

LOCATING THE UNITY OF CHRIST'S RULE: A RESPONSE TO RESPONDENTS TO *BAPTIST IDENTITY AND THE ECUMENICAL FUTURE*

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I'm pleased that my respondents haven't shrunk from challenging me. They've embodied well the contestation of what it means to be Baptist and Christian that I've argued is indispensable for our pilgrim journey toward the ecumenical future. Before responding to the questions they've posed, I want to engage broadly and somewhat indirectly their perceptions of my agenda.

The book's cover image has become symbolic to me in this connection. The dust jacket art isn't the first cover Baylor University Press submitted for my consideration. The first proposed cover featured a Russian Orthodox icon of the Council of Nicaea in AD 325.¹ "It looks good," I thought, and the choice of an image of the first ecumenical council, which belongs to the heritage of the whole church, made sense in relation to the book's theme. So I replied that I liked the cover, but to myself I worried that it might communicate something I didn't intend: that the book was about recovering some idealized past expression of Christian community. Later I received a message soliciting my thoughts on another cover, which ended up being the final choice.² It looked like another icon of one of the ecumenical councils, but I had no idea which one. A Google image search revealed it as a sixteenth-century wall fresco of the Council of Ephesus in AD 431 from the Church of St. Sozomenos in Galata, Cyprus painted by Orthodox iconographer Symeon Axenti.³ "This is aesthetically pleasing," I thought, "but what an odd choice of a council." Yet as I learned more about the image, I came to regard it as exceedingly appropriate for this book. The final cover image is only a portion of the fresco, from its upper left quadrant. The full fresco illustrates well the pilgrim character of the quest for unity—not the restoration of some idealized past unity, but movement toward a future unity that will mark a church fully under the rule of Christ. The fresco and its context are in tension with unity and suggest some of the reasons Baptists, as I've characterized them, contest realized eschatologies of the church. We have the machinations of the messiest of the seven ecumenical councils: on the left are Cyril and the Egyptian bishops, and on the right are John and the Antiochene bishops who arrived late and, incensed that the Council had been essentially decided in their absence, convened their own council and excommunicated the other bishops. There's the intertwining of church and imperial power:

¹ The image, which may be viewed online at <https://www.superstock.com/stock-photos-images/4069-5167> is from a mid-eighteenth-century icon calendar for the month of October by the Novgorod School of Russian Orthodox iconographers.

² For the final front cover image on the dust jacket of *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future*, see the book's page on the Baylor University Press site at http://www.baylorpress.com/Book/470/Baptist_Identity_and_the_Ecumenical_Future.html.

³ Symeon Axenti's 1513 wall fresco of the Council of Ephesus in the Church of St. Sozomenos in Galata, Cyprus may be viewed online at <http://www.katapi.org.uk/ChristianFaith/StSozomenos.htm>; the image posted online is credited to Henry Chadwick and Gillian Rosemary Evans, eds., *Atlas of the Christian Church* (London: Macmillan, 1987).

emperor Theodosius II wasn't actually present at the council but is prominently portrayed in the centre of the fresco, between the two factions, as the council's presiding authority. There's the silencing of the voices of theological dissent, represented by Macedonius and Nestorius, anathematized as heretics *in absentia* and depicted as cowering beneath the feet of the council fathers. And then there's the context of the painter and the church for which the fresco was painted in 1513—Orthodox, almost five centuries after 1054 Great Schism and on the eve of the further divisions of the church in the sixteenth century (the fresco dates to 1513). This is not the church fully under the rule of Christ; thus the book's summons to ecumenical pilgrimage.

Andrew Smith wonders if the cooperative impetus for Baptist denominational structures has a place in my ecumenical rationale for their continuation (offered in chapter six, "The End of Baptist Denominationalism"). Yes—in light of the coinherence of ecumenism and mission,⁴ and to the degree that such intra-denominational cooperation takes seriously the "Lund Principle" voiced at the Third World Conference on Faith and Order in 1953: "the churches should act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately."⁵ In other words, what the churches *can* do together, they *should* do together. Denominational structures can be the means by which interdenominational cooperation can be coordinated. In that connection the Baptist impetus for translocal denominational structures would indeed join the way in which translocal denominational structures serve as the bearers of the traditions that facilitate receptive ecumenical learning as that which legitimates the continued separate ecclesial existence of Baptist denominational identity—for the time being.

