Carrying out the Theological Task in a Baptistic Way

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Abstract: This essay affirms James McClendon’s claim that baptistic communities, of which the Baptists are a representation, constitute a distinguished form of Christian life with distinct hermeneutics of the biblical narrative guided by a particular vision—the baptistic vision. This vision provides necessary and sufficient scope for an authentic baptistic theology to take shape. The baptistic way of theologising is defined as communal, convictional, and contextual. The vector of theologising takes its direction from the lived-out or primary theology of the gathering, intentional, convictional community and points to scholarly theological discourse.

Keywords: McClendon, baptistic vision, convictional theology, perspectivism, primary theology

The aim of this paper is to reflect on a Baptist, and more generally on a baptistic way, of being a distinct Christian community, as well as to honour the academic inauguration of the International Baptist Theological Study Centre’s collaborative partnership with the Faculty of Theology of the Free University, Amsterdam. The claim made in this paper is that the baptistic

1 Some material of this paper was originally presented as a keynote lecture, ‘Doing Theology in a Baptist Way [Theologie op een baptistenmanier]’ and discussed at the Jubilee Symposium on 400 years of the Baptist Movement, 1609-2009 [Jubileum Symposium 400 jaar Baptisme, 1609-2009] and on the occasion of the academic inauguration of the Dutch Baptist Seminary joining the academic community of the Faculty of Theology at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam on 01 January 2009. The Symposium on the theme of Doing Theology in a Baptist Way was organised jointly by the Centre for Evangelical and Reformation Theology, VU and the Baptisten Seminarium in Amsterdam, the Netherlands 16 April 2009. The lecture, together with the discussion papers, was made available to the participants in a collection of essays with limited circulation edited by Teun van der Leer, Doing Theology in a Baptist Way: The Plenary Papers Collection of the Symposium (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 2009, in English and Dutch), pp. 1-33. An edited and expanded version of the lecture with the title ‘Theologie op een baptistenmanier’ is published as a chapter in a collection of research papers in Teun van der Leer, ed., Zo zijn onze manieren! In Gesprek over gemeentetheologie, Baptistica Reeks, vol.1 (Barneveld, Nederland: Unie van Baptisten Gemeenten in Nederland, September 2009, in Dutch), pp. 7-22 and 66-75. I want to express my gratitude to my colleagues Dr Keith G. Jones, Dr Ian M. Randall, Prof John H.Y. Briggs, Dr James G.M. Purves, and to the Dutch Baptist scholars, Dr Teun van der Leer and Prof Dr Henk Bakker, for the careful reading and critical comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

2 The collaborative partnership agreement was signed on 12 June 2013. Article 1 of the agreement specifies that the two institutions ‘wish to collaborate to the greatest extent possible in the field of education, research and community service in Theology and Religious Studies’. It further envisions that IBTS Centre will be situated in the Faculty of Theology of VUA as of 01 September 2014 and that the ‘collaboration primarily
form of Christian life, of which the Baptists’ congregational life is a representation, has a distinguished character. If this is so, there must be also a distinctive way of doing baptismic theology. Given that, holding to a common vision–baptistic vision, which defines a baptismic hermeneutical perspective of shared identity, does not preclude contextual peculiarities of baptismic theologising.

The argument of the paper unfolds in the steps delineated above by looking first at the distinctive Baptist/baptistic way of being a Christian community. It progresses by probing into the essence of the baptismic hermeneutical approach and investigating the baptismic understanding of the nature of the theological task, not as building up a unique theological system, but rather as an exercise in convictional theologising. This type of theology accepts shared convictions as the ‘stuff’ of theological investigation; it proceeds from primary theological awareness of the lived-out beliefs of a community of faith to their scholarly or second-order assessment. Finally, the ambiguity of baptismic particularity is examined and a way of doing baptismic theology is clarified. Considering the occasion, some didactic elements are also included in the content of the paper.

The Baptist Way of Being a Christian Community

I want to suggest that, while Baptists with a capital ‘B’ may claim specific historic beginnings in early seventeenth-century Britain and the Netherlands, their way of being Christian is not uniquely Baptist. It has been

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3 The debate about the origins of the Baptists is still going on. For subsequent reflections I am in debt to Prof Briggs’ comments and suggestions. One school of historians holds the view that Baptist life originated in the Netherlands in close association with the Waterlander Mennonite communities in early 1600s (e.g. Ernest Alexander Payne in the UK and William R. Estep and Glen H. Stassen in the USA). There is another school of historians who believe that Baptists have their roots in English separatism or extreme leftward Puritanism (e.g. Winthrop S. Hudson in the USA and Barrie R. White in the UK). Those who take the latter line are likely to emphasise the relationship of the Baptists with English Congregationalists rather than Dutch Mennonites. In the nineteenth century there was considerable anticipation of the amalgamation of the two streams of Congregational life in the UK articulated by people like John Clifford. In 1862 and 1900 the two denominations symbolically held united assemblies. For an overview of the nature of the debate, see Ian Sellers, ‘Edwaridans, Anabaptists and the Problem of Baptist Origins’, The Baptist Quarterly, the Journal of the Baptist Historic Society in the UK, Vol. XXIX, No. 3 (July 1981), pp. 97-112, and Kenneth R. Manley, ‘Origins of the Baptists: The Case For Development from Puritanism-Separatism’, in William H. Brackney with Ruby J. Burke, eds. Faith, Life and Witness: The Papers of the Study and Research Division of the Baptist World Alliance 1986-1990 (Birmingham, Ala.: Samford University Press, 1990), pp. 56-69. For a brief review of the origins and of the spread of the Baptist movement, see James Leo
argued persuasively by theologians and historians alike that the Baptist marks of ecclesial identity⁴ are shared by a wide variety of groups with a strong family resemblance. These groups together form a major stream of being Christian, a people of God following in the steps of the Radical Reformation.

