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The Catholicity of the Church:

An Interdenominational Exploration

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Final Rejoinder to Peter J. Leithart

BY R. LUCAS STAMPS

I am grateful to Peter Leithart for his evenhanded response to my essay. Like his opening essay, his response manages to be both charitable and challenging. Leithart accurately recites the major lines of my original argument and registers agreement with it on a number of points. But the thrust of his disagreement with the Baptist position remains intact: that in denying the validity of infant baptism, Baptists have effectively cut themselves off from the catholic church.

One of the challenges that the Baptist faces when trying to articulate his opposition to the paedobaptist position is that there isn't one. There are many. The practice may be the same, but the theologies undergirding it vary, sometimes widely, by tradition. The Reformed paedobaptist argument, built on the architecture of covenant theology, is not the same argument that a Roman Catholic would make. The Roman Catholic argument is not precisely the same argument that a Lutheran would make or an Anglican or a Methodist. Another unique challenge that a Baptist faces in dialogue with Peter Leithart, in particular, is that his own position is rather idiosyncratic. I do not say this as a criticism. It turns out that Leithart's theology of baptism places him in agreement with some of my own criticisms of the Reformed paedobaptist view, at least as it is currently expressed in certain sectors. I do not have the requisite expertise in intramural Reformed debates to label his view properly (does it still represent a version of the Federal Vision, or has it moved beyond that label without leaving behind all of its trappings?). But it is unique indeed for a theologian emerging from the American Reformed tradition to argue for an *ex opere operato* understanding of baptism, for baptismal regeneration, and for apostasy.

On these points, it seems to me that there are several equivocations at work. Leithart wants to embrace baptismal regeneration, but he conceives of this regeneration rather differently than its usual treatment in Reformed theology. He understands baptismal regeneration through the lens of Jesus's use of the term in Matthew 19:28: the renewal of the cosmos at the parousia. He argues that Paul's usage of the term in Titus 3:5 (the washing of regeneration) has this usage in the background. So, to be baptized is to participate proleptically in the final renewal at the end of the age. Leithart admits that this understanding of regeneration is the not common use of the term found in standard Reformed dogmatics; it is not "the irreversible renewal of an elect individual." His view, then, must entail the possibility of apostasy: "Not everyone baptized into the regeneration is eternally saved; not everyone perseveres in new life." But, again, this is not quite a wholesale denial of the Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. For Leithart, to be regenerated is not necessarily to be one of the elect. So, Leithart's argument for apostasy is not quite the same one to

found in, say, the Wesleyan tradition. But does this reckoning not leave us in much the same place as the *de jure* mixed community of traditional Reformed theology? Leithart's vision of baptism may ensure regeneration (of a sort) for all who receive it, but it does not ensure salvation. So, the church is still mixed—including both the elect and the potentially nonelect—not as a matter of fact (even Baptists admit that people can make false professions and thus be subject to church discipline) but as a matter of principle.

Furthermore, it seems to me that Leithart's re-envisioning of baptismal regeneration actually undercuts something that he wants to affirm. He writes, "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." Well and good, but the New Testament connects baptism specifically to salvation, the forgiveness of sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, not merely to a contingently possessed participation in the renewal to come that can be forfeited through apostasy. Baptism is baptism for Leithart, but only because it has been (pardon the pun) watered down to signify and seal something other than salvation, "The irreversible renewal of an elect individual."

It seems that Leithart's main worry about the prospects of Baptist catholicity is that it represents an unstable position. Baptist catholics want to embrace the whole church, but by insisting on believers-only baptism, they effectively unbaptize most Christians throughout time and space. He expresses this concern in a series of questions:

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?

The question about "modern, individualistic prejudices" deserves some comment. Both in his opening essay and in his response, Leithart seems to believe that the Baptist movement and modern liberalism are inseparably joined at the hip. As a matter of historical record, it is true enough that the Baptist movement emerged in the early modern period, seventeenth-century England, to be exact. But it should also be noted that the Baptists began registering their disagreement with infant baptism a century and a half before what we know as democratic liberalism was fully formed. In an American context, the Baptist movement underwent a series of modifications that fit more comfortably within such an individualistic context (but, to be fair, so did other denominational traditions). But Baptists in the seventeenth century flourished in a variety of socio-political arrangements from toleration under the Protectorate to persecution under the Clarendon Code, followed by a return to toleration after

the Glorious Revolution. At any rate, the Baptist view is not consigned to a purely individualistic conception of the faith. As I tried to demonstrate in my essay and response, Baptists do have a theology of children, even if it is different from the one to be found in paedobaptist traditions. Further, Baptists, at their best, have always held the individual and the community in balance, as evidenced by the disciplinary role played by the gathered congregation and the accountability structures provided by associations and general assemblies.

What about Leithart's other questions? Can Baptists hope to remain Baptist if they go deeper into the Christian tradition with its insistence (at least after about the fourth or fifth century) on infant baptism? It should be noted that no Protestant can determine doctrinal truth simply by counting noses. The mere historical fact that infant baptism went largely unquestioned from the fifth to the sixteenth century does not necessarily settle the debate about who has the better claim to the apostolic practice and, therefore, to the deepest root of catholicity. Baptists, like all Protestants, should be committed to a strong sense of tradition in the theological task. The Vincentian Canon is still a helpful guide: we ought to believe that which has been affirmed in all times and all places by all Christians. Tradition serves as an authoritative guide to biblical interpretation. But tradition is not infallible. Only Scripture is the infallible rule of faith and practice. Tradition is a contested reality, and Protestants, of all Christians, should know this. Leithart's questions could just as easily be adapted and pressed upon all the heirs of the Reformation: can Protestants remain Protestant as they explore and embrace the overwhelmingly non-Protestant tradition of the late patristic and medieval church? Can Protestants remain Protestant as their admiration for the church's medieval scholastic tradition grows? Can Protestants remain Protestant as they increasingly see the story of church history as a single story of the one people of God, even among those who would have denied the *solae* of the Reformation? Here's hoping that they can. And, here's hoping that the Baptists can as well.