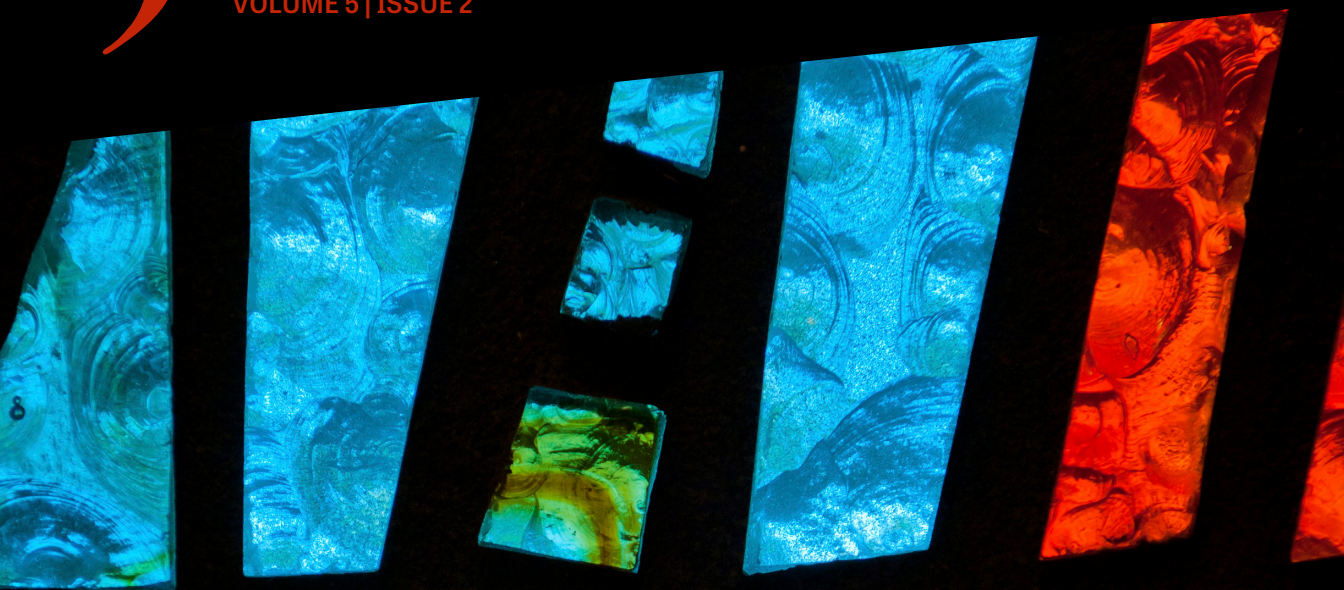
JBTS
Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies
VOLUME 5 | ISSUE 2



The Catholicity of the Church:

An Interdenominational Exploration

Edited by Ryan A. Brandt and Matthew Y. Emerson

[JBTS 5.2 (2020): 229–235]

An Introduction to Catholicity: An Editorial Preface to this Special Issue

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While it has a long and distinguished history in the Christian tradition, the word "catholicity" has become a buzzword of sorts in these last few decades. Across some denominational lines, it elicits polarizing responses that lead to neglecting or even dismissing it. Yet, in recent decades there has been a revival of interest on the topic, a growing awareness that catholicity is an essential part of Christianity, including at least most of the major denominational heritages. This volume was inspired by the renewed Protestant emphasis of catholicity in the contemporary landscape. Given the broadness of the term as well as the varied application across different denominational lines, it seemed helpful and timely to offer a survey of various approaches. Such approaches show real differences among Christians, but they also show encouraging signs that Christians are reappropriating their long and distinguished tradition, especially including its early and medieval roots. This article is an introduction to both the topic of catholicity as well as this special issue for interested readers.

What is Catholicity? Two Challenges

"I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church."

Thus reads the second clause in the third article of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. The unity of the church is highlighted in various ways by each of these four "notes," but the term "catholic," at least in contemporary discourse, holds a special significance with regard to affirming the church's unity. Given the Great Schism of 1054, the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, and the plethora of denominations today, the church's catholicity is viewed by many as a goal—one still out of reach, but one that is vital for the church's health and vitality. The prayer of many Christians from a variety of traditions regarding the church's catholicity is an echo of Jesus's prayer in John 17, that we—the church—may be one, as Jesus is one with the Father. This positive vision of catholicity is a pursuit of the visible unity of the church.

Nevertheless, catholicity broadly defined as visible unity raises two particularly noteworthy challenges for Christians across different denominational lines.

