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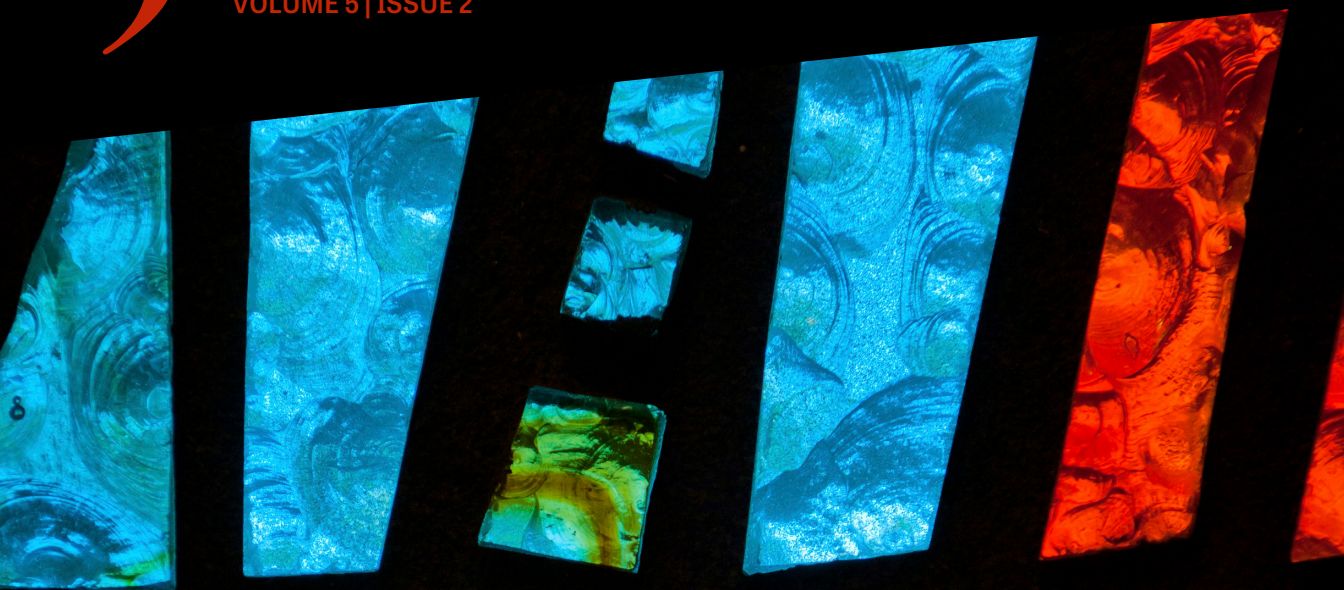

The Catholicity of the Church:

An Interdenominational Exploration

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A Response to Peter J. Leithart

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I greatly appreciate the clarity and even the "provocation" of Peter Leithart's articulation of infant baptism. He has helpfully pointed out some of the potential fault lines that lie between the Baptist vision and claims to catholicity. All of these pressure points can be relieved, as I hope to demonstrate. Admittedly, other tensions may have to remain, and perhaps further dialogue can cast more light on precisely where our disagreements lie, and perhaps where they do not.

A Baptist Appreciation

There are many things that a Baptist can appreciate about Leithart's vision of the church and its catholicity. He offers a helpful exposition of what the term "catholic" meant in the early centuries. As he argues, catholicity had doctrinal, missional, geographical, intellectual, social, political, and moral implications. In our own way, we Baptists can readily affirm this thick description of what it means to say that the church is catholic, despite Leithart's belief that we are "subcatholic" in light of this multidimensional understanding of the church catholic. But this rubric for thinking about catholicity at least gives Baptists a starting point for thinking about how and how far we can position our movement as an expression of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

I am also grateful for Leithart's admission that the provocative claims he makes about the implications of Baptist thought do not necessarily entail that individual Baptists and Baptist churches are completely devoid of a "generous catholic spirit." Leithart also admits that Baptists even get some things right in raising our children, "socializing" them in the faith, even as he questions whether we have any firm theological ground for doing so. I suppose it is better to be thought inconsistent than unfaithful. These charitable admissions are not inconsequential to my mind. Too often in these discussions, heated polemics tend to crowd out warm-hearted charity. There is no question where Leithart stands on the question of Baptist catholicity: "In no respect can a consistent Baptist fully affirm the full catholicity of the church." But even if the conclusion is bluntly stated, the manner in which Leithart carries out his argument evinces his own "generous catholic spirit" at many points.

