Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Mind of Christ: How the Baptist Tradition of Discernment Can Serve as a Resource for the Dialogue between Practical Theology and the Social Sciences

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Recent conversations in practical theology have wrestled with how to allow social scientific research to critique theological beliefs and practices without allowing theology to adopt a naturalistic world view. This article proposes that enough attention has not been paid to the theological assumptions of the epistemology used in these conversations. The article suggests that the hermeneutical theory of Hans-Georg Gadamer provides a framework for understanding how the Baptist tradition of discerning the mind of Christ can serve as a resource for integrating knowledge gained from the social sciences with theological beliefs in a way that resists passively adopting an essentially deistic view of the world.

Keywords

Discernment; hermeneutics; ecclesiology; ethnography

Introduction

Practical theology for the last forty years has wrestled with how to integrate knowledge gained by social scientific investigation into practical theology in a way that allows empirical research to critique more abstract theological theory without ceding epistemological primacy to the social-historical and succumbing to a world view that is essentially deistic or atheistic. A discussion of how the process of mutual critical dialogue should preserve theology as a central source of knowledge and criteria for analysis in both epistemology and methodology will be reviewed below. I propose that the solutions offered have dealt with questions of research and reflection methodology but have not adequately addressed how the underlying hermeneutical epistemology can be more robustly theological. I suggest that reading the hermeneutical theory of Hans-Georg Gadamer in light of the Baptist tradition of discernment by seeking to know the mind of Christ through the reading of the Scriptures and dialogue in covenant community can be helpful in avoiding a naturalistic world view.

Browning's Influence on Practical Theology

Often, in the past, practical theology has taken an applied approach, using

the conclusions of more abstract fields like biblical studies, systematic theology, or historical theology and applying those insights to the practices of ministers and lay Christians, hoping for improved outcomes in those practices. John Swinton illustrates his growing dissatisfaction with idealistic accounts of church by telling of a panel discussion he joined with Stanley Hauerwas on the topic of Hauerwas' writings on disability and Christian community. The entire panel of brilliant theologians was left rattled when the question came from the audience, "Where is this community you talk about? Where is your church?"[1] The woman asking the question spoke from a place of pain and disappointment. Her experience of Christian community was not reflected in this developed ecclesiology.

Practical theology in the last forty years has seen a movement toward using the qualitative methods of the social sciences to explore the embedded meaning of Christian practices first. It recognises that there is much to learn about faith from the way it is actually lived. Don Browning has been an important influence in this shift in practical theology as an early advocate for moving the starting point of theological study from systematic theology, historical theology, or biblical studies to current practice. For Browning all theology is a branch of practical theology. We first should observe lived practice and then enter into dialogue with the more theoretical theological disciplines with the goal of allowing theory and practice to critique and affect one another. Miller-McLemore describes this model as a movement from 'theory-laden practice to practice-laden theory back to theory-laden practice'.[2]

Following Browning, there has been a more extensive use of social scientific methods of observation to provide a robust description of the practices of believers and others. Empirical theology was expanded by Johannes van der Ven, using statistical analysis and other methods, and by Hans-Gunter Heimbrock, working from a phenomenological perspective.[3] Within a few years Elaine Graham and Bonnie Miller-McLemore had moved the field further in paying close attention to practice, with a greater awareness of 'embodied, relational and contextual sources and norms, and accounting more carefully for power and difference in the context of lived experience'.[4]

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[1] John Swinton, 'Where Is Your Church? Moving toward a Hospitable and Sanctified Ethnography', in *Perspectives in Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. by Pete Ward (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), p. 71.

[2] Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), p. 155.

[3] Eileen R. Campbell-Reed and Christian Batalden Scharen, 'Ethnography on Holy Ground: How Qualitative Interviewing Is Practical Theological Work', *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 17 no. 2 (2013), 232-259 (p. 234).

[4] Ibid., p. 234.

The ecclesiology and ethnography movement in practical theology has developed in recent decades to address the concern that modern ecclesiology was still too abstract and remained too disconnected from the lived reality of the church and its members. This movement, driven by theologians like John Swinton, Pete Ward, and Christian Scharen, building on the work of those above, has sought to use methods developed in ethnography and other social sciences to observe the experiences of communities and individuals and to create dialogue between those experiences and Christian theology.

