

# What Makes Baptist Theological Education Baptist?

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What makes Baptist theological education Baptist? I start the article by asking what makes Baptist theology distinct among other theological approaches. After that I present two types of empirical data: the first was gathered in two conversations, which took place among Baptist theological educators in the summer of 2018 – one at the workshop of the Consortium of European Baptist Theological Schools (CEBTS) and the other at the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) Theological Education Committee. The second set of data comes from research into alumni feedback from Tartu Theological Seminary. In conclusion I suggest five possible characteristics of Baptist identity in regard to the method and content of theological education:

- Baptist theological education is rooted in Baptist ecclesiology;
- Personal faith and integrity are crucially important aims of theological studies;
- Biblical hermeneutics and knowing one's tradition in context are two important areas of study;
- Constant openness and search lead to even better understanding;
- Baptist theological education is always missional.

## Keywords

Theological education; ecclesiology; Baptist; method

## Introduction

This article is written from the context of Estonia, which is one of the most secular European countries in terms of church membership<sup>1</sup> and has a population of only 1.3 million people. At the same time, there are three different protestant denominational theological schools, all at university level.

Working as Rector of Tartu Theological Seminary, owned by the Estonian Evangelical Christian and Baptist Union, has made me think about why we need our own theological school. What makes Baptist theological education distinct from Lutheran and Methodist traditions, which are represented in two other theological schools in Estonia? Do we need our own school and, if so, then how should we be different?

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<sup>1</sup> According to Eurobarometer 2005 <<https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2005/eurobarometer-2005-questions-answers>> [accessed 23 April 2019]

However, I think the question is important not only for Estonian Baptists. Denominational Baptist seminaries all over Europe and, indeed, across the world could gain new insights from the same discussion. Therefore, in the following article I will ask the question: what makes Baptist theological education Baptist?

I start the article by asking what makes Baptist theology distinct among other theological approaches. Is it method or content or both? After that I present two conversations among Baptist theological educators, which took place in the summer of 2018 – one at the workshop of the Consortium of European Baptist Theological Schools (CEBTS) and the other at the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) Theological Education Committee.

These discussion results represent the first type of empirical data of the article. The second type of empirical data comes from alumni feedback from Tartu Theological Seminary, also gathered in 2018 (see Table 1 and Table 2). In the discussion part of the article I will draw these together and present five possible characteristics of Baptist theological education.

## **What is Distinct about Baptist Theology?**

One may start to address this question by asking if there is a Baptist theology at all. Paul Fiddes argues: ‘If there is such a thing as this (the Baptist way of being the Church), then there must also be a Baptist way of doing theology.’ And therefore, ‘as long as we can identify a Christian community, or family of communities, as something called “Baptist”, then there must be a Baptist mode of theologizing.’<sup>2</sup>

Paul Fiddes mentions, some years later,<sup>3</sup> that we may discriminate between content and method of theology. Are the Baptist distinctives more in the method of theologising or is the content different as well?

### **1. Method of Baptist Theology**

Brian Haymes<sup>4</sup> is sure that the method is different. He mentions four Baptist ways of theologising. These are rooted in the distinctive ecclesiology, which is in interaction with the method of theology. The four characteristics of theologising in a Baptist way, summarised by Paul Fiddes, are as follows:

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Fiddes, ‘Theology and a Baptist Way of Community’, in *Doing Theology in a Baptist Way*, ed. by Paul Fiddes (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 2000), p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces. Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Brian Haymes, ‘Theology and Baptist Identity’, in Fiddes, *Doing Theology in a Baptist Way*, pp. 3-5.

continual re-making, and imaginative living in the biblical story, a generous pluralism, and a collegiality in which doing theology is shared between experts and those who simply live out their theology.<sup>5</sup>

I will look at these in a more detailed way. The first one, continual re-making, means that ‘each generation must work at its theology as reflection upon practice...It is not enough simply to ask how we can get the gospel across – we have to keep asking together what the Good News of God is.’<sup>6</sup> This suggestion to rethink theological approaches in a fresh way becomes specially important during the moments of the development in tradition which Alisdair MacIntyre calls ‘epistemological crises’.<sup>7</sup>