Baptism and the Church

Leithart begins the substance of his argument by exploring the relationship between baptism and the church. As he puts it, "Baptismal theology and practice decides the boundaries of the church." Leithart acknowledges that both Baptists and paedobaptists see baptism as the initiating rite that functions to incorporate an individual into the visible church. But he worries that by limiting baptism to professing converts, Baptists must exclude children and "childlike adults" (presumably those who have severe mental disabilities) from full membership into the church. Here, it is important to recognize that Leithart admits that Baptists see regeneration and conversion, not baptism per se, as the actual entry point into the fellowship of believers. He later acknowledges that Reformed Baptists might readily admit that children and childlike adults could be regenerated by God's grace. So, they are not entirely barred from membership in the company of believers. But, for Leithart, to exclude certain persons who may be regenerate from baptism and thus from full membership in the church signals a diminution of the church's socio-political inclusivity, a point that he develops further later in the essay.

Still, as I argued in my opening essay, the best context within which to understand the Baptist rejection of infant baptism is the Baptist theology of baptism, not a sacramental theology of some other tradition. For the Baptist, to delay baptism until a profession of faith is not to utterly exclude the unbaptized, including the children of believers, from what we could call the saving orbit of the church. Baptists believe 1 Corinthians 7:14, too: "Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy." Baptists just see baptism as a kind of confirmation, a sign and seal of the grace given to those we have good reason to believe are among the elect. Until that point, Baptists seek to raise their children in the "discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4), acknowledging that God may be at work savingly in their lives before we are able to discern it and hoping that they will personally own their faith in more mature years and thus be engrafted into the New Covenant community of the church, which is comprised of those who give a credible profession of faith in Christ. The question of mentally disabled adults introduces a unique challenge for the Baptist position, but one that is sufficiently dissimilar from the question of infants that it warrants a separate answer later in this response essay.

Baptists and Multidimensional Catholicity

After this opening clarification about baptism and church membership, Leithart then fleshes out his multidimensional understanding of catholicity—temporal and geographic, socio-political, and intensive—and suggests that Baptists fail in every regard to display the full catholicity of the church. It is true enough that the Baptist understanding of the baptism yields a view of the church (and its relationship to the

covenants and the people of God in the Old Testament) that is different than the one envisioned in the paedobaptist traditions. It is not my intention to paper over those differences precisely because Baptists, as a dissenting movement within the tradition, wish to allow those differences to remain both a challenge and a call to the broader body of Christ. As Baptist ecumenical theologian Steve Harmon has described it, the Baptist vision entails a "theology of the pilgrim church"—a theology on the way.[1] We resist any over-realized understandings of the church that identify its perfection with any communion on earth, including our own. We are all marching to Zion and should be open to "more light from the Word." At the same time, catholic-minded Baptists do not understand this posture of dissent to be something that stands outside the tradition, as some kind of sect or cult. No, we too are a part of the Great Tradition, and simply intend to contest certain aspects of that tradition from within.[2]

So, the brief response that follows is not meant to suggest that we are all saying precisely the same things only in different ways (although the principle of differentiated consensus can be an important concept in ecumenical discussions). Instead, I intend to suggest here that Baptists do not necessarily fail to live up to the multidimensional understanding of catholicity that Leithart so helpfully exposits. We have our own way of being catholic that should at least hearten other traditions that some contemporary Baptists are seeking to avoid the sectarian impulse.

So, first, as to temporal and geographic catholicity, Leithart suggests that Baptists "undermine" these emphases "at a fundamental level." On geographic and temporal catholicity, Leithart claims that Baptists fail in two ways: (1) by their emphasis on the discontinuity between the Old Testament people of God and the New Covenant people of God, and (2) by their claim that most Christians throughout church history and across the globe today have not been baptized. On the first point, Leithart acknowledges, through interaction with the covenantal argument of Stephen Wellum, that Baptists can claim that there is one people of God across redemptive history. But Baptists often distinguish the Old Testament covenant from the New Covenant by claiming that the former had to do with genetic and national ties, whereas the latter does not. Leithart disagrees on all accounts. The Old Covenant was not merely about genetic ties, since many Gentiles had attached themselves to Israel and had been circumcised. Nor is the national dimension missing from the New Covenant, since the New Testament speaks of the church as a "holy nation," for example.

