

AUTHOR'S RESPONSE

According to the often-repeated story, Pope John XXIII said that he convened the Second Vatican Council because the time had come for the Catholic Church to open the windows and let in some fresh air. In his review Dennis Doyle offers another metaphor that may be more fitting. He says that the council cracked open the door of ecumenical relations, and suggests that I have shoved my foot inside the door that is still cracked. Though they may have gone by largely unnoticed, over the years plenty of Other Baptists have slipped through the cracked door to take a peek inside. Some, like James Leo Garrett, who was an invited observer at Vatican II, continued in ecumenical dialogue with Catholics. Others, like James William McClendon Jr., taught theology in Catholic universities and engaged a wide range of Catholic conversation partners. Other Baptists like these defied the impression that Baptists and Catholics were at opposite ends of the ecclesial spectrum with little in common. They understood there is much to learn from Catholics, but they also believed there are things Catholics can learn from Baptists as well.⁴⁸

I am indebted to these Other Baptist mentors who preceded me on this journey, but had it not been for my friends and colleagues in the College Theology Society, who, like Evangelist in Bunyan's story, pointed me to the wicket gate, I doubt that I would have ever even noticed, and surely would not have stuck my foot inside, the door. To all of you and especially to those who have taken the time to read and reflect on my book in these review essays I owe an enormous debt of gratitude. If we Catholics and Baptists recognize one another as sisters and brothers in Christ (and I think we do), and if we believe our churches are expressions of the one church of Jesus Christ (and I hope we do), then we need one another. For alone we cannot reach our journey's end to receive the gifts that await us there, which as described by the apostle Paul include the unity of the faith, the knowledge of the Son of God, and the fullness of Christ that is in his body (Eph 4:13). I want to confine my response to the reviewers along these

⁴⁸ James Leo Garrett Jr., *Baptists and Roman Catholicism* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1965); James William McClendon Jr., "What Is a Southern Baptist Ecumenism?," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 10, no. 2 (1968): 73-78; and McClendon, "Why Baptists Do Not Baptize Infants," in *The Sacraments: An Ecumenical Dilemma*, ed. Hans Küng (New York: Paulist Press, 1966), 7-23. For a brief history of the ecumenical engagement between Baptist and Catholics, see Curtis W. Freeman, "Baptists and Catholics Together? Making Up Is Hard to Do," *Commonweal*, January 16, 2009, 18-21; and Freeman, "Baptists and Catholics in Conversation after Forty Years," *American Baptist Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2012): 3-6.

three lines because I think they are particularly important if Baptists and Catholics continue on this journey as fellow pilgrims.

1. *The unity of the faith.* I offer a modest proposal in the book that Baptists commit themselves to a generous orthodoxy as expressed in the ancient ecumenical creeds. Recognizing that Baptists have a long history of aversion to creeds, I proposed the voluntary confession of the creed, not as a matter of coercion, but as a simple acknowledgment of where we stand and what we believe. My concern is that the faith of both liberals and conservatives has become eccentric and requires a reorientation toward the Christological and Trinitarian center of historic orthodoxy. Without a constant focus on that center I worry that Baptists will continue to drift in a sea of heterodoxy. My proposal has been met with suspicion from both sides of the spectrum, but there are signs that may be changing.

Several years ago I was asked to write a post for an evangelical blog. After giving a quick summary of the theological eccentricity of the evangelical left and right, I made the comment, repeated in the book, that one might conclude that Baptists are simply Unitarians who have not yet gotten around to denying the Trinity. This comment unleashed a torrent of criticism by conservatives, who agreed that it fit liberals, but they insisted that they were vigilantly on guard against such dangers. Then *Christianity Today* released a survey that confirmed that “most American evangelicals hold views condemned as heretical by some of the most important councils of the early church.”⁴⁹ I take no comfort in this vindication, but it confirms the importance of addressing the problem. A generous liberal orthodoxy with Christ as the center and humility as the circumference is admittedly a modest proposal, but it is an important start.

Mark Medley agrees, but rightly indicates that perhaps this is a bit too modest. He suggests that this emphasis on a *generous liberal orthodoxy* could be strengthened by complementing it with a *generative liberating orthopraxy*. It is a lovely turn of phrase that lays stress on the reciprocal relationship between theology and practice as defined in the rule *lex orandi est lex credendi*. Of course, I am in full agreement, and I only wish that I had thought of this explicit connection myself. It is, I think, implicit in my account, for as I argue it is not only praying that regulates and generates believing, but also (and especially for Baptists) singing that regulates and generates believing (*lex cantandi, lex credendi*) (183). Offering the praise of God in clear and

⁴⁹ Kevin P. Emmert, “New Poll Finds Evangelicals’ Favorite Heresies,” *Christianity Today*, October 28, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/october-web-only/new-poll-finds-evangelicals-favorite-heresies.html>.

concise Trinitarian language generates the basic Trinitarian language of the creeds and gestures toward the performative dimension of the faith.