Toivo Pilli illustrates this need for re-thinking theology using two images. He writes that people who have expressed a Baptist doctrinal distinctive through the image of ‘the sword of the Word’ in hand could also consider the alternative of ‘a walking stick’ in the manner of a pilgrim.<sup>8</sup> This continuous searching and re-making of theology happens in at least five healthy tensions, which could become ‘stepping stones’ both for keeping theology in balance and in planning the theological education curriculum and teaching methods. These tensions inherited in Baptist identity are: Word and Spirit; Individual and Communal; Witness and Service; Freedom and Responsibility; and Autonomy and Co-operation.<sup>9</sup>

Secondly, the imaginative living of the biblical story means that the Word of God will become alive and visible in the life of the believer. Faith takes the form of discipleship and changes the believer. The biblical story is lived out in the individual and corporate life of Christians. ‘Narratives construct our identity, the theology is self-involving, and active discipleship is a creative feature of it all.’<sup>10</sup> Nigel Wright reminds us of the central Baptist characteristics of making a voluntary and independent decision to follow Jesus and to become a member of the church. However, he adds, after the decision is made, the person is becoming a disciple of Jesus. And being a disciple means that they should let Christ form them in his image by the means of Spirit and Word.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the biblical story become alive in believers again and again. However, the biblical story does not only influence the practice of living. Practice itself inspires theology and is worthy of reflecting and inspiring theological discourse.

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> Haymes, ‘Theology and Baptist Identity’, pp. 3-4.

<sup>7</sup> Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Toivo Pilli, ‘Baptist Identities in Eastern Europe’, in *Baptist Identities: International Studies from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Centuries*, ed. by Ian Randall, Toivo Pilli and Anthony Cross (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2006), p. 92.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>10</sup> Haymes, ‘Theology and Baptist Identity’, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Nigel G. Wright, *Free Church, Free State* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), pp. 65-66.

Thirdly, generous plurality is based on the understanding that all of our theologies must be provisional, because ‘all authority in heaven and earth is given to Jesus Christ’.<sup>12</sup> Therefore we need to recognise and accept theological plurality. Haymes writes: ‘Tentativeness is not a mild form of sin but might be the expression of serious searching faith. Hence, in the Baptist theology, there will be a recognition of plurality.’<sup>13</sup> This means a hermeneutical approach to the Word of God and willingness to listen to each other.

Lastly, the Baptist way of theologising is unashamedly confessional and collegiate. Steve Holmes argues that the theologian is accountable to the whole people of God as a gathered church. We create our understanding of God in discussion and in shared searching. Holmes emphasises the need to return theology to the churches, where it belongs. Even more, the theological ‘authority within the church belongs to all’.<sup>14</sup> Yes, ‘scholarship is necessary, but the scholar is not possessed of any authority within the church’.<sup>15</sup>

Paul Fiddes<sup>16</sup> shares the list of characteristics outlined by Haymes. He values specially the role of ‘everyday theology’, together with flexible and context-sensitive answers, with the element of playfulness. These attitudes help to find the way in changing circumstances. He adds that theologians should be looking for ways in which theology connects with other academic disciplines and with human culture in the past and present. Fiddes calls theology ‘high culture’, which involves the discipline of the mind and skills of linguistics and visual analysis and which is learned through long apprenticeship.<sup>17</sup> Thus, we need both theology and theological education to help people to become professional theologians. But this needs to cooperate with and connect to the everyday life of the church.

So, there are methodological distinctives in doing Baptist theology. These lie in the continuous process of re-making theology, the embodied story and personal life of the disciple, generous plurality, and dialogical interaction between theologians and the practising church.

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<sup>12</sup> Haymes, ‘Theology and Baptist Identity’, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Steve Holmes, ‘Introduction: Theology in Context’, *Theology in Context*, No 1, Winter (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 2000), p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Fiddes, ‘Dual Citizenship in Athens and Jerusalem: The Place of the Christian Scholar in the Life of the Church’, in *Questions of Identity*, ed. by Anthony Cross and Ruth Gouldbourne (Oxford: Regent’s Park College, Oxford, 2011), p. 120.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

## 2. Content of Baptist Theology

But what about the content of theology? Fiddes claims that ‘Baptists have been reluctant to admit that there are any particular Baptist forms of basic Christian doctrines.’<sup>18</sup> However, he argues, Baptists do have a theological theme – ‘covenant’. This theme not only involves the idea of participation in God, but also the aspect of covenanting together as a community of God.<sup>19</sup> Fiddes suggests that ‘covenant and communion in God are in fact mysteriously intertwined in both time and eternity’. He explains this covenant through the theological challenge ‘to try and describe this relationship between God and the whole world, a covenantal relationship between human beings and their natural environment, in a way that truly expresses mutual dependence rather than domination’.<sup>20</sup>

