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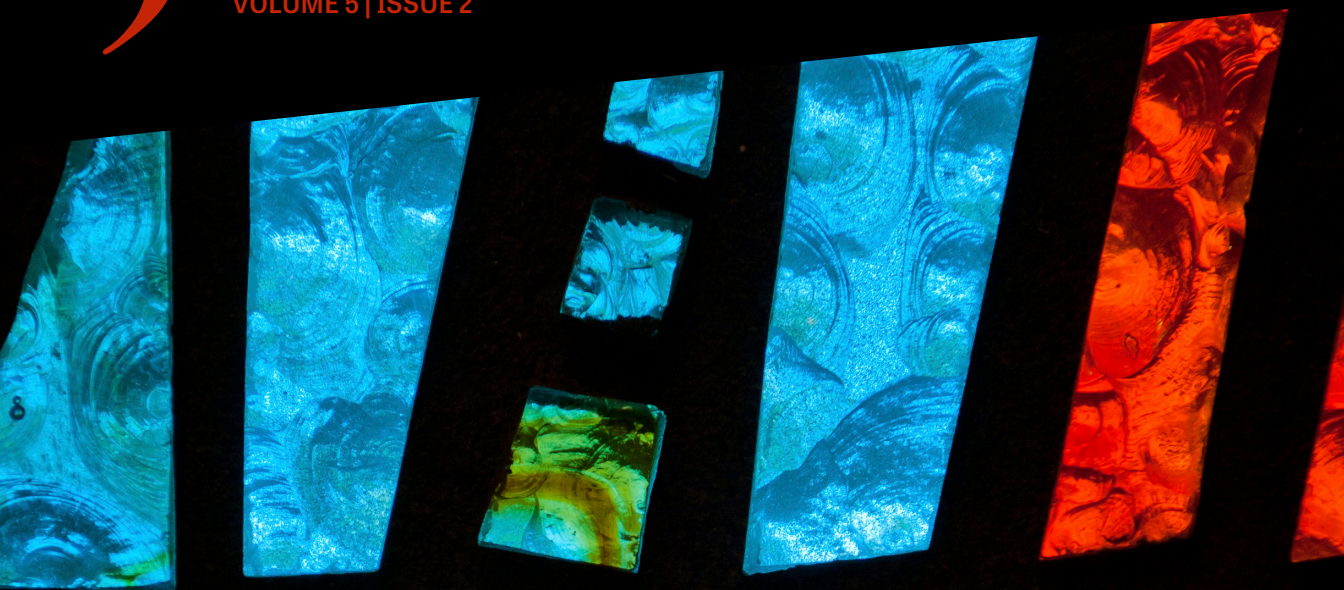

The Catholicity of the Church:

An Interdenominational Exploration

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A Response to R. Lucas Stamps

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My thanks to Lucas Stamps for his suggestive, cogent, and bold paper. I am heartened that "catholicity" is no longer a swear word among Baptists and heartened too by signs of sacramental and liturgical renewal in Baptist churches. I applaud the efforts of Stamps and others to rehabilitate earlier threads of Baptist theology and practice more in keeping with the sensibilities of the universal church.

Can Baptists be catholic? Stamps asks. "Perhaps," he replies, and then defends his disarmingly modest answer with three lines of argument.

He carves out a place for Baptist catholicity by probing criteria of catholicity. If full acceptance of all Trinitarian baptisms is the standard, then Baptists fail. But this net catches too many fish because, by this criterion, other Christian traditions also fail. Stamps is right that Baptists are not the only ones preventing full Eucharistic communion. As he points out, different Christian traditions not only promote divergent theologies of baptism, but also place baptism differently within their theologies, practices, and piety. From a Baptist perspective, denying the validity of infant baptism does not unchurch a church or de-Christianize a Christian, because Baptists do not believe valid baptism is necessary to mark a true church or a genuine Christian. Baptists should not, in short, be judged for failing to live up to criteria they do not accept in the first place.