So, how does one bring ecclesiology and ethnography into dialogue? In *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* John Swinton and Harriet Mowat lay out a 'revised model of mutual critical correlation'.[5] This model adapts the model developed by Seward Hiltner and David Tracy. Whereas Paul Tillich had suggested that reason and experience produce questions and Christian tradition and Scripture seek to provide answers that correlate to those questions,[6] Hiltner and Tracy were concerned that this correlation was one-directional and left Christian tradition unquestioned. Instead, they suggested allowing mutual criticism between tradition, Scripture, reason, and experience.[7]

Where Swinton and Mowat take exception to Hiltner and Tracy's methodology is in that these dialogue partners are not symmetrical. For theologians, knowledge acquired through revelation maintains a 'logical priority' ahead of information gained by social scientific research.[8] Swinton and Mowat revise this mutual critical method in an attempt at keeping Scripture and tradition 'logically prior to and independent of qualitative research data'[9] as sources for practical theology.

Swinton and Mowat suggest four stages for their revised model of mutual critical correlation. The first is to locate the practice that is to be explored and observe what seems to be taking place on the surface level. Second, qualitative research methods are used to uncover more complex meaning at work behind the practice being observed. Third, this practice and the meaning being ascribed to it are critiqued in light of Scripture and Christian tradition. Finally, revised practices can be proposed, based on the interaction between the social scientific discoveries and the theological reflection.[10] All of this is intended to keep practical theology theological. Yet, the problem remains that what we believe to be revealed can (and does)

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[5] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (2nd edn) (London: SCM Press, 2016), p. 83.
[6] Ibid., p. 74.
[7] Ibid., p. 75.
[8] Ibid., p. 82.
[9] Ibid., p. 83.
[10] Ibid., pp. 89-94.

become obscured by our social constructs.

Insufficiently Theological

Some have been concerned that these attempts threaten to make theology a second order science to the social sciences and assume a naturalistic world view. Campbell-Reed and Scharen point out that with all of the insights gained in the 1990s, it was not until the mid-2000s that practical theologians began to explore how the very methods of empirical research themselves should be transformed in order to be properly theological.[11]

Theologians want to have a mutually critical dialogue with the social sciences, but few social scientists are interested in receiving insights from theology. So, theologians are left to passively receive information from the perspective of social science and then to theologically reflect on it as an afterthought.

> If theological reflection occurs *after* the event has been observed, recorded, interpreted, and explained, then theology becomes a second-order activity that is dependent on a particular account of the world that is generated via ethnographic methods that are far from neutral.[12]

To do this means we are ceding our basic world view to one that is essentially atheistic or deistic.

Swinton and Mowat recognise the difficulty of resolving the basic epistemological tension when integrating knowledge from Christian theology that claims to be revealed by God and knowledge from the social sciences that claims to be empirical. They insist that this kind of dialogue between two disciplines will require 'hospitality, conversation, and critical faithfulness'.[13] Still, this leaves much to be resolved. Even Andrew Root, an advocate for this kind of integrative work, points out:

> While the issues of interdisciplinary and articulation of possible perspectives was rich, the constructive proposal was not. The authors simply assert that hospitality, conversation, and critical faithfulness should frame the dialogue between practical theology and qualitative research, but they fail to articulate how this would be done.[14]

John Webster has been critical of the use of ethnography in ecclesiology more broadly. Webster is concerned that not enough is done to ensure that the theological maintains its place of logical priority. He writes:

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[11] Campbell-Reed and Scharen, 'Ethnography on Holy Ground', p. 242.
[12] Swinton, 'Where Is Your Church?' p. 88.
[13] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, p. 86.
[14] Andrew Root, 'Practical Theology and Qualitative Research', *The Journal of Youth Ministry*, 6 no. 2 (2008): p. 114.

> Christian dogmatics does not concede the ontological primacy and self-evidence of the social-historical; and it considers that apprehension of the phenomenal visibility of social-historical realities is not possible in the absence of reference to their ordering to God, that is, in the absence of reference to their creatureliness.[15]

Webster insists that fundamental to the discipline of theology is recognising Christian doctrinal claims, not as less real than sensory experience, but more real. One cannot speak theologically about sensory experience of the physical world without recognising that the physical world we experience is defined as creation and as being in relation to the Creator.