This leads us again to ecclesiology and it is hard to say how much ecclesiology is method and how much it is the content of theology. Maybe it is both. Baptist ecclesiology is, among others, discussed in Nigel Wright’s book *Free Church, Free State*. He writes: ‘the church is a community, a communion, a fellowship of persons in relationship’.<sup>21</sup> It is inspired by the communion of relatedness of Father, Son, and Spirit. At the same time, when the community of persons is in relationship with each other, they are in relationship with God, ‘participating on an equal basis in the life of God’.<sup>22</sup>

Wright expresses the Baptist (or what he also calls Radical) expression of church through three images: the people of God, the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit.<sup>23</sup> All of these pictures are gathered into the defining essence of the church – mission. Wright states:

As the body of Christ, the church is that community in which activated by the Spirit Christ takes shape and form through flesh and blood and may be encountered in the worship and witness of real-life communities.<sup>24</sup>

So, what makes Baptist theology Baptist? It is emphasised both in method and content and derives its inspiration from the ecclesiology. Even more, it is formed and discussed in the midst of church community, in dialogue between scholarly search and embodied worship of the covenanting community. But what about Baptist theological education?

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<sup>18</sup> Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, p. 17.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>21</sup> Nigel Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11-15.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

## **Looking Forward: Conversations with Baptist Theological Educators**

As the method of doing theology is important and requires conversation partners if we want to do it in a Baptist way, we asked Baptist theological educators to contribute to the discussion about the nature of Baptist theological education. In the summer of 2018, there were two gatherings where this issue was discussed. One, held in June in Vienna, was at the Consortium of European Baptist Theological Schools (CEBTS) meeting. Another followed shortly afterwards – the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) Theological Education committee meetings, which were held in Zurich in July as part of the BWA annual meeting.

### **1. CEBTS Meeting Insights**

CEBTS participants were asked the question: “What are the two or three most important things you want to see in your students at the end of their studies?” They discussed the ideas in small groups and then offered these for discussion in the larger group of around twenty participants. The answers are summarised in the following list:

- Love of God and the Church;
- Hermeneutical competence;
- Knowing him/herself and his/her tradition;
- Knowledge of different opinions; ability to change perspective;
- Capacity for leadership;
- Discipleship;
- Knowing how to study, love of learning;
- Character – humble, curious.

Interestingly, the personal characteristics are quite strongly set side by side with theological knowledge. One can even say that the personal and loving relationship with God and the Church is emphasising that theological studies are not predominantly about knowledge and theory, but first and foremost incarnated and visible in a person’s life and attitudes. Several things on the list – such as capacity for leadership, knowing how to study, and knowledge of different opinions – are often categorised in general educational theory as generic competencies or learning outcomes, which are not subject area-specific.<sup>25</sup> Generic competencies were mentioned as important learning outcomes also in the research I conducted in Belfast Bible

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<sup>25</sup> John Biggs and Catherine Tang, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University: What the Student Does*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (Society for Research into Higher Education; Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2011).

College in 2006.<sup>26</sup> Integrity, honesty, and humility were mentioned more than any others.

However, it is not only about generic competencies. Two theological disciplines, which ‘blink out’ from the CEBTS list are ‘hermeneutics’ and ‘church history in context’. These might easily be a reaction to the tendencies experienced. Hermeneutical competence avoids the (mis)use of the Bible at a mechanical and superficial level. Knowledge about the tradition becomes even more important in the area of global communication, where local churches are more and more in the pulling wind of the internet and all the groups and individuals which compete with the local church pulpit and practices.

Even more, these two areas of study are connected: if the hermeneutical skills take seriously a person’s church tradition, these are rooted into fertile soil and follow the communal nature of theologising. This deep-rootedness makes it possible to be open to other viewpoints and gives appropriate ability to change one’s perspective, if needed.

The challenge is how to support the development of all these personally connected competences and characteristics. How can we develop not only the curriculum, but also the teaching methodology and learning environment, so that growth will happen? How can we model it well as faculty?

## **2. BWA Theological Education Committee Discussion**

Another conversational setting took place just a week later with approximately forty participants. These people were theological educators from the world-wide spectrum of Baptist Churches. The format was similar – participants were asked to discuss two questions first in small groups and then the ideas were brought to the larger group discussion.

