lenses of the attention bilateral ecumenical dialogue has given to Christology as central to efforts toward confessing "one faith," in particular in light of the progress in overcoming the fifth-century Christological divisions made in the ecumenical dialogues between the non-Chalcedonian churches of the East and Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches during the past four decades? Second, what are the ecumenical implications of McClendon's suggestion of a link between his two-narrative Christology and ecclesiology? The article develops this suggested link by proposing the outlines of a narrative-Christological ecclesiology in terms of seven theses regarding what it might mean ecumenically for the church to embody the story of Jesus as a pilgrim people.

I. McCLENDON'S NARRATIVE CHRISTOLOGY

The year 2014 marks the twentieth anniversary of the publication of *Doctrine*, the second volume in the *Systematic Theology* by Baptist theologian James Wm. McClendon, Jr. (1924-2000).[2] Following on the heels of the publication of a new edition of the three-volume work by Baylor University Press in August 2012,[3] this is an opportune occasion for reconsidering one of McClendon's most significant contributions: his proposal of a "two-narrative Christology."[4] And as McClendon was a North American Baptist theologian who pursued the majority of his career in California and thus within a Pacific Rim context, it is especially appropriate for this reconsideration to appear in the pages of the *Pacific Journal of Baptist Research*.

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[1] An earlier version of this article was presented to a session on "Christology Today" in the Constructive Theologies section of the Southeast Regional Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Greenville, South Carolina, USA, March 15-17, 2013.

[2] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Doctrine* (vol. 2 of *Systematic Theology;* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994).

[3] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2012). The text and pagination of the original Abingdon Press edition and the new Baylor University Press edition are identical; the new introduction by Curtis W. Freeman included in the Baylor University Press volumes is paginated with roman numerals as frontal matter. Thus while the page references in the notes that follow in the present article are to the Baylor University Press edition unless otherwise noted, the page references apply to either edition.

[4] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 263-79.

Much subsequent reception of McClendon's proposal has focused on its relation to the Chalcedonian "two-natures" Christology that became the received criterion of Christological orthodoxy East and West. Since McClendon himself gave much attention to the weaknesses he perceived in the two-natures model and seemed to urge its abandonment, one of the lingering questions debated in the reception of McClendon's two-narrative Christology has been whether it is consistent with orthodox Christological formulations.[5] While not ignoring this question, this article addresses the ecumenical and ecclesiological implications of McClendon's Christology by turning to a pair of different questions not sufficiently explored heretofore. First, what does McClendon's seemingly non-Chalcedonian Christology look like when viewed through the lenses of the attention bilateral ecumenical dialogue has given to Christology as central to efforts toward confessing "one faith," in particular in light of the progress in overcoming the fifth-century Christological divisions made in the ecumenical dialogues between the non-Chalcedonian churches of the East and Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches during the past four decades? Second, what are the ecumenical implications of McClendon's ever-so-brief suggestion of a link between his two-narrative Christology and ecclesiology?

A brief introduction to McClendon is in order for readers who may be unfamiliar with his work. McClendon, who died in 2000, received his early Christian nurture and theological education in the context of the Southern Baptist Convention (the largest union of Baptists in the United States of America), among whom he served as a pastor and then professor of theology at the Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in Mill Valley, California (near San Francisco). There McClendon experienced an early exile from his Southern Baptist community, terminated despite having tenure when he encouraged student involvement in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s efforts in Selma, Alabama. That experience proved to be fortuitous for the subsequent development of McClendon's thought. It led to a sojourn that involved visiting professorships in a series of institutions not connected with Baptists, especially Roman Catholic institutions. One of them, the University of San Francisco, dismissed McClendon for reasons connected with his public opposition to the Vietnam War. But in a subsequent visiting professor stint at the University of Notre Dame, his relationship with Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder contributed to McClendon's reclamation of his free church heritage even while the Catholic context led him to relate this heritage to the larger Christian tradition. Eventually he landed another tenure-track position at the Episcopal Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley, California and then taught until his death at the broadly evangelical Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. Along the way McClendon made an early contribution to the post-liberal narrative theology movement with his 1974 book *Biography as Theology*.[6] His magnum opus was his three-volume *Systematic Theology*, in which he sought to give voice to what he discerned as a distinctively Baptist way of doing theology—not only from the upper-case "B" Baptist tradition, but also from the broader free church tradition that he references as lower-case "b"

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[5] See, e.g., Jonathan R. Wilson, "Can Narrative Christology Be Orthodox?" *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8, no. 4 (October 2006): 371-81, which answers the question posed in the article's title in the affirmative, *contra* critics of McClendon's proposal cited therein.

