Towards a Baptist Theology of Creation: Thinking in Place with Willie James Jennings and Baptist Ecclesiology

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Abstract
The article takes Willie James Jennings's vision for a theology of creaturely connection as a starting point for suggesting a distinctively Baptist mode of creation theology — one that both flows out of and may further inform Baptist ecclesiology. It is argued that theologies of creation and church are mutually informing and patterned after one another in ways that tend to go unrecognised. Drawing on the work of Stephen Holmes and Paul Fiddes, it is suggested that the interrelated emphases on responsible discipleship, congregational liberty, and associationalism orient the Baptist imagination toward the particularities of local communities, encouraging a doctrine of creation that analogously begins with and lingers over how a given place is created and sustained by God in its ecological interdependence.

Keywords
Creation; Willie James Jennings; place; ecclesiology

Introduction

'Belief in creation has to refer to current real-world places or it refers to nothing'.
—Willie James Jennings[1]

Near the end of *The Christian Imagination*, Willie James Jennings reflects on the destructive effects that the colonial imagination has had on the world over the last five centuries, declaring the racialising and distorting legacy of this mindset a 'revolt against creation'.[2] He therefore suggests the need for a 'far more grounded doctrine of creation', one that may function as a reparative balm for the fracture that has been introduced into the Christian imagination by the colonial theology of extraction.[3] In

[1] Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 85.
[2] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, p. 248.
[3] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, p. 248.

response to the racialised, commodified, and desacralised vision of the world that has resulted from the separation of peoples from land, place, and natural histories, he suggests that the doctrine of creation 'should not be articulated as though it is first an academic dissertation about divine power and ownership or human stewardship of the earth or about theoretical possibilities of the exact nature of human origins or about the precise relationship between biblical accounts of creation and the actual cosmic order of material existence'.[4] Rather, it should be 'first a doctrine of place and people, of divine love and divine touch, of human presence and embrace, and of divine and human interaction' — that is, 'a way of seeing place in its fullest sense'.[5] Thus in Jennings's analysis, a doctrine of creation that does not attend to the interwoven particularities of people and place remains within the destructive (and racialised) constraints of the colonial imagination.

While Jennings has continued to develop these intimations toward a larger project and forthcoming monograph on the doctrine of creation, I here wish to join my own voice to his in imagining how such a theological vision might unfold. And in fact, I aim to do so with recourse to our shared denominational heritage as Baptists. This article will therefore take Jennings's critical vision as a starting point for developing a distinctively Baptist mode of creation theology — one that both flows out of and may further inform Baptist *ecclesiology*. In what follows, I propose that an explicitly and self-consciously Baptist creation theology can take up Jennings's challenge in an intellectually generative and pragmatically relevant manner. In sum, I suggest that the interrelated emphases on responsible discipleship, congregational liberty, and associationalism orient the Baptist vision toward the particularities of a given place, encouraging a doctrine of creation 'from below', so to speak: that is, one that begins with and lingers over how *this* place is created and sustained by God; how *this* place lives from the earth as an interconnected community of creatures; how *this* place may be kept, tilled, enriched, and made more just by the work of our hands in the life of the Spirit.

[4] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, p. 248.
[5] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, p. 248.

Jennings: Creaturely Connection versus a Theology of Extraction

The features of Jennings's thought that are especially germane for the concerns at hand are his articulation of *creaturely connection* and the *theology of extraction*. The former will be brought into contrastive focus below; the latter, he argues, is what has emerged from the colonial vision of the world. Through a supersessionist reading of Scripture and Christian civilisation, this vision first imagined the European as autonomous and separable from the earth, capable of manipulating the world through god-like knowledge and power over it. It then turned an objectifying and commodifying eye upon New World lands and inhabitants: viewing the land as 'inert, dead ground existing only in potential', the colonial gaze separated indigenous peoples from any meaningful relation to place, denying land as facilitator of identity and replacing it with an essentialising scale of racial existence featuring the white European at the pinnacle.[6] Having 'hollowed out our sense of our creatureliness and reduced the world to an inert or minimally alive resource for our use', this deformed theological vision remains normative and formative into the present, to pervasively damaging effect — ecologically, politically, and theologically.[7]

'We lost the world as creation', Jennings laments, 'with the emergence of a way of seeing the world and peoples that displaced their identities from the earth, animals and their environs'.[8] Perceiving the earth as dead matter to be rendered economically productive through domination or domestication, and drawing New World peoples into a scale of values oriented to whiteness, the colonial European saw themselves not as one creature among other creatures, but as enacting a creative agency upon the world's untapped natural resources with the divinely given power, authority, and blessing to do so. The emergence of such a 'theology of extraction' signified, and continues to signify, the

[6] Willie James Jennings, 'Being Baptized', in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. by Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, 2nd edn (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 277–89 (p. 284).
[7] Willie James Jennings, 'Reframing the World: Toward an Actual Christian Doctrine of Creation', *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 21, no. 4 (2019), 388–407 (p. 390).
[8] Jennings, 'Reframing the World,' p. 390.