The first question asked was: “What are the required future competencies of the graduates of theological education? What do we need ‘then’ more than ‘now’?” The list offered was, after slight editing, as follows:

- Team work attitude and leadership skills;
- Foreign language;
- Digital and cultural literacy;
- Stress tolerance and time management;
- Media skills and digital literacy;
- Contextual hermeneutical skills.

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<sup>26</sup> Einike Pilli, ‘Educating for Wisdom’, in *Church-Based Theology for Ministerial Practice*, ed. by T. Pilli and A. Riistan (Kõrgem Usuteaduslik Seminar, 2008), pp. 76-93.

As the emphasis was more on future skills than on distinctively Baptist theology, this list presents generic competencies even more clearly than the previous one, which was gathered by CEBTS. However, some similarities catch the eye quickly – notably, contextual hermeneutical skills and leadership skills. Additionally, stress tolerance and time management place a strong emphasis on the self-management aspect of the person. How can this be taught? Or maybe life teaches it anyway and only the strong one makes it to ‘another side’? Of course, we do not need to add stress in theological education to develop this ability. However, do we offer support and skills to cope with stress and manage time well? Which parts of our theological education do that?

Another question, presented to the BWA Theological Education Committee, moved more deeply into the issue of the current article, asking: “Is there anything ‘Baptist’ about Baptist Theological Education?” Respondents offered the following characteristics:

- Integrity of life and teaching;
- ‘Theologian-hood’ of all believers;
- Primary theology is done in the local church, theological education reflects on that practice and is secondary in nature;
- Dialogue and search for God’s will in common discernment;
- Humility – knowing that God has always ‘more light and truth’;
- Servant attitude, enabling others;
- Creativity.

This list comes very close to the characteristics of Baptist theology, which were discussed in the first part of this article. What is immediately worth noticing is that most of the things mentioned, if not all, talk about the method of theology. And these indicate the elements of ecclesiology. One possible explanation of that phenomenon is that the content is something we share with other Christian denominations, whereas the method of doing theology is different, because the ecclesiology differs. But does the way we do theological education differ as well? And if yes, how?

Another feature of this list is the great emphasis on personality characteristics such as humility, servant attitude, creativity – all of which can be included in the characteristic of ‘integrity of life and teaching’. If we believe the classic axiom of communication: ‘The medium is the message’, then we could easily say it also about students and teachers of theological education. Integrity matters and this is clearly one of the Baptist values. It is also true of the connection between Baptist theology and Baptist theological education.

## Looking Back: Alumni Research from Estonia

It is one thing to talk about aims, competencies, and methods. Another perspective comes from the feedback of those who have studied theology in a Baptist theological school. I would like to present a small research study carried out in Tartu Theological Seminary, Estonia during the spring of 2018.

The school was established in 1922 as a seminary for The Union of Free Evangelical and Baptist Churches of Estonia and, after being closed during the Soviet years, re-opened in 1989.<sup>27</sup> Since its re-opening, the seminary has been functioning as a government-recognised, university level school.

The research was conducted with graduates of the years 1993-2016. Twenty out of 118 graduates answered and Table 1 illustrates the breakdown of respondents by date of graduation. I acknowledge that the number of respondents was not big, but I am hopeful that it still provides some insight. The gender of respondents was: seven women (39%) and eleven men (61%); two people did not indicate their gender. The questionnaire was sent in the form of an electronic link.

**Table 1: Respondents by Year of Graduation**

Year	Number of alumni answering (n=20)
1993-1999	9
2001-2008	6
2011-2016	5

Tartu Theological Seminary operated from its re-opening in 1989 with local (Estonian) teachers, while three of them, Rector Peeter Roosimaa included, were educated in East Germany in Buckow and/or Halle. Most of the faculty were members of The Union of Free Evangelical and Baptist Churches of Estonia. Slowly the school has moved towards a broader theological influence (several teachers studied at IBTS, Prague). During this process, finding the contextually relevant model has been one of the constant challenges.

<sup>27</sup> <<https://kus.kogudused.ee/en/the-story-of-the-school/>> [accessed 18 April 2019]

Alumni answered some retrospective questions about their learning experience at Tartu Theological Seminary. Table 2 presents a short overview of the questions asked and the answers given.