[6] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Reshape Today's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974); a revised edition was published by Trinity Press International in 1990.

baptist. This concrete community of reference led McClendon to write the first volume on *Ethics*, dealing with what it means for a community of disciples to walk together in the way of Jesus.[7] Since such a community must form disciples in this way by teaching what the church must teach to be a community of faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, he devoted the second volume to *Doctrine*. Such a community exists not for its own sake but to testify to the world, in its cultural and philosophical particularity, that salvation is found in Jesus and his way, so volume three dealt with the church's *Witness*.[8]

In the *Doctrine* volume, McClendon surveys three rival Christological models—the pre-Nicene Logos model, the two-natures model of the trajectory from Nicaea through Chalcedon, and the historical model influenced by the modern quest of the historical Jesus[9]—to which he addresses three "persistent questions" intended to probe their adequacy: first, "what right has Jesus Christ to absolute Lordship—the Lordship that Scripture assigns to God alone?"; second, "How can monotheists… tell the Jesus story as their own?"; and third, "how Christ-like… are disciples' lives to be?"[10] McClendon finds the culmination of the two-natures trajectory in the Chalcedonian definition deficient especially in regard to the third question, asking whether that Jesus provides a paradigm for discipleship that disciples can really put into practice. Later he concludes, "Two-natures Christology has had its day, and we need not return to it save as a monument to what has gone before. All honor to Athanasius and Basil and Leontius, but they did not write Scripture, and it is to Scripture that we must return in fashioning our convictions."[11]

Seemingly as a replacement for the two-natures Christology that since 451 has defined the orthodox centre for much of the church in its teaching about the person of Christ, McClendon proposes a "two-narrative Christology."[12] In this account, one's identity is located not in one's classification according to abstract categories of "natures." One's identity is nothing other than one's story. A person's story in its totality and particularity is the thickest possible description one can offer of a person's identity.[13] For Christ, this narrative identity is both twofold and singular. One might summarize what McClendon proposes along these lines, intentionally echoing the two-natures-in-one-person template of the Chalcedonian Definition. *The story of Christ fully encompasses and discloses the story of the Triune God, which is God's*

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[7] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Ethics* (vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology*; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986). A second revised and enlarged edition of *Ethics* was published by Abingdon Press in 2002.

[8] James Wm. McClendon, Jr. with Nancey C. Murphy, *Witness (*vol. 3 of *Systematic Theology*; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000). For a helpful orientation to the *Systematic Theology* as well as the biographical context of its genesis and development, see Curtis W. Freeman, "A Theology for Brethren, Radical Believers, and Other Baptists: A Review Essay of James McClendon's *Systematic Theology*," *Brethren Life and Thought* 50, nos. 1-2 (Winter/Spring 2006): 106-15, revised and expanded as "Introduction: A Theology for Radical Believers and Other Baptists" in McClendon, *Ethics*, vii-xxxviii (Baylor University Press edition; also included as the introduction to the *Doctrine* and *Witness* volumes).

[9] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 251-63.

[10] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 194-95, and restated on p. 250.

[11] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 276.

[12] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 263-79.

