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## The Catholicity of the Church:

An Interdenominational Exploration

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## Paedobaptism and Catholicity

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Though not a biblical term, “catholic” appears early in Christian history. The earliest uses give only tantalizing hints of the word’s meaning,<sup>1</sup> and the letter describing the martyrdom of Polycarp is the first to use “catholic” in the way that has since become standard, as a descriptor of the church’s universal extension in space. The letter is addressed not only to the congregation of Philomelium, but to “all the congregations of the Holy and Catholic Church in every place” (Mart. Pol. 0:1).<sup>2</sup> Just before Polycarp rides into the city on a donkey to be executed, he offers a prayer for “all that had at any time come in contact with him, both small and great, illustrious and obscure, as well as the whole catholic church throughout all the world” (8:1).<sup>3</sup> Like Jesus, Polycarp loves and prays for the entire company of disciples throughout the *oikoumene*, the imperial world. When one of the executioners stabs Polycarp, a dove flies out and the gushing blood extinguishes the fire. These miracles ensure that all who witness Polycarp’s martyrdom know they have seen the death of “an apostolic and prophetic teacher, and bishop of the Catholic church” (16:2). After his death, the letter assures its readers Polycarp went to heaven to glorify the Father and the Son, who is the “Savior of our souls, the Governor of our bodies, and the Shepherd of the Catholic Church throughout the world” (19:2).<sup>4</sup>

Over the centuries, other meanings are extrapolated from that original geographic sense. All believers from Abel to the end of time, writes Gregory the Great, are members of the catholic church, a single church throughout all ages.<sup>5</sup> What

1. Writing to the church at Smyrna, Ignatius encourages the members to imitate Christ by following the bishop, as Jesus follows the example of the Father. Nothing ought to be done in the church without a bishop, he adds, including the Eucharist, which is to be administered “either by the bishop or by one to whom he has entrusted it.” Baptisms and love feasts also require the presence of a bishop, whose approval is tantamount to God’s own approval. In sum, “Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church” (*Epistle to the Smyrneans*, 8). For Ignatius, catholicity depends on the presence of Jesus; the catholic church is where Jesus is. But it is equally clear that the church cannot function, in Ignatius’s view, without an *episkopos*. The catholicity of the church is dependent on the authority of the bishop as a representative, perhaps even as a mediator, of Christ’s presence to the church. Unless otherwise indicated, translations of patristic texts are from [newadvent.org](http://newadvent.org).

2. “ταῖς κατὰ πάντα τόπον τῆς ἀγίας καὶ καθολικῆς ἐκκλησίας παροικίαις.” Greek text at [ccel.org/l/lake/fathers/martyrdom.htm](http://ccel.org/l/lake/fathers/martyrdom.htm).

3. “ἥς κατὰ τὴν οἰκουμένην καθολικῆς ἐκκλησίας.”

4. “ποιμένα τῆς κατὰ τὴν οἰκουμένην καθολικῆς ἐκκλησίας.”

5. *Forty gospel Homilies*, 19, quoted in *Lumen gentium*, 1.2 (available at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html)).

the universal church declares to be true is catholic doctrine, and thus, “orthodox” and “catholic” become virtually synonymous in some contexts. The catholic faith meets the test of the Vincentian Canon: what has been taught everywhere, at all times, by everyone (*Quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*). As Thomas Oden notes, in response to heresy, the church began to use the term “catholic” to describe the “wholeness of received doctrine,” with “wholeness” defined as all that is necessary for salvation.<sup>6</sup>

The church is catholic also in its mission because it carries it out to all peoples and places. If we may be permitted terminology that is anachronistic in a patristic context, the catholic church is cross-culturally adaptable. She takes root in diverse cultural settings and expresses the gospel in the forms of that culture, transforming them along the way. This, Oden says, cultivated a catholic spirit in the church, a spirit of patient tolerance: “Since the church is called and sent into every cultural context, it has engendered tolerance toward cultural varieties wherever it has remained most true to its catholic mission.” Catholic tolerance is not rooted in Enlightenment optimism about human nature but is “grounded directly in the gospel of God’s love for all. It is gentle and patient because it seeks to reflect God’s own gentleness and patience.”<sup>7</sup> By the fourth century, when “catholic” is used in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creedal, it had been enriched by these further meanings.<sup>8</sup>

These various threads come together in Cyril of Jerusalem’s often cited 18th Catechetical Lecture:

The Church, then, is called Catholic because it is spread through the whole world, from one end of the earth to the other, and because it never stops teaching in all its fulness every doctrine that men ought to be brought to know: and that regarding things visible and invisible, in heaven and on earth. It is called Catholic also because it brings into religious obedience every sort

6. Thomas Oden, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, *Life in the Spirit* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), 338.

7. Oden, *Life in the Spirit*, 342.

8. “Catholic” captures this multi-dimensional meaning better than the alternative term, “universal.” Writing on Catholic education in a 1990 essay in *America*, Walter Ong addresses the issue of Catholic identity by raising the question: What is the “catholicity” of “Catholic”? “‘Catholic,’” he observed, “is commonly said to mean ‘universal,’ a term from the Latin *universalis*.” But this does not fit the linguistic history: “If ‘universal’ is the adequate meaning of ‘catholic,’ why did the Latin church, which in its vernacular language had the word *universalis*, not use this word but rather borrowed from Greek the term *katholikos* instead, speaking of the ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic church’ (to put it into English) instead of the ‘one, holy, universal and apostolic Church’?” Ong turns to etymology: “The etymological history of *universalis* is not in every detail clear, but it certainly involves the concepts of *unum*, ‘one,’ and *vertere*, ‘turn.’ It suggests using a compass to make a circle around a central point. It is an inclusive concept in the sense that the circle includes everything within it. But by the same token it also excludes everything outside it. *Universalis* contains a subtle note of negativity.” By contrast, “*Katholikos* does not. It is more unequivocally positive. It means simply ‘through-the-whole’ or ‘throughout-the-whole’ - *kata* or *kath*, through or throughout; *holos*, whole, from the same Indo-European root as our English ‘whole’” Ong, “Yeast,” *America*, April 7, 1990.

