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## The Catholicity of the Church:

An Interdenominational Exploration

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## Catholicity from a Baptist Perspective

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Baptists may not be the first group of Christians to come to mind when one thinks of catholicity. Often displaying an aversion to anything that bears the name catholic, Baptists also maintain a fierce commitment to local church autonomy and individual conscience that contributes to a largely individualistic sense of the Christian faith. This can be seen in folk aphorisms such as “When you get two Baptists together, you have three theological opinions.” While these tendencies of Baptist life and thought are notable, Karl Barth offers a reminder that “the church is catholic or it is not the church.”<sup>1</sup> It is not surprising, then, to find a growing collection of literature from some Baptist scholars that have sought to re-discover the church for Baptists, including its catholic nature.

A brief word about this article’s title is necessary. Anyone who has researched Baptists, or even spent much time among Baptists, has noticed that they are a diverse group of Christians. In the United States alone, there are more than thirty Baptist denominations. Some of the fault lines between groups are geographic, but others are caused by the intersection of a variety of theological streams (both old and new) flowing into Baptist life and thought.<sup>2</sup> As a result, it is very difficult for one Baptist to speak for all (or even most) Baptists. This article then presents *a* Baptist perspective, but not necessarily *the* Baptist perspective as another Baptist could certainly present an alternative. Beginning with a brief survey of Baptists’ place in discussions about catholicity, this article will describe several notable historical examples of Baptist affirmation of the concept. After detailing some major present challenges for a Baptist notion of visible catholicity, the remainder of the article will examine a significant contribution from Baptist theologian James William McClendon, Jr. It will be argued that McClendon’s approach, which will be called “radical catholicity,” is thoroughly grounded in Baptist life and thought and allows Baptists to move distinctly into a more catholic future.

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation: Part 1*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), 702.

2. A similar recognition is at work in Curtis W. Freeman’s discussion of “Other Baptists” at the outset of *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), ix.

## **Can Baptists Have Catholicity?**

The term “catholic” is derived from the Greek *katholikē* (which was later translated in Latin as *catholica*). While often translated as “universal,” it is perhaps better rendered as “of the whole,” though even that definition will require some additional exploration. In the apostolic period, the word itself first appeared in Ignatius of Antioch’s Epistle to the Smyrneans, stating that “where Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church” (8.2). The term is also used in several places in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, notably to refer to the whole church (1.1; 8.1; 19.2; 16.2), though it is also used to refer to the revered bishop’s position in the church. Avery Dulles argues that these earliest uses of the term are open to various interpretations, noting that a more defined sense of catholicity only emerges in the fourth century with Cyril of Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup>

While the term “catholic” does not occur substantively in the New Testament, the idea behind it is certainly present. Acts 1:8 provides a thesis statement for what follows in that canonical book, but it also represents a spatial sense of catholicity when it states that the apostles will be “witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (NRSV). The Pauline literature similarly encourages the quest for catholicity. Ephesians urges that Christians “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” It continues, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (4:3-5). Paul chastises the church in Corinth for divisions, speaking of the church as a body, an organic and interrelated whole (1 Cor 1:10-13; 12:12-27). Colossians describes Christ as the head of that body (1:18). A link between scattered Christian communities is reflected in Paul’s encouragement to Gentile Christians in places like Corinth and Rome to contribute to an offering for the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem (Rom 15:25-27; 2 Cor 8:1-9:5).

Further, Jesus prays for his disciples before his betrayal: “Sanctify them in the truth” (John 17:17). He continues,

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20-23)

In this prayer, Jesus intercedes for the sake of all Christians, requesting that they all be one. The unity of the church is certainly present, but there is more. As a prayer

3. Avery Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 14. See Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 18.23.

of Jesus, it stands as a prayer on behalf of all Christians, but it is also an invitation to all Christians to join in this prayer. To do so is to share in Jesus's prayer for the church as the church.

As part of the Free Church tradition, Baptists do not have many of the visible marks of catholicity that characterize other traditions. They usually do not have bishops that collectively represent local congregations to a larger ecclesial entity and represent the whole church to the local congregation.<sup>4</sup> Many Baptists offer the Eucharist (often called the "Lord's Supper") infrequently (such as monthly or quarterly), while other Christians celebrate communion every week, serving to accentuate the shared and translocal participation of the whole church in this sacramental action. Finally, Baptists are not as likely to recite any of the ancient creeds of the church in their worship services (for example, the Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed). In other traditions, this practice extends beyond the local setting to include all worshipers who affirm the *regula fidei* embodied in the creed. That Baptists lack these (and other) features can lead to the conclusion that catholicity is not something valued in the Free Church tradition. As Miroslav Volf wonders after a similar survey, "A catholic Free Church is a contradiction in terms; it understands itself as free precisely with regard to those relationships that would tie it to the whole and thus make it catholic in the first place."<sup>5</sup>