[13] Cf. F. Michael McLain, "Narrative Interpretation and the Problem of Double Agency," in *Divine Action: Studies Inspired by the Philosophical Theology of Austin Farrer* (ed. Brian Hebblethwaite and Edward Henderson; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 143: "If God is an agent who acts in the world so as to disclose divine character and purpose, then narrative is the appropriate form in which to render God's identity." Daniel L. Migliore cites McLain in connection with his own observations on the connection between narrative, identity, and revelation: "[O]ur identity as persons is often rendered in narrative form. If this is true of our self-disclosure to each other, by analogy it is also true of the self-disclosure of God." D. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 37.

identity. At the same time the story of Christ fully encompasses and discloses the story of humanity, which is our identity. Yet these two distinguishable stories, these two identities, are in Jesus Christ one indivisible narrative identity. Below is McClendon's summary of his proposal in his own words:

> Therefore we have these two stories, of divine self-expense and human investment, of God reaching to people even before people reach to God, of a God who gives in order to be able to receive, and a humanity that receives so that it shall be able to give. Together, they constitute the biblical story in its fullness. *And now the capstone word is this: these two stories are at last indivisibly one.* We can separate them for analysis, but we cannot divide them; there is but one story there to be told. Finally, this story becomes gospel, becomes good news, when we discover that it is our own.[14]

Notwithstanding McClendon's declaration that "two-natures Christology has had its day, and we need not return to it," I see his two-narrative alternative not as a replacement for Chalcedon but as an extension and enrichment of it. McClendon's Christology teases out additional implications of the incarnation beyond what could be expressed within the constraints of the Chalcedonian categories by re-reading the Council's insights in light of a new set of questions and categories that belong to a context other than the Hellenism of late antiquity—namely, the West after modernity. Just as McClendon compared the diverse historical atonement theories to the Jewish rabbinical midrashim that re-interpreted rather than replaced the biblical stories,[15] so we might regard McClendon's two-narrative proposal as a sort of midrashic re-interpretation rather than replacement of Chalcedon. Furthermore, McClendon's qualifications regarding the relation of the two narratives to each other correspond to those of the Chalcedonian Definition: the two narrative identities may be separated for analysis ("without confusion"), but they cannot be divided ("without division or separation").

II. MCCLENDON'S NARRATIVE CHRISTOLOGY IN ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVE

It is true that "to the objection that all this talk of twoness and oneness in narrative does not correspond very well to classic two-nature-in-one-being Christology," McClendon himself replied, "it does not."[16] Thus it might initially seem that McClendon's proposal is just as much of an ecumenical non-starter as would be the suggestion of scrapping Trinitarian faith, which is the minimal doctrinal basis for membership in the broadly inclusive World Council of Churches.[17] Yet there is good ecumenical

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[14] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 276-77.

[15] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 230-33.

[16] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 276.

[17] Affirmation of a basically trinitarian doctrine of God—one God who exists as three distinct persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—seems to be the implication of the basis adopted by the World Council of Churches at its Third Assembly in Evanston, Illinois in 1961: "The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (World Council of Churches, "Theological and Historical Background of the WCC Basis"; n.p. Online: http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/other/theological-and-historical-background-of-the-wcc-basis).

precedent for considering the Chalcedonian two-nature Christology and McClendon's two-narrative account fundamentally compatible. The Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio* allowed that differing doctrinal formulations, including the relation of Chalcedonian Christology to the Christologies of the non-Chalcedonian churches of the East, may be "mutually complementary rather than conflicting."[18] John Paul II's encyclical "On Commitment to Ecumenism" *Ut Unum Sint* likewise posited the essential unity of "different ways of looking at the same reality," offering as evidence that such is possible the common declarations on Christology signed by Catholic popes and patriarchs of non-Chalcedonian churches.[19] *Unitatis Redintegratio* and *Ut Unum Sint* may be Catholic documents, but they testify to what is an ecumenically shared recognition. Several bilateral dialogues between the non-Chalcedonian churches of the East and Protestant as well as Catholic and Orthodox churches bear this out: these include dialogues between the Anglican Communion and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, between the Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, between the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, between the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, and between the Roman Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East.[20] The following quotation from the "Agreed Statement on Christology" issued in 2002 by the Anglican-Oriental Orthodox International Commission is representative of what these dialogues have achieved in overcoming the Christological divisions of the fifth century, in this case between those who affirm the Chalcedonian Definition and the Monophysites anathematized by it:

> [T]hose among us who speak of two natures of Christ are justified in doing so since they do not thereby deny their inseparable indivisible union; similarly, those among us who speak of one incarnate nature of the Word of God are justified in doing so since they do not thereby deny the continuing dynamic presence in Christ of the divine and the human….We recognize the limit of all theological language and the philosophical terminology of which it makes and has made use. We are unable to confine the mystery of God's utter self-giving in

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[18] Vatican II, "Decree on Ecumenism" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*), 21 November, 1964, § 17, in *Trent to Vatican II* (vol. 2 of *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*; ed. Norman P. Tanner; London: Sheed & Ward and Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 917. In context, the reference to "mutually complementary rather than conflicting" theological formulations has in mind ecumenical relations with the Eastern Orthodox churches.

[19] John Paul II, "Ut Unum Sint" (Encyclical on Commitment to Ecumenism, 25 May 1995), § 38; [cited?]. Online: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint_en.html.

[20] The reports and agreed statements from these bilateral dialogues are gathered in volumes of the *Growth in Agreement* series published under the auspices of the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission: Jeffrey Gros, Harding Meyer, and William G. Rusch, eds., *Growth in Agreement II: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level, 1982-1998* (Faith and Order Paper no. 187; Geneva: WCC Publications and Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 108-112 (Anglican-Oriental Orthodox), 187-99 (Eastern Orthodox-Oriental Orthodox), 291-94 (Reformed-Oriental Orthodox), 688-708 (Oriental Orthodox-Roman Catholic), 709-12 (Assyrian Church of the East-Roman Catholic); Jeffrey Gros, Thomas F. Best, and Lorelei F. Fuchs, eds., *Growth in Agreement III: International Dialogue Texts and Agreed Statements, 1998-2005* (Geneva: WCC Publications and Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 2-11 (Eastern Orthodox-Oriental Orthodox), 33-38 (Anglican-Oriental Orthodox), 39-57 (Reformed-Oriental Orthodox), 190-96 (Oriental Orthodox-Roman Catholic), 197-205 (Assyrian Church of the East/Chaldean Church-Roman Catholic).

the incarnation of the divine Word in an ineffable, inexpressible and mysterious union of divinity and humanity, which we worship and adore.[21]

If recent ecumenical dialogue is able to recognize such diverse articulations of Christology as belonging to the one faith that the Christian church has in Christ, McClendon's non-Chalcedonian Christology should escape anathema as well. It may be that McClendon has successfully articulated in narrative terms rather more directly the essential event that other Christological formulations reference in less direct ways. Events like the incarnation, after all, *are* stories. Narrations of events have a more direct relationship to the events themselves; explanations of the events are more distant. Fidelity to the same first-order narrative that gives the community its identity may nevertheless yield differing second-order explications that are, in the words of *Unitatis Redintegratio*, "mutually complementary rather than conflicting." McClendon's narrative approach to Christology highlights the shared first-order narrative in ways that render differing explications less exclusive of one another; it might also be applicable to other doctrinal roots of the church's current divisions, but that possibility is beyond the scope of the present article.

III. A NARRATIVE-CHRISTOLOGICAL ECCLESIOLOGY?

There is another feature of McClendon's Christology that has less obvious ecumenical implications. In the course of elaborating his two-narrative proposal, McClendon drops but does not develop the tantalizing hint that features of his Christology may be extended ecclesiologically. He writes, "*in resurrection light*, apostolic Christianity can be construed as the continuation of the Jesus story already begun."[22] The remainder of this article draws on McClendon's narrative Christology to make some constructive ecclesiological proposals regarding this "continuation of the Jesus story already begun." These proposals also draw from the ecumenically shared concept of the earthly church as a pilgrim community. That ecclesial orientation is embodied by the early monastic communities, and it is articulated in the Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, which, in a chapter titled "The Eschatological Nature of the Pilgrim Church and Her Union with the Heavenly Church," insists that the church "will receive its perfection only in the glory of heaven."[23] It is intrinsic to the tradition to which McClendon's project seeks to give voice, for the free churches at their best are relentlessly pilgrim communities that resist overly-realized eschatologies of the church. Their ecclesial ideal is the church that is fully under the rule of Christ, which they locate somewhere ahead of them rather than in any past or present instantiation of the church. In the meantime this free church orientation is one relentlessly dissatisfied with the present state of the church in its pilgrim journey toward the community that will be fully under the reign of Christ.

