

THE UNIVERSAL CALL TO HOLINESS AND THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS, OR WHY THE SAINTS MATTER FOR BAPTIST THEOLOGY

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In his essay, “Theology and Sanctity,” Hans Urs von Balthasar made note of a long-running historical development the seeds for which were planted in the scholastic period but bore fruit in the modern: “Theology and spirituality have become, as it were, each a world of its own, with hardly any point of contact, and so the saints and spiritual writers are more and more ignored by theologians.”¹ This observation is alarming, and von Balthasar continues by offering suggestions to stitch these two worlds back together and resolve the impoverishment suffered by each due to their separation. For Baptists, although the historical details may differ from von Balthasar’s Catholic context, the assessment of the terrain is very similar. Baptist Christians often oscillate between two opposing poles of theology and spirituality. Theological discussion rarely touches on the saints or spiritual writers either. In fact, the saints can hardly be described as constituting a separate world since many Baptists are suspicious of the project entirely, including naming particular individuals as saints, their continued remembrance in annual sanctorals, and the devotion to and intercession of the saints. All of these have caused many Baptists to call into question the place of saints within Christian life and practice, to omit them entirely, and to worry about those who do embrace them.

In this article, the prevalent Baptist understanding of the saints will be examined. Focusing on Scripture, “saints” have been viewed by many Baptists as simply a synonym for all members of the church. This coheres with a Baptist emphasis on the priesthood of believers, where holiness is grounded in the personal with little or no external shape provided. Interestingly, Catholics have similarly discussed holiness or sanctity in a broader (or more diffused) manner with an articulated emphasis on the universal call to holiness. After discussing this theme, this article will examine some recent work about saints by Baptists. This return to “the saints” is significant and will contribute to an argument that the universal call to holiness (and its Baptist analogue in the priesthood of believers) requires the recognition of sanctity in other people (i.e., the saints) who issue an invitation to pursue alongside and who mediate the divine empowerment to embody the same holiness.

¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Theology and Sanctity,” in *Word and Redemption* (Montreal: Palm, 1965), 63.

BAPTISTS AND “THE SAINTS”

To begin, it is important to note that Baptists have said very little about saints and have tended to avoid serious discussion of the subject altogether. For instance, few congregations have the word “saint” in their title, a practice that is common among Catholic and some Protestant traditions.² There is no calendar of saint observances, and no persons are officially remembered as “saints.” Moreover, it is not merely the absence of certain “saintly” emphases that marks Baptist faith and practice. Indeed, many Baptists are even suspicious of those who have embraced a robust economy of sanctity (especially Catholics). The invocation of saints in prayers prompts worries about replacing Jesus as the object of our prayers. At the very least, Baptists grow concerned that the saints function as a necessary stepping stone for the religious life. E. Y. Mullins, similarly concerned about anything that might stand between an individual believer and God, would likely identify the economy of saints as the sort of “religion by proxy” that works against the soul’s competency in religion.³ Moreover, devotional practices related to particular saints are occasionally cited as a sign of something patently unscriptural and unchristian.

Of course, as Baptists do acknowledge, the word “saint” does appear in the New Testament, primarily as a substantive version of the adjective *hagios*, which means “holy.” The plural substantive *hagioi* is translated “holy ones” or “saints.” While scarcely used in the gospels and the book of Acts (four times total), it is prominent within the Pauline literature (8x in Romans, 10x in the Corinthian correspondence, and 20x in the rest of the Pauline corpus) and the Apocalypse, where we observe thirteen occurrences. Notably, when used in the New Testament, it is almost always plural. The general Pauline use points to Christian believers in a certain locale, serving as a common element in each letter’s greeting. In Philippians, for example, we find, “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi” (1:1, NRSV). The letter to the Colossians is addressed “to the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae” (1:2, NRSV). In the Pauline epistles, this term is used broadly in connection with the hospitality of the church (Romans 12:13, 15:26; 1 Timothy 5:10, Philemon 7), of its love and care (Colossians 1:4, Philemon 5), of its reception of divine revelation (Colossians 1:26), and of its divine empowerment (Ephesians 3:18). Moreover, the saints are active, sending greetings to a few letters’ recipients as well (2 Corinthians 13:13, Philippians 4:22).