Furthermore, ecclesiology is a theological discipline that follows out of core beliefs about who God is. 'Ecclesiology has its place in the flow of Christian doctrine from teaching about God to teaching about everything else in God.'[16] According to Webster, the church does not find its basic meaning in its social and cultural realities, but rather, what it means to be the church is grounded in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. The relationship of God with God's self is intrinsic to the triune nature of God and is reflected in the community that God gathers on earth. All of this being so, to begin Christian theological inquiry with observations of social phenomena and attempting to defer, until after these observations are complete, the input of Christian doctrine about the nature of these phenomena in God, denies the very premise of Christian theological inquiry itself.

So, Webster warns that ecclesiology must be undertaken with the question of the origin of the church first and then inquiry about the phenomena of the church. If ecclesiology jumps ahead to the phenomena without reference to the church's origin in the nature of God, ecclesiology easily becomes 'naturalized'.[17] He suggests that ecclesiology resists being 'naturalized' by keeping this ordering that reflects the distinction between Creator and creation, by being mindful that the phenomena observed are only signs of deeper realities, and by grounding ecclesiological descriptions in robust language that makes direct reference to God. One who wants to make use of ethnography must be clear that the cause and nature of observed phenomena are rooted in God and that much of what the church is will always be a mystery beyond the scope of social scientific investigation.

Hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer

While Webster makes important points, he seems to want to use the

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[15] John Webster, '"In the Society of God": Some Principles of Ecclesiology', in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. by Pete Ward (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), p. 204.
[16] Ibid., p. 205.
[17] Ibid., p. 221.

categories of theological beliefs and sociological data as discrete containers of knowledge that can be kept uncontaminated by the one bringing them into dialogue. However, much of the ecclesiology and ethnography conversation builds on the hermeneutical theory of Hans-Georg Gadamer. To Gadamer's way of thinking the researcher cannot so easily disentangle the data they produce from their perspective or 'horizon'.

The use of Gadamer's hermeneutics in this movement goes back to Don Browning's *Fundamental Practical Theology*. Browning underpins his thinking with Gadamer. Browning's project was to approach practical theology as a critical reflection on the interaction between the church and its tradition and experiences, with the goal of improving future action.[18] This understanding of the nature of practical theology is behind Browning's use of Gadamer's dialogical thinking.

For Gadamer, being human means practising hermeneutics. We are interpreting creatures. This means that our preconceptions, fore-understandings as Gadamer calls them, cannot be avoided and must be owned and acknowledged. What we already know is critical to what we will come to understand. This is a direct challenge to the Enlightenment demand for objectivity. Gadamer works to move beyond certain aspects of Enlightenment thinking: Browning says that he and others undercut '"foundationalist" preoccupations with anchoring knowledge on pure and undistorted sense impressions or something like *a priori* first principles or transcendental notions, that is, something certain, objective, and neutral'.[19]

We do not even think to question our fore-understandings of texts, events, or other people's perspectives until there is a breakdown in understanding and something does not quite fit. When people use a particular word, we assume we know what it means until it does not make sense in context. Gadamer calls this an incongruence. Then dialogue is needed to reach understanding. The same thing happens when we are reading a text from a different time and place. Gadamer says we need a fusion of horizons between the text and interpreter. This fusion is accomplished through constructive, critical dialogue between the two.

Interpretation to Application

There are two key insights of Browning regarding Gadamer that I believe are important for practical theology. The first is that interpretation is not an end in itself. It is always wrapped up in application. The process of application

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[18] Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 36.
[19] Ibid., p. 40.

is present and active in the interpretation through and through.

> The hermeneutic process aimed at understanding any kind of human action – a classic text, work of art, letter, sermon, or political act – is like a moral conversation, when the word *moral* is understood in the broadest sense... In both hermeneutical conversation and moral judgment, concern with application is there from the beginning.[20]

To make his point, Browning cites Gadamer: 'We too determine that application is neither a subsequent nor merely an occasional part of the phenomenon of understanding, but codetermines it as a whole from the beginning.'[21] This insight into the co-determination of application and understanding is what grounds Browning's proposal that all theology is practical theology and forms a practice-theory-practice movement.

