A RESPONSE TO REVIEWERS OF *CONTESTING CATHOLICITY*

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I want to thank Bill Leonard, Doug Weaver, Adam English, Fisher Humphreys, and the readers of these reviews, for taking time to engage my book with critical honesty and scholarly charity. But before addressing the specific questions and issues they raise, I would like to tell a short story. Once upon a time there was a family—a mom, a dad, and two children. Theirs was a happy home, and the children grew up knowing what it meant to love and be loved. The older child graduated from high school and went to a prestigious university out of state, where she earned a bachelor's degree and eventually an M.B.A. She met and married a young man, and they moved back to her hometown where they bought a house in the same neighbourhood as her parents. She and her husband worked in the family business, raised children of their own, and lived happily ever after.

The younger child had a very different story. He too left home and went away to college where he majored in philosophy and came under the influence of some radical ideas. He grew increasingly uncomfortable with his family of origin. Eventually, he became so alienated from them that he went to court and legally severed his relationship with his family. All of this made his parents very sad. They still loved their son, and so, they decided to give him his share of the inheritance as a sign that their love for him had not changed. The young man quickly lost his fortune in several risky business ventures. And no matter how hard he tried, he could find no work. One day he saw a job opening with a multinational agribusiness firm. He quickly snapped it up, and moved far away from his former family and friends. There he met a young woman, who he married. They had several children but their marriage grew increasingly unhappy. It eventually ended in a messy divorce. He soon remarried a woman with two children of her own, but this new relationship did not last either. This large and unhappy blended family did not get along. They never got together, not even for birthdays or holidays. They seldom talked, and they never attempted to make contact with their great grandparents, cousins, aunts, or uncles in the old country. And they all lived unhappily ever after.

This is no imaginary fairy tale. It is, of course, a thinly veiled retelling of Jesus' story of a father and two sons (Luke 15:11-32), and yet with a very different outcome. But it is also the all too real divide-and-multiply story of sectarianism, and the characters, as is easy to see, are figures of the unhappy history of the church oppressed "by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed." It is a sad account of discontinuity and brokenness, oddly often celebrated by Free Churches, and Baptists in particular. But it is not a new one, for it can be traced back to the primal human story in which the sons and daughters of earth chose to live "free" (as they understood it) in the land east of Eden (Genesis 3). In my book I tell a different story for Baptists

and other Free Churches, not rooted in the search for independence that was Adam's sin, but in a vision of interdependence that is the mark of the new humanity and of the new creation on its way (Eph 2:15; 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15).

I am especially grateful that two of the best Baptist historians, who have argued for what Doug Weaver calls "the liberal or freedom-based" approach to Baptist identity, are represented on this panel. This is not the first time that we have talked about how to understand the present circumstance in Baptist life in light of the past, but it is surely one of the best. One misconception that has confused previous conversations is the notion that our divergent interpretations of the past can be explained as simply a difference between historians, who appeal to historical facts and sources, and theologians who look to ideas and arguments to support their views. This simple explanation has resulted in talking past one another. Out of respect for my historically minded colleagues I committed myself to pay careful attention to primary sources from the origins of the Baptist movement in hopes that it might enable us to hear and understand one another better.

It was this close reading of early materials that led me to believe that part of the problem between the "historians" and "theologians" was that the secondary sources had over-reported "the liberal or freedom-based" account and underreported the "Other Baptists" who understood themselves as communities of contested convictions within the church catholic. In describing what I found, I made no claim that the Other Baptists were the majority influence or that they are the expression of true Baptist identity. Instead I offered a theologically constructive account of a contesting catholicity based on a retrieval of sources from the Baptist heritage and in conversation with the wider church. Weaver and Leonard disagree with my theological proposal, but it is gratifying to know that they recognize the validity of the historical evidence. That is a step forward.