To be sure, there are several possible exceptions to this widespread use of the term (or at least ambiguous uses worthy of attention). In the Pauline letters, the term occasionally points to

² Notable exceptions include St. John’s Baptist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina. It should be noted that using “saint” to name a congregation seems far more likely to occur in an African-American Baptist church.

³ E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1908), 54.

aspects of vocation: “To all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints” (Romans 1:7, NRSV; cf. 1 Corinthians 1:2). This disrupts the static identity of believers as saints to indicate that the believers (i.e., God’s beloved) are beckoned to holiness. Other texts speak of the saints in connection with future blessings. Ephesians 1:17-19 states, “I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are *the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints*, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power” (NRSV). Here, even as their breadth might not be diminished, the saints retain a deeper significance as part of God’s inheritance.⁴ Similarly (though with a bit more ambiguity), Colossians 1:11–12 deploys an inheritance image: “May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has *enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints* in the light” (NRSV).

The fact that “the saints” are literally “the holy ones” is also important to note, as it deepens the biblical background of the term. Underscoring the consecration or “set apart” character of these people, the way of life embraced by Christians becomes important. In 1 Peter, this path is described as a turning from former desires toward the hope found in Christ: “[A]s he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct” (1 Peter 1:15, NRSV). Further in the letter, the church is described as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (1 Peter 2:9, NRSV). These Petrine phrases echo discussions of holiness in the Old Testament, especially the covenant between God and Israel, which was formalized on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:3–6).⁵ Throughout the remainder of the Pentateuch, discussion of particular practices and stipulations was linked to holiness: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2, NRSV; cf. Leviticus 11:45; Deuteronomy 7:6, 28:9). Here, the people of God bear witness to the holiness of God and seek to embody it in the world. Consequently, when 1 Peter adopts this language, it brings this sense of holiness to the community of Christians as well. That is, “Israel’s vocation as God’s elect, holy, and witnessing people is passed on to a united company of believing people, both Jews and Gentiles, who find their true calling by sharing in Christian fellowship the unity they have in Christ as his people.”⁶

In light of these brief scriptural observations, it is not surprising to find that Baptists have held a very circumscribed notion of saints within Christianity. This is seen in the confessions of

⁴ While there are differing opinions regarding the nature of this inheritance, one intriguing reading links this to the Israel’s promised inheritance of the land, a shared gift in which everyone participates.

⁵ Paul S. Fiddes, Brian Haymes, and Richard Kidd, *Baptists and the Communion of Saints: A Theology of Covenanted Disciples* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 15.

⁶ Ralph Martin, “Ephesians,” in *Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 11 (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1971), 133.

faith written by Baptists through the centuries. The London Confession of 1644 uses the word “saints,” but does so in a very limited manner, describing the church as “a company of visible saints, called and separated from the world, by the word and Spirit of God, to the visible profession of the faith of the Gospel.”⁷ These saints participate in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ and share in communion with others within “his walled sheepfold and watered garden.”⁸ The Second London Confession of Faith of 1689 also discusses saints, noting that they are united to Christ and bound with one another in “an holy fellowship and communion in the fellowship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services, as tend to their mutual edification.”⁹ Moreover, with its distinct Reformed emphasis, this confession invokes saints as a synonym for the elect when it discusses their perseverance to the eschaton.¹⁰