He asks also about what seems to be my lack of distinction between description and prescription. I grant that we theologians don't always signpost that move, but I should hasten to add that historians too narrate the Christian past in subtly prescriptive ways—and I don't think that's a bad thing for either of us to do. The example Smith offers is what I would call "prescriptive re-description," a complexifying of the received description that raises questions about its prescriptive adequacy and suggests the possibility of a differently nuanced prescription. I note three things about this example. First, what he quotes continues,

⁴ The coinherence of unity and mission, evident in the roots of the modern ecumenical movement in the modern missions movement, has been re-emphasized in recent ecumenical theology. If one compares World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Faith and Order Paper no. 111; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), with World Council of Churches, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (Faith and Order Paper no. 214; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2013), one feature of *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* that seems most obviously an advance beyond *BEM* is the way it reengages the roots of the modern ecumenical movement in the modern missions movement. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* frames the quest for Christian unity as a participation in God's mission in the world in its opening chapter, titled "God's Mission and the Unity of the Church." The opening paragraph ends with these two sentences: "The Church, as the body of Christ, acts by the power of the Holy Spirit *to continue his life-giving mission in prophetic and compassionate ministry and so participates in God's work of healing a broken world*" [emphasis added] (§ 1 [p. 5]). This first chapter sees the *missio dei*, "God's plan to save the world," as carried out in the sending of the Son, defined by the earthly ministry of Jesus, extended in the church as the body of Christ that continues his mission, and empowered by the Holy Spirit sent upon the church and into the world (§ 3 [p. 6]). In the next chapter on "The Church of the Triune God," the church "is by its very nature missionary, called and sent to witness in its own life to that communion which God intends for all humanity and for all creation in the kingdom" (§ 13 [p. 10]).

⁵ World Council of Churches, *The Third World Conference on Faith and Order, Lund 1952*, ed. Oliver S. Tomkins (London: SCM Press, 1953), 15–16.

“even while they affirm and encourage the individual reading of Scripture.”⁶ Second, this isn’t a description of Baptists in their distinctiveness, but rather my articulation of a basic consensus between Baptists and Catholics that’s also significantly differentiated in the remainder of the paragraph. Third, the “Baptist Manifesto”⁷ and Philip Thompson’s dissertation⁸ are footnoted there not as sources that substantiate bare description, but as examples of this differently nuanced way of reading the early Baptist insistence that the Bible be read for oneself in light of the early Baptist insistence that those who read the Bible for themselves should read it as a community that confers regularly upon its sense.⁹ Thompson calls attention to Thomas Helwys’ critique of a kind of individual interpretation practised by Anglican bishops, who interpreted Scripture arbitrarily and coercively apart from the community of the faithful.¹⁰

Is there room in my proposal for Baptists who still think we have it right on some issues like baptism? Yes—I’m one of those. But as I noted with regard to baptism, there’s a sense in which the ecumenical movement, and even the Catholic Church within it, has converged toward our position; yet we can continue to offer believers’ baptism as a gift to the whole church while recognizing parallel essentials in the differently ordered “journey of Christian beginnings” that starts with infant baptism.¹¹

Should Baptists who don’t fit my ecumenical re-description of Baptist identity be written off as not really Baptist? No—for Baptists are diverse. But this diversity should contribute to a living Baptist tradition—a socially-embodied, historically extended argument about what it means to be Baptist in relation to the larger Christian tradition (hat tip to MacIntyre¹²). Living traditions can be killed off when diversity is

⁶ Steven R. Harmon, *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future: Story, Tradition, and the Recovery of Community* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 87.

⁷ Mikael Broadway, Curtis W. Freeman, Barry Harvey, James Wm. McClendon, Jr., Elizabeth Newman, and Philip E. Thompson, “Re-envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America,” published initially in *Baptists Today* (June 1997): 8–10, and *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 24, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 303–10.

⁸ Philip E. Thompson, “Toward Baptist Ecclesiology in Pneumatological Perspective” (Ph.D. dissertation, Emory University, 1995).

⁹ Cf. the description of worship in the Smyth-Helwys congregation in Amsterdam in 1609 in a letter from two of its members, Hugh and Anne Broadhead, quoted in Champlin Burrage, *The Early English Dissenters in the Light of Recent Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), 2:176–77: “The order of the worship and government of our church is [this]: we begin with a prayer, [and] after reading some one or two chapters of the Bible give the sense thereof, and confer upon the same; that done we lay aside our books, and after a solemn prayer [is] made by the speaker, he propounds some text out of the Scripture, and prophecies out of the same, by the space of one hour, or three-quarters of an hour” [spelling and punctuation modernized].

