

Leaving the Gathered Community: Porous Borders and Dispersed Practices

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A Baptist ecclesiology of the gathered community coupled with a characteristic concern for mission has led to a dynamic of gathering and sending within British Baptist worship. This engenders a demarcation between the church and the world, and a sense of a substantial boundary between the two. In this article I explore the metaphor of the boundary between the church and the world. In doing so, I examine recent theological proposals that present formation as taking place within the worship of the gathered community for the purpose of mission. I propose a picture of the boundary as porous and its formation necessarily occurring, both within the church and the world, through worship and witness. I argue that church–world relations are complex and cannot be described as ‘one way’ — from worship to witness. The article concludes by pointing to the need for sacramental practices for the church in dispersed mode, for example hospitality, as well as for the church gathered, for example baptism and communion. This implies recognising that there are graced practices of the church and indwelt sacramentality which find their rightful place in the context of witness in the world, by leaving the gathered community.

Keywords

Baptist ecclesiology; sacraments; mission; practices

Baptist Ecclesiology: Local, Missional, Individualistic

Baptists have long been characterised by ecclesiological concerns for both the local congregation and mission. In his book, *Baptist Theology*, Stephen Holmes states: ‘There are two foci around which Baptist life is lived: the individual believer and the local church’.¹ These are classic concerns for the visible church, ‘gathered by covenant’,² or as Thomas Helwys expressed it at the start of the seventeenth century, ‘A company of faithful people, separated from the world by the word and Spirit of God [...] upon their own confession of faith and sins.’³ Mission does not have quite the same pedigree. Yet Holmes observes that ‘it is difficult to think of another Christian tradition that has so uniformly seen mission as being so central to its vision of the life

¹ Stephen R. Holmes, *Baptist Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), p. 6.

² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³ Thomas Helwys, cited in Nigel G. Wright, *Free Church, Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2005), p. 56.

of the church [...] The missionary impulse runs deep in Baptist identity'.⁴ While mission may have arrived on the Baptist scene a little later, it has proved a robust identity marker. From the earlier mobilisation of Baptists through, for example, William Carey and Johann Gerhard Oncken, mission has evolved from a colonial endeavour of the church to being redefined in post-colonial terms as *missio Dei*. Baptist thought, if not always practice, has kept pace with these changes viewing mission as an 'attribute of God'.⁵ Holmes, following David Bosch, has argued, 'Mission is one of the perfections of God, as adequate a description of who he is as love, omnipotence or eternity.'⁶ This terminology is prevalent in Baptist spirituality, theology and institutional life. 'For Baptists [...] everything is read through a lens of mission.'⁷ Andy Goodliff has observed that the 'phrase "Missionary God" became embedded in Baptist God talk from the mid-1990s onwards [...] The underlying argument being [...] if we confess God as Missionary then the union and the churches must also be missionary'.⁸

Mission, like congregationalism, bore the marks of a 'classically Baptist individualism',⁹ and shared in the voluntarism that has characterised all of Baptist life from the tradition's beginnings. Over the first century-and-a-half of Baptist history the emphasis on personal choice and responsibility led believers first to covenant together in local congregations. Then, in time, Baptists came to own a sense of responsibility for the world around them, which led them to seek the conversion of others. Baptists, from Thomas Helwys and John Smyth through to Andrew Fuller and William Carey, rooted their vision of church and mission in the biblical and theological soil of personal salvation and responsibility. At the same time, it is important in the developing argument of this article to recall that they were also steeped in the cultural and intellectual currents of their time. Early congregationalism was deeply influenced by John Locke's descriptions of voluntary societies.¹⁰ Carey 'unashamedly created a theological rationale from the commercial sector', when he borrowed the model of the Joint Stock Company from early capitalism to enable Christians to 'use means' in the cause of evangelism.¹¹

⁴ Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, pp. 142-3.

⁵ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 390.

⁶ Stephen R. Holmes, 'Trinitarian Missiology: Towards a Theology of God as Missionary', *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 8, no. 1 (2006): 89.