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[21] Anglican-Oriental Orthodox International Commission, "Agreed Statement on Christology" (Holy Etchmiadzin, Armenia, 5-10 November 2002), in *Growth in Agreement III*, 36.

[22] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 272.

[23] Vatican II, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" *Lumen Gentium* (21 November 1964), § 48, in Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (rev. ed.; Northport, N.Y.: Costello Publishing Co., 1992), 407.

This applies also to the church's doctrinal formulations, considered revisable in light of "fresh light that may yet break forth from the Word."[24] McClendon's refusal to be bound Christologically by Chalcedon exemplifies this stance.

To suggest the systematic coinherence of Christology and ecclesiology is nothing new. The New Testament itself offers a Christological approach to ecclesiology for, as Paul Minear demonstrated in his book *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, the Pauline "body of Christ" is the central image that provides the interpretive key to the function of the ninety-six images of the church his book explores.[25] Karl Barth's theology of the church has been called a "Christological ecclesiology,"[26] and Orthodox theologian George Florovsky insisted that the church is the locus of "the continuing presence of the divine Redeemer."[27] But Barth and Florovsky simply echo something long established in the tradition. Augustine had cemented the connection in his memorable formula *totus Christus, caput et corpus*—"the whole Christ, head and body"—which he employed especially in his polemics against the Donatists who would divide the whole Christ.[28]

A Christological ecclesiology rooted in a narrative Christology in which the church continues the story of Jesus highlights the pilgrim nature of the divided church's journey toward the ecumenical future. I propose the following seven theses regarding what it might mean ecumenically for the church to embody the story of Jesus as a pilgrim people.[29]

First thesis: The church's identity is the identity of Christ. If the church is identified with the whole Christ as the body of Christ, the church's identity can be nothing other than Christ's identity. The divided church is a church that is separated from the fullness of its common identity in Christ. Its pilgrim journey to the ecumenical future progressively recovers this identity.

Second thesis: The church's identity is the identity of Christ, which is the story of Christ. If Christ's identity is most fully described in terms of his story, and the church derives its identity from Christ, then unless head and body are severed, Christ's story is the church's story, and thus its identity. The divided church is a church that has lost its unifying story. Its pilgrim journey to the ecumenical future entails a recovery of Christ's story as its own—as the narrative world in and out of which it lives, as the narrative in light of which it understands the world to which it bears witness.

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[24] These much-quoted words attributed to English Separatist John Robinson (1575/76-1625) in a farewell address delivered to the Mayflower Pilgrims at their departure from the Netherlands in 1620 are frequently offered as a concise articulation of this pilgrim hermeneutical stance toward received interpretations of Scripture. Robinson's address was recounted by Edward Winslow (1595-1655) in *Hypocrisie Unmasked: a true relation of the proceedings of the Governor and company of the Massachusetts against Samuel Gorton of Rhode Island* (1646). As scholarship on Robinson has noted, however, the quotation in question may be apocryphal; so, e.g., Timothy George, *John Robinson and the English Separatist Tradition* (NABPR Dissertation Series, no. 1; Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1982), vii.

[25] Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 221-49.

[26] Kimlyn J. Bender, *Karl Barth's Christological Ecclesiology* (Barth Studies; Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2005).

[27] George Florovsky, "As the Truth is in Jesus," *Christian Century* 68, no. 51 (December 19, 1951): 1459 (1457-59).

[28] E.g., Augustine of Hippo, *Sermo* 341.1.1 (PL 39:1493); ET, "Sermon 341: On the Three Ways of Understanding Christ in Scripture," in *Sermons 341-400* (The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, pt. III, vol. 10; ed. John E. Rotelle; trans. Edmund Hill; Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 1995), 19.

[29] While this article does not interact with his proposals, George Lindbeck has offered a narrative account of ecclesiology in his essay "The Story-Shaped Church: Critical Exegesis and Theological Interpretation" in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation* (ed. Garrett Green; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 161-78.