Leonard rightly points out that there is a decidedly Anglo, American, Southern emphasis to my book, with too little attention to how African Americans might fit into the Other Baptist story. It is surely correct that the future must be one that moves beyond the racial divisions that have defined Baptist life in the U.S. In the interest of full disclosure, my original proposal included a chapter on race, which I eventually omitted.[1] However, African American voices are not entirely absent from my account. In chapter two I tracked a liberal to postliberal trajectory in Black Baptist theology, exemplified in Benjamin Elijah Mays, Howard Thurman, and Martin Luther King Jr. (83–84). Mays, who studied theology at the University of Chicago, was rightly puzzled how the social gospel of his White teachers had nothing to say about race. It set him on a path that led him to write *The Negro's God*. Although I did not trace it out, there is also a fundamentalism that became entrenched among Black Baptists, so that African American Baptists are

[1] For some of that research see Freeman, "Never Had I Been So Blind: W. A. Criswell's 'Change' on Racial Segregation," *The Journal of Southern Religion* 10 (2007): 1-12; Freeman, "All the Sons of Earth: Carlyle Marney and the Fight Against Prejudice," *Baptist History and Heritage* 44, no. 2 (2009): 71–84; and Freeman "Let the Doors of the Church Be Open: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Baptists in Chapel Hill, North Carolina," *American Baptist Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2013): 171–89.

caught in the same intractable liberal-fundamentalist polarity that I describe in the book.[2] I remain particularly intrigued with Thurman's christological starting point of Jesus as a poor Jew as a gesturing to a way beyond liberalism and fundamentalism (118–19), not only among Black Baptists, but all Baptists—Black and White.

Both Weaver and Leonard also express a concern that I should have paid more attention to religious experience. They are surely right to point to the fact that faith for Baptists has always been deeply experiential whereby before becoming a candidate for baptism one makes a personal declaration of faith in Christ. Leonard points to the Daniel Featley's *The Dippers Dipt* debate of 1660 for an example of the Baptist account of experience. He is surely onto something important, but because Featley was prone to exaggeration and distortion of the Baptist position, I turned instead to Baptist voices like Jane Turner's *Choice Experiences of the Kind Dealings of God* (1653), who John Spilsbury, the early Baptist leader and signatory of the First London Confession of Faith (1644), commended in his preface to her book as "full of the life and delight to a gracious experienced heart."[3] Or Vavasor Powell, who in his popular collection entitled *Spirituall Experiences of Sundry Beleevers*, described Christian "experience" as "a Copy written by the Spirit of God upon the hearts of beleevers."[4] By "copy" he meant an authentic account written directly by the Spirit of God, so that each specimen is evidence of the same author and each copy represents the same experience. So Baptists like Vavasor Powell and Jane Turner invited other experienced Christians to "hear" the accounts of their experience of grace so they might be persuaded by recognizing in these stories the same experience of grace that they had come to know.[5]

Leonard asks for more clarification about how I might imagine Baptists becoming more intentionally Trinitarian. This is an important question, and I admittedly spent more time tracing out the anti-Trinitarian hererodoxies in the history of Baptist life than in showing a path to renewal. My modest proposal in chapters three and four is to embrace a generous liberal orthodoxy, borrowing a phrase from Robert Calhoun and Hans Frei, which has as its center the christological and Trinitarian account of the faith named by the ancient ecumenical creeds. I recommend that Baptist congregations voluntarily and without coercion affirm the faith by reciting the creeds. They are of course free churches and thus free not to affirm the faith in this way. But a generous liberal orthodoxy, as Mark Medley has suggested, could be strengthened by a complementary generative liberating orthopraxy.[6] There are a whole range of ways in which Christian practice is infused with a Trinitarian grammar. For example, Baptists have the opportunity to performatively display the doctrine of the Trinity when they baptize and lay on hands, offer prayers and pronounce blessings

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[2] Adam Bond shows these divergent theological traditions in his excellent article "Recasting a Black Baptist Narrative," *American Baptist Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2013): 149–70. What has yet to be written is a theological account of Black and White Baptists in the way Paul Harvey has written a historical narrative in his *Redeeming the South: Religious Cultures and Racial Identities Among Southern Baptists, 1865-1925* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

[3] Jane Turner, *Choice Experiences of the Kind Dealings of God*, in Curtis W. Freeman, *A Company of Women Preachers* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 313.