Communal Hermeneutic

A second key insight by Browning is that a communal hermeneutic is implied in Gadamer's dialogical understanding but it is never fleshed out.[22]

> Hermeneutics, even in Gadamer's sense of dialogue and conversation, is a community process. The community as a whole, with members participating to varying degrees, enters a dialogue toward the end of achieving a working consensus – a consensus that may break up and be reformulated repeatedly.[23]

He notes that Robert S. Corrington, especially in *The Community of Interpreters*,[24] has pointed to the American pragmatism of Charles Peirce and Josiah Royce as being helpful in advancing a more communitarian application of Gadamer's hermeneutics.

It may be fruitful to consider further how Peirce and Royce can add insights to this discussion. Peirce advances the notion that the individual cannot, on their own, sufficiently perceive reality because we approach reality through symbols and it is only in community that we can adequately interpret them. Royce applies this to the church as doing the practical work of interpretation for the purpose of building a loving community together. Browning believes these resources should be brought alongside Gadamer to aid practical theology in understanding its work as a community endeavour.[25]

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[20] Ibid., p. 39.

[21] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), p. 333.

[22] Dr Tim Noble rightly points out that, though Gadamer does not focus on a communitarian aspect to interpretation, his work does presuppose the community of classics and philosophers with which he engages.

[23] Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, p. 50.

[24] See Robert S. Corrington, *The Community of Interpreters on the Hermeneutics of Nature and the Bible in the American Philosophical Tradition* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995).

[25] Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, p. 51.

More work needs to be done to see how Peirce and Royce might advance the conversation around this aspect of Gadamer's thinking.

An Epistemological Question

Swinton suggests that in ethnography and ecclesiology we bring the horizons of our theology, ethnographic methods, and the object being observed into conversation from the beginning and through observation, analysis, and interpretation.

> All ethnographic data is seen to be co-construction; a mutually constructed narrative that emerges from the merging of the researcher's horizon and the horizon of the text. If that is the case, rather than bracketing off theology from the process of looking and interpretation, the most authentic hermeneutical movement will be to draw it into the observation and analysis and allow its voice to enable clarity of vision and emerging understanding.[26]

Knowing that Gadamer's hermeneutical theory is operating in the background of the discussion concerning integrating social scientific research into practical theology, we can see that it is not enough to be mindful of our theological convictions when we get to the point of constructing and executing a methodology. Webster's disagreement with others regards how sources interact methodologically. However, there is a deeper epistemological question: What sources of knowledge are we bringing to our methods and are these sources consistent with our stated theological convictions? John Swinton echoes this concern:

> If this hermeneutical perspective is correct, in order for Christians to do ethnography faithfully they should develop a mode of reflexivity within which the theological is assumed as a normal and primary reflective dimension of the researcher's epistemological and methodological assumptions.[27]

Even and especially at the level of hermeneutics we cannot leave our theological convictions at the door. Belief that there is a God who is active in the world will have definitive consequences for what sources will be seen as authoritative when we interpret a text or situation. To introduce the activity of God into Gadamer's epistemology it would be helpful to have an interpretive tradition which recognises the presence, application, and communal interpretation as foundational to hermeneutics.

Ryan Andrew Newson points to the baptistic tradition of discernment as a hermeneutic which ties observation to application and is communal in nature. While we are seeking to ensure theology's logical priority, Newson similarly indicates that the key difference between the discernment and

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[26] Swinton, 'Where Is Your Church?' p. 83.
[27] Ibid.

phronesis in general, is that Christian discernment is always understood to be faithful response to the work of God.[28] Just as Gadamer relates his mingling of interpretation and Aristotle's understanding of practical wisdom or *phronesis*, Newson calls discernment a 'communal *phronesis*'.[29]

Discernment in the Baptist Tradition

The Baptist theological tradition of discernment has claimed that there is one authority that is superior to all others: the person of Jesus Christ. So, the work of all hermeneutics in the context of Baptist congregational life seeks to know the mind of Christ with an eye toward faithful application. Paul Fiddes describes the work of discernment in the Baptist tradition as an interaction between three sources of authority: the congregation, the Scriptures, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