Overall, W.T. Conner sums up a representative Baptist view when he writes that “saints” is used in the New Testament in a sense that indicates people (i.e., all Christians) set apart for God. He elaborates: “These believers had been dedicated to God in that by the act of their own wills they had surrendered themselves to God. . . . [I]t is also the work of God by His Spirit in bringing the sinner to surrender his life.”¹¹ He views this notion of sanctity as part and parcel of the sanctification undergone by all believers who are linked to Christ, resulting in “a righteous life [that] grows out of the indwelling Spirit.”¹² He contrasts this with a Catholic understanding of sanctity, where saints are a special class of people who, in Conner’s view, may be worshiped. Acknowledging that Catholic theology distinguishes between the worship of God and the veneration of saints, Conner declares, “We have no ground in either Scripture or reason for maintaining that we have any living connection with those who have gone on before.”¹³ Aside from concerns about idolatry, he worries that saintly intercession detracts from the work of Christ.

Baptists have been reluctant to sharply distinguish between clergy and laity; instead they have viewed all Christians as fellow priests on level ground in Christ. Any distinction is purely functional, lest it expand into a domineering hierarchy. Similarly, excessively distinguishing the sanctity of specific persons from the church at large strikes many Baptists as dancing very close to idolatry—allowing a portion of the creation to take the place of the creator. Instead, any special

⁷ “London Confession of 1644” (art. XXXIII), in *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, rev. ed., William L. Lumpkin, ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969), 165.

⁸ “London Confession of 1644” (art. XL, XXXIV), in *ibid.*, 167, 166. For two other uses of the term, see art. I & XXXII in *ibid.*, 156, 165.

⁹ “Second London Confession of Faith” (art. XXVII), in *ibid.*, 289–90.

¹⁰ “Second London Confession of Faith” (art. XVII), in *ibid.*, 272–74.

¹¹ W. T. Conner, *What is a Saint?* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1948), 9–10.

¹² *Ibid.*, 11–12. Later, he does acknowledge that, if all Christians are saints, then the departed may still hold that status: “They were [saints] while living, and surely death has not unsainted them. They belonged to God while living; surely they still belong to him” (*ibid.*, 27).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 17.

honour due to saints is gifted to everyone. Nonetheless, a Baptist embrace of a more robust theology of sanctity may not be as dangerous as has been feared, especially when viewed in connection with an emphasis on the priesthood of all believers. To explore this possibility, attention to the Catholic understanding of sanctity within the context of the pursuit of holiness will be necessary.

THE UNIVERSAL CALL TO HOLINESS

Baptists tend to emphasize the priesthood of believers over against what they call a Catholic understanding of sanctity that is reserved for a select class of people (e.g., priests, bishops, martyrs). However, while specific saints do play a role in the Catholic notion of holiness, there is more to be said. Extending from Matthew 5:48, where Jesus tells his disciples, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (NRSV), Catholics are advised to take seriously admonitions to love enemies, to avoid anger and lust, and to be salt and light.¹⁴ All people and all of life are included. As the Catholic Catechism states by quoting from Gregory of Nyssa’s *Life of Moses*: “Christian perfection has but one limit, that of having none.”¹⁵ In short, the faithful are called upon, as those who follow Jesus, to embrace a path of sanctity.

This path is described in the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) as the universal call to holiness in the church. The council states that “all in the Church, whether they belong to the hierarchy or are cared for by it, are called to holiness.”¹⁶ Drawing on the Apostle Paul’s admonition to the Thessalonians that holiness makes up the fabric of all our lives, the text reiterates, “all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity.”¹⁷ The focus of such a vocation is Christ himself, the one who called us to be perfect and the one who modelled this holiness in his earthly sojourn, primarily in the two greatest commandments. Concerning his disciples, *Lumen Gentium* says, “The followers of Christ, called by God not by virtue of their works but by his design and grace, and justified in the Lord Jesus, have been made sons of God in the baptism of faith and partakers of the divine nature, and so are truly sanctified.”¹⁸ Thus, like Christ himself, all of the faithful will be “marked by love both of God and of [their] neighbor.”¹⁹ With Christ as the

¹⁴ *Lumen Gentium* connects the universal call to holiness to this admonition to perfection: “[A]ll the faithful, whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord, each in his own way, to that perfect holiness whereby the Father Himself is perfect” [Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), §11].