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin admitted half a century ago that ‘it is difficult to give a single name to this stream of Christian tradition’,⁵ and yet it does have, according to him, a robust manner of ‘ingrafting into Christ’ having been incorporated into the Body of Christ by ‘receiving and abiding in the Holy Spirit’⁶ on an equal footing with traditionally recognised catholic (and orthodox) and protestant communions. He named it the ‘pentecostal’ (with a small ‘p’) stream, without too close an association with the group of

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⁴ Identity is a contested concept. The topic of Baptist identity has been the subject of numerous discussions, particularly in the years preceding and immediately following the celebrations of the 400-year jubilee anniversary of organised Baptist life in Europe and around the globe. Discussions culminated at the European Baptist Federation’s Assembly Amsterdam 400: Celebrating 400 Years Baptist Life held in the surroundings of the RAI Centre in Amsterdam on 24-26 July, 2009, followed by the Jubilee Annual Gathering of the BWA Celebrating 400 years of the Baptist Movement in Ede, The Netherlands, 27 July 27-01 August 2009.


⁶ Ibid., p. 30.
denominations that bear that name. James Wm. McClendon, Jr., a prominent North American Baptist theologian, suggested the name ‘baptist’ with a lower case ‘b’ for this stream. Recently the term ‘baptistic’ became widely accepted. After surveying a number of settings of Baptist expression in Europe, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, a research team at IBTS came into agreement on the following descriptor for this way of giving expression to the Christian faith:

By ‘baptistic’ is meant those of the free church and believers' baptism tradition. This term is used as an umbrella term for a variety of believing communities (‘gathering’ churches) practising believers’ baptism, and demanding radical moral living, such as [Anabaptists,] Baptists or Pentecostals. It can also include a number of other groups in the regions, such as Adventists and [Mennonite] Brethren. (There is an overlap with the use of the term ‘Evangelical’ in the Central and Eastern contexts—sometimes in denominational names). It excludes churches in which members think in terms of ethnicity or geographical and political boundaries and in which people typically baptise their children into these ethno-geo-religio-identities. That is, ‘baptistic’ excludes traditionally state sponsored ecclesial bodies.

In this paper I will use the term ‘baptistic’ when referring to the ‘pentecostal’ stream as a whole and I will reserve the term ‘Baptist’ for referring to the particular Baptist expressions within that stream in the dynamic relationship of ‘one of many’ and ‘one for many’.

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I have argued elsewhere the case for identifying distinctive hermeneutical, ecclesiological, and missional perspectives among communities⁹ of baptistic Christians.¹⁰ In their understanding, God is known by what he does in their midst. By constructing new ways of social living they succeed in conveying, non-abrasively, the power of God to create anew in those and through those who are united to Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). Stressing the immanence of God, they see themselves embodied in the narrative of the Kingdom of God revealed in and through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.¹¹

Reviewing different proposals offering descriptive expressions of baptistic life and practice made by historians, philosophers, and theologians, McClendon identifies at least five theological distinguishing marks or experiential senses of being a baptist (note the small ‘b’)¹²: a) the stress on the use of biblical story as trustworthy guidance for both faith and practice and as effecting a direct narrative link between the present community with the communities of the apostles, making the biblical story the baptist’s own; b) the freedom of conscience as God’s gift to a believer or to a faith community to congregate voluntarily, to respond to God without interference of the state or other power structures, including the structures of institutional religion, and ‘to live without violence in a violent age’¹³; c) the following of Jesus’ way in mutual submission to the care of the community of disciples under the Lordship of Christ (much as with the Christ-centred Nachfolge

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¹² Ethics, pp. 26-34. For his earlier account of baptistic distinctive marks, see ‘What is a “baptist” Theology?’ American Baptist Quarterly, vol. 1 # 1 (October 1982), pp. 23-28 (pp. 16-39).

¹³ ‘What is a “baptist” Theology?’ p. 28.
Christi of the earlier Anabaptists); d) and, correspondingly, the forming of intentional, gathering, interdependent communities 14 in a daily sharing in the storied life incorporating biblical vision in deliberate opposition to the Constantinian marriage of church and (nation) state; e) the responsibility to witness to what life in Christ means both to persons and to the state in word and deed and to endure the suffering this witness may entail.