Third thesis: The church's identity is the identity of Christ, which is the story of Christ, which is the story conferred in baptism. In baptism the story of Jesus' death and resurrection becomes the story of those who follow him (Rom 6:3-11), making them participants in a new story in which characters have new roles: because they have taken on Christ's story in baptism, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all … are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:27-28 NRSV). The origin of the ancient rule of faith in baptismal confession underscores baptism's conferral of narrative identity. In the eventual forms of the "Nicene" (Niceno-Constantinopolitan) Creed, the baptismal confession of the Eastern Churches, and the Apostles' Creed, the baptismal confession of the Western churches, the rule of faith rehearses in brief the story in Christ told in full by the Bible. In baptism Christians embrace this narrative identity as theirs, and it embraces them. The divided church is a church that has not fully recognized this baptismal identity as one baptism into the one body of Christ. Its pilgrim journey to the ecumenical future involves the mutual recognition of baptism, for not to recognize a person's baptism "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19) is to deny Christ as that person's identity.[30]

Fourth thesis: The church's identity is the identity of Christ, which is the story of Christ, which is the story of the Triune God. The divine story that is the story of Christ is not the story of generic, abstract divinity, but the inescapably triadic story of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who has taken on flesh in Jesus Christ and given God's Spirit to the church in Pentecost. To repeat part of my summary of McClendon's two-narrative Christology: "The story of Christ fully encompasses and discloses the story of the Triune God, which is God's identity." This inescapably triadic divine story is the one that the church embraces and that embraces the church in its tripartite baptismal confession. Yet there is a proper distinction between the story of the creator and the story of the creature.[31] For the church as God's creature, Christ is the key to this distinction. As the one in whom "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col 1:19 NRSV), Christ's story is directly the story of the Triune God. As the body that has Christ as head (Col 1:18), the church's story is derivatively the story of the Triune God. By virtue of its *koinonia* in Christ as Christ's body, the church has a participation in the life of the Triune God. This is the point at which Christology has an advantage over Trinitarian theology as the organizing principle of an ecclesiology. Ecclesiologies developed along the lines of social Trinitarian thought have contributed important insights regarding the ecclesial life that ought to be,[32] but the church's identity in the story of the Triune God does not come

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[30] Two documents offered to the churches as the fruit of decades of multilateral dialogue through the World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order have proposed possible pathways to convergence in mutual baptismal recognition: World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Faith and Order Paper No. 111; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982); World Council of Churches, *One Baptism: Toward Mutual Recognition. A Study Text* (Faith and Order Paper No. 210; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2011). For a Baptist perspective on the proposals of the latter document, see Steven R. Harmon, "'One Baptism': A Study Text for Baptists," *Baptist World: A Magazine of the Baptist World Alliance* 58, no. 1 (January/March 2011): 9-10.

[31] A distinction McClendon makes in *Doctrine*, 275.

[32] E.g., Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (trans. Margaret Kohl; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981); Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Theology and Liberation series; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988).

merely from the church's imitation of the mutuality that characterizes the Triune life.[33] The church's identity in the story of the Triune God comes from its participation in the life of the Triune God through Christ. The divided church has an attenuated Trinitarian identity because it is bodily diminished in relationship to its head. Its pilgrim journey to the ecumenical future requires taking up ecclesial practices that draw the church into deeper participation in the life of the Triune God. As the churches participate more fully in the life of the Triune God, the mutuality of the Triune God's oneness-in-distinct-otherness becomes more fully manifest in ecclesial life.