Despite these concerns (both by and about Baptists), catholicity remains an important mark of the church, "One established by Christ and gathered by the Spirit."<sup>6</sup> Fifth-century monastic Vincent of Lérins underscored the significance of shared theological convictions to what is truly catholic, "That faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all" (*Commonitorium* 2.6). To be catholic is to see the Christian faith beyond one's self and to be tied to that faith. Thus, the catholic refers to that which extends beyond the individual congregation and individual believer. In this manner, Henri de Lubac describes it as "social in the deepest sense of the word."<sup>7</sup>

In contrast with the general impression of Baptists' aversion to catholicity, there are moments where Baptists have recognized the value of the church's catholic nature. Several Baptist confessions of faith offer this affirmation. For example, the General Baptist *Orthodox Creed* (1678 [article 29]) underscores the importance of catholicity: "There is only one holy catholick church, consisting of, or made up of

4. A distinct exception to this claim would be the Evangelical Christian Baptists of Georgia, who not only have bishops, but also a school of iconography. See Malkhaz Songulashvili, *Evangelical Christian Baptists of Georgia: The History and Transformation of a Free Church Tradition* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2015).

5. Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 260.

6. Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, 264-65.

7. Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, trans. Lancelot C. Sheppard and Elizabeth Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 15.

the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered in one body under Christ, the only head thereof, which church is gathered by special grace, and the powerful and internal work of the spirit, and are effectually united unto Christ their head, and can never fall away.”<sup>8</sup> In the next article of the confession, the church is described as extending beyond its local gatherings: “We believe the visible church of Christ on earth, is made up of several distinct congregations, which make up that one catholic church, or mystical body of Christ.”<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, at the first Baptist World Congress (1905), Judge Willis, president of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, offered welcome to the initial worldwide assembly of Baptists in part with these words, “We believe, and our fathers have believed, in the Holy Catholic Church. The Church of Rome is right in affirming that the Church of Christ is catholic. The catholicity of the Church is not, however, a doctrine of Rome: it is an essential consequence resulting from the principles on which Christ’s Church is founded.”<sup>10</sup> Later at the same Baptist World Congress, Alexander Maclaren, president of the Baptist World Alliance, called the gathering to make a display of catholicity: “I should like that there should be no misunderstanding . . . as to where we stand in the continuity of the historic Church. And I should like the first act of this Congress to be the audible and unanimous acknowledgement of our Faith.” What followed was a recitation of the Apostles’ Creed.<sup>11</sup> While this may have been quite moving and significant to those gathered in 1905, more importantly, it served as a sign to those watching that Baptists valued the catholic nature of the church.

Additionally, Baptists occasionally sing of the catholicity of the church in hymns such as “The Church’s One Foundation,” which could be seen echoing both Ephesians 4 and the words of Ignatius of Antioch:

The church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord;  
She is His new creation, by Spirit and the Word:  
From heav’n He came and sought her to be His holy bride,  
With His own blood He bought her, and for her life He died.  
Elect from every nation, yet one o’er all the earth,  
Her charter of salvation, one Lord, one faith, one birth;  
One holy name she blesses, partakes one holy food,  
And to one hope she presses, with every grace endued.<sup>12</sup>

8. William L. Lumpkin, ed., “Orthodox Creed, 1678,” in *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, rev. ed. (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969), 318.

9. Lumpkin, “Orthodox Creed,” 318-19.

10. J. H. Shakespeare, ed. *The Baptist World Congress, July 11-19, 1905, Authorised Record of Proceedings* (London: Baptist Union Publication Department, 1905), 2-3.

11. Shakespeare, *Baptist World Congress*, 20. This act was repeated at the centennial Baptist World Congress in 2005.

12. Samuel J. Stone, “The Church’s One Foundation,” in Wesley L. Forbis, ed., *Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1991), no. 350.

British Baptist Christopher Ellis points to hymnody among Baptists as both a catalyst for their embrace of catholicity as well as a sign of it. That Baptists join in signing their faith with other Christian communions (and occasionally by using the same songs) is significant, as is the source of these hymns. Since Baptist hymnbooks include many hymns and songs written by non-Baptists, the hymnbooks themselves represent a certain level of catholicity “through the resources of the wider Church being made available to a local congregation.”<sup>13</sup>

What emerges from these moments is that Baptists can embrace some sense of catholicity, despite their reticence to speak of it. Catholicity resides beneath the surface of their expressed faith, always present, yet never articulated. Moreover, this catholicity has a particular shape. Specifically, catholicity for these Baptists refers to the church’s invisible unity, as the Particular Baptists’ *Second London Confession of Faith* (1677 [chapter 26]) states: “The Catholick or universal Church, which (with respect to internal work of the Spirit, and truth of grace) may be called invisible, consists of the whole number of the Elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.”<sup>14</sup>

The emphasis on invisible unity is important for the sake of catholicity, reminding Christian groups that it can still abide imperfectly despite divisions. However, invisible unity is simply insufficient in light of the scriptural material mentioned earlier. To be sure, there is an eschatological aspect to this sense of catholicity, anticipating full visible unity only at the consummation of the reign of God. Nonetheless, claims of invisible unity leave too much of the present life of the church in an “uncatholic” state, prompting the question: does not this eschatological telos make particular claims on the church in the present? To defer visible unity entirely to the future would seem to deny any relationship between the anticipated eschatological fulfillment and our present situation. Can Baptists claim (and participate in) a more visible sense of the church’s catholicity?