'death' of the world 'as an animate and communicative reality for Christians and so many others'.[9]

The colonial gaze sees the world as sitting 'silently, passively, waiting to give itself up and give up what lies within it. Only in its surrender and in its role as divinely given gift can its life be honored by bringing that life to maturity through occupation, examination, manipulation, fragmentation and extraction.'[10] Operating according to such an extractive theology of creation, European colonists 'positioned themselves as those first conditioning their world rather than being conditioned *by* it'.[11] By contrast, New World inhabitants understood the earth 'as never silent, never passive, but always already actuality, speaking in and through creatures, including the human creature, and making intelligible life itself as both resource and source'.[12] Such awareness of the land's vitality and interconnectivity was essential to the life of indigenous peoples encountered by the European colonists, and perceived by the latter as so much superstition, savagery, or demonic influence. Yet it is precisely this kind of 'land-based identity' and 'ecology of connection' that Jennings maintains is essential for Christian theology to perceive anew if it is to recover creation — and the life of creatures — in the wake of the colonial imagination.[13]

A Christian doctrine of creation must therefore find and foreground ways of re-establishing this 'creaturely connection', the loss of which has given way to the 'pedagogy of lines and circles'.[14] This pedagogy refers to the colonial project that draws arbitrary *lines* through land to carve and divide it into an economic entity in terms of private property, and *circles* around human bodies to demarcate racial identities that are severed from the complex web of relations to land, earth, and culture — and therefore malleable to the economic ends and values of whiteness. A theology grounded in creaturely connection thus represents for Jennings the necessary foil to a theology of extraction and its attendant commodifying imagination. It is 'a participatory reality in

[9] Jennings, 'Reframing the World', p. 394.
[10] Jennings, 'Reframing the World', p. 397.
[11] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, p. 60 (italics mine).
[12] Jennings, 'Reframing the World', p. 397.
[13] Jennings, 'Being Baptized', p. 281.
[14] Jennings, 'Reframing the World', pp. 399–400.

and through which we enter into the communicative and animate density of the creaturely world interacting with the built environment'.[15] As such, it is existential as well as conceptual; hence we might say that it elicits and reflects an ecologically self-involving theology of creation, one that actively draws the self into a deeper awareness of human connectivity with the world and its inexhaustible web of interrelations.

What has taken place in the long unfolding of colonial destruction, Jennings contends, is not simply the product of doctrines, but is also rooted in a particular *posture* toward the world made possible by a supersessionist mode of reading. Carrying to its logical conclusion the ancient heretical tendency to forget that Christians have entered the story of Israel to become 'second readers' of the world and God's relation with it, colonial Christianity saw itself instead as the first and final arbiter of knowledge about the world. Positioning themselves as 'first readers' of creation, as those whose knowledge and power over nature reflected a deified perspective, 'Christians reframed the world and bodies and in so doing reframed thought itself as an action *upon the world* rather than an action *of the world*'.[16] As such, the distortion of creation that has taken place cannot be resolved through more thinking — no matter how ecologically, cosmologically, or politically attentive — within the logics of first reading that continue to characterise western thought (including much ecologically-oriented creation theology). Thus, what a theology of creation must do is to 'situate us as creatures in process of joining other creatures in and through life with God whereby we constantly enact *second readings* that build with and within the ways others see the creation'.[17] Engaging creation not as though our thought is what conditions the world, but as those who receive from others the knowledge of its givenness and interrelatedness, an ethos of 'second reading' is therefore 'the way of the creature that attends carefully to the ways of other creatures listening and learning from them of the reality of this world and of God's life with the world'.[18]

[15] Jennings, 'Reframing the World', p. 400.
[16] Jennings, 'Reframing the World', p. 389 (italics mine).
[17] Jennings, 'Reframing the World', p. 394.
[18] Jennings, 'Reframing the World', p. 389 (italics mine).