> The point is to find together the mind of Christ, who is present in the midst of his church as the risen Lord to whom "all authority is given," and to use the scriptures to help us in this search for the purpose in our world today.[30]

This discerning movement from formation in the context of a community through scriptural interpretation to discerning the mind of Christ is deeply rooted in the Baptist tradition. The Particular Baptists of the early seventeenth century were shaping their own brand of Covenant Theology. For these Baptists, God in Christ had initiated a new covenant with his church 'through the blood of the everlasting Covenant'[31] between the Father and the Son. The *London Confession, 1644* paints a rich and beautiful picture of the covenant relationship in Baptist churches in the first half of the seventeenth century. Christ's covenant with his universal church called believers to actualise visible communities in covenant with the Lord and one another. In the opening letter to this confession, the Particular Baptist churches tell the reader that they are all in one communion and that Jesus Christ is their 'head and Lord'.[32]

Article XXXIII of the *London Confession, 1644* tells us that 'visible profession of faith' is 'being baptized into that faith, and joined to the Lord, and each other'.[33] Paul Fiddes points out that this kind of talk refers to the dual dimensions of the church covenant. The believer enters both a 'horizontal' and a 'vertical' contract with God and his or her brothers and

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[28] Ryan Andrew Newson, *Radical Friendship: The Politics of Communal Discernment* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), p. xix.
[29] Ibid., p. 47.
[30] Paul S Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster Press, 2005), p. 52.
[31] William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1959), p. 164.
[32] Ibid., p. 155.
[33] Ibid., p. 165.

sisters.[34] We see also how inseparable baptism is from covenantal church membership. In many places the covenant was never written; baptism was the covenant. Though the document may have been optional, being joined to one another in covenant was not an option, 'thither ought all men to come'.[35] They were to surrender their lives and talents to the service of the church and become like limbs of a single body.

The General Baptists did not use as much 'covenant' language as their more reformed Particular Baptist brothers and sisters, but the concept was still present. The language of 'walking together' and giving oneself up to Christ and the church is used in the General Baptist confessions known as *Thirty Congregations*[36] and *The Midland Confession*.[37] *The Orthodox Creed* says of baptism,

> Baptism is an ordinance of the new testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, to be unto the party baptized, or dipped, a sign of our entrance into the covenant of grace, engrafted into Christ, and into the body of Christ, which is his church.'[38]

Notice the presence of the new covenant with all the church and baptism serving to join the believer to Christ and his body, the church.

In 1677, in the *Second London Confession*, the Particular Baptists admit that every gathered church is prone to error, but that the authors are committed to the journey. They refer to themselves as, with other Christians, 'living and walking in the way of the Lord that we profess'.[39] The believer is called out of the world by the Word and God's Spirit, but he or she is called out to be together. 'Those thus called he commandeth to walk together in particular societies, or Churches,' and to 'willingly consent to walk together according to the appointment of Christ, giving up themselves, to the Lord and one another by the will of God.'[40]

This language is so rich, so relational. In baptism one died to self and took on the vocation of service to others through the covenant church. Believers were bound together, they belonged to Christ and so they belonged to the church of which He was Lord. Members were accountable to that lordship. Article 12 states that 'all that are admitted unto the privileges of a Church, are also under the Censures and Government thereof, according to the Rule of Christ'. Christ was the real and present Lord of these churches. There is an emphasis on acting in accordance with the 'mind' of Christ as discerned together.

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[34] Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, p. 29.
[35] Lumpkin. *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, p. 166.
[36] Ibid., p. 183.
[37] Ibid., p. 199.
[38] Ibid., p. 317.
[39] Ibid., p. 244.
[40] Ibid., p. 286.