¹⁵ Quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §2028.

¹⁶ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, §39

¹⁷ Ibid., §40. Cf. 1 Thess 4:3.

¹⁸ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, §40.

¹⁹ Ibid., §42.

exemplar, the goal of discipleship becomes Christologically shaped as well. Indeed, this link between Christ and the holiness of disciples echoes Augustine's statement in the *City of God* that "we can rightly call all those christs who are anointed with His chrism, forasmuch as the whole body with its head is one Christ."²⁰

In the Catholic view, then, there is no doubt that this call is universal, but the ways that it can be manifested and developed are multiple. In other words, as the council states, "The forms and tasks of life are many but holiness is one—that sanctity which is cultivated by all who act under God's Spirit and, obeying the Father's voice and adoring God the Father in spirit and in truth, follow Christ."²¹ This sanctity is broader than simply a handful of people—that is, those whom Aristotle called "great-souled." Instead, all the faithful (in all stations of life) are part of the same journey and headed in the same direction, even in the midst of great diversity. Aiming to illustrate the breadth of this chorus, *Lumen Gentium* discusses the manner in which several classes of people share in this call, including bishops, priests, ministers of lesser rank, married couples and parents, widows and single people, humanitarians and activists, and all people, especially those "weighed down by poverty, infirmity, sickness and other hardships."²² What we see here, then, is not a superhuman sense of sanctity. Rather, the council, by appealing to people of all stations of life, offers what it calls "a more human manner of life" to the world.²³

One year after *Lumen Gentium*, the council released the Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*). This document extends from *Lumen Gentium*'s emphasis on the significant place and work of the laity in the church. The decree states that the church has a "diversity of ministry but unity of mission."²⁴ Thus, while ordained ministers certainly have roles to play in pursuit of this aim, the laity do as well since they "share in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ."²⁵ This Christological emphasis elevates the work of the laity in the world. More specifically, they are to endeavour for "evangelization and sanctification" as they live "in the midst of the world and of secular affairs."²⁶ In short, their work for holiness in all parts of life serves as "a leaven in the world."²⁷

More recently, popes have highlighted the centrality of the universal call to holiness. In January 2001, John Paul II offered *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, an apostolic letter on the occasion of the new millennium. In it, he outlined the church's priorities going forward. Not surprisingly, he

²⁰ Augustine, *City of God*, Book XVII, ch. 4.

²¹ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, §41.

²² Ibid., §41.

²³ Ibid., §40.

²⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, §2.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

focused primarily on holiness, which he described as “a message that convinces without the need for words” and as “the living reflection of the face of Christ.”²⁸ Continuing, he stated, “Holiness, whether ascribed to Popes well-known to history or to humble lay and religious figures, from one continent to another of the globe, has emerged more clearly as the dimension which expresses best the mystery of the Church.”²⁹ Recalling *Lumen Gentium*, he noted that the council document rediscovered this mystery when it recognized the church as a people gathered together in the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.³⁰ This holiness, though, is more than a state; it is a task as well, one that deserved the utmost attention and effort: “all pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to holiness.”³¹ Further, John Paul II connected baptism to holiness in a manner that should appeal to Baptists: “To ask catechumens: ‘Do you wish to receive Baptism?’ means at the same time to ask them, ‘Do you wish to become holy?’”³² He reiterated the council’s point that holiness is not a condition reserved for a few special persons. Instead, John Paul II declared, “The time has come to re-propose wholeheartedly to everyone this *high standard of ordinary Christian living*.”³³ To do so requires “training in holiness,” which includes the art of prayer, Eucharistic practice, penitential contrition, and listening to and proclaiming the word of God.³⁴