[4] Vavasor Powell, *Spirituall Experiences, of Sundry Beleevers* (London: Robert Ibbitson, 1653). See *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), s.v. "copy."

[5] Freeman, *A Company of Women Preachers*.

[6] Mark Medley, Panel Review of *Contesting Catholicity*, College Theology Society (30 May 2015).

and benedictions, sing the *Gloria Patri* and the Doxology, confess sin and proclaim pardon, make the sign of the cross and exchange the right hand of fellowship in the name and the sign of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.[7] Such Trinitarian practices are generative of precisely the sort of Trinitarian faith that the Creed names. For the Trinity is not merely a doctrine. It is the life in which we as Christians live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28).

I am surprised that neither Leonard nor Weaver raised an issue about what I take to be one of the most controversial claims in the entire book. Namely, that in his rejection of Landmarkism, William H. Whitsitt set historically conscious Baptists on an ahistorical course by arguing that Baptists have no stake in historical continuity with apostolic Christianity because (he believed) the authenticity of the Baptist view of the church was uncontestable and obvious. Whitsitt based his claim on the unqualified and unexplained assertion that Baptist ecclesiology rested on "the Bible" and "the Bible alone." But the claim that the truth of the Baptist position is self-evident on the basis of "the Bible" and "the Bible alone" is just another version of the restorationist argument which contends that the true church at some point in history ceased to be identified with the historic churches and had to be reconstituted according to the New Testament pattern (122-23). The obvious problem with this approach is that rather than moving toward a greater expression of the *consensus fidelium*, the result has been a proliferation of competing groups, each one claiming to be the true restoration of "apostolic Christianity" on the basis of "the Bible" and "the Bible alone." I make it clear that I think Whitsitt was correct in his historical conclusion that Baptists did not begin to immerse until 1641, but mistaken in his ecclesiological assumption that a sectarian doctrine of the church is the perspicuous teaching of Scripture.

So I faced the restorationist myth head on, not only among Landmarkers but among historicists who followed Whitsitt. Against both I argued that Baptists and other Free Churches must understand and seek to manifest that their gathered communities are not participants in an isolated sect but churches in historic continuity with the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. I argue that Whitsitt, just as much as Landmarkers, invoked a biblicism in which each individual biblical interpreter sees what is right in her or his eyes. This sort of biblicism is a denial of catholicity, and as I show it is a continual source of doctrinal heterodoxy. The rightful reading of the biblical canon requires that the Scriptures be read along with the ancient ecumenical creeds. By holding canon and creed together, communities of readers participate with the *consensus fidelium* in continuity with the faith of the apostolic church and join their voices with the apostolic witness to the Bible as the unfolding story of the triune God. Thus I arrived at the inseparable connection between Jesus Christ as the object of faith and knowledge, the ancient ecumenical creeds as the rule of faith, and the catholicity of the church as objective and historical.

Weaver rightly asks why I stopped short of a similar endorsement for the role of bishops to ensure the rightful performance of the *consensus fidelium*. In fact I do argue that Baptists and other Free Churches, which rely on the Holy Spirit working providentially to keep the churches in the apostolic tradition, can

[7] I outline such a strategy in my essay "Back to the Future of Trinitarianism?" in *Theology in the Service of the Church: Essays Presented to Fisher H. Humphreys*, ed. Timothy George and Eric F. Mason (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2008), 36–61. See the final section, "Toward a Trinitarian Ressourcement Among Baptists," especially points 4-5.