Contrary to a theology of extraction and the pedagogy of lines and circles, such second reading is 'a process fundamentally governed by the *pedagogy of joining* we learn as gentiles entering the story of Israel (…) a pedagogy offered to biblical Israel in the New Testament where they were invited to join the lives of gentiles in new and revolutionarily intimate ways'. Yet this habit of mind is all but absent in Christian thought, Jennings laments, a fact that 'shows itself painfully in our doctrines of creation', which by and large continue to read the world as though Christian theology possesses a first, unmediated view of reality.[19] Reforming this totalising mode of seeing means that we must relativise and historicise our claims to knowledge, especially through recovering and learning to hear the voices of indigenous peoples, as well as attending to 'non-white', 'non-Western', and 'feminine' modes of knowledge-building that have been cast aside as sub-rational or unscientific by the hubris of supersessionist logic and hyper-rational Western epistemology.[20]

In summary of this short engagement with Jennings, then, a doctrine of creation that is capable of extricating itself from the legacy of colonial logics and the theology of extraction that separates us from the world must be about grounding us in earthly life, about articulating and fostering creaturely connection. Such a creation theology must be as much about ethos as it is about content, about a pedagogy of joining and second-readings that attends to the particularities of land and place. As I will demonstrate in the following sections, it is especially here that we may recognise — or at least develop — something distinctively Baptist about Jennings's vision.

Baptist Ecclesiology

Because of the constellation of ongoing debates around Baptist history and identity, it is important to clarify from the outset that in this section I am not attempting to address those conversations directly, or to delineate precisely what it is that makes Baptists Baptist. Rather, I am undertaking the more modest task of outlining Baptist ecclesiology by

[19] Jennings, 'Reframing the World', p. 394 (italics mine).
[20] Jennings, 'Reframing the World', p. 389.

describing how Baptists do in fact do church and teasing out the basic theological commitments that inhere within this mode of ecclesial life. Drawing on the work of Paul Fiddes and Stephen Holmes, I offer below a broad synthesis of Baptist ecclesiology, one that I take to be faithful to the realities of historical development and global Baptist identity, as well as reflective of my own lifelong experience in a wide spectrum of Baptist churches in the United States and United Kingdom:

> *Baptist ecclesiology is rooted in an understanding of the individual's proper response to Jesus's call to discipleship as voluntary covenant membership in a local church, with the conviction that the local church retains the congregational liberty to respond directly to the lordship of Christ, as it corporately discerns the guidance of the Holy Spirit for its life together.*

The particular schematic formulation is my own, but I trust it will be readily recognisable to anyone invested in Baptist life and thought. I will briefly unpack the major aspects of this ecclesiology ('individual', 'discipleship', 'voluntary', 'covenant membership', 'local church', 'congregational liberty', and 'corporate discernment') with reference to Fiddes and Holmes, and subsequently take this characterisation as a jumping off point for thinking about a Baptist creation theology.

Individual, Voluntary Discipleship

Individualism may seem an odd place to begin developing an ecclesiology; but as will become clear, this emphasis belongs to a broader framework of theological commitments that hang together such that, in terms of conceptual explanation, one could just as well begin with covenant membership, congregational liberty, or associationalism. Phenomenologically, however, Baptist life begins here, with a deeply personal understanding of the individual's relationship with God in terms of a pneumatologically guided discipleship to Jesus.

Holmes summarises neatly: 'In Baptist theology, God deals directly with each particular human being, summoning him or her to respond in repentance and faith to the gospel call, and to take his or her place within the active community of the redeemed, living a life of

visible holiness and committed to the evangelization of the world.'[21] The directness, immediacy, and personal nature of God's relationship to each person is reflected in the commitment to believer's baptism, as Baptists understand this responsive action to be a matter of individual decision — one that cannot be made 'as a result of some proxy decision', on the basis of the faith of the church or family.[22] Rather, the individual is called *as individual* to follow Christ, into a life of faithfulness and visible regeneration through the power of the Holy Spirit; one cannot be a disciple of the living and personal Lord by proxy or association, but must respond to his call with the fullness of existential commitment. Baptism and church membership must therefore be voluntary, and of course this also means that they can never be coerced by state violence or coterminous with citizenship and its benefits. And as we will see, this individualism also constitutes an egalitarian responsibility for the life of the church and its mission in the world.

Covenant Membership in the Local Church

While the Baptist understanding of faith and discipleship is thus deeply personal and, in this sense individualistic, it at the same time cannot be reduced to the private faith of the individual: 'God's call comes to individuals', Holmes affirms, 'but the call is to become a part of a community of faith.' In Baptist understanding, this means covenant membership in a local congregation, for it is primarily in and through the local church body that 'God has promised to be active'.[23] Two interrelated ideas need unpacking here: the concept of covenant, and its application to the local church. Fiddes has given particular attention to the role of covenant in Baptist ecclesiology, suggesting that it may be the common thread that holds Baptist life and theology together across time and geography.[24] Looking at the first Baptist congregations that emerged from the English Separatist movement (which considered the state church to have voided its covenantal responsibilities to God), he sees that in a new and creative interpretation of Scripture, these Baptists

[21] Stephen R. Holmes, *Baptist Theology* (London: T&T Clark International, 2012), p. 95.
[22] Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, p. 95.
[23] Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, p. 6.
[24] Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002), p. 17.

particularised the idea of God's covenant relation with the church, 'as a relationship between God and distinct local congregations. *Each* local church, even if only two or three faithful people, was to be gathered by its own covenant.'[25] There were (and are) two dimensions to this notion of covenant, which continue to be discernible in Baptist theology up to the present: the vertical and the horizontal.