¹⁰ Here is the quotation in question: “It was . . . primarily in the community that Baptists believed that Scripture bore the Word of God. In earliest Baptist worship, after the Scripture was read, the whole congregation conferred upon the sense of the passage prior to any of the day’s four or five expositions. Interpretation of Scripture which was private and dissociated from the community was frowned upon by the Baptists. [Thomas] Helwys excoriated the Church of England for limiting the acceptable interpreters of Holy Writ to the bishops, for such private interpretation kept the Spirit in bondage and made the Word to no effect” (Philip E. Thompson, “Toward Baptist Ecclesiology in Pneumatological Perspective” [Ph.D. dissertation, Emory University, 1995], 65–66). Thompson cites in this connection Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* (London: Thomas Helwys, 1611), 55, and *The Orthodox Creed* (1678), § 37, “Of the Sacred Scripture” (*Baptist Confessions of Faith*, ed. Lumpkin, rev. Leonard, 335–37).

¹¹ E.g., 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), §§ 42–52 (pages 46–52).

¹² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 222.

merely acknowledged and not constructively contested. I want to be able to ask whether Westboro Baptist Church is really Baptist, or really a church for that matter.¹³

Courtney Pace presses me on the adequacy of religious orders as an analogy for the place of denominational traditions in a united church of the future. All analogies break down at some point, and this one breaks down at several points in the historical development of the relationship of these orders with the institutional church (though the contrast between early monastic communities and “institutional” church is often overdrawn). But in monasticism are antecedents of something like a believer’s church community, whose members are covenanting to bring their life together more fully under the rule of Christ. Others have envisioned an ecumenical future in which denominational traditions function as distinctive religious orders within a united church; for example, the earliest round of the Methodist-Catholic international dialogue creatively re-imagined John Wesley as the founder of a religious order within the one church.¹⁴

I didn’t address gender and race as explicit motifs, but I differ with Pace’s characterization of their place in the book. The point of the paragraph in which I mention several theologies rooted in experience and social location wasn’t to marginalize these voices, but precisely the opposite: to include them squarely *within* this configuration of free church magisterium as voices that must be heard and weighed and not silenced—they are not marginalized, but “magisterialized” in my treatment of them.¹⁵ Another of my respondents in this panel, Amy Chilton Thompson, has exemplified what it might mean for Baptists to do what I have proposed—to invite into Baptists’ practice of congregational magisterium such voices as expressions of Latin American liberation theology, hearing and weighing and not silencing these voices—in her own work engaging the Christology of Catholic Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino as a paradigm for how Baptist communities might do their own theological work.¹⁶

Pace’s criticism that these voices “on the margins” are missing might hold more water if my primary dialogue partners were individual theologians. But my primary dialogue partners are the expressions of church that are bilateral and multilateral ecumenical dialogue commissions. In the Baptist-Catholic international bilateral in which I participated, eight of the twenty-four members of the joint commission were women, and the most prominent and influential theological voice on the Catholic delegation was easily

¹³ Readers outside of the United States who may not be familiar with the community in Topeka, Kansas that calls itself “Westboro Baptist Church” may gain a sense of the significance of my reference to it from the group’s web site (<http://www.godhatesfags.com/>), the Wikipedia entry for “Westboro Baptist Church” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Westboro_Baptist_Church), and the collection of text and video stories referencing Westboro Baptist Church on the Huffington Post site (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/westboro-baptist-church/>).

¹⁴ World Methodist Council and Catholic Church, “Denver Report” (1971), in *Growth in Agreement: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level*, ed. Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer (Faith and Order Paper no. 108; New York: Paulist Press and Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1984), 308–39.

¹⁵ Harmon, *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future*, 185–86.

¹⁶ See Amy L. Chilton Thompson, “Unsettling Conversations: Jon Sobrino’s Christo-Praxis as a Baptist Theological Method?” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 40, 3 (Fall 2013): 235–50; idem, “Practiced Theological Diversity: Jon Sobrino and James Wm. McClendon, Jr., on Theology as a Particular, Christological, Holistically Self-Involving Practice of the Church” (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2015).