In a November 2014 general audience in St. Peter’s Square, Pope Francis also invoked the theme of holiness as discussed in *Lumen Gentium*. Grounded in baptism, “all Christians . . . share in the same vocation,” one that he described as a “universal vocation to being saints.”³⁵ Like John Paul II and the Second Vatican Council, Francis refuted the notion that sainthood is something obtained through determined effort. Instead, sanctity is always received as a gift, “granted to us by the Lord Jesus.”³⁶ It involves “rediscover[ing] oneself in communion with God, in the fullness of his life and of his love.”³⁷ Consequently, sanctity is not the “prerogative of the few.”³⁸ Francis gave more texture to this claim by walking through various states of life (consecrated, married, unmarried, parent or grandparent, catechist, educator, volunteer).³⁹ In short, he declared, “[E]very

²⁸ John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, §7. Available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20010106_novo-millennio-ineunte.html.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., §30. Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, §4.

³¹ John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, §30.

³² Ibid., §31.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., §§32-41

³⁵ Francis, General Audience (19 November 2014). Available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20141119_udienza-generale.html.

³⁶ Ibid., §1.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., §2. Francis even imagines a potential dialogue objecting to this claim: “But, father, I work in a factory; I work as an accountant, only with numbers; you can’t be a saint there . . . ‘. ‘Yes, yes you can! There, where you work, you can become a saint” (ibid.).

state of life leads to holiness, always! In your home, on the street, at work, at church, in that moment and in your state of life, the path to sainthood has been opened.”⁴⁰ To pursue that path, Francis suggests small acts consisting of patience, prayer, generosity, and hospitality as progress.⁴¹

Throughout all these reflections, it is clear that in the Catholic view the laity have a significant role to play as part of Christ’s ministry of reconciliation to the world (cf. 2 Corinthians 5). Despite the presence of formally designated priests, bishops, and even saints, the laity are called to a vocation of holiness. As *Lumen Gentium* states, “In the Church not everyone marches along the same path, yet all are called to sanctity.”⁴² What results is a shared priestly role for the entire church, lay and clergy alike, one where “all together, and each one to the best of his ability, must nourish the world with spiritual fruits. They must diffuse in the world the spirit which animates those poor, meek and peace-makers whom the Lord in the Gospel proclaimed blessed.”⁴³ As can be observed, this priesthood has some significant resonances with its Baptist counterpart.

Similarly, Baptists might agree to a “sainthood of all believers,” where all are equal in Christ regarding the pursuit of holiness. Yet, this general call to sanctity does not exclude a place for specified saints. In fact, the Baptist concern that named saints are problematic could undercut the depth of this broader shared sainthood. After all, the fullness of this universal vocation received by the whole church is manifested in the life and witness of these specified saints, as *Lumen Gentium* makes clear: “[T]he authentic cult of the saints consists not so much in the multiplying of external acts, but rather in the greater intensity of our love, whereby, for our own greater good and that of the whole Church, we seek from the saints ‘example in their way of life, fellowship in their communion, and aid by their intercession.’”⁴⁴ To lose specified saints might mean losing part of the path toward incarnating the fullness of Christ’s love. Therefore, while there may be aspects of this understanding of the saints that confound or bother some Baptists, it is worth the time and effort to consider recent Baptist reflections on the saints in order to ascertain whether genuine *rapprochement* is possible.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., §3.

⁴² Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, §32.

⁴³ Ibid., §38.

⁴⁴ Ibid., §51. Elsewhere, *Lumen Gentium* links the holiness of the faithful with the saints by stating, “[T]he holiness of the People of God will grow in fruitful abundance, as is clearly shown in the history of the Church through the lives of so many saints” (ibid., §38).