There are a whole range of ways in which Christian practice is infused with a Trinitarian grammar. For example, Baptist ministers have the opportunity to display the doctrine of the Trinity performatively when they baptize and lay on hands, offer prayers and pronounce blessings and benedictions, confess sin and proclaim pardon, make the sign of the cross and exchange the right hand of fellowship in the name and the sign of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.⁵⁰ Such Trinitarian practices are generative of precisely the sort of Trinitarian faith that the creed names. As Baptists draw upon the theological resources of a generative liberating orthopraxy they would do well to look to the liturgy and life of the historic tradition kept alive by Catholics, to retrieve practices that are infused with the language and vision of historic orthodoxy. Catholics might also look to Baptists and other Free Churches for patterns of responding to new Spirit-led practices in worship, work, and witness. In such an arrangement Baptists and Catholics contribute to one another in the task of retrieving and updating the ancient-future faith leading to the promised unity that lies at the end of the journey.⁵¹

2. *The knowledge of the Son of God.* This second point is not only emphasized by the apostle Paul, but also voices a central theme in the Gospel of John, namely, that eternal life is a matter of knowing the one true God through Jesus Christ whom God has sent (John 17:3). Knowing God for Baptists has always been understood as deeply experiential, whereby before becoming a candidate for baptism one makes a personal declaration of faith in Christ. But knowing God through Jesus Christ is not simply the response of a single individual, trusting in God's saving grace and pledging to follow Jesus. Such a transactional understanding, though ever more pervasive through the influence of the culture of evangelicalism, simply exacerbates the sickness of individualism that must be overcome by the healing grace of

⁵⁰ I outline such a strategy in my essay "Back to the Future of Trinitarianism?," in *Theology in the Service of the Church: Essays Presented to Fisher H. Humphreys*, ed. Timothy George and Eric F. Mason (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008), 36–61. See the final section, "Toward a Trinitarian Ressourcement among Baptists," especially points 4 and 5.

⁵¹ One prominent example of this is the work of Baptist/Evangelical theologian Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999). See also Webber, *Ancient-Future Evangelism: Making Your Churches a Faith-Forming Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003); *Ancient-Future Time: Forming Spirituality through the Christian Year* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004); *Ancient-Future Worship: Proclaiming and Enacting God's Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008). Webber's influence continues through the Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies, <https://iws.edu/>.

salvation in which a believer participates in the communion between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with fellow believers in the church. Through faith in the gospel enacted in baptism, believers are united with Christ, and in Christ they are united with one another. Knowing God in Christ, then, is an interconnection between belief, the believer, and other believers so that the Christian's relation to Christ is never simply between the individual and Christ, but rather between the believer and Christ's body—the church. This account of faith as knowing Christ by participation in his body is another way of putting the maxim defined by Cyprian that “outside the Church there is no salvation.”⁵²

One of the most significant challenges I faced in making a case for the inseparability of faith in Christ and participation in Christ's body was the underlying restorationism that many Baptists and other Free Churches have long assumed. According to this narrative the true church at some point in history ceased to be identified with the historic churches and had to be reconstituted according to the New Testament pattern. The obvious problem with this approach is that rather than moving toward a greater expression of the *consensus fidelium*, the result has been a proliferation of competing groups, each one claiming to be the true restoration of “apostolic Christianity” on the basis of “the Bible and the Bible alone.” So I faced the restorationist myth head-on, arguing that Baptists and other Free Churches must understand and seek to manifest that their gathered communities are not participants in an isolated sect but churches in historic continuity with the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

A crucial mistake of restorationism is that it confuses *sola scriptura* as *solo scriptura* where each individual biblical interpreter sees what is right in her or his eyes.⁵³ This sort of biblicism is a denial of catholicity and, as I demonstrate, a continual source of doctrinal heterodoxy. The rightful reading of the biblical canon requires that the Scriptures be read along with the ancient ecumenical creeds. By holding canon and creed together, communities of readers participate with the *consensus fidelium* in continuity with the faith of the apostolic church and join their voices with the apostolic witness to the Bible as the unfolding story of the triune God. Thus I arrived at the

⁵² Cyprian, Epistle 72.21, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 5:284.

⁵³ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2005), 154. Vanhoozer argues that Scripture and tradition are rightly hermeneutically joined, but he contends that “the church's proclamation is always subject to potential correction from the canon.” Thus he maintains that the text of Scripture must not be collapsed into the tradition of ecclesial interpretation and performance. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 152.

inseparable connection between Jesus Christ as the object of faith and knowledge, the ancient ecumenical creeds as the rule of faith, and the catholicity of the church as objective and historical.

Both Bill Portier and Dennis Doyle wonder why I have stopped short of a similar endorsement for the role of bishops to ensure the rightful performance of the *consensus fidelium*. As they recognize, I argue that Baptists and other Free Churches, which rely on the Holy Spirit working providentially to keep the churches in the apostolic tradition, can welcome episcopal succession as a sign of apostolicity in the life of the whole church, though they need not regard it as a necessary condition for valid apostolic ministry and gifts (269). If the mark of apostolicity means that the church today lives in continuity with the faith and practice of the church of the Apostles, then a continuous episcopacy is surely one way in which the church has sought to maintain its apostolicity. As such it is a sign precisely because it points us to the church and says, "See, here is the church of Jesus Christ." The reason why I argue for the successive office of bishop as a sign but not a condition of faithfulness to the apostolic tradition is that I do not think *episcopate* can be reduced to historical continuity.