of men, rulers and ruled, learned and simple, and because it is a universal treatment and cure for every kind of sin whether perpetrated by soul or body, and possesses within it every form of virtue that is named, whether it expresses itself in deeds or works or in spiritual graces of every description.<sup>9</sup>

For Cyril, the church is catholic because it encompasses the world; it is geographically extended to all parts of the world and exists in all times. Her doctrine is catholic because she teaches the fullness of all truth regarding things visible and invisible; she is intellectually universal. She is catholic because she encompasses all sorts and conditions of men; she is socially and politically catholic. She is catholic because she has a single treatment and cure for all sorts and conditions of sin, and because she contains all forms of virtue. She is morally catholic.

With this complex definition in mind, I devote the remainder of the essay to arguing this claim: Paedobaptism best expresses the multidimensional catholicity of the church. Negatively, I argue that credo- or believer's baptism is necessarily subcatholic. I do not make judgments about Baptist individuals or churches, which often breathe a generous catholic spirit. My argument is about Baptist theology of baptism, and the ecclesiology it implies.

Before making that argument, I need to establish a prior claim: Baptismal theology and practice decide the boundaries of the church.

## **Baptism and the Church**

In the New Testament, baptism is the mark of inclusion in the Christian church, the "rite of passage" from outside to inside. John preaches a baptism of repentance, and those who submit to the sign become part of a community of the penitent who awaits the Messiah to come. Jesus sends his disciples to the Gentiles to baptize them into communities of disciples, where they are taught everything he commands (Matt 28:18-20). At Pentecost, three thousand are baptized, and so, added to the original company of one hundred twenty (Acts 2:41-42; compare with Acts 1:5). Ananias greets Saul as "brother" just before laying hands on him and baptizing him into the brotherhood (Acts 9:17-18).

Paul's statements on baptism are consistent with this. His theology of two Adams (Rom 5:12-21) is immediately followed by an exhortation that points to baptism (Rom 6:1-11). Baptism marks the transition from Adamic humanity under the dominion of sin and death into a new life in the Last Adam.<sup>10</sup> Israel was "baptized into Moses" in the Red Sea, a phrase that echoes Paul's language of "baptism into Christ" (1 Cor

9. William Telfer, ed., *Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 4, *Cyril of Jerusalem and Nemesis of Emesa* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 186.

10. Baptism at least marks the transition. I believe Paul's language is stronger: Baptism effects the transition from Adam to Christ. Pursuing that line of thought, however, would distract from the aims of this essay.

10:1-14). As a baptism, the sea crossing signified a departure from Egypt into the torturous wilderness journey toward the promised land.<sup>11</sup>

Baptists and paedobaptists both affirm that baptism is a visible mark related in some fashion to membership in the church. There is a significant divergence between the two in their understanding of that relationship. The 1689 Baptist Confession does not include the claim in the Westminster Confession of Faith that baptism solemnly admits the baptized to the visible church.<sup>12</sup> For Baptists, by regeneration and conversion, the Spirit brings a person into the fellowship of believers.<sup>13</sup> Yet, because Jesus commanded baptism, the converted should be baptized. For many Baptists, baptism is a sign of membership and a necessary prerequisite for participation in the Lord's Supper. I discuss recent Baptist debates about baptism and church membership below, but those complexities are not germane to my opening argument. Even if we assume that the baptized is, in some way, a member of the church before baptism (as many paedobaptists do), baptism still functions as a visible mark of the boundary of the fellowship of Jesus's disciples. For Baptists and paedobaptists, membership of the church consists (ideally at least) of the baptized.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, baptism always implies an ecclesiology. The nature of the church is bound up with the character and practice of baptism, and the larger import of the debate between Baptist and paedobaptist lies in this ecclesiological realm. If, as Baptists claim, only professing converts can be validly baptized, then the church consists of those who are capable of making such a profession. On a strict interpretation, not only children but all "childlike" adults are outside the church. If, as paedobaptists claim,

11. There is dispute about whether 1 Corinthians 12:13 speaks of water baptism. Whatever the referent, it is significant that Paul uses the verb "baptize" to describe the incorporation into the body; we are baptized by one Spirit into one body, the body of which Paul speaks throughout the remainder of 1 Corinthians 12.

12. *Westminster Confession of Faith* 28.1 states, "Baptism is a sacrament of the new testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible church; but also, to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life. Which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in his church until the end of the world." The *London Baptist Confession* (29.1) states: "Baptism is an ordinance of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, to be unto the party baptized, a sign of his fellowship with him, in his death and resurrection; of his being engrafted into him; of remission of sins; and of giving up into God, through Jesus Christ, to live and walk in newness of life."

13. John Gill takes the extreme position that baptism "is not an ordinance administered in the church, but out of it, in order to admission into it, and communion with it; it is preparatory to it, and a qualification for it, it does not make a person a member of a church, or admit him into a visible church; persons must first be baptized, and then added to the church, as the three thousand converts were; a church has nothing to do with the baptism of any, but to be satisfied they are baptized before they are admitted into communion with it." Gill, *Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* (Philadelphia: Delaplaine and Hellings, 1810), 541.

14. This is the position, for instance, of editors Thomas Schreiner and Shawn Wright, "In Scripture baptism is regularly linked with admission into the people of God – the church of Jesus Christ" Schreiner and Wright, eds., *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 1-2.

children of church members should be baptized, then the church will necessarily include many who have not and cannot make such a profession. These obvious differences imply the deeper and broader ecclesiological divergences I discuss below.