First, the term catholicity can have broad connotations and a variety of meanings for different Christian traditions. Part of the purpose of this volume is to show just how different Christians define and use the term. Suffice it to say that Christian catholicity, at least minimally, shares the conviction that the beliefs and practices articulated and embodied in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church belong to all Christians. These beliefs and practices, especially as reflected in the early and medieval church, are often called the Great Tradition. Catholicity seeks to engage with church tradition for the purposes of the spiritual life and theological health of the church today. While attention to catholicity—or the related Nicean notes—has naturally been an integral part of the theology of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodoxy, Protestants too are recovering or, in some cases, continuing to emphasize their original awareness and appreciation of catholicity as developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

For many Protestants, and particularly for evangelicals, the church as one, holy, and even apostolic raises no concerns; but to say that the church is "catholic" evokes worries about capitulating to the Roman Catholic Church. A common way of putting it would be to say that, for many Protestants, to affirm the church as "catholic" is a non sequitur, since we are Protestants, not (Roman) Catholics. Furthermore, in the wake of rationalism, sectarianism, and the Fundamentalism-Modernism divide, each especially characterizing the Western world, Protestants have often resorted to caricatures of their own view, viewing a high view of the Bible as somehow opposed to the teachings of church tradition. *Sola scriptura* in this view is seen as a call against all forms of tradition instead of a reaffirmation that the authority of Scripture trumps the authority of tradition. It is reduced to a view summarized as "No creed but the Bible," implying that the Bible is the only authority for a Christian. This view of *sola scriptura*, a rather recent phenomenon, is more accurately called *solo* or *nuda scriptura*; it stands in contrast to the historically Protestant view, a view that went part and parcel of a high view of church tradition, which understood that theology was accomplished in the context of the Spirit's work in tradition according to the ultimate authority as found in Scripture.[1] Given the Protestant renewed understanding of *sola scriptura*, there are encouraging signs that evangelicals are moving past these misconceptions—hence the now Protestant emphasis on catholicity.[2]

1. For example, William Perkins writes, "By a Reformed Catholic, I understand anyone that holds the same necessary heads of religion with the Roman Church: yet so as he pares off and rejects all errors in doctrine, whereby the said religion is corrupted." *A Reformed Catholicke*, Works of William Perkins, vol. 1 (London: John Legatt, 1626), 555.

2. Among the many examples of this trend, see the manifest written by Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015); see also Gavin Ortlund, *Theological Retrieval for Evangelicals: Why We Need Our Past to Have a Future* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019).

As mentioned, this volume was inspired by the renewed Protestant emphasis of catholicity in the contemporary landscape, which then extends the discussion back to the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions. For Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, catholicity is integral to their conception of the church and is defined in particular ways relative to their respective communions. And while, at this moment in ecclesial history, calls for ecumenism and catholicity are relatively more common than they have been since the Reformation, there is no real agreement on how to pursue unity among Christians.

Second, therefore, there is a practical or ecclesial challenge concerning what actually constitutes catholicity. At the broadest possible level, for the church to be catholic means for it to exhibit visible unity. But where is this visible unity found? In institutions? If so, what institution claims primacy? In liturgy? If so, whose view of the sacraments or the elements required in worship prevails? In biblical interpretation and doctrinal formulation? If so, which interpretive methods and doctrinal statements are taken to be foundational?

Relatively easy answers are sometimes given to these questions. For instance, regarding the latter question about doctrinal formulation, the Three Ecumenical Creeds (Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian) are employed as a kind of creedal minimum for catholicity. In one respect, this approach is a serious-minded means of pursuing unity in the church. In another sense, however, it is often employed in such a way that it glosses over significant differences between different traditions. Taken to the extreme, this latter approach can also be used as cover for doctrinal positions that have not been held by any tradition for the two millennia of the Church's existence but that are popular in some segments of global Christianity today. Regarding the debates about human sexuality, for example, this approach says that the Creeds do not address the issue and therefore it is *adiaphora* with respect to doctrinal fidelity and a creedal approach to catholicity.[3]

Again, we could take liturgy as indicative of visible unity. Suppose there is unity between traditions regarding what is required in worship—the Word preached and the sacraments administered, at bare minimum. But once we dig in on either of these elements, divisions abound. Who is allowed to preach and (or) administer the sacraments? What view of the sacraments do we take—transubstantiation, consubstantiation, some version of real presence, spiritual presence, or memorial? Of course, the most problematic element for Protestant visions of catholicity concerns the first answer: institutional unity. But this is often where the Roman Catholic emphasis is placed in these discussions, even if it is not done so exclusively.