RECENT BAPTIST WORK ON THE SAINTS

James McClendon's *Biography as Theology*

James McClendon discusses the role of saints in several of his works, most notably *Biography as Theology*. There, McClendon argues that specific biographical accounts should be embraced as serious theological resources, illuminating visions of the shape of the Christian life in new contexts. He surveys several lives, including a person who led an international entity (Dag Hammarskjöld), a civil rights leader (Martin Luther King), a New Testament scholar turned farmer (Clarence Jordan), and a lesser-known composer and musician (Charles Ives). These lives are significant not for the theology they articulate or embody, but for what they reflect and how they illustrate new possibilities for the shape of the Christian life. In other words, as McClendon states, these lives confront us to make room so that our theology can be “adequate to lives such as these lives.”⁴⁵

McClendon draws on the insights of German Catholic priest and theologian Romano Guardini, who saw the saints not as super-Christians, but as particular intensities of the love of God and love of neighbor. Guardini writes that a saint is someone “to whom God has given the strength to take this commandment with utter seriousness, to understand it profoundly, and to bend every effort to carry it out.”⁴⁶ With the vast array of saints across the centuries, “saints serve as models for new styles of being Christian, opening paths which many others will follow.”⁴⁷ These intensities need not be extravagant. In fact, both Guardini and McClendon are looking for more subtle saints in the post-Enlightenment era, those that will be found in homes, offices, and factories as well as monasteries and churches. In short, saints of this generation “take up the way of practical holiness in daily life.”⁴⁸ Moreover, as McClendon notes, this reinvigorates an interest in the saints’ role in worship—what he is unashamed to describe as veneration of saints.⁴⁹ Drawing on a Roman Catholic distinction between *dulia* (a devotion that is rendered to God by honoring these graced exemplary lives) and *latria* (worship that is due to God alone), he states that no saint should be the object of worship.⁵⁰ In practice, then, while he is clear that “the saints are all of God’s children,” McClendon proposes that a Baptist veneration of particular people in worship can “serve as encouragement and guidance for our own lives in the presence of God.”⁵¹ As later authors have

⁴⁵ James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* (1974; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 25.

⁴⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, 156.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 156–57.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 181, 173.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 179.

indicated, McClendon's thoughts are the beginning of a Baptist framework for veneration (i.e., honoring) of the saints and nonetheless a worthwhile proposal regarding the place of the saints as a whole.⁵²

Fiddes, Haymes, and Kidd, *Baptists and the Communion of Saints*

In 2014, Paul Fiddes, Brian Haymes, and Richard Kidd, all three British Baptist theologians, co-authored *Baptists and the Communion of Saints: A Theology of Covenanted Disciples*. In its pages, each contributes to a sustained treatment of the saints and how they might find a more robust role in Baptist life and thought. The authors view the term *saints* as a signifier for more than simply all the faithful, though it does have at least that sense as affirmed by early Baptists. Additionally, they see value in designating a select handful of people as “the saints,” those in whom “there appears to be a particular disclosure that calls for attention.”⁵³ This disclosure is not based on the merits or abilities of the individuals, but on the grace of the Holy One within them. We recognize such grace perhaps due to special circumstances that make it visible in a peculiar manner, not only captivating our gaze, but beckoning us to imitation. Highlighting the role of ecclesial judgment and recognition, the authors state, “the church corporately has *found* them to be a focal point for reflecting on the generosity of God in human life.”⁵⁴

When considering the saints' ongoing significance, the authors discuss these faithful ones in the context of memory. Indeed, understanding the “memory of God” as a useful metaphor for conceptualizing the abiding relationship between the creator and the creature, they see the memory of God as binding all the saints together as all are in Christ.⁵⁵ Thus, even beyond death, these beloved disciples continually serve the church and are signs of Jesus' life and work. Because of this, they note, “To remember them and others is to be inspired by the Spirit.”⁵⁶ Moreover, the authors welcome the intercession of these who live in God, these whose prayers (like all prayers), “ride upon the praying of Christ into the most holy place.”⁵⁷ To be certain, they avoid any sense that Mary and the saints are a necessary conduit for our prayers, but they do affirm that we offer our prayers with Mary and the saints such that our prayers are never alone.⁵⁸ The authors make the

⁵² See Andy Goodliff, “Towards a Baptist Sanctoral?,” *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 13.3 (May 2013): 24-30.