Dr. Ian M. Randall, a well-known Baptist historian, has surveyed the formative periods of the European Baptist stories.15 Using history as a laboratory for understanding crucial convictions which marked the early Anabaptist and Baptist communities, he came to a surprisingly similar list of five distinctive marks of Baptist self-understanding: the particular way of reading the biblical story together in a community; living the costly life in the imitation of Christ; covenanthing together and nurturing a Spirit-led community; redeeming the powers of the flawed world order by offering an alternative social way of communal living; and a missional commitment to telling the biblical story. This is an historian’s description of ‘thick’ character, forming and transforming, living together as baptismal communities.16

The sets of markers discerned by McClendon and Randall provide neither prescriptive norms for, nor universal characteristics of, a baptismal community. They are instead descriptive markers of the way noticeable unity might be envisioned, that is, through a stable pattern of identification among

16 In most cases the notion of community refers to a ‘thin’ community, which is a virtue excelling community. It is held together by a limited range of interest. For the purpose of this work, I assume ‘thick’ communities, which are character forming and transforming. Members interact in a variety of practices and in so doing they build identity. Community formation and transformation call for a common understanding and mission, for a lived-out vision, for discipleship with care and the discipline of watching over one another’s lives, not without tension. To use Terence W. Tilley’s picture language, these are ‘communities of solidarity, resistance, and fellowship’ (Postmodern Theologies: The Challenge of Religious Diversity (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995), p. 151). Originally I have introduced the distinction of ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ communities for the purpose of defining primary and secondary levels of theologising, to which I will refer later in the paper, in a keynote paper ‘Theology for the Church: A Convictional Perspective on Community's Theological Discourse’, at the IBTS Directors’ Conference: The Dynamics of Primary and Secondary Theologies in Baptist Communities, 24-28 August 2004, Prague, Czech Republic, unpublished paper available through the author. It has been used and extended further by Nigel G. Wright in his Free Church, Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision (Carlisle, Cumbria, U.K.: Paternoster, 2005), pp. 256, 280; Einike Pilli in her doctoral work Terviklik Elukestva Õppe Kontseptsioon Eesti Protestantlike Koguduste Kontekstis (A Holistic Concept of Life-Long Learning in the Context of the Estonian Protestant Church), Dissertationes Theologiae Universitatis Tartuensis Series, volume 8 (Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2005), pp. 29-30; and Meego Remmel in his doctoral work ‘Sense of Virtue in the Estonian Baptist Tradition’, an unpublished PhD thesis, University of Wales, Cardiff UK, February 2011, passim.
the specificities and particularities of baptistic ways of life\textsuperscript{17} that constitute ‘a very notable movement to which all the churches of the modern world owe a debt’.\textsuperscript{18}

McClendon further insists that a binding vision is needed to bring coherence among different expressions of integrated forms of Christian living within the community. The baptistic way of being a Christian community is best seen in the narrative, hermeneutical perspective of aligning congregational life with the biblical story. It is the ‘shared awareness of the present Christian community as [both] the primitive community and the eschatological community’.\textsuperscript{19} In other words, ‘we are Jesus’ followers; the commands are addressed directly to us’.\textsuperscript{20} I will turn now to view in some detail the three horizons of this bi-focal hermeneutical perspective.

An Enquiry into Baptististic Hermeneutical Perspective

Attempting to speak on behalf of the baptistic stream of being a Christian community is a notoriously difficult task. It involves navigating between positing a narrow parochial perspective as the tradition (substituting one for many); and making typological generalisations such that no one particular ecclesial form of life will feel fairly represented. While there are no agreed-upon confessional boundaries, the stream has marks of a robust ecclesial identity, as listed above. The marks fit well with other nationally and internationally agreed-upon twentieth-century documents on the Baptist identity, particularly with the Statement ratified by the Baptist Heritage Commission of the Baptist World Alliance in Zagreb, Yugoslavia (July 1989)\textsuperscript{21} and with the description of Baptist distinctives world-wide issued by the Study and Research Division of BWA.\textsuperscript{22} These identifying marks, or better, characteristic practices of baptistic life, are the common property of diverse communities, arising as they do from a distinct hermeneutic. On several occasions, and following in the footsteps of his Mennonite predecessor Harold Bender’s earlier account of envisioning Christian life

\textsuperscript{17} For a discussion of Baptist identity and theology of identification, see Paul S. Fiddes, \textit{Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology}, in Studies in Baptist History and Thought, volume 13 (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster Press, 2003), pp. 14-16.

\textsuperscript{18} Payne, ‘Who Were the Baptists?’ p. 342.

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Ethics}, p. 30; McClendon’s italics.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p. 33; McClendon’s italics.


\textsuperscript{22} \textit{We Baptists}.
through ‘the Anabaptist vision,’ McClendon referred to the theological hermeneutics of the stream as a ‘baptist vision’. I will follow McClendon’s version of baptismic hermeneutical perspectivism as outlined in his Ethics.

McClendon finds the hermeneutical key to the identity and vision of baptismic communities in their distinctive reading strategy of the biblical story. It is a bi-focal strategy in which communities find themselves involved both as part of the biblical story and yet also examined by it: it is ‘that’ eschatological moral vision of the New Testament communities which defines ‘this’ present moral life of a community (or of a person in it). And it is also the ‘then’ of the future fulfilment of the Kingdom vision that verifies the ‘now’ of everyday living.