Susan Wood, chair of the theology department at Marquette.¹⁷ The commission included representatives from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America, as well as Europe and North America. In the World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order, forty percent of the members are female, and forty percent are from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America.¹⁸ When I represented the BWA to the plenary meeting of the WCC Faith and Order Commission in 2009, we worked on a draft text of what ultimately became the 2012 convergence text *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*. One member of the commission from India, Syrian Orthodox Metropolitan Geevarghese Mar Coorilos, critiqued the way the draft text on *The Nature and Mission of the Church* treated biblical images of the church in purely doctrinal terms without sufficient attention to their sociological dimensions and implications for the liberation of the dispossessed and the disempowered, what Metropolitan Coorilos called “the actual church amongst communities of people in their struggle for the fullness of life.” He said,

In India, for Dalits who form the majority of the Indian church, the body of Christ is a Dalit body, a ‘broken body’ (the word Dalit literally means “broken” and “torn asunder”). Jesus Christ became a Dalit because he was torn-asunder and mutilated on the cross. The Church as “body of Christ,” in the Indian context, therefore, has profound theological and sociological implications for a Dalit ecclesiology. . . . [The *Nature and Mission of the Church*], however, fails to strike chords and resonate with such contextual theological challenges In other words, the text fails to encounter the real *ecclesia* among communities of people in pain and suffering.¹⁹

As a corrective Metropolitan Coorilos outlined a contextual Christology in which the solidarity of the incarnation is with the Dalit, the untouchable caste, with profound implications for what it means for the church to be the body of this Christ. The Commission heard that voice, and it is discernable in the final text of the document. These theological voices are attentive to gender and race, to experience and social location, as integral to the quest for unity, and they’re my primary dialogue partners—even if my focus on the Faith and Order stream of the ecumenical movement rather than its Life and Work stream, where the ecumenical quest for racial and gender justice has tended to be focused at the international level (and which I also affirm as indispensable for the church’s pilgrimage to the ecumenical future), has meant that I’ve not highlighted these themes in this book in ways that correspond to their importance. The subject of the book is the whole church, and not only Western men—but Pace is right to remind us that the divisions we must overcome to get to the ecumenical future are not only between denominations.

¹⁷ Baptist World Alliance and Catholic Church, “The Word of God in the Life of the Church: A Report of International Conversations between the Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance 2006-2010,” Appendix II, “List of Participants in the Joint International Commission,” in *American Baptist Quarterly* 31, 1 (Spring 2012): 112 (28–122).

¹⁸ World Council of Churches Central Committee, “Report of the Governance and Nominations Committee” (July 2–8, 2014), Appendix III, “Membership of Governing Bodies Revised,” 10–11. Online: file:///C:/Users/sharm_000/Downloads/GEN_NOM06_APPROVED_ReportGovernanceNominationsCommittee_rev11Nov2014.pdf.

¹⁹ Geevarghese Mar Coorilos, “The Nature and Mission of the Church: An Indian Perspective,” in *Called to Be the One Church: Faith and Order at Crete*, ed. John Gibaut (Faith and Order Paper no. 212; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2012), 190–91 (188–92).

She's also right to insist that the maintenance of ecumenical relationships not be prioritized over the prophetic call for just relationships, for ecumenism ought to entail speaking truth in love. The WCC Programme to Combat Racism did this: it spoke truth to a member church, the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, at great institutional cost to the WCC. But the outcome was repentance and reconciliation, and today the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa is once again a member church of the WCC that it left in 1961 (readmitted in 2016) and of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (now known as the World Communion of Reformed Churches) from which it was expelled in 1982 (readmitted in 1998).

David Wilhite, whose response opens with a splendid summary of the agenda of my book in relation to that of my earlier book *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, notes my seeming contrast between the gifts of baptistness and the gifts of catholicity. I don't intend this to be mutually exclusive; it might be better to say that there are gifts of catholicity that have *tended* to be neglected by Baptists, with the result that some of these gifts may have been better stewarded in some other streams of the Christian tradition than ours, even while Baptists may have better stewarded some other gifts of catholicity that other streams of the Christian tradition have tended to neglect. Wilhite correctly perceives the factor behind my shift from references to the Roman Catholic Church in *Towards Baptist Catholicity* to the Catholic Church in *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future* as my sensitivity to the designation preferred by my ecumenical dialogue partners and employed throughout the agreed report issued by the second series of international Baptist-Catholic conversations.²⁰ Yet I do not intend that language to suggest that Catholics have a corner on catholicity, nor for that matter do I intend the occasional use of "ecclesial communities" with reference to Baptist churches to suggest that I think their status is less than fully church. (It should be noted that Catholic documents referring to the "ecclesial communities" of the Protestant Reformation as distinguished from what constitutes a "church" in the proper sense in Catholic understanding—i.e., the Orthodox churches—is at least affirming their ecclesiality, for the application of "ecclesial" to them means that they are regarded as partaking of important qualities of what it means to be church in Catholic understanding, but elaboration of the implications of noting this is beyond the scope of this response.)