Fair enough, but this probably eases the burden on Baptists too much. After all, by Baptist criterion, invalid baptismal theologies and practices do not arise here and there but represent the church's tradition since at least the fourth century. Invalid baptism has been a de facto norm, not an aberration. If infant baptism is an aberration, it is an aberration indeed.

Stamps proposes other criteria of catholicity (common faith and life, commitment to Scripture and creedal orthodoxy, a principled effort to do the sacraments as Jesus commands, and common worship), and he suggests practices to exhibit and enhance the unity and the universal scope of the church.

His second main line of argument is to demonstrate that credobaptism has stout catholic credentials. Baptists have "thicker" criteria of baptismal validity than other traditions, but each of the thickeners has a plausible claim to catholicity. Immersion is the only valid mode of baptism, say Baptists. This is not uncatholic, though, since baptism by immersion was the norm of the early church. The subjects of baptism must be professing believers, say Baptists. This is not uncatholic either, since (on

Stamps's reading) this was the practice of the early church.[1] Baptist theology grew out of Reformed theology, and thus may be characterized as a variant of Reformed catholicity. Stamps's genealogy of Baptist theology is the most arresting part of his paper, and I return to it in detail below.

The final section of Stamps's paper lays out the ways Baptists might treat those who were baptized with regard to church membership and admission to the table, and examines the costs and benefits of each. It is a trade-off of catholicity: Do Baptists insist on the catholic practice of requiring baptism as a prerequisite for the Supper, or do they insist on embodying the catholic unity of the church as fully as possible? What Stamps calls "cost-benefit analysis," I am inclined to call an "impasse," one imposed by Baptists' denial of the validity of infant baptism.

So much for the overall layout of Stamps's paper. In the remainder of this response, I focus on one thread of his argument.

Baptist and Reformed

Following Matthew Bingham, Stamps claims the particular Baptist position arose from the Reformed understanding of sacraments. Reformed theologians rejected the medieval notion that sacraments work ex opere operato, that is, that they are effective merely by being performed. Baptism, the Reformed argued, does not confer or guarantee regeneration or justification. Yet they retained infant baptism. That conjunction of continuity and discontinuity "necessitated an understanding of the church as, in principle, a mixed community," divided between members who are "externally and federally" Christians and members who are "internally and savingly" so.

Congregationalists refused to identify with the national church but believed the church existed only in local congregations of real Christians. They rejected the mixed community idea, yet they too retained infant baptism. Stamps says Baptists "simply carried the logic of congregationalism to its necessary conclusion." Baptist theology did not arise from sectarian motives or "radical biblicism" but from within the logic of Reformed theology in its "rejection of the late medieval understanding of baptismal regeneration." Stamps traces this history to show that Baptists are not out of step with Reformed orthodoxy or catholicity: "Baptists have as much a

1. Baptists and paedobaptists both believe the church abandoned apostolic practice at some point. They differ about what the apostolic practice was and when the fall occurred. Stamps's conclusion about the historical evidence is as modest as his overall argument. The paedobaptist fall story may be right, but "it is no more historically transparent than the Baptist one." I tell my version of the story in "Infant Baptism in History: An Unfinished Tragi-Comedy," in Gregg Strawbridge, ed., *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2003), 246-62.

claim to catholicity . . . as any other Protestant demurring from medieval notions of baptismal regeneration."

In fact, he goes on; some Baptists have a stronger claim to continuity with the tradition than Reformed paedobaptists. Baptists view baptism as "part of a complex of events involved in one's conversion to Christ," linked with remission of sins, union with Christ, incorporation into Christ's body, and salvation. Paedobaptists who "sever baptism from conversion" and "treat baptism as merely promissory in lieu of future faith" are the ones who are "out of step with catholic practice." Lutherans and Anglicans who speak of the baptismal regeneration of infants "are more in line with the teaching of the New Testament than those who treat baptism as something more like a 'wet dedication.'" Baptists are also catholic in making baptism the rite of admission to the Lord's table.