⁵³ Fiddes, Haymes, and Kidd, *Baptists and the Communion of Saints*, 23.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 69–70. “To be remembered by God would be nothing less than being alive in God” (*ibid.*, 90).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 92–93. See also 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,” *American Baptist Quarterly* 31.1 (Spring 2012): 88–89 (§§ 156–58).

point that even Baptists elevate certain individuals—pastors, evangelists, martyrs—for the sake of their devotion to Christ.⁵⁹ In fact, they see “the saints” as something of an antidote to the celebrity that tends to characterize the lives of these people. Rather than saints, they are often viewed as heroes whose actions are their own qualification. Instead of the spotlight center stage, “saints may indeed be hidden on the periphery of the public world. . . . [T]heir lives make no sense apart from the God they serve.”⁶⁰ In other words, a singular focus on a particular saint is owed to “God’s own singularity.”⁶¹ This particular disclosure recognized within these saints does not eclipse their faults. On the contrary, by living their lives before God (*coram Deo*), the presence and effects of their sin are magnified.⁶²

Fiddes, Haymes, and Kidd highlight the fact that an emphasis on the priesthood of believers need not exclude named saints from Baptist life and thought. In fact, to truly take this priesthood seriously, a specified economy of saints might even be necessary. Brian Haymes makes precisely this point: “Insofar as we are in [Christ]—saints alive on earth and those departed in Christ—might we not think of ourselves as the one priesthood of all believers in and under Christ our head? An essential aspect of this priesthood is to offer prayers for the world, focused in the divine prayer for the coming of the kingdom, the doing of God’s will on earth.”⁶³ In other words, while all of the faithful (both alive and dead) are rightly named as “saints,” those specified (and even elevated) for their particular witness to Christ and his holiness redirect our focus toward the church’s continual prayer for the consummation of God’s kingdom.

BAPTISTS AMONG THE SAINTS

As has been discussed, the economy of saints does not detract from the pursuit of holiness; rather, it offers resources for the fulfilment of that pursuit. It does so in several important ways. First, the saints, instead of usurping the role of Christ, serve as signs of the fullness of Christ. Returning to Hans Urs von Balthasar, he writes that the saints are situated within God’s relationship with the world: “[The saints] never at any moment leave their center in Christ. They give themselves to their work in the world, while ‘praying at all times’ and ‘doing all to the glory of God.’”⁶⁴ In other words, whether discussing saints such as Athanasius of Alexandria (who suffered for the sake of

⁵⁹ “Baptists have always known, along with the whole church, that some lives do disclose the divine presence and grace in a specially striking way” (ibid., 114).

⁶⁰ Ibid., 106.

⁶¹ Ibid., 149.

⁶² Ibid., 112.

⁶³ Ibid., 20.

⁶⁴ Balthasar, “Theology and Sanctity,” 68.

Christological orthodoxy), Thérèse of Lisieux (whose life and devotion were permeated by the love of Christ), or André Trocmé (who saved up to 2500 Jews from the Nazi concentration camps), their lives and actions are unintelligible without Christ and the church.

Second, the Christological emphasis is not abstract. The saints, like Christ himself, occupy the rough ground of human existence. As David McCarthy notes, “They are constituted by, and are the instantiation of, our access to the reality of communion—to God’s community of human life, to God in the lowly, to the incarnation. The saints and their lives embody an incarnational reality; they populate the borderlands between the future and now, there and here, and heaven and earth. . . . They bring ordinary life and people into a real experience of *communitas*.”⁶⁵ The saints—these ordinary people—do not restrict access to God. Rather, they open greater access (even more than might be available solely through personal devotions) by mediating the divine presence to all of the faithful in all places and times. Von Balthasar resists the temptation to view the saints as simply past historical data, stating, “The saints have always been on guard against such an attitude, and immersed themselves in the actual circumstances of the events of revelation. They desired to be present, when and where each thing happened.”⁶⁶ The work of the saints, then, is ongoing and ever-present in the church.