welcome episcopal succession as a sign of apostolicity in the life of the whole church, though they do not need to regard it as a necessary condition for valid apostolic ministry and gifts (269). The reason why I argue for the successive office of bishop as a sign but not a condition of faithfulness to the apostolic tradition is that I do not think *episcope* can be reduced to historical continuity. My reservation in part stems from the conviction that the priesthood of all believers enables every baptized believer to participate in the priesthood of Christ, and thus exercises a form of communal *episcope* of "watching over one another in love" (218–23). But this conviction correlates with the larger belief that the "rule of Christ" may be employed in personal and collegial as well as communal ways, which together comprise the overall *episcope* in the church.[8]

Weaver raises the interesting question about an infant baptism by a Baptist church in Dayton, Ohio and its relation to my view. He is correct that I recommend Baptists practice believers baptism by immersion as the rule while being open to accepting "confirmed" infant baptized believers into membership without asking for rebaptism as an exception to the rule. But I decline to criticize the Dayton church which takes a different view out of my respect for their congregational freedom to make such judgements, and in doing so I recognize precisely what Weaver asks about congregational independence. My own view of congregational polity can be summarized in the statement by Henry Cook that "No outside body, however influential or numerous, can impose on a Baptist church, even the smallest or humblest, a decision that it does not choose to accept."[9] But I also stand by the statement of Baptist historian B. R. White that "interdependence is the mark of the converted" and "the search for independence was Adam's sin."[10] I respect the freedom of individual conscience and the judgement of independent congregations, but I recognize the need of wider interdependence in discerning the rule of Christ. I do not share the same confidence as Weaver about "the consensus of the competent" along the democratic lines recommended by E. Y. Mullins.[11] Nor do I think that Matthew Caffyn, James Foster, or George Burman Foster were odd exceptions that prove the rule of Baptist orthodoxy. Instead I think that contemporary Baptists, liberal and conservative, are vulnerable to the moralistic therapeutic deism that appeals to "the autonomy of the human soul" as the internal authority which trumps all confessions and traditions as irrelevant artifacts of the past.

I could not imagine two Baptist theologians in the US more qualified to evaluate my book than Adam English and Fisher Humphreys. They are correct that my basic argument is to show how Baptists might understand themselves in continuity with historic Christianity. They recognize that my book is an ecclesiology, but they also grasp why a theological argument showing historical continuity requires rigorous historiographical work. They rightly identify as one of my crucial questions how to know whether when two or three are gathered it is the church of Jesus Christ. They grasp without explanation the complementarity

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[8] "The Word of God in the Life of the Church," §§173–75, A Report of International Conversations Between the Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance, *American Baptist Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2012): 94–96. See also http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/Bapstist%20alliance/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20101213_report-2006-2010_en.html.

[9] Henry Cook, *What Baptists Stand For* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1958), 78.

[10] B. R. White, "The Practice of Association," in *A Perspective on Baptist Identity*, ed. David Slater (Kingsbridge, U.K.: Mainstream, 1987), 29.

[11] My concern about Mullins is on record: "E. Y. Mullins and the Siren Songs of Modernity," in *Through a Glass Darkly: Contested Notions of Baptist Identity*, ed. Keith Harper (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012), 84–111.

of canon and creed. They rightly recognize that I am issuing a call to embrace a catholicity that contests while at the same time contesting the nature of what catholicity is. They understand that I do not regard believer's baptism merely as a Baptist distinctive, but rather the most clearly warranted pattern of Christian initiation in the New Testament and thus a disciple-making practice waiting to be embraced by the whole church. They also grasp why I contend that faithfulness to the Baptist heritage means that whenever Christian baptism is practiced according to the apostolic pattern it demands to be recognized and received as valid without need of completion or confirmation. It is wonderful to be so clearly understood by readers who have read so closely and so well.