Moreover, baptismic hermeneutics begin in ‘the middle of things’ to use Archbishop’s Rowan Williams’s catch phrase. ‘What holds the beginning, middle, and end of a story together … [is ] the linking of its parts into one narrative’, which is the life of the community itself. The community must look back to its past as well as forward to its future. While looking backwards, it is not intended that the community should become retrograde, dissenting, or sectarian. It is rather looking ‘forward to the roots’. Such a perspective sees that the narrative of the Bible, ‘the story of Israel, of Jesus, of the church, is intimately related to the narrative we ourselves live’. Similarly, looking forward is not a speculative futuristic

23 The Anabaptist Vision (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1944). Bender argued that Anabaptists had a distinctive ‘way of seeing’ the realities of Christian life as discipleship, the church as a brotherhood, and Christian ethics as love and non-resistance (Ibid., p. 20).


25 ‘Perspectivism’ or ‘soft perspectivism’ is a technical term introduced by McClendon and James M. Smith to distinguish an epistemological position different from absolutism and relativism in Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism, rev. ed. (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1994, 1975). Perspectivism ‘regards convictional conflict as expected, but not inevitable, fundamental but not ultimate, enduring but not inherently ineradicable’ (Ibid., p. 9). Contrary to absolutism, such a view recognises ‘the great, contrary variety of human convictional communities, and acknowledges that the truth perceived in one is not easily translated into the truth of another community’. It is also at variance with relativism by not assuming that ‘there is no truth that is true’ (Ethics, p. 346; authors’ italics). For further development of this notion, see my essay on ‘Convictional Perspectivism’.

26 Here I am building on my previous enquiries into the specifics of baptismic hermeneutical perspectivism presented in ‘Baptistic Convincional Hermeneutics’; cf. McClendon’s essay in this issue.


28 McClendon and Smith, Convictions, pp. 175-176.


30 Parushev, ‘Freemad, Mod Rødderne!’ [Forward, to the Roots!], in baptist.dk (Danish Baptists’ monthly magazine, in Danish), Volume 152:17 (September 23, 2005), p. 14 (pp. 14-17).

31 McClendon, Ethics, p. 36.
exercise. It is an acute alertness that the story of the Kingdom of God proclaimed and lived out by the prophets, by Jesus and by his disciples, is still the story that shapes our lives today. Yet we choose to take different paths to lead us to the Kingdom. This theological vision functions as a hermeneutical key ‘construing our experience by the way of Scripture’. The vision operates with two guiding narrative images of ‘this is that’ and of ‘then is now’. The three horizons of baptistic hermeneutics can be captured in a motto: ‘the [storyline of the] church now is [that of] the primitive church and the church on the judgment day [is the church now]’. Baptist visionary hermeneutics may be even further defined as a particular way, in fact:

the way the Bible is read by those who (1) accept the plain sense of Scripture as its dominant sense and recognize their continuity with the story it tells, and who (2) acknowledge that finding the point of that story leads them to its application, and who also (3) see past and present and future linked by a ‘this is that’ and ‘then is now’ vision, a trope of mystical identity binding the story now to the story then, and the story then and now to God’s future yet to come.

Thus, this hermeneutical vision is not merely a reading strategy for understanding the Bible. More importantly, the vision provides necessary and sufficient conditions for a way or ‘the way’ of Christian existence’. It shows ‘how a people’s identity is construed by means of narratives that while historically set in another time and place nevertheless display redemptive power in the present time’. This identity can be properly defined as a baptistic or congregational way (not to be confused with Congregational Church) of living as a Christian community with an open Bible, ready to follow God ‘wherever the Holy Spirit leads them’. The baptistic vision works to keep the community centred not on the story alone, but on Christian discipleship in the world as a people whose lives are to reflect the life of those called to embody the Jesus way. Apart from the biblical ‘fulfilment’ expressions of the operational force of the ‘this is that’/’then is now’ vision referred to above, an historic example may illustrate the way the vision functions in a Baptist’s daily living:

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32 Ibid.
33 The phrase ‘this is that’ refers to the opening words of Peter’s speech in Acts 2:16 (in the wording of KJV) when on the day of the Pentecost he recalls the prophet Joel’s vision of the grand Day of the Lord (2:28-32). In Peter’s use, the Scriptures are not just a historical record of the past, but a living story line disclosing meaning and significance in the present. Similarly the phrase ‘then is now’ reminds us that that the expectation of the end times in Scripture is not simply information about how things will or ought to come out in some distant future. Biblical eschatological visions have operating immediacy for the here and now.
34 McClendon, Ethics, p. 30; cf. pp. 26-34.
36 McClendon, Ethics, p. 33; McClendon’s italics.
37 We Baptists, p. 3.
In 1787 William Carey addressed the [Particular Baptist] Ministers Fraternal of the Northampton (England) Association. He asked those gathered to ponder “whether the command given the apostles to teach all nations was not binding on all succeeding ministers to the end of the world.” Dr John Ryland, Sr., a hyper-Calvinist and respected Baptist leader, is reported to have called Carey an enthusiast and told him to sit down. Carey may have sat down, but he did not stop asking the question until he had convinced a group of fellow Baptists (including Andrew Fuller, John Sutcliff, John Ryland, Jr., John Fawcett, and Robert Hall, Jr.) that the Great Commission was addressed directly to them. They were Jesus’ disciples. This is that. Then is now. In 1792 the baptist vision launched a modern missionary effort that sent Carey as its first missionary to India. ... This hermeneutical stance was shared [earlier] by Anabaptists who came to believe that in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus spoke directly to them...38

This example evidences that baptistic vision serves both as the guiding pattern by which baptistic communities shape their thought and practice and as a prophetic corrective to those thought and practices. In doing that, the vision provides necessary and sufficient scope for an authentic baptistic theology to develop. I will turn now to consider the baptistic take on the theological task.