⁷ Paul Goodliff, *Shaped for Service: Ministerial Formation and Virtue Ethics* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2017), p. 230.

⁸ Andy Goodliff, "'Missionary God": The Place of Mission Among British Baptists', in *Gathering Disciples: Essays in Honour of Christopher J. Ellis*, ed. by M. Blythe and A. Goodliff (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2017), p. 234.

⁹ Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, 142.

¹⁰ See Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2003), pp. 40-45; and William H. Brackney, *Christian Voluntarism: Theology and Praxis* (Grand Rapids Michigan: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 33-36, 4-46.

¹¹ Brackney, *Christian Voluntarism*, p. 46.

Charles Taylor, in his book, *A Secular Age*, has charted the emergence of ‘the human agent of modernity’ as a major factor in the complex and convoluted process of disenchantment visible within Western culture. He notes that the individual who emerged in this period had a sense of having both the capacity and the task to ‘make over’ society. He also highlights the role played by those churches

where one was not simply a member in virtue of birth, but where one had to join by answering a personal call. This in turn helped to give force to a conception of society as founded on covenant, and hence as ultimately constituted by the decision of free individuals.¹²

The Church: Gathered and Sent

The ecclesiological images of being gathered (ekklesia) and being sent (missio) have exercised a formative influence on Baptist self-consciousness. How this is experienced has evolved over the years as contexts have changed. Being gathered from a Christendom world is different to being gathered from, and sent to, a post-Christendom context. In both these contexts, the notion of being separate is a constant for Baptists and so, therefore, is the image of the boundary. However, the priority of gathering in the Baptist imagination is suggested by the fact that over time Baptists came to subsume their missional objectives within the act of gathering. Christopher Ellis has pointed out how Baptists shared the tendency of evangelicals in the nineteenth century to lean ‘towards a programmatic and evangelistic use of worship [...] as a means of encouraging a faith commitment on the part of the worshippers’.¹³ Indeed, Baptist practices of the Lord’s Supper and Baptism have been shaped with outreach in mind.¹⁴

Along with these historical characteristics of Baptist worship, a number of Baptist theologians have followed Keith Jones in registering a preference for the language of ‘gathering’, rather than the ‘gathered community’.¹⁵ This is a promising development as it stresses that the local church is not ‘formed by the will and choice of those individuals who constitute it’. Rather, it is the ‘community through which the Spirit gathers them into [...] the communion of God’s own life’.¹⁶ Such language is also an advance on the traditional terminology which ‘has a feel of the complete,

¹² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007), p. 155.

¹³ Christopher J. Ellis, ‘Spirituality in Mission: Gathering and Grace’, in *Under the Rule of Christ: Dimensions of Baptist Spirituality*, ed. by Paul Fiddes (Oxford: Regents Park College, 2008), p. 181.

¹⁴ Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, p. 146.

¹⁵ Keith Jones, ‘Towards a Model of Mission for Gathering, Intentional, Convictional Koinonia’, *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, 4, no. 2 (January 2004): 5.

¹⁶ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, p. 57.

the settled, the static community about it'.¹⁷ In distinction to this the gathering community has 'an open attitude to those who are seekers'.¹⁸ In both the gathered and the gathering church models, however, the congregation persists in the Baptist imaginary as the place of God's activity, cast now in evangelistic terms. Dispersal, or *missio*, serves as preparation for the gospel, the occasion for bringing people into church to hear the gospel and be converted.

More recent theological developments have put the emphasis on what happens to believers, rather than seekers, in the time of gathering. The Virtue Ethics developed by Stanley Hauerwas has underscored the crucial role of the practices of the gathered community in shaping Christians to be authentic witnesses to the gospel. Hauerwas has been influenced by Alasdair McIntyre's rediscovery of the role of tradition, community, and narrative for producing character. Several prominent Baptist theologians, in the UK and the USA, have used this focus on liturgical practices to reverse the tendency to prioritise mission over worship in the gathered setting. They note that often worship is viewed 'instrumentally [...] to facilitate conversions, rather than to glorify God', but propose instead that it should be viewed as a suite of practices that shape distinctive disciples of Christ, who are able to live counter-culturally and be effective witnesses to Christ within secular societies.¹⁹ John Colwell, consciously channelling Hauerwas, states: 'The Church must continue to relate its story, shape its worship [...] and allow that worship simultaneously to shape every aspect of its living within the world.'²⁰