English tells a compelling story about a missional engagement between an American congregation and a church in the Dominican Republic. Though the theological differences between them were as deep as their cultural and language divide, when they joined in worship they discovered a unity that transcended their differences. It seems to me that what he correctly points to is the generative nature of worship in which not only does praying regulate and generate believing (*lex orandi est lex credenda*), but also singing (*lex cantandi est lex credenda*). English asks whether the common faith enacted in worship is sufficient to create and maintain real unity in the global Baptist community. There is not an easy answer to his question, but it is surely the case that a faith deficiently enacted in word and sacrament (and it sounds like the Dominican church was lacking in both respects) is not sufficient to create and maintain unity among Baptists or the wider church. It is an important reminder why liturgy as well as theology must be grounded in the tradition of the church. For offering the praise of God in the language of historic orthodoxy in continuity with the church catholic is a sufficient condition, though not guarantee, of the unity we seek.

Humphreys wonders how contesting catholicity might make a difference for the way Baptists would engage matters about God, ethics, politics, and science, which he wonderfully describes as "that factory for the manufacture of unbelief." In addition to the earlier mentioned chapter on race, I originally projected a chapter on how to practice the politics of Jesus that is neither Republican or Democrat or something in between, as well as a chapter on why Christians should be neither anti-science nor scientific positivists who look upon science as foundational for knowing about God and God's ways. I think Humphreys can imagine the basic features of my answer to these questions, as they would follow the argument of other chapters in providing an alternative beyond the liberal-conservative options. Here I am thinking about the way I described liberalism and fundamentalism as two opposite traditions in American Christianity that comprised a constellation of beliefs rather than a coherent theological consensus (1–5).

Humphreys's question about how contesting catholicity might shape our ways of knowing God strikes me as central to the overall theme of my book, especially chapters three and four. Knowing God for Baptists has always been deeply experiential, so that before becoming a candidate for baptism one is asked to make a personal declaration of faith in Christ. But knowing God through Jesus Christ as I understand it is not simply the response of a single individual, trusting in God's saving grace and pledging to follow Jesus. Such a transactional arrangement, though ever more pervasive through the influence of the culture of evangelicalism, simply exacerbates the sickness of individualism that must be overcome by the healing grace

of salvation in which believers participate in the communion between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with fellow believers in the church.

Humphreys raises three substantive criticisms that I want to address. The first concerns gender specific language and the Trinity.[12] The continued use of the traditional language of "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" has become a contested matter among theologians. Some revisionists have argued that it is patriarchal and should be replaced with more gender inclusive imagery, for example, "Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer" or "Creator, Christ, and Holy Ghost." But while substituting non-gender specific language for the Trinity without regard for doctrinal orthodoxy may satisfy concerns about patriarchy, it may also reintroduce ancient heresies in new iterations. Feminist theologian Sarah Coakley has wisely observed that merely changing established language by theological manipulation or political fiat, no matter how well intentioned, will not result in sustained renewal, for the aim of such language is not about satisfying social conventions, but participating in the divine life.[13] This theological concern finds expression in an often repeated apocryphal story about a worried parent who reportedly told a theologian that at her child's baptism the minister invoked the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. She asked if her baby would go to hell, to which the theologian answered, "No, but that pastor will!"[14]

I worry that the substitute formulas "Creator, Redeemer/Christ, Sustainer/Spirit" lean in a modalistic direction because they might just as easily be understood as naming three modes of being in a uni-personed God with no differentiated personal relations as a three-personed God with a unitary being. I suspect that most of the people who intone one of the alternate non-gendered Doxologies actually intend to address the Trinity, and I hope that with infinite wisdom and mercy God hears and receives even garbled and confused praise. Of course, not even the best theological formulations comprehend the mystery of the Trinity. There is an old adage attributed to Augustine which warns that whoever tries to understand the Trinity would lose their mind, but whoever denies it would lose their soul.[15] Humphreys, however, does not share my concern about the "Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer" formula, and he cites other variations of Trinitarian language in the New Testament, which I am much more inclined to receive. In fact, the *Chalice Hymnal* which contains the "modalistic" alternate Doxology also contains another version that uses the terms "God, Christ, Holy Spirit" along the lines Humphreys suggests. I agree that this is a more suitable alternative and approve its use (185, fn 175), which Humphreys curiously does not mention.