'On the vertical plane is the relation of the congregation to God', he observes, 'which takes the particular form of living under the rule of Christ alone, who is calling a church into covenant.' Thus while 'it is essential that faith be voluntary, in response to the initiating grace of God, the local church is *not* to be regarded as a merely voluntary society'. To the contrary, 'the congregation gathers in obedience to Christ as the maker of the new covenant through his death and resurrection'.[26] This vertical dimension thereby calls into existence a horizontal covenantal reality as well, according to which 'members of the congregation relate to each other and agree to live together by a certain discipline of life, holding each other up to the high demands of discipleship'.[27] In short then, 'the members of a church instituted by covenant thus undertake a dual promise, to be faithful to God and to one another'.[28]

This conceptualisation of covenant elucidates the primacy of the local church that is characteristic of Baptist life and theology. As Holmes summarises, '[t]here is no "Baptist church" that is not a local congregation'.[29] As the particularisation of God's covenantal relationship with individual churches is operative on the vertical plane that founds and establishes local congregations, so on the horizontal plane one's covenantal membership is not with a global or translocal institution, but with the local body. Baptists do of course acknowledge the global communion of saints and universal church of Christ as one catholic body, but they hold that 'that universal church is only instantiated in local congregations'. As Fiddes summarises, Baptists from their beginnings 'have regarded the local congregation as a visible

[25] Fiddes, 'Baptist Ecclesiology', in *T&T Clark Handbook to Ecclesiology,* ed. by Kimlyn J. Bender and D. Stephen Long (London: T&T Clark, 2020), pp. 25–240 (p. 226).
[26] Fiddes, 'Baptist Ecclesiology', p. 226 (italics mine).
[27] Fiddes, 'Baptist Ecclesiology', p. 226.
[28] Fiddes, 'Baptist Ecclesiology', p. 226.
[29] Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, p. 97.

manifestation […] of an "invisible church"'.[30] It is to the Baptist understanding of the local body's relation with other churches and structures that we now turn in order to round out this picture.

Congregational Liberty for Corporate Discernment

The primacy of local church covenant membership, then, is both reflection of and ground for the Baptist understanding of congregational liberty. Contrary to cultural connotations, the concept of congregational liberty is not primarily about the rejection of authority but a matter of its source(s). '[T]he particular Baptist vision of the local church', Holmes summarises, 'depends, theologically, on the belief that Christ's rule over the church is experienced directly by each local congregation, and not mediated through a translocal hierarchy.' As such, Baptist ecclesiology is grounded in a particular understanding of the Lordship of Christ; for while all Christian denominations will of course affirm that Lordship in a cosmic or global sense, 'the Baptist distinctive is applying this resolutely *to the local congregation*'.[31] For Baptists, no state authority or ecclesial body can stand as mediator of Christ's Lordship over the local church. As Jesus Christ calls the individual believer directly and personally to a life of discipleship, so he directly establishes (by the work of the Spirit) the local congregation in its common life under his immediate authority. Thus, as Fiddes puts it, 'the rule of Christ as discerned by the church takes precedence over human structures of authority, and is constantly allowed to relativise them'.[32]

The rule of Christ as discerned by the church, then, is the operative principle for the Baptist understanding of congregational church government. Such discernment, moreover, is not made exclusively by the pastor(s) or any other leaders, but rather by a prayerful hearing of Scripture and Spirit in the context of corporate discussion among all members, lay and ordained — commonly referred to as the 'church meeting'. The church meeting, Fiddes observes, 'makes decisions about the life and mission of the local church, preferably by finding a consensus but where necessary through a democratic vote'. Despite the

[30] Fiddes, 'Baptist Ecclesiology', p 232.
[31] Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, p. 101.
[32] Fiddes, 'Baptist Ecclesiology', p. 238.

language of democracy, however, this practice is rooted in pneumatological expectation and Christological authority rather than the will of the people simply; for '[t]he aim is not to win a majority to a particular opinion but to find "the mind of Christ" for the congregation'.[33] The logic of this governmental process, profound in its simplicity and elegant in its consistency, is as follows: 'Christ deals directly, or perhaps mediately, through the Holy Spirit, with every particular believer. From this claim it is an easy step to insist that every particular believer in a given fellowship should be involved in the discerning of Christ's call on the fellowship, and so in the governance of the church.'[34] Thus as indicated above, the individualism characteristic of Baptist thought, rather than isolating the believer, actually places each one squarely in the corporate life of the church in ways that demand responsible action and involvement.