My reservation in part stems from the conviction that the priesthood of all believers, which also stems in successive line from the Apostles, enables every baptized believer to participate in the priesthood of Christ, and thus exercises a form of communal *episcopate* of "watching over one another in love" (218–23). But this conviction correlates with the larger belief that the "rule of Christ" may be employed in personal and collegial as well as communal ways, which together comprise the overall *episcopate* in the church.⁵⁴ Here also I was guided by the pattern of the exchange of gifts between the churches of Antioch and Jerusalem (Acts 11:22–26), in the hopes that like the church of Antioch, Baptists might receive from Catholics a greater sense of connection with the Apostles, and that perhaps like the church of Jerusalem, Catholics might receive from Baptists a Spirit-led vision for a world mission (256).

I also resonated with Susanna Cantu Gregory's description of Baptists serving as lay associates in Catholic orders, which suggests a wide range of opportunities for the exchange of gifts. In imagining a reciprocal way Baptists might think of their contribution to Catholics I was reminded of Albert Outler's suggestion that it might make sense to think about Methodism as a renewal movement within the catholic church with a charism of holiness.⁵⁵ I wonder what sense it might make to think of the

⁵⁴ "The Word of God in the Life of the Church," §§173–75.

⁵⁵ Albert C. Outler, "Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?," in *The Doctrine of the Church*, ed. Dow Kirkpatrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1964), 11–28.

Baptist movement not as a sect or a denomination, but as a renewal movement within the church catholic with a charism of evangelism and discipleship. As Cantu Gregory notes, there is ample room for greater receptivity in the exchange of gifts. Such receptive ecumenism provides opportunities to move toward attaining the unity of the faith and to grow into the deeper knowledge of the Son of God.

3. *The fullness of Christ.* What is at stake in ongoing ecumenical conversations between Baptists and Catholics is nothing less than a credible and viable mission for the church, which Jesus prayed might be one, so that the world may believe that the Father sent the Son (John 17:21). The history of Baptist and Catholic relations has been a contentious one in which we have tended to view one another not as partners in God's mission, but as competitors in a diminishing market. Yet in the midst of this contestation the Spirit has been at work in ways we have not sufficiently acknowledged. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults is an important step that demands to be noticed by Baptists because it embraces believer baptism as a disciple-making practice and recognizes adult believer baptism as the normal way for unbaptized persons to become Catholic Christians.⁵⁶ This development provides an opening for Catholics and Baptists to join one another as partners in God's mission. But Baptists can also take a step forward by looking for the marks of authentic discipleship in the Catholic process of Christian initiation that begins with infant baptism and leads to the making of mature Christians, and when they see these marks to recognize and receive Catholic Christians as true disciples according to the apostolic pattern, including reception into church membership without rebaptism. For, as Baptist theologian Malcolm Tolbert observed, a church that includes only people baptized by immersion is surely smaller than God's church.⁵⁷

As Bill Portier notes, it could be argued that similar evangelical catholic experiments may have resulted in more Protestant conversions to the Catholic Church than in catholic renewal of Protestant churches. But to his list of recent prominent Catholic converts, I might add the counterexamples of Albert Outler, Geoffrey Wainwright, Carl Braaten, and Daniel Jenkins, all who remained and sought the recovery of catholicity within their own ecclesial traditions. My intention and that of other Other Baptists is to remain within the tradition into which we were baptized with the hope of being witnesses to more visible unity of faith, mission, and worship. But even if we are

⁵⁶ *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, study edition (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1988).

⁵⁷ Malcolm O. Tolbert, *Shaping the Church: Adapting New Testament Models for Today* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2003), 60; cited in Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, 365.

committed for the long haul to theological renewal in our own denominational family, Derek Hatch rightly wonders whether Other Baptists can move beyond otherness, beyond dissent, beyond contestation as proximate goods and embrace the fullness of Christ, or whether they will remain islands of catholicity, separated from Rome. This worry is at the heart of Carlyle Marney's contention that the unity given in Christ can be denied but not divided (259–60). This is not to ignore the enigmatic rift between Catholics and Baptists, but it forces us to ask if the rift is real or only apparent.

Yet what if we were to understand our contestation as not ultimately about struggle, dissent, and contentiousness, but simply about fellow pilgrims bearing witness (*testari*) with (*con*) one another on a journey? As Cardinal Kasper, quoted by Hatch, rightly noted, the goal of this sort of contestation is not to convert other witnesses, but to move closer to Christ, and in moving closer to Christ to move closer to one another. It is a line remarkably close to the penultimate sentence of my book, in which with Jim McClendon I suggest that to embody the fullness found in Christ and the saints is to embody the catholicity that is authentically Christian (392). As the Father sent the Son, so now the Son sends us (John 20:21) as witnesses to the fullness that is in Christ. In bearing witness together we are certain to come closer to one another, giving the world a glimpse of the reality that has already come and the destiny to which we with all creation move. This is contesting catholicity.

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