**Baptistic Understanding of the Nature of the Theological Task**

Measured by the scholastic standards of the university faculties of theology, which have been developed to satisfy their own academic ends, one may be puzzled as to whether the Baptists have written anything uniquely Baptist that deserves specific academic consideration.39 Baptists do engage academic theology. One may list a number of Baptists who have written first class biblical, historical, systematic, and mission theologies. But when they do, as Dr. Paul S. Fiddes, a Baptist professor on the faculty of theology at Oxford University observes, they:

... have always resisted the idea that there is a distinctively ‘Baptist theology’, at least in terms of there being a Baptist version of such basic doctrines as Trinity, Christology, anthroplogy and eschatology ... [Baptist scholars] think of themselves as simply contributing to a common storehouse alongside other Christian theologians.40

They accept the rationality and the intellectual rigor of the theological task. For example, in their comprehensive collection of essays of baptistic writings, Freeman, McClendon, and da Silva-Ewell noticed that in search for

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39 Reflections on and response to this puzzlement can be found in McClendon, “What is a “baptist” Theology?” *Cf. Ethics*, chapter one.
40 Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, p. 3.
distinctive features of Baptist doctrinal theology, John Quincy Adams,41 Timothy George and David Dockery42 among others ‘called attention to the similarity of Baptist doctrines with Reformed theology on such themes as the authority of Scriptures, the Trinity, the person and work of Christ, the kingdom of God, but they maintained that Baptists carried forward the reform of the church, which the Reformation only began’.43

On the other hand, Christian (and any other) theology must always embrace wrestling with the need and the pitfalls of contextualised faith, because there must always be an inseparable link between the faith community (committed to the common life of faith, defined by shared experience and guided by a common vision) and the theology that is of and for that community. In line with Friedrich Schleiermacher’s judgment, ‘any given theology must represent and refer to the doctrine of some particular Christian body at some particular time’. In other words, theology must have a distinct ‘community of reference’,44 that is to say, the theological task is legitimately contextual and pluralistic. For a faith community to live an organic life, its ecclesial distinctiveness should be evident and expressed theologically in one way or another. If there is ‘the Baptist way of being the church’,45 as I have argued earlier in this paper, there must be a Baptist way of doing theology.46 A personhood, ‘a being’, the character of a person, or a community or a family of communities, is inevitably manifested in doing, because ‘[The] character is paradoxically both the cause and the effect of what we do’.47

Baptists do have a shared faith story and they should have a distinctive voice among the many Christian ways of legitimate theologising. Baptist theology is a theology that draws upon the fabric of the community’s narrative life, discovering ‘... traces of theology which appears only in the context of community’.48 For Baptist theologising the narrative dimension

43 Freeman et al, Baptist Roots, p. 5.
48 Fiddes, Tracks and Traces, p. 3.
of the theological task is both necessary and appreciated. What is then distinctive about the form, if not the content, of a baptistic way of approaching the theological task?

Theological discourse can be imposed top down by the practitioners of academic theology devising a particular conceptual framework or a system of theological thought. It can also be initiated from below as a form of ad hoc theologising. The latter is the preferred baptistic theological paradigm. The vector of theological reflections points from the primary or lived-out theology of a community of faith to second-order theology of critical reflection upon the community’s experience with God and on the community’s practices. \(^{49}\) McClendon maintains that:

The church teaches in many modes—by the visible life of its members as well as by the preached [or enacted] word, by the welcome it extends (or does not extend) to human beings in all their racial, cultural, sexual variety as well as by the hymns it sings and the door-to-door witness it bears, by the presence it affords the defeated and despairing as well as by the generosity it extends to the down-and-out—and not least by classroom instructions of members and inquirers young and old.... Doctrine is not manufactured by theologians to be marketed by churches or pastors. It is the church that must (and does!) ask questions and seeks answers. So doctrine (the church teaching) is the first-order task; doctrinal theology is necessarily second-order. \(^{50}\)

Considering the vector of baptistic theology-in-community, expressed by the community’s convictions of being and doing, the task of academic theology for Baptists (and others) can be defined, according to McClendon and Smith, as a science of convictions, aimed at ‘the discovery, examination and transformation of the conviction set of a given convictional community;