While Baptists do not have a set liturgy, the churches within the Baptist Union of Great Britain have been resourced and encouraged to view this model of 'gathering and sending' as a paradigm for Christian worship. 'In worship we are gathered to hear and receive the Word of God [...] and we are sent in mission to share him with others.'²¹ The practices of worship 'enable us to prepare for mission'.²² It is the difference of gathering, what happens in worship, that equips members for being sent. Alongside this, worship itself is viewed as being a counter-cultural witness to an onlooking world.

Our being the Church is simply a matter of identity through Baptism and the Lord's Supper as a worshipping people, as a people being formed and transformed

¹⁷ Keith Jones, 'Towards a Model of Mission', p. 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁹ Ellis, 'Spirituality in Mission', p. 181.

²⁰ John E. Colwell, *Living the Christian Story* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), p. 168.

²¹ Christopher J. Ellis and Myra Blyth, *Gathering for Worship: Patterns and Prayers for the Community of Disciples* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005), p. 5.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

by the story we indwell, as a people whose very existence within the world is a witness to Christ.²³

Attention to the formative impact of Christian worship shifts the focus towards the shaping of witnesses, rather than towards the conversion of those who have not explicitly confessed faith in Jesus. This focus on practices sets the task of mission outside the church, to a watching world or within the series of engagements where those formed in gathered worship witness to Christ. The church becomes characterised as a polis, or a public, with its own practices and social ethic, and Christians are imagined as ‘resident aliens’ in the broader culture. It is clear that the existence of the Church as a particular social entity implies some form of boundary: the church cannot be ‘an endless plain’.²⁴ Such a theology, however, can convey a pronounced sense of separation from, and dichotomy with, the world, and such talk ‘quickly slides towards speaking of the church-world divide as sharp, external and spatial’.²⁵

The issue, though, is not so much that theologians like Hauerwas and Colwell articulate a strong sense of church as bounded from wider society, it is rather that the practices focused on within this ecclesial turn shape something closer to what Charles Taylor calls the ‘Social Imaginary’. By this he intends to conjure the ‘inarticulate understanding’ we have of the world. This ‘background understanding’, or perhaps this ‘feel for the world’, is largely carried in practices rather than ideas and ‘can never adequately be expressed in the form of explicit doctrines, because of its very unlimited and indefinite nature’.²⁶ My contention is that the sense, or feel, of the church as a reality bounded from the world, while not always explicit in its ‘espoused theology’, is carried within the practices, the ‘operant theology’, of a church that views itself as gathered from the world.

Mission as Boundary Crossing

Once the world and the church are imaginatively and effectively bounded and separated, John Flett observes that historically ‘mission functions as the bridge between the two’.²⁷ It is here that we can start to discern the problems with ecclesial practices that develop a keen sense of the boundary between the church and the wider world. Firstly, this suggests another metaphor in relation to mission — that of the bridge. These two metaphors together,

²³ John E. Colwell, ‘Mission as Ontology’, *Baptist Ministers Journal*, 295 (2006): 11.

²⁴ R. Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 160.

²⁵ Ryan A. Newson, *Inhabiting the World: Identity, Politics, and Theology in Radical Baptist Perspective* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2018), p. 94.

²⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 173.