Finally, one further issue must be framed: the relation of congregationally governed local churches to one another in regional, national, and global communion. While each Baptist congregation operates independently in terms of its governance and decision-making, 'that does not mean that it is free to ignore whatever lies beyond the bounds of its own fellowship. Instead, Baptists have, virtually from their foundation, held that true churches have a duty to unite together for support and instruction.'[35] There is therefore an understanding of congregational *inter*dependence in Baptist life, resulting in networks of mutuality that unfold in terms of 'associationalism', wherein individual congregations cooperate in regional and national associations for mutual edification, discernment, and financial support. However, congregations 'may always voluntarily withdraw from them, and regularly do', since no associational decision can ultimately 'commit a church to any doctrinal or ethical decision'.[36] Membership in these various associations thereby remains voluntary, and while certain decisions at the associational level may result in individual congregations being barred or excluded from their resources, churches cannot be made to comply in any final sense. As Fiddes observes, the association functions by analogy as a 'church

[33] Fiddes, 'Baptist Ecclesiology', p. 228.
[34] Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, p. 101.
[35] Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, p. 104.
[36] Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, p. 96.

meeting of church meetings', thereby further extending the logic of corporately discerning the mind of Christ in individual liberty and responsibility. As in the local church, the guiding principle of the associational meeting is the pneumatological expectation that the mind of Christ will be revealed through collective prayer and hearing of the Word.

In summary of this outline, we might think about Baptist ecclesiology in terms of three concentric circles, beginning with the individual called to discipleship in the centre, moving outward to the circle of the local congregation, and then to the association at the periphery (with the associations themselves overlapping and interlinking). Phenomenologically and in terms of the responsibility of discipleship, life in the church begins with the individual's voluntary response to Christ's call; yet this call inheres and places the individual within the common covenantal life of the local congregation called together by the Spirit. In turn, the congregation retains the liberty to discern and respond directly to the mind of Christ as its unmediated authority in the particularities of its context; yet it does so always in the recognition that it is but one visible and interdependent instantiation among others of the body of Christ in the world.

I said above that I am not attempting to enter the fray of debates about Baptist identity with any precision. I nonetheless think it a straightforward observation in light of the preceding outline to say that whatever historical or practical specifics one may argue for, the distinctive thing about Baptists comes down to the shape of our ecclesiology. Indeed, Baptists have tended to deny that there is anything unique about our doctrinal commitments at all, aside from our understanding of the church and the baptismal practice implicated by it. And formally this is true, as Baptists are well within the mainstream of orthodoxy on other classical doctrinal questions; as Holmes recognises, 'there is no Baptist doctrine of the Trinity, or of salvation, or of eschatology, which is not shared with other Christian communities'.[37] However, Fiddes has noted that in making such qualifications without nuance, we have 'not always realiz[ed] how deeply intermeshed

[37] Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, p. 7.

ecclesiology and sacramental theology are with concepts of salvation and the nature of the triune God'.[38] We have already seen, for example, how the link between soteriology and discipleship is refracted through and shaped by Baptist ecclesiology in an idiosyncratic manner. It stands to reason, then, that thinking from the starting point of the ecclesiology outlined above may give other theological loci a specifically Baptist texture as well. Thus, taking Fiddes' cue regarding the interconnectedness of such commitments, the remainder of the article proposes that if we take our distinctive ecclesiology as a starting point and think seriously and systematically about its broader logics, it suggests a comparably distinctive Baptist theology of creation.

Church and the Doctrine of Creation

This section first provides the basis of an argument for an ecclesiological creation theology, outlining the logic of these doctrinal connections in a manner that gives basic justification for the move to come. Following on from this, I will unpack the major features of a specifically Baptist creation theology that flow from the ecclesiology outlined above.

An Ecclesiological Doctrine of Creation

The rationale for developing an explicitly ecclesiological doctrine of creation is as follows: If we take the church to be the body of Christ in the world (1 Cor 12:12–31), the community where he has promised to be present in the power of the Spirit (Matt 18:20) to restore human beings to God, themselves, each other, and the world (Isa 65:17f; 2 Cor 5:17–19); if, in short, the church is the present primary site of God's work of new creation (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15) in eschatological expectation of its fulfilment (Rom 8:22–23; Rev 21), then in the life of the church and God's relation to it we should expect to encounter God's intent for and relation to creation as a whole. Thus, the way in which we exist as church suggests an implicit doctrine of creation: a doctrine of *new* creation, in which the goodness and meaning of creation are illuminated by the light of Christ, and that which fractures or opposes this goodness is brought back into harmony with the Creator and

[38] Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, p. 17.

thereby made whole and right. This is not to claim an unmediated divine authority for the church in the world, nor to suggest that the visible church is coterminous with the will of God — for the fullness of reconciliation remains an eschatological hope, and the church remains a church of redeemed sinners. Rather, I am simply arguing that there is good reason to identify a more direct relationship between ecclesiology and the doctrine of creation than is usually acknowledged, and suggesting that this connection is more operative in the life of the Church than we are accustomed to think.

