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The Catholicity of the Church:

An Interdenominational Exploration

Edited by Ryan A. Brandt and Matthew Y. Emerson

Final Rejoinder to R. Lucas Stamps

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I am grateful for the invitation to participate in this exchange, and for Luke Stamps's illuminating, careful, and generous interactions. Over the centuries, the church has been immeasurably blessed by the gifts and labors of Baptists, and that blessing will only increase as Baptists more fully live out their conviction that the church is one and catholic.

If I may assign myself the role of scorekeeper: Luke scores several points in his response to my essay. He is right to challenge any implication that Baptists are *outside* the “Great Tradition” rather than a protest movement within. I laughed out loud at his question: “Are the Dutch Reformed the only ones with a rightful claim to catholicity?” As a Christian of German descent, I sincerely hope not, though I may be too not-Dutch to matter much. Luke has reason to protest when I object to Baptist theology for not measuring up to the sacramental theology of other Christian traditions (though see below), and his list of Baptist activists and advocates is an impressive one. Fair points all. Still, as self-appointed scorekeeper, I can report I still hold a comfortable lead.

Let me clarify and reinforce a few lines of argument. I claimed Baptists cannot be “chronologically catholic” because their theology requires them to believe baptism has been virtually (because *some* adults were baptized on profession) or wholly (because of a faulty Catholic and Orthodox baptismal theology) absent through most of church history. Luke answers by summarizing the Baptist theology of baptism. That misses the point. The problem is not simply that Baptists view millions of millions of Christians through the centuries as unbaptized. The problem is more fundamental. Baptists must conclude that the church (nearly or wholly) lacked the rite of baptism *as such* for at least a millennium. Baptists will reply that men and women were still regenerated and converted, and so entered the church. That is not the issue. The question is not: Is baptism essential in the experience of individual believers? The question is: Is the practice of baptism a *sine qua non* of churchiness? Through all those long centuries, was there a church for the regenerated and converted to enter?

As I see it, this leaves Baptists at an impasse. If they say baptism is *not* necessary for the existence of the church, they defy a near-universal Christian confession. If they say baptism *is* of the essence of the church, they have to admit the church was all but non-existent for most of its own history. Either answer puts Baptist catholicity in question. Perhaps Luke will see this as another attempt to judge Baptist theology by another tradition, but the tradition in view here is the catholic tradition that makes “baptism for the remission of sins” a matter of credal orthodoxy. Interesting and potentially fruitful as it is, Luke's “baptism of desire” is too fragile to sustain

the weight of these baptismless centuries. Is there a church at all if there is only baptism-of-desire?

Luke's responds to my claim that "Baptist theology is inimical to the evangelization of institutions and cultural spheres" by naming Baptists who have offered "prophetic witness in the cultural arena" and asking whether these can be "chalked up to happy inconsistencies." Fair enough, though many Baptists today would balk at claiming Rauschenbusch as an ancestor. Though it may require qualification, I believe my claim still stands, and can be sharpened by consideration of the long-standing Baptist advocacy of the separation of church and state. I heartily agree with Baptists that the church should be independent of state interference, but that does not mean the state is outside the purview of Christianity. Psalms 2 commands kings and judges above all to "kiss the Son." In an essay on catholicity, John Williamson Nevin bluntly stated, "The imagination that the last answer to the great question of the right relation of the Church to the State, is to be found in any theory by which the one is set completely on the outside of the other must be counted essentially antichristian."¹ I imagine few Baptists would affirm this strong version of "intensive" catholicity.

Inevitably, we return to the question of the relationship of Israel and the church. Defending the Baptist construal of the Old-New relationship, Luke says "one could be born into the Old Testament nation of Israel" but can only be "reborn into the church." On the contrary, boys in ancient Israel weren't members of the covenant people merely by birth. They had to be circumcised, on threat of being cut off from the people (Gen 17:14). No one is born into the church either; all must be reborn "by water and the Spirit." Luke's reference to treaties and the use of force is beside the point. Naming other discontinuities does not address the issue in view. Many peoples lack political autonomy or the authority to conduct war (for example, the Kurds and the Basque). No living nation lacks children.

Luke will protest: Baptist churches do not lack children either! Neither children nor the handicapped are "entirely barred from membership in the company of believers." From Luke's perspective, I continue to judge Baptists because they fail to conform to an alien tradition. That is true; it is also inevitable. Luke does the same, after all, when he says the mark of a Christian "is not baptism per se . . . but personal, saving faith in Jesus Christ" and when he judges my infant baptism a mere "baptism of desire." We are measuring one another by the standards of our own tradition. Convinced as each of us is of our own correctness, what else can we do? So, we zero in, as we must, on the question: which is true?

Over centuries of debate, Baptists and paedobaptists have each developed our own lines of argument, our own standard responses, proof-texts, and counter-texts. We are well armed, one against the other. I have no illusions about convincing anyone in the final paragraphs of a brief essay, especially with the peculiar argument

1. John Williamson Nevin, "Catholicism," *Mercersburg Review* 3 (1851): 14.

I present below. Still, I'll give it a shot. Perhaps it is peculiar enough to breach the fortress, to get under the skin of the question.

Paul says Israel was "baptized" into Moses in the cloud and sea (1 Cor 10:2). For Paul, this is not a loose analogy. Rather, he sketches an entire sacramental economy from events of the exodus: Baptism into Moses foreshadows baptism into Christ, Israel's spiritual food and drink anticipates the Supper, the wilderness is the postbaptismal world through which the church wends her pilgrim way.

Paul extrapolates from the type, inviting us to do the same. Who was baptized? All Israel (*pas* repeated five times in verses 1-4). Does that include infants? Yes (compare Exod 12:37). And the rescue of infants at that mass baptism is a central aim of the exodus. The book of Exodus begins with an Egyptian assault on Hebrew infants (Exod 1:15-22). Yahweh visits Israel in response to their lamentation over their hard labor and their infant sons (Exod 2:23). No wonder Moses insists that the "little ones" be released along with their parents (Exod 10:8-11, 24). At Passover, the Destroyer distinguishes between Egyptian and Hebrew firstborn, including infants; infant sons of Israel were among the saved (Exod 12:23-27) and were finally delivered from pursuing Pharaoh through water. It would be worse than jarring to imagine Israel's infants would be redeemed from Egypt and death, only to be left behind on the Egyptian side of the Sea.

Then we can take a further step: Exodus is the birth story of Israel. The book begins with Israel multiplying rapidly, with pregnancies and births and midwives. Israel becomes so threatening Egypt resorts to a policy of forced infanticide; Pharaoh seeks to abort Israel in the womb of Goshen. Moses's parents protect him, and he passes safely through the same waters that drowned his brothers. According to Isaiah, the new exodus was a birth from Zion (Isa 54:1; 66:8), modeled on the first exodus, Israel's birth through the labor of plagues out the birth canal of the bloody doorways, so that Israel could be baptized in a recapitulation of Moses's own infant water-rescue. The infant baptism of the head sets the pattern for the corporate baptism of Israel, newborn son of Yahweh (compare Exod 4:22-23). The shape of the book and of the events it records encourages us to see the exodus baptism as an infant baptism.

By Paul's typology, all baptism is infant baptism. Every baptism is a beginning, a new birth. Infant baptism is not an exotic deviation from the norm; baptism of older children or adults is the deviation, albeit a legitimate one. Because Exodus is our baptismal story, written for our instruction.