²⁷ John G. Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), p. 3.

boundary and bridge, (in)form an understanding of mission as transmission from one region to another. The missionary posture is one of delivery or conveyance. Mission is delivering a message, servicing a need; it is responding to deficit out of fullness. In this model of, or feel for mission there is little room for receptivity, which has historically been the Christian stance in worship. Michael Stroope, the Baptist missiologist, has offered a critique of mission as a practice that was birthed in modernity and is decisively shackled to this paradigm. He states that it is characterised by an understanding of ‘mission as one-way deliverables’.²⁸ He urges a rediscovery of the Church’s ‘ancient language that will enable a more vibrant and appropriate encounter between the church and the world’.²⁹ Christian Scharen has brought a similar critique to proponents of virtue ethics, such as Hauerwas — and we may add Colwell — who view worship as forming participants for witness in the world. He cautions against accepting a ‘linear model’ of relating worship to mission, or ethics, according to which, ‘public worship forms one as a Christian, who then lives this out in public works of justice and mercy’.³⁰ Such a model does not account for the complex and multi-site dynamic of formation in pluralist societies, where Christians live much of their lives ‘with other configurations of people according to other institutionally patterned ideals, practices, rules and regulations’.³¹ Both Stroope and Scharen are, in differing ways, looking for ‘an authentic faith exchange that converts and transforms in both directions’.³²

John Flett offers a theological critique of the bridge metaphor for mission, which can legitimately be extended to that of the boundary. He notes that ‘missio’ finds its theological moorings in the doctrine of the trinity, rather than in ecclesiology. He engages with Karl Barth’s theology to underscore that God *is* on mission as God *is* in God’s inner relations. The sending of the Son and the proceeding of the Spirit correspond to how God is within the mystery, and event, of divine being. That is to say, there is no ‘second step’ of mission in the world for God. Equally the church does not have its being within its gathered reality or practices and then, in a secondary fashion, go out on mission to the world. ‘Mission is not a second step in addition to some other more proper being of the church.’³³ The church cannot be two different creatures: in worship receptive and in mission transmissive.

²⁸ Michael Stroope, *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition* (London: Apollos, 2017), p. 352.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 348.

³⁰ Christian Scharen, *Public Worship, Public Work: Character and Commitment in Congregational Life* (Collegeville, Minnesota, Liturgical Press, 2004), p. 30.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³² Stroope, *Transcending Mission*, p. 352.

³³ Flett, *The Witness of God*, p. 34.

Its witness to the world — its identity in dispersed mode — is, and must be, of a piece with its identity in worship, that is, in gathered mode.³⁴

God in the Gathering: Revisiting Sacraments

The benefit of increased attentiveness to the formative practices of worship among Baptists has been to focus on how God acts in worship, and to rearticulate the relationship between worship and mission. This reflection has been useful and productive, because Baptists have customarily answered questions about what happens in worship in a reductive fashion. That is to say, Baptists have often fought battles on what does not happen in worship and ended up with an unsettling, but settled, conviction that not much happens through the liturgical practices of the gathered community.

This can be illustrated with reference to the sacraments. Stephen Holmes notes that Baptists have historically preferred the term ‘ordinance’ to sacraments, as it is held to be ‘safer, as pointing simply to the origin of baptism and the Lord’s Supper in the command of Christ’.³⁵ He goes on to point out that ‘perhaps bizarrely, Baptists have been remarkably poor at developing a theology of baptism over their history [...] [offering] no theological account of why this biblical practice is important, or what it achieves’.³⁶ Curtis Freeman concurs, noting similarly in the case of Communion that ‘the belief that the risen Lord is not really present through the Holy Spirit at the table but that the Lord’s Supper is merely of symbolic significance has become a new kind of popular consensus among Baptists’.³⁷ Preference for the language of ordinance over sacrament means that the question of divine and human agency can be handled in a straightforward fashion. The act of God is always prior to the obedience entailed in the ordinance, and encounter with God is not tied to any particular embodied practice or element of creation. Faith is imparted before baptism and ‘nothing happens’ in the water. Except for testimony.

Alexander Maclaren made a similar point about the Lord’s Supper in the nineteenth century: ‘The purpose of the Lord’s Supper is simply the commemoration, and therein the proclamation of His death. There is no magic, no mystery, no “sacrament” about it.’³⁸ Maclaren’s sentiment still holds among many Baptists and could be expanded to comment on Baptist

³⁴ This point may seem to be in agreement with the view of Colwell, already stated. The difference, though, is that for Colwell this heightens the significance and status of worship, whereas for Flett it means that the activities of mission gain an ontological status.