In response to the point about genetics, the Baptist claim here is not meant to exclude a degree of ethnic diversity in the Old Covenant (though the New Covenant is more deliberately missiological in its mandate) but to distinguish the multigenerational arrangement of the Old Testament covenantal structure from the

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

2. For more on this emphasis, see Curtis Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).

New Testament emphasis on regeneration and conversion as the only entry point into the New Covenant people of God. The Baptist claim is that one could be born into the Old Testament nation of Israel (whether one's parent was an ethnic Hebrew or a circumcised proselyte), but one can only be reborn into the church of Jesus Christ. In the New Covenant, circumcision counts for nothing; a new heart is the point of entry into the church. On the point about the church being a "nation," no Baptist should feel compelled to disagree. Leithart wonders how there can be a nation without children, but surely every contemporary theologian has to admit some discontinuity between what it meant for Israel to be a nation and what it means for the church to be a nation. The emerging nation born from the Abrahamic Covenant involved the people of God taking up arms against the kings of Elam, Goiim, Shinar, and Eliasar (Genesis 14). Yes, the church is a kind of nation, complete with its own alternative politics of the kingdom of Christ, but the church has no authority from God to enter into wars and treaties with other nation-states the way that Old Testament Israel did. In other words, as Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world." Thus, the nation established by the New Covenant in Christ's blood is not perfectly continuous with the theocracy of Old Testament Israel. So, it should not surprise us that there are certain discontinuities between them. For the Baptist, one of these discontinuities involves the parties of the New Covenant: God and believers, not God, believers, and their children as in the Old Testament theologico-political nation of Israel.

Leithart rightly sees that the Baptist rejection of infant baptism entails the belief that most Christians across the centuries and around the world are unbaptized. This is admittedly a challenge for the Baptist position, but as I argued in my essay, this rejection of infant baptism must be understood in the context of a Baptist theology of baptism. For the Baptist, what makes someone a Christian is not baptism per se (even for those Baptists who see baptism in more sacramental terms, as a sign and seal of God's regenerating grace), but personal, saving faith in Jesus Christ. I also suggested that Baptists might think of nonbaptized Christians as possessing a kind of "baptism of desire." Though the infant-baptized Christian has not received a valid baptism in accordance with the New Testament pattern, he or she can still receive the benefits of baptism—washing, regeneration, incorporation into the church, and so on—without having been baptized in reality. No doubt, this position will sound offensive to paedobaptist ears, but it must be borne in mind that the impetus behind it is the desire to accept as genuine Christians those that we believe have not been biblically baptized without diminishing the significance of the sacrament (as more open membership policies seem to do).

Second, on socio-political catholicity, Leithart worries that Baptists cannot give adequate expression to the boundary-destroying inclusivity of the church, which welcomes people from every nation and from every condition of life. He pinpoints this problem by focusing on the exclusion, not only of infants but also of adults with severe mental disabilities from baptism and church membership. If someone

is cognitively incapable of giving a personal profession of faith, are they to be excluded from full participation in the church and the baptismal rite that marks that participation? Leithart examines the proposal of Baptist Jason Whitt, who suggests that, in the case of severely handicapped persons, Baptists should reinterpret what counts as a response to the gospel and should be open to extending baptism to these disabled persons. Leithart heartily agrees but claims that this argument constitutes a distinctively "paedobaptist move." If baptism is primarily the work of Christ and if cognitive capacities are not a bar to God's saving work, then why exclude baptism from infants either? He anticipates the potential objection that infants, who will eventually grow into cognizant adults, are not precisely analogous to adults who lack such cognitive abilities. However, Leithart wonders what would become of that dissimilarity if scientific advances could eventually bring healing to such mental disabilities in adults. But is this hypothetical likely? And should we adjust our baptismal practices with regard to infants because of some hypothetical scientific advance? In any event, I would argue that baptism should never be administered to someone without at least some evidence of consent. Perhaps a mentally disabled adult can understand at a rudimentary level the basics of the Christian gospel and express a desire to give themselves to the love of Jesus. Such a person would be more analogous to a young child receiving baptism than an infant. For those who cannot give even this rudimentary consent, baptism should be withheld. But again, on Baptist terms, this does not absolutely exclude them from the saving grace of the gospel. They, too, might possess a baptism of desire, in ways known only to God, and can thus be welcomed into the saving orbit and love of the church without necessarily receiving the confirming sign of baptism.