### Challenges to Visible Catholicity

Before proceeding to answer the previous question, it is necessary to address two major challenges to the Baptist pursuit of catholicity, whether visible or invisible. First is the fragmented nature of Baptist life. Baptists have been dividing almost since their arrival on the ecclesial landscape in the seventeenth century. Occasionally, some Baptists describe the parting between John Smyth and Thomas Helwys (before Helwys and his congregation returned to England from Amsterdam) as the first

13. Christopher J. Ellis, *Gathering: A Theology and Spirituality of Worship in Free Church Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 158.

14. Lumpkin, “Second London Confession,” 285.

Baptist church split.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, many Baptist denominational groups have a prior (and often painful) rift woven into their history. This was evident when the Southern Baptist Convention broke with the rest of the Triennial Convention in 1845. Based on disagreement with northern Baptists concerning whether slavery was biblically legitimate, a new denomination was born, and the separation between Northern and Southern Baptists remains today, even though both denominations now agree about what initially divided them. New Baptist groups have multiplied over the decades, with each one seeking to differentiate itself from others on the Baptist landscape.

In historical discussions of these developments, some observe a broad diversity of Christians that carry the name of Baptist. A spectrum of Baptist identity is constructed where many people disagree with one another, but they are all Baptists.<sup>16</sup> Here, Baptists represent a broad sense of freedom that has a wide embrace. Even if there is some truth to this description (and a diverse Baptist ecosystem does have its merits), questions remain about what binds these ostensibly disparate Baptist groups together. Because of this, more often than not, the plurality of Baptist groups should be viewed as a sign of deep divisions that do not move toward any sense of unity and, in fact, stand as obstacles to full catholicity. There are many reasons for this. For instance, the pain from previous conflicts (and the frequent description of one's own group over against another) is rarely addressed so that genuine reconciliation can come about.<sup>17</sup> Over time, the depth of the dispute can provoke later anger, or the drifting apart of the two groups can make reconnection difficult even when the original offense has been forgotten. This is compounded by regionalism between Baptist groups, which makes encounters with other Baptist groups infrequent and awkward. For example, American Baptists are less likely to occupy the same space as Southern Baptists or Cooperative Baptists. As a result, even when Baptist groups

15. W. Glenn Jonas, *The Baptist River: Essays on Many Tributaries of a Diverse Tradition* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2006), 6

16. See, for example, Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1993), 3. Jonas describes the central Baptist characteristic as "diversity-through-dissent." See *Baptist River*, 3.

17. An example of this is the 1995 resolution of the Southern Baptist Convention where the SBC apologized for condoning racism and slavery. See "Resolution on Racial Reconciliation on the 150th Anniversary of the Southern Baptist Convention," available at <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/899/resolution-on-racial-reconciliation-on-the-150th-anniversary-of-the-southern-baptist-convention>. While this act is very significant, it is worth mentioning that there has been no resolution related to working together with the inheritors of the Northern Baptist heritage, the American Baptist Churches USA, from whom Southern Baptists separated because of slavery.

By contrast, after the Second Vatican Council, the official removal of mutual anathemas by Roman Catholics and the Orthodox (which had stood since 1054) opened up new possibilities for formal conversations and reconciliation, a process which has slowly taken place since 1965.

do encounter one another, they usually do so with caution and even suspicion, even when there is much that they hold in common.<sup>18</sup>

This fragmentation is fed and exacerbated by the growing individualism of contemporary Western culture that surrounds and even influences many Baptists. While this is concerning to some Baptists, many simply embrace it as part of the Christian faith. Faith convictions are privatized or spiritualized as interior beliefs unaffected by political or economic circumstances. Worship becomes about personal preferences, which almost always concern style rather than substance. The Bible is even read in a manner that underwrites this emphasis on the individual's need for personal assistance. The result is that there is very little sense that one participates in a social body that is larger than oneself. Instead, one's private relationship with God is the *summum bonum* of Christian existence. The Christian faith is "Jesus and me" (JAM), with no room for the church. In fact, American Baptist Winthrop Hudson described these circumstances as making "every[one's] hat [their] own church."<sup>19</sup>