\(^{49}\) Parushev, ‘Theology for the Church’; cf. Parush R. Parushev, ‘Theological Education and Academia: A Convictional Theological Perspective on Evangelical Learning’, in Ábrahám Kovács and Zoltán Schwáb, eds., In Academia for the Church: Eastern and Central European Theological Perspectives (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Langham Monographs, 2014), ch. 10, pp. 135-151. The dynamics of bottom up and top down theologising is revealed in the way the church is defined or how it is thought to come into being. For example, mainstream reformers would identify the church as existing wherever the ministry of Word and sacrament is faithfully carried out. Now clearly that requires a congregation, the definition of which starts with the ordained ministry. By contrast, Baptists would consider that the church is brought into being as women and men turn to God in believing faith. In this view the church is defined from the bottom up, from the act of faith as Christ draws people into living faith. This point was forcefully made by The Revd Dr W. Morris S. West in discussions about believers and infant baptism between representatives of the BWA and of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC (Louisville, Kentucky, April 1979) where the issue becomes rather clearly demarked: faith that creates the church, and the church that accepts those yet to believe in the reverent hope that this will happen. West writes: ‘It may be argued that those who practice infant baptism and those who practice believers [sic] baptism start from different "models" of the church. Those practicing infant baptism see the Church as an ontologically given community into which a child is incorporated, whereas Baptists and those practising [sic] believer’s baptism, view the Church as a community which is constituted by the activity of God on the individual who responds consciously and believes and so becomes a participating member of the community’. (‘Towards a Consensus on Baptism? Louisville 1979,’ The Baptist Quarterly, Vol. XXVIII, No. 5 [January 1980], p. 227 [pp. 225-232]). I am indebted to Prof Briggs for pointing me to this discussion.

\(^{50}\) McClendon, Doctrine, pp. 23-4; McClendon’s italics.
carried on with a view to discovering and modifying the relation of the member convictions to one another and ... to whatever else there is’. Convictions here are understood as a class of formative beliefs that make us who we are personally and corporately. Convictions are shared properties and stand for persistent beliefs ‘such that if X (a person or community) has a conviction, it will not easily be relinquished and it cannot be relinquished without making X a significantly different person (or community) than before’.

One can readily name a cluster of widely shared baptistic convictions and discern some distinctive ways in which Baptists in particular have held them together in the worship activities and practices of their local assemblies by addressing the gospel of the Triune God in a particular place and time. Some have already been mentioned and can be summarised (but not exhausted) by belief in the voluntary association of believers in gathering communities; believers’ baptism; the final authority of Christ in matters of personal and congregational life, including discipleship and concern for the mutual welfare of all the members; the priesthood of all believers; religious freedom, and the like. One may also find a particularly baptistic way of fitting communal life and theological convictions together in Eucharistic gathering for discernment of the mind of Christ and covenanted relationship of living together under God’s eternal covenant of grace. The baptistic way of theologising is a convictional one.

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51 McClendon and Smith, Convictions, p. 184.
52 Ibid., p. 5. On the origins of the theological usage of the notion of convictions, see David McMillan’s paper ‘Willem Zuurdeeg and the Concept of Convictional Theology’ in this issue.
53 E.g. We Baptists, pp. 19-33.
54 The idea of voluntarism in baptistic associating has to be handled with care. It does not imply that the members of the local community are free, as in a voluntary club, to set whatever terms of communion they choose because they accept that they are under the Lordship of Christ, constrained by covenant requirements, and in a relation of interdependency or sisterhood with other gathering communities. Voluntarism points to the fact that members of the local congregations are not coerced by the magistrate or state legislation in gathering and expressing their faith.
56 It is widely accepted that convictional and ad hoc baptistic theologising was instigated by the work of McClendon, Smith and John Howard Yoder. Recently the Rector of the IBTS Centre, Dr Stuart Blythe,
the commonly held set of convictions, to understand them by interpreting their emergence and sustenance through the practices of communal living over a period of time, and to critically examine, and if necessary revise them in relation to one another and to other sets of Christian and non-Christian beliefs. Being by nature a theology in and for a community, it reflects critically on commonly shared communal convictions and its task is both a descriptive and a normative one. Baptist theologians are regularly ‘theologians-in-community’ engaged in convitional work for which ‘self-involvement is natural and appropriate’. At the same time, being ‘theologians-in-dialogue’ their critical and constructive disengagement from the life of the community when necessary ‘requires to be explained case by case’. 58

**Testing the Case of Baptist Particularity**

The use of the indefinite article ‘a’ in the title of this paper is deliberate and, in my use of it (which may not necessarily be evident, given the way English grammar works) signifies ambiguity. It refers to the fact that there is no commonly agreed doctrinal or any other theological system that all Baptists would hold together. As the Study and Research Division of BWA rightly observes, the task of discerning baptistic theological perspective is more complicated as it may seem at first glance.

There is no central body, such as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith of the Roman Curia of the Holy See of the Roman Catholic Church that defines what Baptists believe. There is no one single historic formulation of beliefs, such as the Anglican Thirty-nine Articles or the Augsburg Confession of the Lutherans, which all Baptists at some given moment in time have affirmed. There is no one historic person, such as Martin Luther for the Lutherans or John Calvin for the Reformed churches, whose teaching gives to the Baptists their basic legacy of beliefs. 59

While several Baptists have come to prominence in ecumenical circles, Baptist bodies or communities are quite uneven in their attitudes

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57 A play on words on being a [lived out] theology in a community that gives life-witness to what the community believes, rather than doing theology in a community—similar to being a church rather than doing a church. See Brad J. Kallenberg, *Live to Tell: Evangelism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2002).