Ecclesiology has tended to be considered in its (legitimate) relation to Christology, or perhaps more specifically in terms of soteriology or sacramentology. While not rejecting these connections, the ecclesiological theology of creation that I am proposing sees a more malleable web of doctrinal logics, in which ecclesiology is caught up more directly in a hermeneutical circle with the doctrine of creation, rather than existing as a Christological appendix in the body of systematic thought. Formally and in the contents pages of systematic theology textbooks, a number of other logical connections are involved to get from creation to ecclesiology, via the doctrine of God, Christology, eschatology, and so on. But functionally and in the life of the church their mutual influence is more direct; they flow in and out of each other without regard for formal systematic procedure, because both are ultimately about our fundamental ways of being in the world. Creation theology, then, is always lived through the structures, commitments, and shape of the church.

This is a twofold claim. First, I am making a claim about the way in which theology *does* operate: I am suggesting that doctrines of church and of creation influence, colour, and reshape one another on an ongoing basis in the life of the church — in its social action, preaching, and catechesis — even when such connections are not made explicit in doctrinal or confessional terms. It seems to me that something very close to this is what Jennings has argued so persuasively in assessing the ways the colonial imagination reshaped creation and its understanding of the church's relation to it (one thinks, for example, of the 'doctrine of discovery' by which popes bestowed 'rights' of 'ownership' to Christian nations who encountered lands already long inhabited by

indigenous peoples). And second, I am making a claim about the way in which theological investigations *ought to* operate: I am suggesting that we should consciously and intentionally think about ecclesiology and the doctrine of creation in terms of mutually influential logics.

An important question at this point is who are the 'we' that I am speaking of. On the one hand, I am speaking for 'we' theologians and Christians broadly, for as I have indicated, I believe this connection is everywhere real and operative, if largely unnoticed. On the other hand, I am speaking specifically as a Baptist, for I am presently arguing that Baptist ecclesiology bears particular potential for shaping a distinctive and important mode of creation theology. As a theologian of the church universal, then, I contend that we should think about ecclesiology and creation as directly bound up together because Christology is already implied in both. More to the point, Christology is the space in which both doctrines operate. While this is more obvious and commonly recognised for ecclesiology, we have tended to forget that it is also true for the doctrine of creation. Creation is not a pre-Christian space,[39] for the second person of the Trinity is an active agent in creating and sustaining all things (Col 1:15–20). Christology without creation is therefore an abstraction, as is any ecclesiology that may spring from it. Such an ecclesiology will always suffer from a certain un-reality or otherworldliness, a disconnection from the earthy and worldly realities created, incarnated, and restored by God in Jesus Christ.

As a Baptist theologian, I will take all this a step further and unpack how an ecclesiological doctrine of creation can and should unfold within the life of my own denominational tradition. Because ecclesiology plays such a determining role in Baptist life and imagination, I am seeking to indicate how we are in a position to make these connections explicit to significant theological effect, both conceptual and practical. In the course of demonstrating my central claim that Baptist ecclesiology may provoke a distinctive creation theology that responds to Jennings's concerns, this unpacking, then, will also function as an argument-by-demonstration for the connections between creation and ecclesiology that I have been articulating.

[39] My thanks to Hanna Reichel for this formulation.

Toward a Baptist Theology of Creation

I now turn to filling out these connections through the lens of Baptist ecclesiology as we have explored it thus far, by outlining seven basic features of a creation theology that flow out of Baptist congregational life. Recall that the governing ecclesio-logic at work here is that our understanding of the church's life and God's relation to it both illuminates and reflects our understanding of the proper life of creation in its interconnectedness and position before God as Creator. I will therefore begin each consideration with a tenet of Baptist ecclesiology, and work out what I take to be its implications for a theology of creation. As will come into focus, our ecclesiology and its imagination for the local and particular makes Baptist thought well equipped to respond to Jennings's critique and vision by thinking in place: by beginning with and lingering over what it means for *this* place to be creation before God and in creaturely interconnection.

1) In the Baptist understanding, God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit establishes covenantal churches of believers at the local level, relating to them im-mediately in the particularities of their life together in a given time, place, and cultural location. Extending this pattern to creation more broadly by our ecclesio-logic, it follows as a basic first principle that God relates to the diversity of created places in fittingly distinct ways, affirming the particularity and identity of local creaturely communities in the fullness of their ecological interrelatedness. 'Place' here refers to a creaturely location in the fullest sense: the land and the people that live with, on, and from it; the soil itself and the innumerable creatures that have their lives through its cycles of seasons, growth, decay, life, and death. In their inexhaustible uniqueness then, each and all places are full of meaning and the fecund presence of the Spirit, and one place cannot be substituted for another in our thought about or relation with it. Though it is the same Spirit at work in all places, the integrity of local creaturely communities — like that of local church communities — should be foregrounded and celebrated, such that the distinctive character of the place is seen to reflect God's unique and personal relation to it.