In seeking to justify his position, Humphreys points to the Nicene Creed which refers to the first person of the Trinity as the "Maker/Creator of heaven and earth." Here I think Humphreys actually compounds the problem, for a deeper examination of Nicene theology shows that the Cappadocians explicitly rejected precisely the suggestion he offers. Gregory of Nazianzus, whom I cite on this matter,

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[12] I have described my appreciation for Humphreys's significant work on the Trinity in my essay "Back to the Future of Trinitarianism?" in *Theology in the Service of the Church: Essays Presented to Fisher H. Humphreys*, ed. Timothy George and Eric F. Mason (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2008), 36–61.

[13] Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On The Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 290–91.

[14] Ted Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster/ John Knox, 1993).

[15] Harry Emerson Fosdick, *Dear Mr. Brown: Letters to a Person Perplexed About Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 120.

explains that the reference to God as "Father" "is not a name either of an essence or of an action," but rather "is the name of the relation in which the Father stands to the Son, and the Son to the Father." Gregory argues against substituting "Creator" for "Father" because it is not capable of expressing the relational dimension that carried in the personal language and thus leans toward monarchic modalism (185).[16]

The term "Creator" in the Nicene Creed does not ascribe a function or action as a substitute for the name of the first person of the Trinity identified in the First Article, but rather to show precisely that the "Maker of heaven and earth" is none other than the "Father" of the second person "Jesus Christ" the "Son" in the Second Article. The upshot is a decisive refutation of the Marcionite partition of creation and redemption. The creed thus stresses the differentiation and relation between the persons and the actions. The substitute formula of "Creator, Redeemer/Christ, Sustainer/Spirit" is not sufficiently perichoretic, but rather suggests that the Father alone creates and the Son alone redeems and the Spirit alone sustains. It does not make clear that although each of these dimensions of the divine work have distinctive focal points in the work of the three persons, all three persons participate together in all these works.

The Scriptures, for example, do not present the Father alone as the Creator. The Father creates through the Son with the Spirit. The biblical teaching consistently affirms that all three persons of the Trinity are Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer (Gen 1:1-5; Ps 33:6; John 1:1-5; Col 1:15-20; Heb 1:1-4; passim). Humphreys's suggestion is actually closer to the disputed interpretation of Origen that the phrase the "only true God" (John 17:3) applies to the Father only who is "very God" (*autotheos*, God of himself), not the Son who is "the first-born of all creation."[17] Augustine argued to the contrary that the designation the "only true God" does not attain to the Father alone, but properly denotes the Father, Son, and Spirit in Trinitarian relation.[18] Augustine here follows the theology of the historic baptismal formula in which the terms "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" are not simply images, metaphors, actions, or descriptions, but *the name* of the one true God (Matt 28:19).

Humphreys's second criticism relates to my view of the church as a voluntary association. He quotes the very helpful clarification by Claude Welch, which says that when thinking about the church "we must speak of God's *convocatio* before we speak of human beings' *congregatio*." I agree, and this strikes me as

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[16] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Third Theological Oration* XVI, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series (Oxford: James Parker & Co., 1894), 7: 307.

[17] Origen, *Commentarii in Evangelium Joannis*, 2.2, ANF 10:21. Origen's interpretation reflects the Orthodox emphasis on the Father as the source of life and draws from the Orthodox theology of *theosis* in which through the incarnation divinity is united with humanity thus enabling humanity to participate in divinity. E.g., Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 8.54, NPNF2 4: 65; Irenaeus *Against Heresies*, 5.preface, ANF, 1:526. Citing Christ's words in John 17:3 that the Father is "the only true God" Origen maintained that the Father alone is God in a strict sense (*autotheos*) as ingenerate (*agennetos*). The deity of Christ as the Son of God was derivative. He is the "first-begotten of all creation" (Col 1:15), receiving his life and being from the Father, though he was begotten eternally and not created in time (Prov 8:22). Origen's Trinitarian theology ironically became the source of both the Nicene doctrine of eternal generation and the Arian stress on the Father alone as very God resulting in the ontological subordination of the Son. See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper, 1978), 128–30.