Baptists in America were similarly 'church-centered'.[41] Robert Handy describes the relationship between obedient believers and churches in the early American Baptist mindset like this:

> The church was free of external human control, but free only to follow Christ. The whole life of the church was to be conducted in response to divine command and under divine guidance according to Scripture. With such a firm conviction, these Baptists were bound to take their churchmanship with deep seriousness.[42]

Seeking the Mind of Christ

We have seen that the theme of seeking the mind of Christ by the reading of Scripture in covenant community is a consistent theme among Baptists in the first one hundred and fifty years. However, during the modern period the goal for many was to uncover objective evidence of the empirical reality that could be rationally assessed in methodologically consistent ways, such that any rational person would come to the same conclusion about the truth. The naïve assumption is that the traditions we are formed in can be set aside and we can assume an objective, balcony-level perspective.

For Gadamer, since we cannot be fully objective, to pretend to be so and ignore our prejudices inhibits our ability to come to better understanding.

> The overcoming of all prejudices, this global demand of the Enlightenment, will itself prove to be a prejudice, and removing it opens the way to an appropriate understanding of the finitude which dominates not only our humanity but also our historical consciousness.[43]

Baptists have wrestled mightily with this Enlightenment temptation. The Restoration Movement of the nineteenth-century American frontier could be said to have largely grown out of the Baptist tradition, as an attempt to find unity through jettisoning tradition and relying on reason as a common ground for finding a universal consensus on Scripture's meaning. However, this movement for unity based on objective reasoning not only led to division with Baptists, but the Restoration Movement itself fractured into at least three separate movements over the next century.

As I discussed earlier, Gadamer believes our tradition is indispensable in how we interpret the world around us. This includes the authority of persons:

> Admittedly, it is primarily persons that have authority; but the authority of a person is ultimately based not on the subjection and abdication of reason but on an act of acknowledgment and knowledge – the knowledge, namely, that the other

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[41] Robert T. Handy, *'The Philadelphia Tradition', Baptist Concepts of the Church*, ed. by Winthrop Still Hudson (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1959), p. 35.
[42] Ibid., p. 37.
[43] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 288.

is superior to oneself in judgment and insight and that for this reason his judgment takes precedence – i.e., it has priority over one's own. This is connected to the fact that authority cannot actually be bestowed but is earned, and must be earned if someone is to lay claim to it. It rests on acknowledgment and hence on an act of reason itself which, aware of its own limitations, trusts to the better insight of others.[44]

So, to accept another person as authoritative is entirely reasonable, if that person is understood to have knowledge or an understanding of knowledge greater than our own. Baptists have always claimed that the truth itself is a person. This is not a static set of facts but a person that can be known and interacted with, whose perspective is the fullness of reality.

The claim here is that Jesus Christ is not just a historical figure whose teachings are preserved in texts and traditions, but that the resurrected Jesus Christ is immanently present as a person. This is a difference between mere observation of a subject and interaction and dialogue with a subject open to self-disclosure. As a matter of fact, we have to invert Gadamer's concept of authority when we speak of Christ. It is not that Christ is the authority because of his familiarity with the tradition, but that the tradition is authoritative because of its familiarity with the person of Christ.

Faithfulness in the Baptist tradition is not primarily about certain theological propositions, but about a yielding to the lordship, or authority, of the person of Christ. So, all theological inquiry in the Baptist tradition has to be, from the beginning, about application to faithful living. We seek to understand the mind of Christ. In Gadamer's terms, we seek to merge our horizon with the horizon of Christ. This re-orients our methodology. Swinton writes, 'Indeed, it may be that the honest methodological position from which Christians should begin their ethnographic practice is not neutrality but prayer.'[45] This is the only reasonable way to proceed if one has the conviction that the creator of heaven and earth is immanently present as a personal force. To seek and trust the authority of the mind of Christ 'is an act of freedom because he has a wider view of things or is better informed'.[46] Whereas Gadamer's epistemology reintroduces the authority of a person who 'knows more',[47] trust in Christ is even firmer as he has not merely a greater quantity of knowledge, but knowledge of a quality that is intrinsically superior – the knowledge of one through whom 'all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made'.[48]

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[44] Ibid., p. 291.
[45] Swinton, 'Where Is Your Church?' p. 84.
[46] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 292.
[47] Ibid.
[48] John 3.1 (NIV).