2) In light of the immediate and specific character of God's relation to the local church, Baptists therefore live in expectation of the

Spirit's particular guidance for the congregation in a given moment of its life. Following our ecclesio-logic into the theology of creation, this encourages a habit of mind guided by the expectation that God's activity and life-giving presence will be discernible in and through wider creaturely communities, through the sustaining and creative power of the Holy Spirit. Yet, as is the case in covenantal church membership, in order to discern this divine presence rightly one most know a place intimately, having comprehended oneself as bound up in relationships of mutuality and interdependence with its life. In other words, we must belong to the place rather than presuming that the place belongs to us. Belonging to local ecological communities in an abiding way therefore positions us to be able to discern their character as creation, and such an imagination enables us to perceive whatever place we are in as the place of God's presence.

3) Baptists anticipate this presence and guidance for the local church, and therefore hold that the congregation must discern the mind of Christ for itself, through trust and attentive hearing of the Word. On this understanding, no translocal authority can determine the will of God or mind of Christ for the local congregation, and the shape of the church's life cannot be determined with *a priori* certainty by any theological or ecclesial principles. By extension, a Baptist theology of creation should foreground and insist upon the fact that local ecological communities of human beings and their fellow creatures have needs and an inner integrity that cannot be determined *a priori* by the needs, character, or productive capacities of *other* places. Recognising the inherent creaturely value and divinely affirmed character of place in its fullness, we must respect the particularity of land, people, and the identity-facilitating bonds that constitute their creaturely connection.

4) Further to this effect, in Baptist life and theology the reality of one's discipleship is deeply individual, but at the same time intimately shaped by and made possible within the local church community. Attending to this reality from the perspective of creation, Baptist theology should foreground the manner in which one's identity as creature is individual and particular, yet made possible only by the interrelationships of persons to place, land, and community that always precede any ostensible autonomy. For attempting to abstract the self

from this fundamental web of connection results in the refusal of creaturehood and a life of un-reality, leading to the 'revolt against creation' that Jennings identifies as the result of the colonial imagination. This will require of Baptists a stronger and clearer emphasis on the communal and covenantal nature of our ecclesiology than we have often managed, as the individual responsibility of voluntary discipleship and covenant membership has tended to give way to the individualism of 'soul freedom' and notions of autonomy derived more from cultural definitions of freedom than the sole authority of Jesus Christ and the Spirit who gathers his body together. Yet while we have not always succeeded in stressing this, it is there at the heart of our ecclesiology as a resource that ought to (re)shape our understanding of ourselves as creatures.

5) According to Baptist ecclesiology, no state power or ecclesiastical body has the right to impose a shape of life or faith on the local church. Essential to the Baptist understanding of the church is the determination that the human being's relationship to God cannot be coerced or made to adhere to a predetermined mode of expression. Recognising the particularity of God's relationship to individual human beings as well as to the church communities of which they are members, a Baptist theology of creation will therefore not imagine that one people, nation, or church can transpose itself and its interests onto the place or faith of others. In line with Jennings's concerns, the parochial character of Baptist ecclesiology shapes our imagination in such a way that the colonial pedagogy of lines and circles should be ruled out from the outset. The Baptist imagination ought to be conditioned to relativise not only the violent certainty of the state, but also (with Jennings) any pretension to Christian mastery of creation or absolute knowledge of its meaning and reality.[40] As indicated by Holmes above, discerning the mind of Christ is an act of confident faith and trust, but one that can never claim the kind of certainty to justify an exertion of violence over the integrity of others' relation to God. Thus, Baptists ought to be predisposed to being 'second readers', hearing the voices of indigenous peoples and respecting the knowledge of Creator and creation made possible through their long belonging to place. A Baptist creation

[40] Cf. Jennings, 'Reframing the World', p. 389.

theology as I have been outlining it should therefore be especially attuned to the particularity of God's relationship with people and place that precedes our own presence there.[41] Here again, we must acknowledge the fact that Baptist mission activity, though by definition never an explicit extension of any state power, has nonetheless participated significantly in the colonial mindset endemic to the idea of 'global missions'. But also again, a failure to live into the logics of our convictions does not negate the reality that these implications are there as potent resources.