It is difficult, if not impossible, to pursue catholicity when drinking deeply from the well of this fragmentation and individualization. The church becomes, at best, an aggregate of individuals rather than a cohesive whole, and any social linkage between persons is tenuous and constantly threatened by new rifts and dissent. At worst, it promotes a desire for uniformity—as seen in certain fundamentalist tendencies—that continually reduces the community of faith to a minuscule remnant of the whole. One distinct Baptist conviction—local church autonomy—becomes the seed of mistrust within any cooperative endeavor, often fostering nothing more than cautious collaboration. What emerges is that Baptists become prototypical examples of what Curtis Freeman calls "the teleology of progressive fissiparation from catholicity to sectarianism."<sup>20</sup> This ecclesial fragmentation can theologically blind Baptists to the social dynamics of sin. Writing about Maximus the Confessor, Henri de Lubac describes original sin as "a separation, a breaking up, an individualization it might be called."<sup>21</sup> Consequently, a "humanity which ought to constitute a harmonious whole . . . is turned into a multitude of individuals, as numerous as the sands of the seashore."<sup>22</sup> What Maximus identified as a sin hence becomes a source of pride for many Baptists.

Second, Baptists have a history of setting themselves over against other Christians. In many ways, early twentieth-century Baptist ecumenism consisted of

18. This is seen often in mission and church planting efforts, where one Baptist group overlooks the presence of another in a given area or holds suspicions about the possibilities of collaboration. A recent exception to this trend occurred in 2007, when the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the American Baptist Churches USA held a joint annual gathering in Washington, DC. At that meeting, they also jointly appointed missionaries.

19. Winthrop S. Hudson, *Baptists in Transition: Individualism and Christian Responsibility* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1979), 142.

20. Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, 10.

21. de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 33.

22. de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 33-34.

converting the world to be Baptist. In his *Axioms of Religion* (1908), E. Y. Mullins offers a severe critique of Catholicism, but he also extends that criticism to other Christian communions if they resemble the Catholic Church in any way (especially regarding infant baptism or episcopacy).<sup>23</sup> George W. Truett, after stating that the “Baptist message and the Roman Catholic message are the very antipodes of each other,” describes the Reformation as “an arrested development,” incomplete because it retained too many of the errors of Catholicism.<sup>24</sup> Catholicity of any sort is hard to cultivate when the rest of the whole church is described in these terms.

Much of this opposition to ecumenism—like the divisiveness mentioned above—is founded on a Baptist principle of dissent. Dissent, many Baptists declare, stands as a good to be invoked as much as possible. Part of this use of dissent is to argue that Baptists are necessary pieces of the historical picture of Christianity. That is, if Baptists did not exist, the Christian world would lack the convictions that only Baptists could offer. In this mode, dissent contributes to a forgetfulness of the larger Christian tradition in which Baptists participate and from which Baptists have received many gifts. Instead of this approach, Steven Harmon writes that dissent should be viewed as “an ecclesial practice necessitated by the current failures of the church to embody the unity that is an essential mark of the church.”<sup>25</sup> To dissent may be necessary, but it is a tragic necessity.

In the end, Baptist catholicity must have a twofold method if it is to overcome these challenges. First, a Baptist catholicity inside Baptist life is required. This would address the present fragmentation of Baptists and seek to draw Baptists of all stripes to a greater sense of unity in the midst of considerable diversity. While some existing dividing lines might be erased, others might at least be reconsidered in light of further reflection. Second, a Baptist catholicity outside Baptist life is needed, one that embraces non-Baptist Christians as part of the body of Christ. Here Baptist catholicity would not be set against other forms of catholicity. Instead, Baptist catholicity would be seen as a path toward greater ecumenical convergence while still articulating the differences that remain between Baptists and non-Baptists.

## **A Path Forward**

In light of these challenges, Baptist catholicity will need to take a particular shape. Theologians often distinguish between quantitative catholicity and qualitative catholicity. While both have visible unity as their aim, they account for this goal in

23. E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1908), 63-65.

24. George W. Truett, “Baptists and Religious Liberty,” in *God’s Call to America and Other Addresses Comprising Special Orations Delivered on Widely Varying Occasions* (New York: George H. Doran, 1923), 36, 48.