Finally, the saints speak to the catholicity of the whole church. That is, while there is a “localness” in sanctity that allows each believer to honour (perhaps even venerate) a particular saint who may be unacknowledged beyond that setting, there is an additional need to share in the pursuit of sanctity in order to more fully participate in the mystical body of Christ. When surveying lists of official and unofficial saints, one gains an awareness of the depth of the call to holiness and the breadth of its scope, reaching across the earth but also throughout time. After discussing the so-called “Hall of Faith,” the writer of Hebrews states, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. . . .” (Hebrews 12:1-2a, NRSV). This cloud of witnesses consists not only of Old Testament saints such as Abraham, Moses, and Rahab. Indeed, it is filled with all the faithful, especially those named saints who embody our vocation of holiness most intensely and who point to our “pioneer and perfecter” most distinctly (i.e., the one whom *Lumen Gentium* calls “the crown of the saints”).⁶⁷ In this way, we see the saints articulating an ecclesiology that simultaneously makes room for the universal and local, truly embracing the catholicity (i.e., wholeness) of our faith.

⁶⁵ David Matzko McCarthy, *Sharing God’s Company: A Theology of the Communion of Saints* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 53.

⁶⁶ Balthasar, “Theology and Sanctity,” 81.

⁶⁷ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, §50.

CONCLUSION

Von Balthasar has written that “the life of the saints is theology in practice.”⁶⁸ Such words may sound odd to Baptist ears. However, even with prevalent Baptist convictions, the saints should have a significant role to play. Interestingly, as has already been noted, Baptists have elevated key figures within their history, perhaps using the memory of Lottie Moon, Martin Luther King Jr., or someone else to channel reflections on what Christlikeness looks like in the contemporary context. In this way, these persons are not only inspirational, but they also participate in the presence of Christ, mediating that to the church at large. This mediation is not always affirming, at times challenging the ways in which we may have lost a sense of sanctity. As Fiddes, Haymes, and Kidd write, the saints’ role in the formation of Christlikeness can be both “inspiring and disturbing.”⁶⁹ Other traditions, recognizing the importance of several Baptists, have honored them as part of their sanctoral cycle; Baptists can do the same, not only honouring the memory of their Baptist departed, but sharing in the memory of all of the Christian faithful who have gone before and who continue to share in the life of God even now.⁷⁰ An embrace of “the saints” is not a turn away from Christ, but a pivot toward a deeper journey into the vocation that rests upon all believers – to be holy as God is holy.

⁶⁸ Balthasar, “Theology and Sanctity,” 79.

⁶⁹ Fiddes, Haymes, and Kidd, *Baptist and the Communion of Saints*, 161. “Recalling the saints illustrates the risks and diverse meanings of discipleship, the wide variety of forms of life following Christ may take” (ibid., 160).

⁷⁰ Several Anglican communions honor John Bunyan. In the Episcopal Church in the United States, Walter Rauschenbusch has a feast day (July 2), as does Roger Williams (February 5), Martin Luther King, Jr. (April 4), William Carey (October 19), Adoniram Judson (April 12), and Lottie Moon (December 22). The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America honors King on January 15. Steven Harmon recommends that Baptists embrace the calendars of other traditions, with a few caveats: “If Baptist historians were to propose additional exemplary Christians from the Baptist tradition to add to such calendars in producing a sanctoral that is both distinctively Baptist and broadly ecumenical, Baptist congregations might be able to include in their weekly worship a few moments for telling the stories of men and women who have provided worthy examples of lives lived in the service of God and humanity” [Steven R. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2006), 170].