³⁵ Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, p. 165.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

³⁷ Curtis W. Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2014), p. 330.

³⁸ Cited in Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, p. 166.

perceptions of worship in general. This is not to say that God is not invoked or believed to be encountered in worship. Rather Baptist piety views this happening, as Colwell has pointed out, in terms of immediacy. Meeting with God is always Damascene for Baptists, a direct in-breaking of God. In more recent years, charismatic renewal has heightened expectation that something happens in Baptist worship, but has continued to view this within the vocabulary of immediacy. There is an occasionalism to divine encounter within Baptist worship, with scant reference to how God is active in and through the practices of the church.

Over the last two decades there has been an effort to move beyond what Steven Harmon has termed, the ‘symbolic reductionism typical of Baptist theologies of the ordinances’, and towards ‘an understanding of baptism and eucharist as paradigmatic of the relation of God to the material order that is disclosed in the incarnation’. Harmon contends that it is the ‘sacramental narration of the world that forms the Christian self’.³⁹ Several Baptist theologians have featured in this effort to rehabilitate the sacraments. This has moved the emphasis from immediacy, to mediation — or ‘mediated immediacy’ — with regard to God’s presence in and through the materiality and embodied engagement of worship and witness. Material mediation of the divine is God’s way of being in the world, as aptly summed up by Colwell: ‘In the defining core of the Christian story there is no unmediated divine presence; all that God is and does here is done by the mediation of the Spirit through the flesh assumed by the Son.’⁴⁰ In the sacraments God, through the Spirit, indwells believers and enables them to indwell the gospel story, to which the sacraments themselves point.

John Colwell and Paul Fiddes are examples of how Baptist reappraisals of sacramentality have followed on from the growing awareness of the inadequacies of Enlightenment epistemology and ontology. The picture of the human being as analytical observer, a thinking thing, has strained to cover human experience of embodied participation in the world. Other images that are more attentive to embodiment and relationality have become increasingly compelling. Both Colwell and Fiddes propose epistemologies that view knowledge in terms of indwelling stories and participating in God.⁴¹ This is connected to an ontology that ‘defines us as dependent, rather than independent’, and engages with reality as ‘a “being-giveness” rather than a “givenness” – since it is mediated by the living

³⁹ Steven R. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2006), pp. 13-14.

⁴⁰ John E. Colwell, *Promise and Presence: An Exploration of Sacramental Theology* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2011), p. 56.

⁴¹ Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), and John E. Colwell, *Living the Christian Story* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001).

Spirit'.⁴² Receptivity is a core human capacity in such an ontology. These developments are both promising and difficult for Baptists, on account of the ingrained individualism and the focus on autonomy that characterise Baptist ecclesiological concerns for both the gathered community and evangelism.

The engagement with theologians who focus on ecclesial practices, and their formative effect, enable Baptists to give a more positive answer to questions regarding what happens in worship. It is an answer that resonates well with a tradition that extols the gathered community of believers: God forms a people, a polis or a public, through the embodied practices of the sacraments. This leads to an appreciation of receptivity, rather than characteristic Baptist activism, as the normative stance of the believer in worship. Reinhard Hütter urges that concentration on ecclesial practices need not, and should not, lead reductively, 'to an anthropological theory of action'. Following Martin Luther, he describes engagement in the core practices of the church as a form of pathos. By this he intends to describe a practice, or activity, that has the stance of receptivity: it aims at the practitioner being acted upon, rather than acting. Referring to ecclesial practices such as the sacraments, he comments, 'Although they do indeed refer to human activities, through them the human being undergoes, or it subject to, the actions of the Holy Spirit [...] The human being is always the recipient, that is, always remains in the mode of pathos.'⁴³ Colwell concurs: 'Sacramental reality of the Church's identity is [...] both an authentically human and an authentically divine occurrence.'⁴⁴ For Hütter it is through its core practices that the church is constituted as 'the public of the Holy Spirit'.⁴⁵ For Colwell, through the sacraments, 'the Church itself is formed into a living narration of the gospel story through the living Spirit'.⁴⁶