Fifth thesis: The church's identity is the identity of Christ, which is the story of Christ, which is the story of our humanity. Here the emphasis is on *our* humanity. McClendon's insistence that the story of Christ fully encompasses and discloses the story of humanity means that in Christ's humanity is the story of humanity as it ought to be—seen in the New Testament emphasis on the sinlessness of Jesus, or positively expressed as his "full faithfulness"[34]—as well as the story of humanity in opposition to God's intentions for human life. In regard to the latter, McClendon seems to follow Karl Barth in suggesting that the humanity that Jesus embraces is not unfallen humanity but humanity inclined toward sin—an inclination that Jesus shared in his solidarity with the human condition but which Jesus faithfully resisted at every stage in his human moral development.[35] When Christ's story as the story of humanity becomes the church's story, it is in this twofold sense. It discloses the church as it ought to be—the spotless bride of Christ. But it also exposes the church's distance from that in its existence in the eschatological tension between the "already" and the "not yet." The church is a pilgrim community because of its earthly distance from its not-yet-realized goal—a distance that includes what Karl Rahner named as ecclesial sin.[36] Certainly the church's divisions and refusals to overcome them are among these ecclesial sins. The pilgrim church, whose narrative identity is that of Christ, shares especially in the story of sin-inclined humanity that Jesus's story encompasses. The church's pilgrim journey to the ecumenical future therefore involves owning its temporal identity as a penitential community, called to repentance for sins of division and its perpetuation.[37]

Sixth thesis: The church's identity is the identity of Christ, which is the story of Christ, which is the story of all the members of Christ's body. The way to the ecumenical future entails the recovery of the common narrative-Christological identity the church receives in baptism, but that does not require the relinquishing of the stories of divided communities in their historic and ongoing journeys. While denominational stories are in part stories of ecclesial sin, they also serve as bearers of the distinctive ecclesial gifts that are distributed

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[33] Miroslav Volf offers appropriate cautions regarding the pitfalls of rooting an ecclesiology or political theology in human imitation of the intra-trinitarian relations in his article "'The Trinity is Our Social Program': The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement," *Modern Theology* 14, no. 3 (July 1998): 403-23.

[34] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 273.

[35] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 262 and 273. Karl Barth, whose anticipations of a narrative Christology McClendon applauded, had also insisted that it is this sort of sinful humanity that Christ assumed. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2 (trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 151-55.

[36] Karl Rahner, "The Sinful Church in the Decrees of Vatican II," in *Concerning Vatican Council II* (vol. 6 of *Theological Investigations*; trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger; Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1969), 270-94.

[37] This point is forcefully argued by Ephraim Radner, *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1998).

throughout the divided church and that no one church completely possesses. In recognition of both dimensions of the stories of particular communions—ecclesial sin as well as ecclesial giftedness—the five-year international dialogue between the Baptist World Alliance and the Anglican Consultative Council gave significant attention to the sharing of local stories of Baptist communities, of Anglican communities, and of the local relationships between them.[38] The story of Christ includes such particular stories, for Christ is present in them. And if these stories belong to the story of Christ, they are the whole church's stories, too. The church's pilgrim journey to the ecumenical future involves the sharing of the particular stories that belong to the story of the whole church—as acts of confession, repentance, and reconciliation, and as acts of receptive ecumenism that receive as gifts from one another the missing pieces of the divided churches' stories.

Seventh thesis: The church's identity is the identity of Christ, which is the story of Christ, which is the story of the eschatological community. Story is inherently eschatological—a story goes somewhere. If it is a story, it has a plot, driven by conflict and resolution. The Johannine Jesus discloses a dimension of the conclusion to the church's story when in John 17 he prays for the visible unity of those who follow him. The story's plot is driven in part by the conflict of division, introduced already in the New Testament chapter of the story. The church's pilgrim journey to the ecumenical future takes place in the tension between the present conflict of division and the future resolution of visible unity. But because the church knows the story's conclusion, the church participates in the quest for Christian unity in hope, no matter how dismal the present prospects for visible unity may seem.

I do not know whether McClendon would endorse these theses outlining a narrative-Christological ecclesiology and its ecumenical implications, and I do not think that they necessarily depend on McClendon's distinctive Christology. But in ecumenical and ecclesiological perspective, McClendon's two-narrative Christology can both lend support to ecumenical convergences on Christology and inspire an ecclesiology that lends support to ecumenical convergence.

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[38] Anglican Consultative Council and Baptist World Alliance, *Conversations Around the World: The Report of the International Conversations between the Anglican Communion and the Baptist World Alliance 2000-2005* (London: Anglican Communion Office, 2005), 82-97.