59 *We Baptists*, p. 20.

and participation in the major ecumenical assemblies, and for very good reason: they cannot represent a binding ecclesial consensus of any sort, apart from the perspective of a Baptist association and, at best, a kind of a Baptists’ theology, a compendium of the thoughts of some individual theologians.

As with the notion of voluntarism earlier, a note of caution is needed in regard to baptistic particularity. Too much stress on the individual theologian tends to privatise theology and obscure the corporate dimension of baptistic theologising, or at least to distance second-order theology too much from the place where primary theology is being worked out. Being a convictional theology, any authentic baptistic theology has to work at the level of acceptability in the local congregation. In the fellowship of the gathering community, ‘the church listens to the Scriptures, prays and shares together, and tries to discern together the leading of the Holy Spirit’ in making moral and theological judgments. Making convictional judgments in baptistic communities is guided by their belief in the Lordship of Christ, in the authority of the Scriptures, and in the fellowship of believers. It involves asking: ‘What would Jesus Christ do? [this is that hermeneutical trajectory] What does the Bible teach? [for the situation now] What do we together think is the mind of Christ as thought by the Spirit? [then in eschatological immediacy is now].’

The baptistic family is not synodical but congregational and associative; thus the vector of authority, as stated earlier, is from the local to the regional to the national and beyond, and not vice versa, as if they had some para-catholic ecclesiology, whereby the Baptist World Alliance or European Baptist Federation determined the theology of the local church and handed it down through national unions and regional associations.

The important thing is the direction of travel—the local faith community may seek the wisdom of others either individually or in

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61 For a recent account of the involvement of the unions and associations of the European Baptist Federation in organised ecumenical life, see Jones, *The European Baptist Federation*, chs. 3 and 7 and materials of the conference on *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* organised jointly by the Consortium of European Baptist Theological Schools and the Division for Theology and Education of the EBF hosted by the Baptist Centre of Poland in Radość near Warsaw, Poland, 02-05 July 2014. Major conference presentations are published in the *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 15:2 (January 2015) and 15:3 (May 2015, forthcoming).


63 David McMillan is also uneasy about theologies preceded by an indefinite article, when such theology ‘is used uncritically, particularly in the context of research, the indefinite article becomes a mere linguistic gloss—theology has become, for those who fail to be critical, an ideology’. See his ‘McClenond/McClendonism: Methodology or Ideology?’ *Baptistic Theologies*, 3:1 (Spring 2011), p. 57 (pp. 45-58).


65 *We Baptists*, p. 42.

66 Ibid., p. 43.
association, but they only receive advice, not commands. The local congregation may covenant away to a larger body responsibilities for aspects of mission, ministerial formation, or education. For example, they do this by contributing to central funds for mission abroad, for cooperative development of quality educational programmes, or for the support of ministry at home when the local congregation cannot do something on its own, and commissioning headquarters staff to undertake certain tasks on the congregations’ behalf which very often could not be done by even a large local congregation. Whilst larger bodies cannot coerce a local congregation in matters of faith and practice, it is also true that those bodies can withdraw fellowship if the primary theology of that congregation is deemed heterodox or if the congregational minister’s behaviour is deemed scandalous, or the local congregation’s life detrimental to the good name of other associated communities; and vice versa local congregations can and do withdraw from the larger body when it does not seem to represent their theological understanding, e.g. in participating in ecumenical activity.

This situation may be adjudged as the liability of a baptistic way of theologising. And yet as has been argued earlier, Baptist history and present experience show that there are marks of robust convictional identity that are the common property of diverse baptistic communities with which Baptists would readily identify. Conversely, the plurality of baptistic convictional theologies can be assessed as complementary pneumatological expressions of theologies grappling with the immanence of God in the life of communities or in the ontic actuality of God’s presence.

The viability of a distinctively baptistic way of doing theology has been set out in the works of the late theologians James Wm. McClendon, Jr.—a Baptist—and John Howard Yoder—a Mennonite, among others. The probing goes further by theologians on both sides of the Atlantic. I have

67 An infamous example is heavy shepherding being perceived to destroy the unity of the faith family.
69 The term ontic actuality of God was coined by Dr James G. M. Purves to complement the propositional ways of expressing God’s immanence. He insists that the primary means of God communicating His present reality to a believer and a faith community cannot to be understood by propositional language alone. Believers can only apprehend God in so far as He comes to them or actualises His own Being towards them. The ontic actuality of God denotes the becomingness of God towards believers in His own Being. God is known and met with by them through His ontic actuality. See Purves, *The Triune God and the Charismatic Movement: A Critical Appraisal of Trinitarian Theology and Charismatic Experience from a Scottish Perspective*, foreword by Parush R. Parushev (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster, 2004), chs. 1 and 8.
70 Considering this probing, David McMillan makes a helpful distinction between appropriation and appreciation of the works of the most respected precursors of baptistic theologising. He ponders over the question: Should their work be seen as a constructive investigative methodology for the context of one’s academic research or a standard pattern for understanding any research subject matter and their necessary re-definition in their theological categories? In response to the question he highlights ‘the difference between appreciation of McClendon [or other significant theological voice] as providing a useful methodological perspective and the possible appropriation of McClendon’s [or others’] work as an ideology. (‘McClendon/McClendonism,’ p. 45)’.
referred to a set of field surveys of Baptist theological identity among communities in Eastern and Central Europe undertaken by a team of the International Baptist Theological Seminary of the European Baptist Federation in Prague. The surveys seem to fit into a larger project of furthering the development of the notion of a baptistic way of doing theology for a gathering community of convictional, intentional believers. The surveys have helped to evidence what is meant by a ‘baptistic’ approach to what is regarded in this paper as primary theology (the theology done in such gathering convictional communities) and what it might mean to speak of a contextual convictional theology for these communities. Thus, the surveys contributed to a way of doing baptistic theology itself, which might be clarified under the following headings:71