25. Steven R. Harmon, *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future: Story, Tradition, and the Recovery of Community* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016), 50.

distinct ways. Miroslav Volf describes quantitative catholicity as an extensive sense of the term, focusing either on geographic expansion of the church or the universality of belief.<sup>26</sup> Avery Dulles writes that this aspect of catholicity is “opposed to schism, sectarianism, and whatever would tend to confine or isolate Christians in a closed, particularist group.”<sup>27</sup> By contrast, Volf notes that qualitative catholicity is intensive, attending to the fullness of faith in the church, despite its geographical spread.<sup>28</sup> After all, the church was “already Catholic on the morning of Pentecost, when all her members could be contained in a small room.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, while quantitative catholicity is an important measure, it should not eclipse qualitative catholicity.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, James William McClendon, Jr. discusses three senses of catholicity emerging from the history of the church, each distinguished by its own subscript indicator. First is what he calls “catholic<sub>p</sub>,” where “some Christian network, perhaps venerable but perhaps newfangled, declares that its unity is the *true* Christian unity.”<sup>31</sup> McClendon points out that this form of catholicity has taken various forms, such as in Landmark Baptists.<sup>32</sup> Regardless, the emphasis for catholic<sub>p</sub> is the “claim of one particular *party* to be in itself all-inclusive.”<sup>33</sup> He then argues that “Catholic<sub>u</sub>” is “authentic Christian existence *fully extended* in space and time.”<sup>34</sup> This form of catholicity, according to McClendon, is less an approach and more “the expression of a hope or faith,” a goal that is pursued through various means. As such, he sees catholic<sub>u</sub> represented by much of the modern ecumenical movement.<sup>35</sup> Finally, McClendon labels the third sense “catholic<sub>a</sub>,” which is a corporate wholeness of character that is authentically Christian. In other words, congregations, local churches, Christian groups all “seek to embody the completeness that is found in Christ Jesus and in his true saints ancient and modern.”<sup>36</sup>

Several observations must be made about these distinctions. First, each sense of catholicity is related to Christian identity; that is, what it means to be catholic is bound

26. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 265-66.

27. Dulles, *Catholicity of the Church*, 68.

28. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 266.

29. de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 49. See Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 265. Dulles, in *Catholicity of the Church*, adds, “Even if there were only one true Christian in the world, that individual would be Catholic in the qualitative sense” (68).

30. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 266.

31. James W. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, *Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 335.

32. Holding that a particular type of local Baptist congregation (closed communion, rejection of other non-Baptist churches) is linked historically by a “trail of blood” to true Christianity, Landmark Baptists stand as a quintessential example of catholic<sub>p</sub>.

33. McClendon, *Witness*, 335.

34. McClendon, *Witness*, 335.

35. McClendon, *Witness*, 336.

36. McClendon, *Witness*, 336.

up with what it means to be Christian.<sup>37</sup> Catholic<sub>p</sub> grounds this identity in membership within a particular Christian communion. Catholic<sub>u</sub> sees this in participation in the worldwide Christian movement, and Catholic<sub>a</sub> centers on the embodiment of Christ by the corporate people of God. Second, while catholic<sub>u</sub> is a goal that all Christians share, the path to this goal is often unclear, producing multiple perspectives and historical examples for how to achieve this sort of unity. McClendon acknowledges that John Henry Newman sought catholic<sub>u</sub> through catholic<sub>p</sub>-style catholicity by seeing his quest for catholicity fulfilled in his conversion to the Catholic Church.<sup>38</sup> With deference to Newman, McClendon argues that this is not the best pathway to Christian unity. Instead, he proposes that catholic<sub>a</sub> catholicity, which centers on the whole church as embodied in faithful Christian witness, offers a superior alternative. McClendon recognizes that catholic<sub>a</sub> catholicity is the oldest sense of “catholic,” though it is also manifested throughout the history of the church. As such, the emphasis of this approach on a gathered church that embodies the authentic character of Christ can encompass a wide diversity of communities. According to McClendon, all Christians who call the church to the root (that is, *radix*) of faithful Christian living share in the baptist vision. As a result, Curtis Freeman rightly describes McClendon’s proposal as “radical catholicity.”<sup>39</sup> For his part, McClendon states that this is a “baptist path to (catholic<sub>u</sub>) Christian unity.”<sup>40</sup>

McClendon’s radical catholicity confronts the challenges mentioned previously. Since it is grounded in the embodied life of a particular community (the church), the community becomes more than simply a gathering of like-minded individuals. As a form of qualitative catholicity, it serves as a witness to the fullness of the Christian faith. This decenters the present emphasis on the individual and the fragmentation that results from it. In many ways, a more biblical sense of God’s relationship with human beings in the world emerges. As Barry Harvey notes, “According to the New Testament, the principal site of the Spirit’s activity is not the individual believer, but the gathered community of disciples who form a distinctive form of commonwealth in the world.”<sup>41</sup> The salvific work of Jesus is not privatized through redeeming individuals. Instead, it is catholic as it centers on the creation of a redeemed people that live corporately in opposition to the fragmentation encountered in original sin.

37. McClendon, *Witness*, 337.

38. McClendon, *Witness*, 336.

39. Curtis W. Freeman, introduction to *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *Doctrine*, by James W. McClendon, Jr., rev. ed. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), xiii.

40. Freeman, introduction to *Doctrine*, 337. For McClendon, “baptist” refers a theological standpoint that emerges from the churches of the Radical Reformation, though the scope of “baptist” need not be restricted to only those communities. See James W. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Ethics*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 19, 33-34.