Finally, on intensive catholicity, Leithart has in mind the all-encompassing claims of the Christian faith "embracing, correcting, redeeming, and transforming every aspect of human existence." He cites the Reformed divine Herman Bavinck, who criticized the Roman church for introducing a kind of dualism into Christian thought on this point: the Pope might have "hegemony over everything" but when the natural and supernatural are so starkly distinguished the dualism remains. But Bavinck has to admit also that not all Protestants took the Reformation reintegration of nature and grace as thoroughly as certain sectors of the Reformed movement did. Luther and Zwingli, as well as the Anabaptists, allowed the dualism between the church and the rest of society and culture to remain. Baptists are faulted by Leithart for being too closely allied with liberalism and its doctrine of consent. Individual responsibility and accountability crowd out the ways in which humans are enculturated first and foremost by families. It is true that Baptist political thought, with its emphasis on the separation of church and state, is in some ways closer to Lutheran two-kingdoms theology than it is to certain expressions of the Reformed tradition. In any event, the Leithart-Bavinck critique may prove too much in that it excludes Roman Catholics,

Lutherans, and Anabaptists from such "intensive catholicity." Are the Dutch Reformed the only ones with a rightful claim to catholicity?

Leithart cites Paul Kahn in claiming that liberalism (with Baptists falling in line and perhaps leading the way) "cannot reckon with children." Leithart admits that Baptists do socialize their children in the faith, but they do so on principles inconsistent with their own political theology. I have already suggested, both in my essay and earlier in this response, that Baptists do believe that their children are holy, in a narrow but important sense: they have the privilege of being socialized within the gospel orbit of the church and are raised in the instruction and discipline of the Lord, even if their confirmation through the baptismal waters awaits their personal profession of faith. This is, no doubt, a different theology of children than the covenantal Reformed one, but it is not a nonexistent or even an inconsistent theology of children.

Leithart also claims that "Baptist theology is inimical to the evangelization of institutions and cultural spheres." But surely such a claim would come as a surprise to many familiar with the rich heritage of Baptist prophetic witness in the cultural arena. What are we to make of William Carey's courageous opposition to the practice of suttee in India (in which widows were burned on their husbands' funeral pyres) or Charles Spurgeon's denunciation of slavery or Walter Rauschenbusch's ministry in Hell's Kitchen or Carl Henry's call for evangelical engagement with every aspect of culture or Martin Luther King, Jr.'s civil rights activism or the many ways in which contemporary Baptists oppose the evil of abortion? Can these examples just be chalked up to happy inconsistencies with Baptist thought? No, the Baptist insistence on the separation of church and state and the responsibility of the individual does not necessitate a kind of quietistic withdrawal from culture or a failure to bring the claims of the gospel to bear on all of life.

Conclusion

Leithart's essay helpfully points out some of the pressure points facing any aspirations to Baptist Catholicity. His objections to such a project provide catholic Baptists with an opportunity to express how our own vision can account for a multidimensional understanding of the catholicity of the church. Our answers to these important questions may be different from the ones Leithart envisions, but they are biblically and theologically defensible answers nonetheless. Contra Leithart, I would argue that in every respect, a consistent Baptist can fully affirm the full catholicity of the church, but in our own unique way, as a dissenting movement within the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church." Catholicity is ultimately grounded in our common faith and life in Christ Jesus and in the Triune God that he reveals. Our sacramental differences may remain until Christ returns, but those differences should not compel us to define out any Jesus-worshipping, Bible-believing, orthodoxy-affirming communion from the church catholic.