### **Temporal and Geographic Catholicity**

Baptists and paedobaptists agree in principle that there is one church throughout all time, stretching back to the earliest moments of the human race. Baptist theology, however, undermines that affirmation at a fundamental level.

At the heart of the Baptist-paedobaptist debate is the question of the relationship between the old and new covenants. Paedobaptists often rest their argument on an analogy between circumcision and baptism, arguing that infants should be included in the church and marked with a covenant seal as they were included in Israel and infant boys were marked with circumcision. Baptists stress the discontinuity of the covenants, implying that the church is not merely a different community but a different sort of community from Israel.

In a powerful essay in *Believer's Baptism*, Steven Wellum insists there is one people throughout the old and new covenants.<sup>15</sup> The church is the same people as the sons of God in the line of Seth, the family of Noah on the ark, Abraham's household, and the nation Israel. There is but one people of God at all times. Wellum is right to insist there are radical changes along the way, and right also to criticize paedobaptists for letting the theological construct of the "unified covenant of grace" take the place of exegetical argument.

But Wellum mistakes the discontinuity of old and new at a crucial point because he assumes Israel's national identity is dependent on blood ties. This is doubly erroneous. Wellum rightly says that being a member of Abraham's family is no longer tied to "any kind of physical links to other believers." But, as Wellum himself realizes, that was already true of Abraham's original household, which included hundreds of unrelated circumcised slaves.<sup>16</sup> Further, Israel came from Egypt with a "mixed multitude" (Exod 12:38), who were later circumcised with the descendants of Jacob. Israel's peoplehood was never a matter of genetics, and that means that the absence of physical ties is not a difference between old and new.

Wellum also errs in the way he links national identity with typological foreshadowing.<sup>17</sup> On his understanding, the nation of Israel foreshadowed the church,

15. Wellum, "Baptism and the Relationship Between the Covenants," in Schreiner and Wright, *Believer's Baptism*, 97-162.

16. Wellum, "Baptism," 123.

17. He regularly connects national with typological and contrasts this combination with "spiritual" realities. The former are associated with the old order, the latter with the new (pages 110, 117, 118, 123, especially. 155). In criticizing Wellum on this point, I am dissenting from the typical Paedobaptist move that stresses the spiritual character of the promises to Abraham. Rather than spiritualizing the old covenant, I wish to nationalize the new.



which is not a nation. But the church, like Israel, is a people and a nation (1 Pet 2:9), a nation bound by no blood but the blood of Jesus, a nation that was not a nation (Rom 9:23-26) until God called it into being—yet a nation. Wellum sees nationhood as a point of discontinuity. Peter and Paul see it as a matter of continuity.

Wellum may agree in principle, but then he must explain the oddity of an ecclesial people and nation without children, a people and nation constituted solely by consent and choice rather than by birth and nurture, a very modern nation. If, on the other hand, he denies that the church is a nation, the problem is even worse, for then it is hard to see how there is one people at all, since on those premises the peoplehood of the people of God will have disappeared in the new covenant.

Paedobaptism highlights the church's continuity of nationhood through all time more fully than Baptist theology and therefore affirms that the church is catholic through all time.

Of course, paedobaptists do confess a single church exists throughout the entire New Testament era. Baptists agree verbally, but that agreement is hard to sustain on Baptist premises. Baptist theology implies that for most of church history, valid baptism was entirely absent from most of the church. Late-baptized church fathers qualify as baptized, but for the first millennium and more virtually no saints, monks, teachers, priests, theologians, nuns, hermits, or ordinary Christians were baptized. One might wonder whether the church could have existed during this period at all. Some resolve the dilemma by tracing a trail of blood, discovering the “true church” on the persecuted margins of Christendom. There is, I suppose, temporal catholicity of a sort in that mythology. Catholic-minded Baptists want to claim St. Anthony, Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, and hundreds of others as their religious ancestors. Thus, they lay claim to a heritage of unbaptized heroes who carried on their work in a church-without-baptism.

Baptist theology runs aground in a similar fashion in affirming the geographic universality of the church. By Baptist criteria, most professing believers today are unbaptized members of churches-without-baptism. There are some 2.2 billion professing Christians in the world,<sup>18</sup> of which 1.3 billion are Roman Catholic,<sup>19</sup> 260 million are Orthodox,<sup>20</sup> 85 million Anglican,<sup>21</sup> and 47 million officially designated as Baptist.<sup>22</sup> Accurate numbers for baptistic nondenominational churches and New

18. Pew Research Center, “Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Christians,” December 19, 2011, <https://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>.

19. Agenzia Fides, “Vatican – Catholic Church Statistics 2018,” October 20, 2019, [http://www.fides.org/en/news/64944-VATICAN\\_CATHOLIC\\_CHURCH\\_STATISTICS\\_2018](http://www.fides.org/en/news/64944-VATICAN_CATHOLIC_CHURCH_STATISTICS_2018).

20. Pew Research Center, “Orthodox Christianity in the 21st Century,” October 7, 2017, <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/08/orthodox-christianity-in-the-21st-century/>.

21. Pew Research Center, “Global Anglicanism at a Crossroads,” June 19, 2008, <https://www.pewforum.org/2008/06/19/global-anglicanism-at-a-crossroads/>.

22. Baptist World Alliance statistics, available at <https://www.bwanet.org/statistics#total>.



Christian Movements are nearly impossible to come by, not to mention underground believers in persecuting countries like China. Let us (generously) estimate that baptistic Christians are as numerous as the Orthodox. Even at a quarter of a billion, Catholics outnumber baptistic Christians by a billion, and the Christian church as a whole exceeds the number of baptistic believers by nearly two billion. On this guess, baptistic believers constitute a little more than 8 percent of the Christian population in the world.