6) Extending these considerations further along this line, though governed congregationally, Baptist associationalism stems from the recognition of churches' interdependence with one another, as individual manifestations of the church universal. Extended to a theology of creation, the concentric circles model of Baptist ecclesiology carries the potential to pattern the pedagogy of joining proposed by Jennings, as it trains us to recognise our interrelatedness with other local ecological communities and seek God's presence in ever-broadening contexts of creation. Where local church primacy and congregational liberty form the Baptist imagination to attend to local ecologies and creaturely communities, the associationalism that is also essential to our church life should train us to respect the integrity of other places on their own terms; at the same time, this learned posture should foster a desire for intimacy and connection with other places, through which we may mutually support one another and enlarge our understanding of the Creator who holds each and all places together.

7) Finally, when extended to a theology of creation, the individual responsibility of discipleship and church membership, along with the communal commitment of the local congregation to discerning the mind of Christ in its concrete context, foster a sense of practical responsibility for the wellbeing of local ecologies and economies. To wit, the interplay of responsibility, locality, and associationalism should form the Baptist imagination to respond constructively to our present ecological crisis in important ways — namely, by developing sustainable

[41] On honouring indigenous knowledge of Creator and creation, see e.g., ordained Baptist minister and Native American theologian Randy Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), pp. 57–60.

modes of life at the local level, for the sake of the worldwide community of creation.

Properly speaking, there is in Baptist ecclesiology no such thing as passive participation, for the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the covenant demand active involvement on the part of all members, lay and ordained alike. Set in the context of creation theology, this active responsibility for the life of the church community ought to incite in Baptists a comparably active and responsible life in the broader creaturely communities of which we are a part. Rather than (merely) bemoaning the problems caused by other people in seats of power, a Baptist creation theology orients us to the personal responsibility involved in developing alternative modes of ecologically responsible, creaturely life together in the concrete here and now. An emphasis on the primacy of the local church should form Baptists to recognise their local ecological and economic communities as the primary site of such responsibility, and to invest in their protection, flourishing, and regeneration. Such involvement should include support for and participation in the just production of local food through regenerative agricultural practices, and will call churches to care for local watersheds and rivers, forests and prairies, to commit themselves to the preservation of native plants and animals, and to assess how congregational and individual property is being used to further or hinder such commitments.

In turn, the Baptist commitment to associationalism ought to alleviate us of the dual temptations to despair or to hubris with regard to ecological destruction and the church's responsibility in the midst of it. In the same way we trust that God calls together, sustains, and guides individual churches in covenantal relation with them, we may analogously live in the humility of faith and hope that the Spirit of God is always present and moving in the global web of ecological communities. As such, we need be neither paralysed by the overwhelming nature of worldwide ecological degradation, nor compelled to take on the impossible responsibility of seeking (or imposing) global solutions — a reflex rooted in the colonial imagination described by Jennings, which amounts to catastrophic injustice as often as not. As we go about the work of responsible care for our local

ecologies, all of which are unique in their needs and capacities, we may (and must) trust that God's sustaining love for all of creation is operative in each and all of the world's communities, just as we understand it to be in our own. An imagination shaped by associationalism therefore directs us ever more deeply into the life of our land, our place, and our communities, for the sake of the whole world and our own creaturely flourishing within it.

Concluding Reflections

I have argued throughout this article that theologies of creation and church are mutually informing and patterned after one another. What we believe about the church will be reflected in our creation theology, and what we believe about creation — about its meaning and our place within it — will be refracted back into the church's self-understanding. There is therefore an analogy, indeed more than an analogy, between the shape of our ecclesiology and that of our doctrine of creation. If we understand the church as 'first reader' of the world, the final arbiter of knowledge and rightful possessor of creation by divine right, then our doctrine of creation will trend inevitably towards the colonial theology of extraction. Likewise, if we see creation as dead matter for our use, human beings somehow hovering above the rest of the natural world, then our ecclesiology will become profoundly dualistic and — as history attests — a tool in the hands of nations and empires. But of course, this connection may also be fostered for the good, for a right understanding of our creaturely belonging in the world; this is the direction that I have attempted to develop by intimating a Baptist theology of creation.

As I have shown, Baptist ecclesiology suggests a lived theology of creaturely connection, grounded in responsibility and thus capable of responding to ecological crisis in concrete ways. This has not been to say that other denominational traditions do not have their own resources to take up Jennings's challenge, nor that everything about this vision is necessarily the provenance of Baptists exclusively. However, as I have demonstrated, there is something distinctively resonant between Jennings's vision for a doctrine of creation and the Baptist mode of being church in the world. Thus, with Holmes, I have proposed an

explicitly Baptist theological vision for the doctrine of creation, 'not because I believe that the entire world ought to be Baptists, but because I believe we have a vision of the Christian life that is of interest and worth, and that deserves to be better understood — by Baptists, and by others — than it presently is'.[42]

[42] Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, p. 9.