3. Of course, another problem with this "Nicaea is enough" kind of approach to doctrinal fidelity is that it presumes that there is not an assumed anthropology and hamartiology implied in the Creeds. A further and more significant problem is placing ultimate criteria for catholicity at the level of creeds and not in Scripture itself.

Given the various definitions of and approaches to catholicity, the essays in this special issue address the question of catholicity from within a variety of different traditions. This collection is not intended to answer the above questions in any kind of definitive manner, but these sorts of questions give rise to distinct conceptions of catholicity as well as distinct emphases as to what constitutes catholicity. Addressing these two concerns, then, becomes a sort of launching pad for further dialogue between denominations.

The Landscape of Scholarship

This kind of discussion as well as the questions addressed in this volume are not new. This special issue comes in the wake of renewed interest in catholicity to date.
Over the last half century, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox scholars have been addressing this topic in renewed ways, including the attempts by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI),[4] the late Avery Cardinal Dulles from the Roman Catholic perspective,[5] and those of Fr. Georges Florovsky from the Eastern Orthodox perspective.[6] Alongside Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, there has been a growing concern for Protestants to write their own confessional theology for the church catholic, each from the point of view of their own denominational heritage. The Lutherans, Reformed, Methodists, and Baptists are among some of the most important new constructive works.[7]

Moreover, the topic of catholicity interrelates with other kinds of biblical and theological issues that, while not always using the language of catholicity, have complementary theological visions or goals alongside the catholicity movement. Several examples are worthy of note. First, recent work has shown a growing desire

4. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "On the Progress of Ecumenism," in *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics: New Endeavors in Ecclesiology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008 [1987]).

5. Avery Dulles, SJ, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

6. E.g., "The Catholicity of the Church," in *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, vol. I: *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View* (Büchervertriebsanstalt, Vaduz, Europa, 1987), 37-55.

7. For Lutheran, see Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Christian Dogmatics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, eds., *The Catholicity of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996). For Reformed, see Allen and Swain, *Reformed Catholicity*; and Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, eds., *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016). For Methodist, see Thomas C. Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (New York: HarperOne, 1987, 1989, 1992). For moderate Baptist, see Steven R. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought 27 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006); Barry Harvey, *Can These Bones Live? A Catholic-Baptist Engagement with Ecclesiology, Hermeneutics, and Social Theory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2008); and Curtis W. Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014). For evangelical Baptist, see Matthew Y. Emerson, Christopher W. Morgan, R. Lucas Stamps, eds., *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Towards an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2020).

to read Scripture and do theology in the context of the history of the church, or the Great Tradition as it is often called.[8] Part and parcel with this development, second, is the increasing number of volumes on ressourcement and (or) retrieval of the early and medieval church from an evangelical standpoint,[9] often connecting catholicity to questions of ethics, morality, and worship.[10] Third, and finally, there are a number of different attempts at constructive dialogue between major Christian denominations, including between Roman Catholics and Reformed,[11] Roman Catholics and Baptists,[12] and different Protestant denominations among themselves.[13] In short, within Christianity today, and evangelicalism in particular, there is a more explicit awareness of the importance of church tradition, on the one hand, and the catholicity of the church, on the other.

Introduction to this Special Issue

Again, the essays in this issue address the question of catholicity from within a variety of different Christian traditions. The editors gave a certain level of freedom

8. See, for example, Craig A. Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018); Iain Provan, *The Reformation and the Right Reading of Scripture* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017); Stephen R. Holmes, *Listening to the Past: The Place of Tradition in Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003); Christopher A. Hall, *Studying Theology with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002); idem., *Reading the Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998).

9. See, for example, D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); idem., *Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); W. David Buschart and Kent Eilers, *Theology as Retrieval: Receiving the Past, Renewing the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015); Ortlund, *Theological Retrieval for Evangelicals*: *Why We need Our Past to Have a Future* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019). There are also wide-ranging examples of evangelical theology done from a more robustly catholic perspective. The examples here are too numerous to list, but in addition to the above bibliographic references, one stands out worthy of mention: Steven J. Duby, *God in Himself: Scripture, Metaphysics, and the Task of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019).

10. Christopher A. Hall, *Reading the Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017); idem., *Worshiping with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009).

11. Matthew Levering, *Was the Reformation a Mistake? Why Catholic Doctrine is Not Unbiblical*, with a Response from Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2017).