41. Barry Harvey, *Can These Bones Live? A Catholic Baptist Engagement with Ecclesiology, Hermeneutics, and Social Theory* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), 251.

This radical catholicity also elevates tradition as important for Baptist practice and for the pursuit of catholicity. Baptist theologian Mark Medley, following the work of Yves Congar, argues that tradition is “the act of transmission (*traditio*), not just the content handed down (*tradita*).”<sup>42</sup> That is, tradition is the *what* of the Christian faith but also the *how* of passing the faith on. Because of this, tradition is an unavoidable facet of Christianity, and engaging the tradition includes more than simply receiving the deposit of faith. Instead, the practices of reception (Bible reading, praying together, and worshiping together) become crucial to inhabiting the tradition, even as they are constitutive parts of it. Thus, the community of faith is significant for sustaining those practices, which passes on their embedded convictions. As Medley writes, “Thinking about tradition not as ‘things handed over,’ but as ‘socially embodied, interwoven, enduring practices’ suggests that knowing a tradition is a learned, acquired rule-ordered skill.”<sup>43</sup> In short, the knowledge of the Christian faith, which is sometimes seen as the sum total of the catholic faith, is learned and discerned through communal practices embedded in the tradition itself. This insight is crucial for understanding radical catholicity as forming Christian identity through embodying the narrative of the Christian faith. Thus, the *tradita* remains significant, but it stands as “fundamentally the Christian story within which we understand our selves and our world.”<sup>44</sup>

As both *tradita* and *traditio*, tradition establishes a robust sense of continuity for Baptists allowing them to see themselves situated within the sweep of the historic Christian faith. To be sure, dissent remains, but as part of the communication of the tradition through time rather than as an antagonist to the tradition. As Richard Crane argues, dissent “is part of a communal process of seeking the voice of the Spirit in and through the voices of every member of the local community and through the witness of Christians through the ages.”<sup>45</sup> We can recognize that radical catholicity is contested, constantly being negotiated and renegotiated in light of various shifts within the ecclesial landscape. To pursue such catholicity requires engagement with the “Great Tradition” of the church—the church fathers and mothers who birthed, nurtured, and sustained the life and thought of the faith before Baptists arrived on the scene as well as conversations with those non-Baptist communions that have been caretakers of (and participants in) that tradition since the days of the apostles. Thus, as participants in this tradition, Baptists become “a pilgrim community of contested convictions within the church catholic.”<sup>46</sup>

42. Mark S. Medley, “Catholics, Baptists, and the Normativity of Tradition: A Review Essay,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 28, no. 2 (Summer 2001), 121.

43. Medley, “Catholics,” 122.

44. Steven R. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 187.

45. Richard Crane, “Explosive Devices and Rhetorical Strategies: Appreciation for Steven R. Harmon’s *Towards Baptist Catholicity*,” *Pro Ecclesia* 18, no. 4 (Fall 2009), 370.

46. Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, 257.

In the end, since radical catholicity is embodied in the witness of the people of God, it is a catholicity that is thoroughly Christological. The embodied witness of the church stands as the ecclesial body of Christ in the world. A catholicity centered Christologically allows us to revisit Ignatius's statement, "Where Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church" to observe a fresh dynamic there (*Smyrneans* 8.2). Instead of seeing the whole (or the "catholic") as a social organism or gathering of individuals, the whole church is recognized when the whole Christ is present in the embodied witness of the church.

### **Leaning into Radical Baptist Catholicity**

By pursuing a radical notion of Baptist catholicity, new opportunities emerge for Baptists to discern the whole Christ. These opportunities arise in three primary areas: a *ressourcement* of the Baptist tradition, greater openness to other Christian pilgrims, and a renewed sense of local catholicity.

Despite a tendency to emphasize the local congregation to the exclusion of the rest of the church, Baptists have embraced some sense of historical consciousness. Invocations of Baptist history are certainly used to rule out certain claims (for example, "Baptists have never been a creedal people") or support a particular sort of Baptist future (such as the Founders Ministries within the Southern Baptist Convention). As helpful as this sense of history is, it is often incomplete, lacking a broader sense of Baptist heritage and the ways in which the Baptist tradition is not a self-contained whole. It has emerged from other streams of the Reformation and even retains a great many convictions and even practices from before the Reformation.

Through the radical catholic lens, Baptists can resituate their heritage within the whole Christian tradition. That is, non-Baptist voices in the conversation stand as insiders rather than outsiders. Significant Baptist convictions, such as religious liberty, will not stand over against the rest of the tradition but serve as gifts for the whole church in pursuit of the whole Christ. For example, when the *Baptist Faith and Message* (1963) states that "the criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ," Baptists will locate that within the whole tradition and recognize vestiges of patristic and medieval hermeneutics as well as the church's ancient rule of faith within the statement.<sup>47</sup> As a result, Baptists will learn more about themselves through this process, which will, in turn, contribute to the task of Baptist catholicity within Baptist life described above.