Scripture and the Body of Christ

In the Scriptures we have the record of God's fullest self-revelation. The Scriptures are authoritative because they are written by a community inspired by God, but inspiration is not how we first come to believe in their authority. We, in fact, believe that the Bible is authoritative because we are members of a community that sees the Bible as authoritative. Often inspiration, and thus authority, is argued using Scripture itself. However, this line of reasoning is circular. We do not come to believe the faith of the Bible through first accepting its authority. Rather, the Holy Spirit leads us to experience Christ. In Christ we find meaningful community and see our lives and our redemption as part of the greater story of the Gospel. We begin to better understand our experience with Christ as the Holy Spirit works though the Scriptures. We can believe the Bible because we believe in Christ and the Bible is the work of his Spirit in his body. It is through this Spirit working in this body that the message of the Bible has been protected and transmitted by and for the community. So, the authority is grounded in and contingent upon a community in relation with Christ.

The church is called to wrestle with the Scriptures to discern the truth of the Gospel in them. To seek the truth in the Scriptures is more than just asking what the text 'means'. Seeking the truth in the Scriptures is being open to not just what the ancient author intended, but also being attentive to how the Spirit has used and is using the text to reveal the mind of Christ to the church.

In the Scriptures the community expects to meet the living person of Jesus. Stuart Blythe warns us to expect more than a static historical record: 'To discern the mind of Christ, therefore, is certainly not less but is more than trying to understand together "the inescapable authority of Scripture". It is to bring oneself with others into engagement with the living Jesus Christ.'[49] The living Lord is revealed in the Scriptures and the wider tradition, but since he is beyond the Scripture and traditions, he also challenges them. 'More generally speaking, to seek the mind of the risen Lord exposes all of our traditions, interpretations, and institutions to the guidance and judgment of Jesus Christ.'[50]

Gadamer's discussion of historical consciousness is helpful in understanding how a community reading the same Scripture texts across time and under the lordship of Jesus can come to evolving and seemingly contradictory interpretations.

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[49] Stuart Blythe, 'Your Will Be Always Done', in *Gathering Disciples: Essays in Honour of Christopher J. Ellis*, ed. by Myra Blyth and Andrew J. Goodliff (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017), p. 80.
[50] Blythe, 'Your Will Be Always Done', p. 82.

> We accept the fact that the subject presents different aspects of itself at different times or from different standpoints. We accept the fact that these aspects do not simply cancel one another out as research proceeds, but are like mutually exclusive conditions that exist by themselves and combine only in us. Our historical consciousness is always filled with a variety of voices in which the echo of the past is heard. Only in the multifariousness of such voices does it exist: this constitutes the nature of the tradition in which we want to share and have a part.[51]

For the congregation to discern the mind of Christ in light of tradition is to hear voices of the past that may seem mutually exclusive, but that demonstrate how Christ's presence was uniquely perceived in the contexts that God's people found themselves in at a particular place and time.

As I have pointed out, hermeneutics is always about application and in Baptist tradition discernment is seeking the mind of Christ to know how to be faithful. In Gadamer's model of co-determination we do not read the text, understand fully the mind of Christ, and then act as a community. Rather, our understanding of the text, the mind of Christ in and beyond the text, and what action is required are co-determined. For Gadamer, fuller understanding is uncovered as we apply our understanding. Browning tries to get at this with his practice-theory-practice model of practical theology. However, I believe what Gadamer suggests is less clearly cyclical and more co-mingled than Browning implies.[52]

Our existing knowledge and perspective shapes our pursuit of new knowledge in that our fore-understandings shape what questions we even think to ask in our research. Browning applies this to reading Scripture, especially in the Western world. The Scriptures have influenced our culture, our culture influences our fore-understandings, and our fore-understandings influence questions we think to ask when interpreting the Scriptures.[53] Frequently we do not think to question our interpretation of Scripture until there is a breakdown in interpretation.

When people with different horizons and pre-understandings come into dialogue, there can be breakdowns and incongruities in understanding. If knowing the mind of Christ is the goal in congregational discernment, then this dialogue is not aimed at simply fusing horizons with one another, but at the mutual fusion of our horizons with Christ's horizon. The practice of congregational dialogue for discernment is a character-forming spiritual discipline. Blythe writes, 'the practice of congregational discernment should be both expressive and formative of discipleship'.[54] Our character and our discernment share in this co-determination relationship that is so central to

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[51] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 296.
[52] Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, p. 39.
[53] Ibid., p. 41.
[54] Blythe, 'Your Will Be Always Done', p. 86.