In no way is my point to belittle Baptists, whose zeal for foreign missions has been unequaled. The point is to highlight the fact that Baptists must, at best, hedge in acknowledging these churches as churches and these professing believers as believers. After all, 90-plus percent of today's Christians are not baptized and are thus disobedient to a central gospel demand.<sup>23</sup>

The problem is more fundamental than these statistics indicate, and it becomes evident in recent debates about the relation of baptism to church membership. Baptists disagree among themselves concerning the necessity of baptism for church membership.<sup>24</sup> Writing in 1851, the Methodist writer Freeborn Garretson Hibbard observed that Baptists and paedobaptists “agree in rejecting from communion at the table of the Lord, and in denying the rights of church fellowship to all who have not been baptized. Valid baptism they consider as essential to constitute visible church-membership.” The disagreement, however, does not have to do with the necessity of baptism but with the definition of a valid baptism. It appears that Baptists pass “a sweeping sentence of disfranchisement upon all other Christian churches,” but Hibbard rightly concludes that Baptists “have only acted upon a principle held in common with all other churches, viz.: that baptism is essential to church-membership.” Thus, “the charge of *close communion* is no more applicable to the Baptists than to us; inasmuch as the question of church-membership is determined by as liberal principles as it is with any other Protestant churches – so far, I mean, as the present subject is concerned, *i.e.*, it is determined by valid baptism.”<sup>25</sup>

Bobby Jamieson has recently defended the position Hibbard describes.<sup>26</sup> Baptism is valid only when a confessing believer is immersed, and thus, Jamieson argues, anyone baptized by a different mode or as an infant must be barred from membership and table fellowship at a Baptist church. Jamieson's book is a rebuttal to

23. I am admittedly ignoring complications. Some non-Baptist and non-baptistic churches immerse. Nearly all paedobaptist churches baptize adult converts upon profession. Thus, Baptists would acknowledge the presence of some valid baptisms within paedobaptist churches. That qualification does not, however, undermine my main claim.

24. These Baptists, incapable of consensus! They should learn from the harmonious, charitable, and universal consensus among paedobaptists, especially Presbyterians. . . . Oh, wait. Never mind.

25. Freeborn G. Hibbard, *Christian Baptism, Part First: Infant Baptism* (New York: Lane & Scott, 1851), 171, 175.

26. Bobby Jamieson, *Going Public: Why Baptism is Required for Church Membership* (Nashville: B&H, 2015); see also the Gospel Coalition interview with Jamieson at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/is-baptism-required-church-membership/>

the view espoused by John Piper, who accepts the paedobaptized as church members and participants in the Supper. For Piper, this is a matter of “tolerating an invalid baptism.” He acknowledges it is an “imperfection,” but says it does not weigh as heavily as “saying to a son or daughter of the living God, ‘You are excluded from the local church.’” Piper agrees that infant baptism is not baptism, and that valid baptism is necessary for full obedience to Christ, but he rejects what he calls the “preemptive excommunication” of the paedobaptized.<sup>27</sup>

To my paedobaptist mind, this leaves the Baptist in a catholic no-man’s-land. Jamieson’s position is more “catholic” in that it defines the church by visible markers. On this point, Piper makes valid baptism optional, and thus Piper leaves us with the anomaly of unbaptized church members and unwashed table companions. Yet Piper adopts this position out of “catholic” instincts, to express his conviction that the catholic church is bigger than the Baptist churches. Jamieson, in fact, agrees. Baptists and paedobaptists should commune and “cooperate as Christians, and as churches” as much as possible.<sup>28</sup> But that generosity only weakens Jamieson’s original “catholic” credentials. Like Piper, he has a category of “unbaptized Christians,” though he would not let them join a Baptist church. He even has a category of “churches-without-baptism.” Baptists, I assume, recognize that the New Testament never entertains such a possibility.

Both sides make the foundational error of viewing baptism as an act of obedience rather than an act of Jesus Christ, authorized by the Lord and mediated through the church. Augustine was able to distinguish the validity of Donatist baptism from its efficacy because the former depends entirely on Jesus. Thus, on Augustine’s account, baptisms can be faulty in many ways without becoming invalid.

Baptists cannot clear up this tangle concerning catholicity unless they accept the validity of infant baptism. So long as they insist that most of the Christian world is a baptism-free zone, they will oscillate among various unattractive options: Piperian generosity-without-ordinances or Jamiesonian ordinances-without-generosity, both of which assume an untenable class of churches-without-baptism.

Paedobaptists have had our own struggles over temporal and geographic catholicity. Differences among Presbyterians were expressed most sharply during nineteenth-century debates concerning Roman Catholic baptism. James Henley Thornwell debated Charles Hodge on the floor of the Presbyterian Church’s General Assembly and subsequently in various publications. According to Thornwell, the

27. John Piper, “Response to Grudem on Baptism and Church Membership,” *DesiringGod*, August 9, 2017, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/response-to-grudem-on-baptism-and-church-membership>. Grudem once shared Piper’s position, but was later convinced that valid baptism was required for church membership. For Piper’s other writings on the subject, see <https://www.desiringgod.org/topics/baptism-and-membership>.

28. Matt Smethurst, “Is Baptism Required for Church Membership?” *Bible and Theology*, The Gospel Coalition, September 17, 2015, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/is-baptism-required-church-membership/>.