I appreciate Wilhite's call for clarification regarding the nature of ecclesial "separation" and "visible unity." I envision visible unity not as structural merger but in terms of the WCC "New Delhi" definition, according to which unity is visibly happening if "all in each place" at the grassroots are mutually engaging in baptismal recognition, Eucharistic hospitality, confession and recognition in one another of the essence of the apostolic faith, recognition of members and ordained ministers, mission and service and work for the liberation of the oppressed, and prophetic engagement when occasion requires.²¹ To the degree that we are unable to do any of these things with full mutuality, separation is happening.

²⁰ Baptist World Alliance and Catholic Church, "The Word of God in the Life of the Church: A Report of International Conversations between the Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance 2006-2010," Appendix II, "List of Participants in the Joint International Commission," in *American Baptist Quarterly* 31, 1 (Spring 2012): 28-122.

²¹ World Council of Churches, "Report of the Section on Unity," in *The New Delhi Report: The Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches, 1961* (New York: Association Press, 1962), 116 (116-35): "We believe that the unity which is both God's will and his gift to his Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Savior are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully-committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate

I applaud Amy Chilton Thompson's call to extend my emphases on receptive ecumenism and "the story of all the members of Christ's body" as essential to the church's identity in the direction of a more intentional exchange of the gifts of individual faith stories dispersed throughout our churches. She connects this with one of the theses of the McClendon-inspired narrative-christological ecclesiology I outline in chapter nine, but that is not the only location of my suggestion that these gifts be offered and received in the practice of receptive ecumenism. In chapter seven, lived Christian lives were the final example I offered of the voices that should be heard and weighed without being silenced in the congregational practice of "Free Church magisterium."²² Chilton Thompson rightly relates the embrace of these lived embodiments of the Christian narrative to what I framed much earlier in the book as the Baptist gift of the "insistence that God's freedom to be God in the life of the church not be constrained." The McClendon quote that ends the section on the magisterial function of lived Christian lives makes such a connection: "If we remember, and relive, and so tell the stories that great Christians are discovered among us again in our own day, then the saints are alive *and the Spirit again informs the people of God.*"²³ How can these stories be incorporated more intentionally into the fabric of Baptist congregational life? In my earlier book *Towards Baptist Catholicity* I suggested that these formative stories of lived Christian lives become a primary means of illustration in preaching;²⁴ I would add to this suggestion Christian education in its various forms and settings as another congregational locus for this reception.

In conclusion: Jürgen Moltmann served as a member of the WCC Faith and Order Commission for two decades, from 1963 until 1983. In his autobiography he lamented that the paradigm of "unity in reconciled difference" that emerged during the 1970s had become "the sleeping pill of the ecumenical movement," so that "we all stay as we are and are nice to each other."²⁵ I do think we should be nice to each other, but I don't think we can insist that the precondition of Baptist participation in the ecumenical movement be a guarantee that Baptists may stay as we are. Baptist identity is not an end in itself, but a means toward the end of the church fully under the rule of Christ, with unity as one of the marks of that rule. But Christian unity is also not an end in itself; it's a means toward the end of God's intentions for the world. God's goal for the world is community. The church's recovery of community is a means toward that ultimate goal. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* puts it this way: "Communion, whose source is the very life of the Holy Trinity, is both the gift by which the Church lives and, at the same time, the gift that God calls the

life reaching out in witness and service to all and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages, in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls his people."

²² Harmon, *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future*, 186–88.

²³ Harmon, *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future*, 187–88, quoting James Wm. McClendon, Jr., "Do We Need Saints Today? (1986)," in *The Collected Works of James Wm. McClendon, Jr.*, 2 vols., ed. Ryan Andrew Newson and Andrew C. Wright (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 2:285–94.

²⁴ Steven R. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought, vol. 27 (Milton Keynes, U.K.: Paternoster, 2006), 170. On the possibility that Baptists might produce their own calendar of saints, including Baptist saints as well as saints from the whole church, see Andrew Goodliff, "Towards a Baptist Sanctoral?" *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 13, 3 (May 2013): 24–30.

²⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *A Broad Place: An Autobiography*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 86.

Church to offer to a wounded and divided humanity in hope of reconciliation and healing.”²⁶ I hope my book can make some small contribution to helping Baptists heed that call.

²⁶ World Council of Churches, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, § 1 (p. 5).