Gadamer's approach to understanding through the unfolding of lived experience. There must be a mutual humility among congregants, recognising that no one person's word is the last word and that we may be wrong. In this humility we recognise the distance between the mind of Christ and ourselves.

For those seeking the mind of Christ there are times when what we discern to be the horizon of Christ comes into conflict with our received understanding of Scripture. Out of this incongruence comes dialogue to reach understanding. The community has to decide how to renegotiate its understanding of Scripture, the practices of the community, the mind of Christ, or all of the above. Often incongruence is sensed in the form of personal sin again the community or in the community's corporate sin. The world's largest denomination of Baptists was formed to protect the institution of slavery and for many years interpreted Scripture to do so. It has taken many decades, but Southern Baptists have come to see that their interpretation of Scripture and community practice could not be fused with the horizon of the mind of Christ. Browning describes the hermeneutical process: 'When these practices become problematic, we try to orient ourselves by reexamining the classic sources that have shaped our present practices.'[55] Browning rightly observes:

> A hermeneutical dialogue with classic texts is not just a solitary conversation between one interpreter and his or her texts. In the situation of a congregation, it should be a community effort involving several people and their respective horizons in a dialogue with the classic text.[56]

However, the work of the congregation is not merely a case of communal reading. Again Webster reminds us that 'ecclesiology cannot be only a matter of historical sociology or practical reasoning: to make it such is to neglect the principle that all creaturely being is grounded in God'.[57] The church has its origin in God.

Browning offers key insights as to how Gadamer's hermeneutics work in a congregation. However, he leaves a congregation as simply a community of people and does not incorporate an understanding of the congregation to be the body of Christ. As we have seen, for Baptists baptism joins the believer to Christ and to Christ's body on earth and is a sign of the vertical and horizontal covenants. As such there is the belief that, by the Holy Spirit, Jesus is present and active in and through the gathered Christian community. This makes possible the communal discernment of not merely 'the "mind of

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[55] Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, p. 39.
[56] Ibid., p. 50.
[57] Webster, 'In the Society of God', p. 202.

the group" but indeed of the "mind" of Jesus Christ himself'.[58]

Conclusion

Understanding the congregation as the body of Christ also has implications for applying Gadamer's thoughts on historical consciousness. As the body of the resurrected Christ, the congregation is an eschatological community.[59] The church must wrestle not only with voices of the past, but with projection of a future that is believed to be already assured. As an eschatological community, the church believes that history has a direction and purpose that will be fulfilled. The horizon of Jesus as Lord includes the hope that the Jesus who was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven will come again to judge the living and the dead. This Jesus will fully consummate his reign of peace and justice. If this is a central theological conviction of a congregation, surely it should have a profound impact on how decisions are made, what risks are taken, and what is valued in the long term.

With theologians still struggling to work out a methodology for practical theology in dialogue with the social sciences that is sufficiently sensitive to lived experience, but appropriately theological, we should be careful to not bypass epistemology. With Gadamer preserving a reasonable place for informed persons to have earned authority, the door is opened for those with the conviction that Jesus Christ is living and active in the world to seek the mind of Christ as not only a legitimate source, but as the most authoritative source for knowing and applying knowledge. The Baptist tradition bears witness to this way of knowing as discernment and to sharing in covenant community as the Body of Christ and reading Scriptures in the community of the Body of Christ as chief ways of knowing together the mind of Christ. Gadamer's understandings of historical consciousness and disruptive power of incongruence in understanding, leading to dialogue for a fusion of horizons, can help us to make sense of how these Baptist convictions can fit into a robust and relevant philosophical framework for how we understand and act in the world around us.

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[58] Stuart Blythe, 'Overcoming Incompetence', *Politurgy* (blog), 24 April 2018 <https://politurgy. wordpress.com/2018/04/24/overcoming-incompetence/> [accessed 15 November 2018]
[59] Blythe, 'Your Will Be Always Done', p. 85.