Roman Catholic Church added rites, such as anointings, to the biblical rite of water baptism. As a result, what Catholics call baptism is not baptism, but “part of the magical liturgy of Rome.” That Catholics use the Trinitarian formula is irrelevant. What is needed is not merely a form of words but faith. A unitarian cannot validly baptize using the Trinitarian formula, and similarly, Catholic corruptions of the gospel invalidate even formally correct baptisms. Roman notions of the covenant are heretical. Catholics are not taught to look beyond the rite to the thing signified, or to depend on the action of the Holy Spirit, but to trust the water rite itself. The Reformers robustly rejected the Catholic idea that sacraments are physical or mechanical causes of grace.<sup>29</sup>

For the Catholic, Thornwell charged, not Jesus but sacraments are “the Saviors to which millions of her deluded children cling for acceptance before God.” Catholics look for nothing beyond “empty pageantry of ceremonial pomp,” and so “their hopes are falsehood and their food is dust.” In the Catholic Church, “The Holy Ghost has been supplanted by charms, and physical causes have usurped the province of supernatural grace.” Roman and Reformed sacraments are in “essentially different categories,” as different as “action and passion.” Reformed baptism does not penetrate the soul but washes “only the flesh, while our faith contemplates the covenant of God, and his unchanging faithfulness.” While Rome’s baptism does the work simply by being done, “Our baptism represents what the blood of the Redeemer, applied by the Eternal Spirit, performs upon the souls of the believers.” Reformed sacraments are “vain without the Holy Ghost.” For the Roman Church, the sacraments are “all the Holy Ghost she needs.”<sup>30</sup>

Drawing on the Reformed scholastic Francis Turretin, Hodge offers a more complicated assessment of the Roman Catholic Church. Hodge observes that for Turretin, a true church is one that is orthodox and pure; however, true does not mean real. Turretin can thus judge a church as “not true” and yet also insist it is really a church. Turretin acknowledges that the Catholic Church continues to profess Christianity and retains evangelical truths, and on that basis, “She may still be called a Christian Church.” This is the case not only because some of the elect are within the Roman Church but because in its “external form,” the “vestiges” of Christianity are “still conspicuous.” These vestiges include “the word of God and the preaching thereof,” as well as the “administration of the sacraments, especially baptism, which

29. This paragraph draws on the summary found in William M. Shea, *The Lion and the Lamb: Evangelicals and Catholics in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 128-29.

30. See Shea, *Lion and the Lamb*, 128-29. Thornwell’s treatise on the invalidity of Catholic baptism is available as *Sacramental Sorcery: The Invalidity of Roman Catholic Baptism* (Unicoi, TN: Trinity Foundation, 2006).

as to its substance is there retained in its integrity.” Hodge concludes, “Turretin says that Romish baptism is valid.”<sup>31</sup>

A church that professes “fundamental error” may, Hodge argues, still have “the essential truths of religion.” He cites the example of first-century Israel, which “by her officers, in the synagogues and in the Sanhedrin, and by all her great parties professed fundamental error . . . and yet retained its being as a church, in the bosom of which the elect of God still lived.”<sup>32</sup> Hodge agrees with Thornwell and his allies that if a church has wholly abandoned the truth of the gospel, it cannot have valid sacraments; a nonchurch can only have nonsacraments.<sup>33</sup> The Roman Catholic Church does not, Hodge claims, fit into this category because it “still teaches enough to save the soul.”<sup>34</sup> And so, its baptism is valid.

Hodge, I believe, has the better of the debate, both theologically and historically, and his view yields a much more robust catholicity than either Baptists or Thornwell offer. On Hodge’s view, everyone who undergoes the water rite in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit is baptized. Whether sprinkled, poured-on, or immersed, they are baptized. Whether as infants or adults, they are baptized. Paedobaptists affirm the continuity of baptism in all times; for more than two thousand years, Christians have been incorporated into the church by baptism. Paedobaptists affirm the universality of the global church in the present, affirming the continuity of baptism in all places.

Of course, paedobaptists have to make judgment calls. Is Trinitarian baptism within an apostate church truly baptism? When is a church apostate, and who decides? Is baptism in the name of “Jesus only” valid? Those are challenging questions, but they arise from exceptional circumstances. Paedobaptists confront tangles at the margins of baptismal practice, while Baptists are forced to dance a two-step of catholicity-and-uncatholicity at the very center of baptismal practice. In the vast majority of cases, a simple tautology serves the paedobaptist: Baptism is baptism. And hence the paedobaptist is able to confess, without hesitation or mental scruple, the geographic and temporal catholicity of the church.

### **Socio-Political Catholicity**

Another dimension of the church’s catholicity is its embrace of all classes and groups, all tribes, tongues, nations, and peoples. Natural and social distinctions between male and female, slave and free, Jew and Gentile are irrelevant to existence in Christ

31. Hodge, “The Validity of Romish Baptism,” in *The Reformed Churches and Roman Catholic Baptism: An Anthology of Principal Texts* (Peru Mission, 2004), 87-88, <https://reformedbooksonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/the-reformed-churches-and-roman-catholic-baptism-an-anthology-of-principle-texts.pdf>.

32. Hodge, “Validity,” 104.

33. Hodge, “Validity,” 88.

34. Hodge, “Validity,” 100.

(Galatians 3).<sup>35</sup> Every member of the body, no matter what his or her social standing outside the church, is a valued and essential member of the body, contributing Spirit-endowed gifts to the edification of the whole. All are needed as much as every organ and limb of an individual's body is needed for the body to function well. Those who are regarded as least respectable, even shameful, outside the church, are treated with even greater honor within (1 Cor 12:14-26).