From this new recognition of organic connection with the tradition historically, a new sense of reform comes to the fore. This reform—known as *ressourcement*—involves returning to the sources of the Christian faith, but not with a view to reprimatinate an old form of Christianity (for example, the so-called "New Testament

47. See Derek C. Hatch, *Thinking with the Church: Toward a Renewal of Baptist Theology* (Eugene: Cascade, 2017), 88-89; Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, 130-31.

church”). In short, the goal is not restoration. Instead, *ressourcement*, as Kevin Hughes points out, “Is not in principle a nostalgic retreat to the theological safety of premodern Christendom. Rather, it is a vital struggle for the proper diagnosis of our present condition and for the proper *pharmakon* that will treat and heal what ails, not only the church but the global cultures which now suffer so many afflictions.”<sup>48</sup> This means revisiting the sources of the faith in order to better understand one’s current context and to move with faithfulness into the future. Because of the vicissitudes of the present moment, *ressourcement* is a task that must “be done and forever done again.”<sup>49</sup>

Fueled by this *ressourcement* impulse, radical catholicity places Baptists in closer engagement with pilgrims in neighboring Christian communions. This occurs via informal interactions at the local level as well as formal ecumenical dialogues. For the majority of Baptists, these happen at the international level through the work of the Baptist World Alliance (BWA). In recent dialogues, catholicity has been an articulated point of convergence. In the report from the second dialogue with Roman Catholics (*The Word of God in the Life of the Church*), the joint commission stated,

The universal communion of the church of Jesus Christ may be aptly called ‘catholic.’ Catholicity, deriving from a Greek word meaning ‘wholeness’ or ‘inclusiveness’ is to be understood both as the fullness of God’s self-manifestation in Christ and as the final destination of the gospel message in reaching and transforming all people. Catholicity is thus not a static possession of the church but is actively sought in the mission of evangelization, which aims at the proclamation and reception of the fullness of the gospel throughout time and space.<sup>50</sup>

Later in the report, catholicity is mentioned again, with particular emphasis on the vocation it places on the present church:

Catholicity—understood as wholeness, universality, and inclusivity—implies an openness to the needs and gifts of the world and the expectation that all people are called to participate in the new creation brought about by Jesus Christ and the Spirit. . . . Scripture is read and used in the light of this vision, so that in interpreting scripture it is important to know how churches in different parts of the world and in a variety of social, cultural and political circumstances hear the Word of God addressed to them.<sup>51</sup>

48. Kevin L. Hughes, “The *Ratio Dei* and the Ambiguities of History,” *Modern Theology* 21, no. 4 (October 2005), 645.

49. Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, trans. Paule Simon, Sadie Kreilkamp, and Ernest Beaumont (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 58.

50. Baptist World Alliance and Catholic Church, *The Word of God in the Life of the Church: A Report of International Conversations between the Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance* (2006-2010), §29, <https://bwanet.org/images/pdf/baptist-catholic-dialogue.pdf>.

51. Baptist World Alliance and Catholic Church, *Word of God*, §52.

Similarly, in conversations with the World Methodist Council, catholicity was an explicit theme, one seen as expressed through the missionary calling of all Christians, the preaching of Word of God, and the celebration of the sacraments and (or) ordinances.<sup>52</sup>

This commitment to ecumenical engagement concerns more than speaking about the theme of catholicity. It creates space for new discoveries of convergence. For example, in *The Word of God in the Life of the Church*, the commission states that their conversations discovered two significant insights. First, Baptists and Catholics were not as opposed to the importance of scripture and tradition to the life of the church: “There is a certain ‘coinherence’ of Scripture and living tradition, in the sense of a mutual indwelling and interweaving of one in the other. They should not be considered as two separate and unrelated sources, but as two streams flowing together which issue from the same source, the self-revelation of the triune God in Christ.”<sup>53</sup> Similarly, by linking radical catholicity, where the whole Christ is recognized, to the Scriptures, which themselves witness to Christ, the Christological convergence between Scripture and tradition (as lived out and embodied in the community of faith) is made possible. Second, through some attention to the theme of *koinonia*, the commission recognized a convergence between Baptist covenantal ecclesiology and Catholic communion ecclesiology. Thus, even though differences between the two communions remain, the report stated, “While the phrase ‘communion ecclesiology’ is relatively recent, and is more frequently used by Catholic theologians than by Baptist ones, we both recognize it as expressing the heart of the nature of the church.”<sup>54</sup> These insights are possible because of a radical and expansive sense of catholicity that makes space for fellowship and convergence with fellow Christian pilgrims.