**Table 2: Questions and Responses after Analysis**

<i>Question</i>	<i>Answers (all except the last question were essay answers, the choices were not given)</i>
<i>What has Seminary education given to you?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• broader view of the world</li> <li>• analytical thinking</li> <li>• courage</li> <li>• basic and holistic knowledge of theology</li> <li>• practical ministry skills</li> </ul> <p>Some mentioned that it has helped in work and has been useful in continuing their studies.</p>
<i>What did you miss in your studies?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• leadership skills</li> <li>• hermeneutics (during the first decade it was not part of the curriculum – author’s note)</li> <li>• biblical languages (because of change to part-time study the amount of credit points for biblical languages was decreased – author’s note)</li> </ul> <p>Some mentioned practical skills in the areas of communication, book-keeping, counselling, education, social work, and contextual approach to Mission and Theology.</p>
<i>How did your studies influence you spiritually?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• spiritual life developed further and deeper, even if it had gone through some crises</li> </ul> <p>Some said that the school had no direct spiritual influence; one respondent commented that her spiritual life influenced her studies, not vice versa.</p>
<i>How did the Seminary education influence your ministry at the local church?</i>	<p>The two words mentioned most often were <i>courage</i> and <i>responsibility</i>.</p> <p>Alumni members valued the role of education in getting greater responsibility and finding courage to serve in the role offered.</p>
<i>What was the biggest change that happened during your Seminary studies?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• critical thinking</li> <li>• courage</li> <li>• personal development</li> </ul> <p>In addition to these, some mentioned study skills; broader and deeper understanding of the world, Christian denominations, and the Bible. One respondent said that she became an independent thinker.</p>
<i>What do you consider being the biggest strength in your current work?</i>	<p>Out of the multiple choices, respondents answered:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• communication (80%)</li> <li>• subject area knowledge (75%)</li> <li>• leadership skills (55%)</li> <li>• hard work (50%)</li> </ul>

Maybe the most surprising aspect of the replies was ‘analytical thinking’. It is not uncommon that local churches present one possible understanding of the Bible. Therefore, after confronting other perspectives, both in church history and among co-students, it has resulted in increased plurality and ability to find their own perspective. Of course, sometimes it does bring crises, but it also adds courage and spiritual growth. However, the emphasis on analytical thinking may also spring from the German model of understanding theological education in the early years after the re-opening of the seminary, which emphasised abstract knowledge and analytical thinking.

Another key word mentioned several times was also one of the generic competencies – courage. And then students talked repeatedly about leadership skills. These two go hand in hand: one cannot be a leader without courage. However, the content area – theological knowledge – is present in answers as well. It has been, is, and will be an important part of Baptist theological education. The alumni research results showed a great deal of similarities with the results of the two discussion groups. However, because of the type of questions, the method of doing theology was not as strongly emphasised.

## **Discussion: Towards the Baptist Model of Theological Education**

In education there is always a temptation to want too much, to overload the curriculum and to try everything. But as in many other places, the phrase ‘less is more’ applies also in education. Therefore, here I try to gather the ideas, discussions, and research findings together into five key characteristics of Baptist theological education.

When Fiddes<sup>28</sup> identifies the convictions of the Baptist community, he says rightly that these convictions themselves are not unique to Baptists; however, Baptists hold these together in unique way. The same could be said about the list that follows.

### **1. Baptist theological education is rooted in Baptist ecclesiology**

As ecclesiology becomes visible in theologising, it reflects method more than content. Baptist theology is characterised through the concepts of theologian-hood and priesthood of all believers, covenanting and dialoguing

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<sup>28</sup> Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, p. 12.

together, listening to each other, and finding a fresh theological expression for every new generation. Baptist theology needs to be done in the communal and covenantal contexts. It has to be embodied and practised, reflected and discussed. It means also the search for balance between freedom and responsibility, autonomy and co-operation.

This means that theological education needs to be tightly rooted in the local church and in a continuous conversation with it. Colin Bond writes: ‘Educating Christians may well involve the seminary, but the seminary must go out into the churches and into the world, in order to ensure the appropriateness of the issues being explored in the learning.’<sup>29</sup>

In this communal model nobody dominates, theology is dialogical and a constant search for common understanding. And, even though professional theologians have an important role, Baptists believe that every Christian is also a theologian. Therefore, we may say that, as the ecclesiology is dynamic, so should be theological education.

## **2. Personal faith and integrity are the crucially important aims of theological studies**

Personal characteristics of a student, including personal faith in God, discipleship, and a serving attitude toward others, are crucial parts of the expected learning outcomes of Baptist theological education. Of course, this means that the teachers are first and foremost teaching by personal example. Robert Banks<sup>30</sup> agrees that theology is more than a set of beliefs requiring practical application and is a holistic enterprise that integrally touches all aspects of the faith-directed life.