Political boundaries are dissolved within the body. Every tribe, tongue, people, and nation enter the body (Rev 5:9; 7:9; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6). Because the nations come to Zion, they are pacified, beating their swords to plowshares and their spears to pruning-hooks (Isa 2:1-4). The church takes on the language and some of the cultural flavor of the groups it evangelizes; the church does not speak a single language. But the multicultural, multilingual body of the church is a Pentecostal reunion of nations.<sup>36</sup>

Of all this, baptism is the sign. Baptism is linked explicitly to the union of social and natural groups within the body: "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:27-28). Baptism invests all the baptized with the same Christic clothing. Paul's discussion of the one-and-many body is preceded by the declaration that we are baptized by one Spirit into one body (1 Cor 12:13). That baptism also marks the reunion of nations is implicit in the Great Commission. Jesus sends His disciples to disciple the gentiles through two means, baptism and teaching (Matt 28:18-20). If we connect this commission with Galatians 3, we can infer the nations are baptized into one body because they are all clothed in Christ. Thus, there is neither Afghan nor Australian, neither Congolese nor Croatian, neither Venezuelan nor Vietnamese, neither Mexican nor Moroccan. All have been clothed in Christ, and so are one in Christ.

Baptists confess this. In a discussion of "equality before God," Wayne Grudem cites Galatians 3 and comments, "Paul is here underlining the fact that no class of people, such as the Jewish people who had come from Abraham by physical descent, or the freedmen who had greater economic and legal power, could claim special status or privilege in the church."<sup>37</sup> Grudem goes on to emphasize that there are no "second-class citizens in the church." Sex, economic status, race, health are irrelevant. Importantly, he insists that it does not matter if one is "strong or weak, attractive or unattractive, extremely intelligent or slow to learn," since "all are equally valuable

35. These distinctions, especially that between male and female, are not erased in every respect. Elsewhere, Paul makes it clear that the created order of Adam and Eve continues to have relevance with regard to leadership in the church (1 Tim 2:9-14).

36. I am speaking of ideals here. In reality, of course, Christians and churches often retain the sectarian of their national and tribal heritage. Christians have often gone to war against Christians.

37. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 458.

to God and should be equally valuable to one another.”<sup>38</sup> In the body, “old hostilities disappear, sinful divisions among people are broken down, and worldly criteria of status no longer apply.”<sup>39</sup> As a visible mark of church membership, baptism is a mark of membership in this body, where old distinctions are subverted.

Baptists affirm that the church consists of all sorts and conditions of men, but to some degree, baptismal practice is at odds with Baptist ecclesiology. In practice, certain individuals are excluded from baptism, not because they are unconverted but because of their immaturity or disability. A Reformed Baptist might well admit God is fully capable of regenerating a two-year-old child and would insist that this child is a member of the church by virtue of that regeneration. Until the child has the mental and linguistic capacity to confess, however, he cannot receive the visible mark of membership. In God’s eyes, he is a beloved child; in the eyes of the church, he is an outsider—beloved certainly as a child, but an outsider to the people of God.

What is temporarily true for infants is true permanently for certain severely mentally handicapped people. Helen Keller could not have been considered for church membership, no matter what the Lord was doing in her soul, until she was able to articulate it satisfactorily. To be sure, Baptists make allowance for severe handicaps, but it is revealing to see how this allowance is made. For example, Jason Whitt contends that since “baptism accomplishes something – namely, the conferring of membership and belonging to the community of faith – withholding baptism from those whom we believe Christ has accepted but who cannot consciously respond entails the Church excluding the most vulnerable in our world.” Therefore, “Denying baptism on the grounds that they have not accepted Christ, the clear message is sent: ‘Because you are limited, you can never be fully a member of this community.’” Baptists who take a strict line and insist the mentally handicapped cannot be baptized do not exclude them from God’s care. The Father still loves them. Whitt agrees, but pointedly asks, “What is lost to the community of faith in our refusal to baptize and share the table?”<sup>40</sup>

Whitt thus advocates baptism of severely handicapped people. In the process, he explicitly calls for a modification of typical Baptist standards for admission to baptism: “Christians who practice believer’s baptism already recognize that salvation is something accomplished in us by Christ. The human part is not primary, but it is not insignificant. Perhaps how we account ‘a response to the gospel’ should be reinterpreted in instances where intellectual assent is not possible.”<sup>41</sup>

38. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 459.

39. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 844.

40. Jason Whitt, “Baptism and Profound Intellectual Disability,” *Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and ethics* 45 (2012), 64–65, <https://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/188185.pdf>

41. Whitt, “Baptism,” 64.

I applaud Whitt's move, mainly because I recognize it. It is a paedobaptist move, shifting the emphasis of baptism from the convert's confession to "something accomplished in us by Christ." He also emphasizes, quite rightly, the edifying impact of the presence of handicapped people in the church. God can save and love them without them being at the Table. But can we fulfill Paul's call to show "more abundant honor" to the shameful of the world without welcoming them as table fellows? Can we be fully catholic if we deny the weak are brothers and sisters clothed in Christ by baptism?

Even with this adjustment, the Baptist is left with a quandary. If there is no overt confession of faith, what counts as a "response to the gospel"? How does a church determine whether or not to baptize a disabled person? Does it matter if the person is part of a church family?

Whitt denies that his position entails infant baptism: "Infant baptism is rejected on the assumption that the child will come to an age where the choice for faith can be made. But what if, because of intellectual disability, the person will never reach a cognitive level where that choice is possible?"<sup>42</sup> But the disanalogy breaks down. Whitt makes the permanence of a disability the crucial factor. But how do we know the disability is permanent? Suppose medical researchers finally discover a genetic fix for Down Syndrome. At present, baptizing Down Syndrome people is legitimate because their disability is permanent, but someday baptism will not be legitimate. What if a cure is available, but the parents are unable to afford the cure? Would baptism be legitimate in those cases?

These are marginal, hypothetical, perhaps whimsical possibilities, but they go to the center of Whitt's argument: The baptism of infants is analogous to the baptism of severely handicapped people. If concessions are made for the latter, concessions can be made for the former. If he is willing to adjust the definition of "response to the gospel" to accommodate disabilities, what prevents him from doing the same to accommodate immaturities?