This genealogy makes a great deal of sense. Though self-identifying as a paedobaptist, I agree that paedobaptist theology is often more Baptist than paedo. Conversely, Lutheran and Anglican baptismal theology are not only more consistent with the catholic tradition; they are also more biblical. No text of the New Testament speaks of baptism as a sign of something that takes place otherwise than in baptism. All texts describe baptism as an effective operative.

To my mind, the way forward is to reaffirm what the Reformed rejected—ex opere operato and baptismal regeneration—albeit in a biblically revised form. Baptism accomplishes what it signifies simply by being administered. Once baptized, a person is more than wet. He is *baptized*. That means he wears the name of the Triune God, is claimed by God, is a member of the family of the Father and the body of the Son, and is a living stone in the temple of the Spirit. By baptism, he is sealed, enlisted into the army of Jesus, branded as a lamp in his flock, tattooed as a servant of his house. Those are uncomplicatedly true of the baptized, by the work worked.

That work includes a kind of regeneration. In Matthew 19:28, *palingenesis* does not refer to the irreversible renewal of an elect individual but to the coming renewal of the cosmos. "In the regeneration," Jesus's disciples will sit on thrones judging the tribes of Israel. When Paul writes to Titus about the "washing of regeneration" (3:5), this cosmic usage lurks in the background. By the washing of baptism, the baptized is inducted into the regeneration, the new age that has dawned in Jesus and his Spirit and will be consummated at the end. The individual baptized begins a new life in the regeneration. He dies to old Adamic flesh with its deadly networks of idolatry and comes to life in communion with the risen Christ.

Making this move accomplishes several things at once. It restores Protestant baptismal theology to the mainstream of the catholic tradition, East and West. In this paradigm, the church is unreservedly the community of holy ones, the body of Christ. It avoids the problems of a de jure mixed community. Not everyone baptized into the regeneration is eternally saved; not everyone perseveres in new life. But that is true of Baptist churches as well. In some ways, this model sharpens the

differences between Baptist and paedobaptist, but hopefully, a sharpened boundary is a clarifying boundary.

Finally, this move provides a basis for infant baptism that does not depend on a nation-state ecclesiology. Stamps may well be correct that seventh-century defenses of infant baptism depended on a national church ecclesiology. He issues this challenge: "What becomes of the defense of infant baptism when the notion of a national church is no longer a reality?" Stamps anticipates my response: the case for infant baptism can be rooted in the Abrahamic covenant, with the consequence that "the church is a society separate and distinct from any nation-state." But since this does not map onto classic defenses of infant baptism, paedobaptists find themselves, uncomfortably, in a Baptist world: "We're all Baptists now."

As a factual matter, Stamps is largely correct. Protestants have adjusted their ecclesiologies and ecclesial practices to accommodate the divided and privatized church. Theologically, though, some of us are not Baptists but Protestant catholics. We find a non-national precedent for infant baptism not in modern Baptistic theology but in pre-Reformation, that is, pre-national theologies of the medieval Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions. Baptism does not mark anyone as an American or Armenian but as a member of a global communion of men, women, and children. As I argued in my initial contribution to this dialogue, paedobaptism strengthens the case for the church as a real-world society separate from every nation-state, since it says the church, like every real-world society, includes children.

Conclusion

Late in the paper, Stamps suggests Baptists might make sense of infant baptism by developing a category of "baptism of desire." Perhaps we can make progress by positing a notion of "catholic by desire." Baptists desire to be in solidarity with the Christian tradition, and Stamps asks, "Will you have us?" It is not up to me, but if it were, I would say, "Yes. Of course. Let's talk."

"We're here, and we are not going away," Stamps says, not in defiance, but as a plea for acceptance. I wonder. I wonder whether catholic Baptists can remain Baptists over the long run. Can Baptists remain Baptist as they explore and embrace the overwhelmingly non-Baptist tradition of the church? Can Baptists remain Baptist as their admiration for the church's liturgical tradition grows? Can Baptists remain Baptist as they abandon their modern, individualistic prejudices for a more churchly form of faith? Can Baptists remain Baptist as they increasingly see the story of Scripture as a single story of the one people of God?

Here's hoping they cannot.