## **3. Biblical hermeneutics and knowing one’s tradition in context are two important areas of study**

As the world opens up and the range of different approaches and views are available in the living room of every student, the ability to analyse and evaluate becomes crucial. In spite of global openness, Perry Shaw contends that theological education needs to be rooted in the local context in order to be successful.<sup>31</sup> And, as every believer is a kind of theologian in Baptist ecclesiology, it means that the seminary-educated theologians do not only

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<sup>29</sup> Colin Bond, ‘What Can and Cannot Be Taught at a Seminary to a Future Worker?’ in *Church-Based Theology for Ministerial Practice*, ed. by Pilli and Riistan, p. 97.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Banks, *Re-envisioning Theological Education* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/ Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), p. 59.

<sup>31</sup> Perry Shaw, ‘Innovation and Criteria: Ensuring Standards While Promoting Innovative Approaches’, in *Challenging Tradition: Innovation in Advanced Theological Education*, ed. by Perry Shaw and Havilah Dharamraj (Carlisle: Langham, 2018), pp 52-53.

need to know and use the hermeneutical tools, but they need to be able to teach these to their church members.

Some years earlier, Shaw expressed a value in the cognitive aim of learning on the side of the affective and behavioural, expecting ‘a mind committed to reflective practice, which means that the graduate is able to interpret Christian life and ministry through the multiple lenses of Scripture, theology, history, and community’.<sup>32</sup> Knowledge is an important part of Baptist theological education, but it needs to be analytical and contextual knowledge more now than ever before.

#### **4. Constant openness and search lead to even better understanding**

Theological education has to remain open to change and generous to plurality of different voices. Humility and courage, combined with contextual hermeneutical skills, help to find the best approach to every new generation of theologians. And while doing that, analytical skills cannot be emphasised too strongly. The Beirut Benchmarks, which were formulated during consultations in Beirut in 2010 and Bangalore in 2011,<sup>33</sup> mention the need for ‘creative and humble use of the rationality God has granted to humans in his own image’ as one of the important aims of theological studies.

#### **5. Baptist theological education is always missional**

The four previous characteristics are in one way or another serving the purpose of mission. Whether it is the faith and life of the individual student or the discerned theological understanding of the covenanting community, these all serve the purpose of mission. The Beirut Benchmarks, mentioned earlier, emphasise ‘appropriate living in the world to reflect God’s calling and participate in God’s mission’ as one of the key aims of theological studies.

Missional theological education may mean the struggle with the balance between witness and service. It may include learning ‘digital and media language’, developing courage and contextual sensitivity, and developing the servant leadership attitude and skills. But none of the missional activities is possible without trusting the living God, who reveals himself for us and others. One of the central aspects of theological education is trust in God, who is the subject and aim of all Christian life and its reflection in the form of theology.

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<sup>32</sup> Perry Shaw, *Transforming Theological Education: a Practical Handbook for Integrative Learning* (Carlisle: Langham, 2014), pp. 31-33.

<sup>33</sup> Perry Shaw and Havilah Dharamraj (eds), *Challenging Tradition*, pp 52-53.

## **Conclusion**

This article started with the question of whether and how Baptist theological education is different from other approaches to theological education. Through an examination of the Baptist theological method and content the answer to the first part of the question is “yes”. The process of answering the question “how?” took us quickly to Baptist ecclesiology. Ecclesiology, more than anything else, marks the distinctively Baptist form of theology and theological education.

Theological education, done in a Baptist way, has a specific approach more in method than content. This finding emerged from the empirical research carried out in two international discussion groups and with the alumni of Tartu Theological Seminary. Additionally, there was quite a strong emphasis on personal integrity and generic outcomes.

In the final section of the article I presented five suggested characteristics of Baptist theological education. These, I argue, could form the Baptist identity of the method and content of theological education:

- Baptist theological education is rooted in Baptist ecclesiology;
- Personal faith and integrity are crucially important aims of theological studies;
- Biblical hermeneutics and knowing one’s tradition in context are two important areas of study;
- Constant openness and search lead to even better understanding;
- Baptist theological education is always missional.

Returning to the question posed at the beginning of the article, as to whether Estonian Baptists need their own seminary, the answer is: yes, because the ecclesiology is different. And the only way to have integrity in theological education is to use the methods suitable to the ecclesiology of the movement.

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