The main thrust of my argument is otherwise. Baptism is the church's welcome of all sorts and conditions of men, of all tribes and tongues and nations. Baptism is the ritual sign that the church is the community of God's weakness, where not many wise, not many high-born, and not many elites assemble so the Father can elevate them as priests and kings in Christ. Baptism is the clothing that covers the shameful members in the glory-robe of Christ Himself. Paedobaptism extends this welcome to the very least—the most needy and vulnerable—and so ritualizes the socio-political catholicity of the church.<sup>43</sup> Paedobaptism thus expresses the socio-political catholicity of the church.

42. Whitt, "Baptism," 64.

43. This does not imply, as often charged, a Constantinian view of the church or baptism (a distorted label in any case!). On what is called a Constantinian view, baptism is not a mark of inclusion in the people of God but a sign of peoplehood or national identity: every English citizen has a right to baptism in the church of England; baptism and German identity are virtually



### **Intensive Catholicity**

Catholicity is not only extensive but intensive.<sup>44</sup> That is, the church is catholic not only in its temporal and geographical scope, but also in embracing, correcting, redeeming, and transforming every aspect of human existence. As the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck explains, the temporal and geographic universality of the church is linked with our vision of the scope of Christianity: “It depends on our concept of this universalism of the Christian religion whether we become narrow or broad in our ecclesiology. How we relate grace to nature, re-creation (*herscheping*) to creation (*scheping*), determines whether our ecclesiastical vision will be broad or narrow.”<sup>45</sup>

In Scripture, the catholicity of the church is “breathhtaking in its beauty.” Whoever thinks the church is confined to a “conventicle” drastically “shortchanges the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the fellowship of the Spirit and incurs a loss of spiritual treasures that cannot be made good by meditation and devotion.” A shrunk view of the church is a symptom of “an impoverished soul.” When we are able to discern “the countless multitudes who have been purchased by the blood of Christ from every nation and people and age” is incapable of being “narrow-minded and narrow-hearted.”<sup>46</sup> Catholicity is not only an ecclesial expansiveness but an expansiveness of soul.

Bavinck sees a fateful shift in the medieval development of natural and supernatural schemes, which treat creation and re-creation as “two realities independent of each other. Nothing remains but a compromise between the natural and the supernatural, between God and humanity, faith and knowledge, church and world, soul and body, religion and morality, quietism and activity.” This necessarily changes the meaning of catholicity: “Catholicity of the Christian principle that purifies and sanctifies everything is exchanged for a dualism that separates the supernatural from the natural by considering it as transcendent above the natural,” as Christian faith becomes an “‘add-on’ or supplementary system.”<sup>47</sup>

In this truncated catholicity, “Christianity is exclusively church,” and Bavinck sees this behind medieval Papal theology, which could only conceive of catholicity as an extension of the church’s—and the Pope’s—“hegemony over everything.” Thus “Rome thus maintains the catholicity of the Christian faith in the sense that it seeks to bring the entire world under the submission of the church. But it denies catholicity

synonymous. But paedobaptism carries precisely the opposite implication. From the very beginning of life, infants in paedobaptist churches are claimed for the counter-polity of the church. Baptists, by contrast, leave children, at best, in marginal position, betwixt world and church, until they are converted and can make a profession.

44. The term is from John W. Nevin, “Catholicism,” *Mercersburg Review* 3 (1851): 1-26.

45. Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992) 220-51. The essay is based on an address delivered in 1888, translated by John Bolt.

46. Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 227.

47. Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 229.

in the sense that the Christian faith itself must be a leavening agent in everything. In this way, an eternal dualism remains, Christianity does not become an immanent, reforming reality.”<sup>48</sup>

As Bavinck sees it, the Reformation was not only a reform of the church but produced “a radically new way of conceiving Christianity itself.” In place of the “dualistic” Catholicism of the middle ages, the Reformers offered “a truly theistic worldview.” Thus the reformers “attempted to free the entire terrain of the natural from the hegemony of the church.”<sup>49</sup> Simultaneously, they supernaturalized the natural: “The natural order is not something of lesser worth or of a lower order as though it were not capable of being sanctified and renewed, but only suppressed and governed. The natural is as divine as the church even though its origin is in Creation rather than re-creation and derives from the Father rather than the Son.”<sup>50</sup>

Not all the Reformers followed through on this expansive vision. Luther and Zwingli, Bavinck claims, shifted the emphasis of the medieval dualism but remained within the dualistic frame. “The Gospel has nothing to do with worldly matters,” Luther wrote, “A prince can be a Christian but he must not rule as a Christian.”<sup>51</sup> Not surprisingly, Bavinck thinks Calvin got it mostly right. His praise for Calvin is not unqualified, but in Calvin, “The Gospel comes fully into its own, comes to true catholicity. There is nothing that cannot or ought not to be evangelized. Not only the church but also home, school, society, and state are placed under the dominion of the principle of Christianity.”<sup>52</sup>

In this essay, Bavinck discusses baptism as an ecumenical problem, in relation to Rome and heretical sects like the Socinians. He does not connect this intensive catholicity to baptism. The two, however, are closely connected.

Anabaptists were persecuted by both Catholics and magisterial Reformers, and early English Baptists were also dissenters from the established church. As a historical matter, it is not surprising that such persecuted groups would insist on what Roger Williams described as a “wall of separation” between church and state. But the link between the believer’s baptism and church-state separation is no historical accident. There is an inner theological connection between credobaptism and secularization of the political order.<sup>53</sup> Baptist theology, in short, reverts to the nature-grace dualism that the Reformation began to overcome.

48. Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 230-31.

49. Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 235-36.

50. Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 236.

51. Quoted in Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 237.

52. Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 238.

53. At a minimum, “secularization” refers to institutional changes such as the disestablishment of the church or the removal of overtly religious symbolism and ceremony from public life. More deeply, a secular state is one that claims official neutrality with regard to religious claims. A secular state claims to take no position, for instance, on the Christian proclamation that “Jesus is Lord” or the Islamic claim that “Allah is One and Mohammed is his prophet.”