Finally, radical catholicity creates new opportunities for Baptists to claim a renewed sense of locality, but not one set over against the catholic. In *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, the recent convergence text from the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, we find stated, “The communion of local churches is . . . not an optional extra.”<sup>55</sup> This is instructive with Baptists, especially when locality has fueled the fragmentation described above. Nonetheless, the Baptist gift of locality must not be eclipsed by the catholic. As John Inscore

52. Baptist World Alliance and World Methodist Council, *Faith Working Through Love: Report of the International Dialogue between the Baptist World Alliance and the World Methodist Council* (2018), §§9, 40-41, <https://bwamet.org/images/MEJ/Final-Report-of-the-International-Dialogue-between-BWA-and-WMC.pdf>.

53. Baptist World Alliance and Catholic Church, *Word of God*, §58.

54. Baptist World Alliance and Catholic Church, *Word of God*, §11. Later, the report states, “The *koinonia* of the church may also be understood as a ‘covenant community’ although this language is less familiar to Catholics than to Baptists” (§16). For more on *koinonia* in recent ecumenical engagement (including among Baptists), see Derek C. Hatch, “*Koinonia* as Ecumenical Opening for Baptists,” *Ecumenical Review* 71, no. 1-2 (January-April 2019), 175-88.

55. World Council of Churches, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (Faith and Order Paper No. 214; Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), §31.

Essick and Mark Medley note, “The two belong to one another, each rendering the other intelligible.”<sup>56</sup> A radical sense of catholicity can hold both together so that both may fully and mutually flourish.

Essick and Medley define locality as “the place where Jesus is.”<sup>57</sup> This echoes the Ignatian description of catholicity, placing locality and catholicity in a dynamic relation. Catholicity cannot be the sum total of the various local parts, each contributing a piece to the whole church. Instead, each local church is the catholic church, even as each church is not the full extent of the church.<sup>58</sup> With this sense of the local, there is a necessary visibility to catholicity. Therefore, on the one hand, *The Word of God in the Life of the Church* stated, “Catholicity is expressed when the message of Christ is proclaimed in a wide variety of languages and thought-forms when the Eucharist or Lord’s Supper is celebrated by peoples of many cultures, races, and nations, and when ministry enjoys and serves communion both locally and at wider regional and world-wide levels.”<sup>59</sup> However, on the other hand, it also declared, “Local churches must be in visible and not only spiritual communion with each other, or else communion will lack fullness.”<sup>60</sup> Through the lens of radical catholicity, Essick and Medley offer a similar summary of this visibility:

Through active and patient listening to the beautiful complexity and diversity of the Christian tradition across space and time, a local congregation learns of the church’s catholic nature. The stories of the saints as well as of the prophetic witness of churches and congregations, past and present, which perform the politics of Jesus, offer, in the hope of the Spirit, compelling depictions of Christian faith that enable Christians to make intellectual and volitional choices about what roles to take up in society.<sup>61</sup>

These “compelling depictions of Christian faith” bear witness to the fullness of Christ to the world in a visible fashion and draw the church in closer communion with one another and with the Triune God.

## Conclusion

All churches, especially Baptist churches, must embrace catholicity. The emphasis on wholeness helps Baptists avoid the hazards of their own theological convictions (such as individualism and privatization). However, this catholicity is more than a

56. John Inscore Essick and Mark S. Medley, “Local Catholicity: The Bodies and Places Where Jesus is (Found),” *Review and Expositor* 112, no. 1 (2015), 51.

57. Essick and Medley, “Local Catholicity,” 58. They borrow this language from Rowan Williams.

58. See World Council of Churches, *The Church*, §31; Baptist World Alliance and Catholic Church, *Word of God*, §15.

59. Baptist World Alliance and Catholic Church, *Word of God*, §30.

60. Baptist World Alliance and Catholic Church, *Word of God*, §23.

61. Essick and Medley, “Local Catholicity,” 50.

mere sense of the universal church beyond the local. Instead, in light of the insights of radical catholicity, the whole Christ is embodied in the life of the church, permeating the local yet also extending to the translocal. Invisible catholicity, then, is clearly inadequate as it still retains a visibly fractured Christ. To truly seek catholicity requires visible union, or at least efforts in this direction. In short, like the dry bones in Ezekiel 37, the church must be re-membered—put back together in a visible manner. Grounded in the practice of the Eucharist, which Henri de Lubac describes as the sacrament of ecclesial unity, a greater sense of the catholic comes to the fore.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, what emerges in the sharing of the bread and the cup is both the goal of catholicity and its present task. As 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 reminds us that we are one body as we share in the one loaf and the one cup, so Steven Harmon states that catholicity is a “qualitative fullness of faith and order that is visibly expressed in one Eucharistic fellowship.”<sup>63</sup> Baptists must lean into this radical sense of catholicity. As they do, they will not only find fellow Christian pilgrims; they will also find themselves as they journey with Baptists and non-Baptists to bear witness to the fullness of the church catholic.

62. de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 89.

63. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, 204.