[18] Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 6.10, NPNF1 3:102. Augustine here is in agreement with Gregory of Nazianzus, who famously declaimed "when I say God, I mean Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. For Godhood is neither diffused beyond these . . . nor yet is it bounded by a smaller compass than these." *Oration* 38.8, NPNF2 7:347.

precisely the emphasis I tried to make in the book, particularly because as I have shown *some Baptists* have ignored God's *convocatio* and speak only of the human *congregatio* as constitutive of the church. Here I actually think we may agree, and I would simply ask Humphreys to read the full sentence that he quotes: "The trouble is not that Baptists and other evangelical Christians forsake to assemble (Heb 10:25) but rather that *often* they understand their assembly as just another voluntary association." By omitting the word "often" Humphreys incorrectly infers that my argument is to be taken with an implied "always." Earlier in the book I argue along precisely the line that Humphreys makes,

> The early Baptists understood the church as both the people gathered by Christ and the people who gathered in response to his call. In this explanation of the church, "believers gather because they are *gathered*." But, like the bells that ring on Sunday morning calling the church to the meeting, the initiative lies with God, not humanity. Thus the early Baptists conceived of their gathered communities as local and visible expressions of the church universal, not merely as independent congregations or voluntary associations (17).

To suggest that the early Baptists conceived of their gatherings *not merely* as voluntary associations is not to deny that there is a human response to the divine call. I agree with the balance of *convocatio* and *congregatio*, with the caveat that I think is implied in the Welch quote, namely that God's calling is prior to the human response. And thus the church is properly understood as constituted, not by a human action, but by an invitation to participate in the eternal and preexistent reality of the divine life.

In his final criticism, Humphreys states that my sacramentalism is still too weak, and that Baptists should embrace *ex opere operato* as an important catholic principle. Here he is correct that I stand with the historic Free Church suspicion of *ex opere operato*. As the report on the most recent international Baptist-Catholic dialogue states, Baptists are not comfortable with the inference of Catholic teaching that the sacraments themselves *confer* rather than *confirm* grace.[19] I can affirm that God has freely chosen to be present in the sacraments and that Christians can expect God's presence based on God's promise, but I am not prepared to support that priestly utterances are the condition or cause of God's presence. Just as an understanding of the church requires both *convocatio* and *congregatio*, so I argue that a right theology of the sacraments requires both divine promise and human response. And just as it is God's Word, not the human response, that creates the church, it is God's Word, not the priestly words, that is the basis of the real presence in, with, and through the sacraments. Humphreys's suggestion that Baptists should receive *ex opera operato* as a catholic principle would have significant implications for baptismal practice, and thus would imply that any who are baptized in water in the triune name should be received irrespective of whether their faith has been confirmed and confessed. I argue at length in chapter nine why this baptismal practice has had serious negative results throughout the history of the church, which lies at the center of the Baptist contestation of catholicity from the beginning. Thus I argue for the sacraments as means of God's promised presence.

Once again I wish to express my gratitude to all four reviewers for their critical and constructive reflections. I apologize to all who have endured to the end for not having been more succinct and clear. I

[19] "The Word of God in the Life of the Church," §§88–90.

hope they will take the length of my response as my respect for the seriousness of each reviewer's remarks, deserving an equally serious response. Finally, I urge readers to continue the process of contestation, which in the end is not ultimately about struggle, dissent, and contentiousness, but about fellow pilgrims bearing witness (*testari*) with (*con*) one another on a journey.