From a Baptist perspective, the link primarily has to do with individual responsibility and accountability in religious matters. That amounts to the primacy of consent. No state has the right to compel belief or impose a particular view of right worship; every individual must be free to make his own decisions concerning religious affiliation and conviction, and any imposition of belief or practice is illegitimate. This demand for consent in the political order is allied with a prioritization of consent within the church. Infants cannot decide for themselves whether to follow Jesus, and it is illegitimate for parents to impose a religious identity and practice on them.

Here there is a close analogy between Baptist theology and liberal order. As Paul Kahn has argued, liberalism cannot reckon with children.<sup>54</sup> It assumes a polity made up of articulate, consenting adult citizens. Baptist theology offers a similar vision of the church. The analogy has historical roots; in colonial America, the rise of liberal order tracks with the dilution of infant baptism.<sup>55</sup>

As a result, Baptist theology does not have the resources to develop a robustly intensive vision of catholicity. As John Williamson Nevin pointed out, humans exist not merely as individuals but within “certain orders and spheres of moral existence.” These institutions are not external to human life but internal, such that “the moral nature of man includes in its very conception the idea of art, the idea of science, the idea of business and trade.” Nothing stands outside the transforming scope of the gospel. The church’s mission is not simply to “subdue” every tribe and nation but to “subdue the arts, music, painting, sculpture, poetry.” This, he recognizes, implies that “the total disruption of Church and State” is “essentially antichristian.”<sup>56</sup> Baptist theology is inimical to the evangelization of institutions and cultural spheres. Even the family cannot be redeemed as a family, since young children are outsiders. Neither a social group nor a national polity can be transformed as a group or polity. Nevin offers a Christian version of Terence’s famous *humani nihil a me alienum puto*, “nothing human is alien to me.” For Nevin, nothing human is alien to the kingdom. For Baptist theology, most of what is human is alien to the gospel.<sup>57</sup>

This does not mean Baptist families are irreligious as families, or that Baptist children before baptism are not being socialized. Baptist families, not merely the individual members, are religious, for good or ill. Baptist children are being socialized, but they are not socialized in a systematically and explicitly Christian manner because they are officially outsiders to the kingdom.

54. Kahn, *Putting Liberalism in its Place* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

55. See Holly Brewer, *By Birth or Consent: Children, Law, and the Anglo-American Revolution in Authority* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). The similarity between Baptist ecclesiology and liberal political order leaves me with a chilling question: To what degree is America’s contemporary contempt for children a bitter fruit of Baptist theology?

56. Nevin, “Catholicism,” 10-14.

57. As I have noted above, Baptists are far better in practice than in theology. Many engage in public and cultural activities, and strive to bring the gospel to bear on those spheres of life. My contention is that their theology gives them scant justification to do so.

Plato viewed pedagogy as the central political question. A polity survives only if it has the capacity to shape ever-new generations to adopt its specific values, habits, rituals, objects of desire, and aspiration. Baptist theology suggests that Christian pedagogy begins at some later stage once a child has consented to be discipled. Baptists are often better in practice than in theology. They teach their children to pray to their heavenly Father and send them to Christian schools. But they have no theological ground for articulating or expecting that families as families will become Christian nor that any group will be transformed as a group by the gospel.

Unchosen givens are inescapable. Baptists are not liberated from such givens. But they refuse to ensure that those givens are the givens of Christ's kingdom. From the perspective of infant baptism, what the gospel announces is not an absolute choice, but an alternative givenness, equally unchosen. Baptism does not liberate us from society, but from Adamic society with all its pathologies, and engrafts us into an alternative society that, like the old society, begins to impose its patterns on an infant as soon as the infant enters it. The Christian life has a trajectory, but this alternative givenness has been reordered and redeemed so that it points (however imperfectly) toward righteousness and life. The order of redemption follows the order of creation; in both cases, we are thrown into situations that are not of our own choosing, and in both cases, our religious identity is initially not a matter of our consent and choice. Paedobaptism is not only more catholic but more real, more attuned to the patterns of created human existence, than credobaptism.

To put it succinctly, paedobaptism affirms that groups as groups are redeemable, institutions as institutions can be conformed to the commandments of Jesus. And that means that paedobaptism confesses intensive catholicity with a clarity and power unavailable within Baptist theology.

## Conclusion

In no respect can a consistent Baptist fully affirm the full catholicity of the church. On Baptist premises, most of the church in most periods of history have been without baptism, and most Christians living today worship in churches without baptism. On Baptist premises, most Christians throughout the centuries have been unbaptized. Baptist theology cannot embrace all sorts and conditions of men without significant adjustment, since it excludes the weakest and most vulnerable from full membership in the body of Christ. Baptist theology cannot affirm the intensive catholicity of the gospel or the church, since it cannot consistently claim human groups and institutions can be subdued to the Lordship of Christ.

Paedobaptism signifies the multiform catholicity of the church. Throughout the past two thousand years, virtually all Christians have been validly baptized, and today, virtually all Christians are validly baptized and worship in churches where baptism exists. Paedobaptism enacts the Lord's embrace of the least of these, the

lowest infant and the most broken and confused. Paedobaptism declares that Christ's grace redeems man as man, man not only as an individual but in his relationships, institutions, and patterns of life.

I end with a provocation, but one, I think, justified by the preceding argument. Baptists cannot consistently confess the catholic creeds, with their statement of belief in "one, holy, catholic, apostolic" church. So long they continue to affirm credobaptism, they should, to be consistent, give up this part of the third article of the creed. Paedobaptists, by contrast, have a theology and sacramental practice consistent with the catholic creeds, and so can confess, without reservation, the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church."