- Theology as a description of identity (located in historical gathering, intentional, convictional communities);
- Theology as dialogue (a process of discernment; interpersonal; contextual, local);
- Theology as inter-community exhortation (not isolationist, yet not seeking agreement by abstractions, by generalisations; dialogue leads to concrete exhortation, whether warning or encouragement; dialogue reaches beyond the immediate context and specific community to other communities in other contexts);
- Theology as listening (hearing also from those who do not have control over the communication of theology; hearing not just ideas but reflections from such communities’ own living out of the faith in their particular contexts);
- Theology as Scriptural interpretation (exegetical, canonical, and as an ongoing process of Scriptural interpretation rather than becoming based on assured results of past interpretations; theology entails continuous interpretation of biblical texts and biblical theology as an exercise of believing communities as they come to possess their own reading of the Scriptures; it is not a distillation of the text in a system but a living with and within the text);
- Theology as missional (with ministry and missions as primary tasks of theology rather than as mere application of theological ideas);
- Theology as communal (responding to the life situation of the churches in their contexts and involving theologising together rather than persons producing their own theological conclusions in a theoretical way);

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Theology as *biblical practice* (seeking to walk in the way of the Lord as revealed in Scripture and being guided in that walk by the vision of the Kingdom Jesus proclaimed and lived that we might follow Him).  

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have suggested that there is a distinct way of doing theology—a baptistic way that corresponds to the Baptist way of being a Christian community. The argument of this paper proceeded by, first, defining the subject of theological enquiry—the Baptists as an integral part of a wider baptistic family of ecclesial communities. I looked at the marks of baptistic identity recognised in the works of Baptist theologians and historians. Next, I considered a hermeneutical perspective, building on McClendon’s concept of the baptist vision as the hermeneutical key that aligns congregational life with the biblical story, the story that formed and still forms the pattern of baptistic thought and practice. Furthermore, I looked at convictions shaped by shared life in gathering, intentional, interdependent communities, and thereby becoming the primary source for authentic convictional theologising. Finally, I looked at the particularity of the Baptist way of life as a contribution to the development of baptistic contextual theologies having the embodied religious experience of communities as their point of departure. My enquiry affirms the critical appropriation of McClendon’s theological method among others of value for the task of baptistic convictional theologising.

Considering the occasion of the academic inauguration of the IBTS Centre as a collaborative partner of the Faculteit der Godgeleerdheid, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, I would like to conclude my reflections with a word of hope. With the European Baptist movement at a mature age and with the

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72 Prof Briggs pointed out to me that many of the older Baptist covenants reflected the language of the farewell sermon of the early Congregationalist, John Robinson, to the Pilgrims leaving Holland (sailing on the *Mayflower* to New England in July 1620), resonating with this point by referring to ‘the Lord had more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy Word’ (see *Words of John Robinson. Robinson’s Farewell Address to the Pilgrims upon their Departure from Holland, 1620 (and other sermons)* on the account of Edward Winslow in his *Hypocrisie Unmasked*, printed in 1646 (Boston: Directors of the Old South Work, 1903), available electronically at http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/558, last accessed on 24 April 2015). This line lies behind the chorus of the popular hymn, ‘We limit not the truth of God’, which states, ‘The Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his Word’. This again suggests that alongside the doctrinal there must always be an experiential or existential dimension to baptistic theological reflection, for there must always be the possibility of theology as encounter: Encountering the living Christ, however this may be done,—in vision, at the communion table, in the life of his poor as in Leo Tolstoy’s short novel *Where love is, God is* [*Gde lyubov’, tam i bog*, 1885] or more biblically in the parable of the Last Judgment (Matt. 25:31-46), or of the Great Assize famously preached by John Wesley (Sermon 15 in *Sermons on Several Occasions*, text of the 1872 four volume edition edited by Thomas Jackson, full text available through Calvin College CD collection *Christian Classics Eternal Library* at http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/sermons.v.xv.html]). A Christian who has never encountered the risen Christ is a very deprived believer indeed.
International Baptist Theological Study Centre relocated in Amsterdam, it is my sincere desire to see the Centre fully integrated into the vibrant intellectual life of the academic community of the Free University. It is also my hope to find the European Baptists, represented vicariously by the studious work of the Centre’s faculty and students, regaining their rightful place and adding their unique voice to ecumenical theological discourse on crucial and mundane issues of the contemporary embodiment of the great vision of Jesus the Christ.

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