12. See, for example, the recent joint report of the Baptist World Alliance and Roman Catholic Church, "The Word of God in the Life of the Church," which will be published, along with responses from scholars representing various Catholic and Baptist groups, in Derek Hatch, ed., *Conversation Toward Koinonia: Baptists and Catholics in North America* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, forthcoming).

13. Biola University hosted a roundtable discussion that included Carl Trueman, Fred Sanders, and Peter Leithart in April 2014 called "The Future of Protestantism," and the recording can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YKekHEco87U&feature=youtu.be. The conference was prompted, in part, by a series of blog posts at *First Things* by Leithart, who subsequently published *The End of Protestantism: Pursuing Unity in a Fragmented Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2016) as a kind of capstone to those initial posts and the conference discussion.

to the contributors to approach the topic and craft their arguments from their own preferred vantage point, given some of the unique features of each denominational heritage. Because of this freedom, each article will approach the issue in unique—though often complementary—ways. This collection is not intended to answer every question of catholicity in a definitive manner, and the editors do not wish to pronounce their own views, either in general or as a kind of summary of the conclusions of the essays included. Instead, our hope is that these articles will serve as a starting point or—depending on one's tradition—further clarifications about pursuing catholicity from within one's own tradition.

It is our conviction that pursuing catholicity begins with a deep understanding of our own tradition, for only by understanding our own specific histories, doctrinal commitments, and liturgical practices can we attempt to converse with those who stand in a different historical or doctrinal or liturgical stream than us. Moreover, it is only by understanding our histories that we recognize that—at least for most denominations—our own denomination was seeking to be catholic all along! Given that goal, each essay attempts to describe what catholicity is from the perspective of the author's tradition, and then, based on that definition, to offer ways forward for pursuing catholicity from within that same tradition.

Part 1 of this special issue consists of articles from several different denominational heritages, including Roman Catholic (Eduardo Echeverria), Eastern Orthodox (John Mark Reynolds), Anglican (Eugene Schlesinger), Lutheran (David R. Maxwell), Presbyterian (Blair Smith), Wesleyan-Methodist (Matt O'Reilly), Baptist (Derek Hatch), and Pentecostal (Chris Green). Each article stands independently and answers what catholicity is in its own tradition. Each article also addresses, at least to some extent, a biblical and theological reflection about the nature, foundation, and proper pursuit of catholicity, though each approaches the issues uniquely and without a standardized script.

Part 2 features an extended dialogue between Peter Leithart and Luke Stamps over the issue of paedobaptism (Leithart) and credobaptism (Stamps) and whether each view can account for the catholicity of the Christian tradition. Leithart and Stamps each thereafter substantially respond to one another's article, and finally they offer rejoinders concluding the dialogue. The order is the following:

1. Peter Leithart, Paedobaptism and Catholicity
2. Luke Stamps, Credobaptism and Catholicity
3. Leithart, Response to Stamps
4. Stamps, Response to Leithart
5. Leithart, Final Rejoinder
6. Stamps, Final Rejoinder

Questions they tackle include the following: How is their view of baptism catholic? How are the distinctives of their view not out of line with the tradition (e.g., rejecting baptismal regeneration)? How does their view of baptism relate to other theological traditions? Would you or would you not allow church membership to those who come seeking it but with a different mode or meaning of baptism? How does their view of baptism impact the practice of the Eucharist or Lord's Supper and other ecclesiastical or theological issues in church?

The editors want to thank the contributors for their work in this issue. We found the planning and editing process extremely edifying as we, in some small ways, helped to foster denominational dialogues in this important topic. We especially want to thank Peter Leithart and Luke Stamps for their graciousness and charitableness in their own interactions on a challenging and neglected subject.

In the end, we want this small volume to help cultivate greater understanding, perspective, and appreciation among different Christians throughout the world. Greater understanding does not always—or even usually—mean greater agreement, but it should lead to an increasing and ever-abounding humility and sympathy towards those with whom you do disagree. Our prayer, along these lines, echoes Jesus's prayer in John 17, that we—the church—may be one even as the Son is one with the Father:

> I pray . . . that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:20-23, NIV).

The positive vision of catholicity is a pursuit of the visible unity of the church, echoing Jesus's prayer for us here. Therefore, we offer this collection to the church catholic: to both students and scholars of the Bible and theology and to all those around the world who cling to Jesus in the hope of the consummation and restoration of his universal people, the Bride of Christ. Come, Lord Jesus, come.