Baptist re-evaluation of the sacraments has led to a new appreciation of worship as a means of formation of virtue or character. It should also lead to a recognition of human embeddedness in creation and, in turn, to a deeper awareness God's engagement with creation. God's presence in the world is always mediated through creation, or materiality. Following Luther and Calvin, Colwell identifies the sacraments as a particular instance of materiality, such as bread, wine or water, which is 'established as a sign by a divine promise'.⁴⁷ Paul Fiddes instead concentrates on how the particularity of the sacraments reveal a universal sacramentality within the world. He follows Teilhard de Chardin in speaking of 'extensions' or 'prolongations' of the sacraments into the world:

⁴² Colwell, *Living the Christian Story*, p. 40.

⁴³ Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things*, pp. 131-32.

⁴⁴ Colwell, *Living the Christian Story*, p. 162.

⁴⁵ Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things*, p. 164.

⁴⁶ Colwell, *Living the Christian Story*, p. 163.

⁴⁷ Colwell, *Promise and Presence*, p. 58.

From the focus on baptism we can find God in the many occasions in the world where water is involved; in the experience of the breaking of waters in birth, in moments of refreshment, when passing over a boundary river, in the washing away of what is unclean, and in facing the hostile force of great floods.⁴⁸

At stake here is not so much the slippery slope to magical or mechanical thinking to which Baptists have traditionally objected. God's presence is not caught in the sacraments, but the Spirit mediates divine encounter through materiality and, through this mediation, draws people into communion with God. At stake is the re-enchantment of creation.

Formation and Porous Borders

These developments are welcome. They draw together worship and formation for the sake of witness, and enable a perception of God at work through the normal practices of the church. They do not, though, help us blur the boundaries between the church and the world which inform notions of mission as 'one-way deliverables'. Nor do they unsettle the linear logic of formation that sees God as active in and through the church and its practices for the sake of the world. Even within these sacramental theologies, and their Baptist engagements, the metaphor of the boundary continues to grip the imagination such that there is a pronounced sense that all the good stuff — the sacramental, the enchanted — happens on the ecclesial side of the border. Christians, on this understanding, are formed within the community for witness in the world. The world, then, continues to be perceived as a context of privation. An important issue here is that formation does not happen in such a linear fashion. Formation works both ways. As Scharen observes, 'Other institutional ideals and practices [...] already shape a community of faith through its members' participation in the world.'⁴⁹

In his book, *The Christian Imagination*, Willie James Jennings has charted how the sacraments buckled before the practices of early capitalism and the slave trade. Jennings notes that the crisis of Christian engagement in the slave trade and the conquest of the New World was, and is, that it was not discerned to be a crisis. It was lived instead as mission. The liturgical tradition and practice of the late medieval period transitioned effortlessly into 'traditioned imperialist modernity'.⁵⁰ Jennings argues, compellingly and disturbingly, that far from the church having the formative resources to resist the broader injustices and cruelty of the slave trade, its practices meshed with colonial practices to form a 'Christian-colonial way of imagining the world'. Katie Grimes, in addressing the now entrenched phenomenon of white

⁴⁸ Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 283.

⁴⁹ Scharen, *Public Worship*, p. 29.

⁵⁰ Willie J. Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 71.

supremacy in the USA, has similarly critiqued ‘sacramental optimism’ which asserts that ‘the church resists the violence of the modern nation-state simply by being itself’. She argues:

The vice of white supremacy pervades the church’s corporate body and thereby permeates all of its practices, including those of baptism and the eucharist. Rather than turning to the church’s sacraments as an antidote to the vices of a presumed external culture [...] these very practices have been corrupted by it.⁵¹

These examples argue against the linear impact of Christian formation travelling from worship to witness. The relationships of worship and witness, the church and the world, are much more complex. This can be supplemented by examples from within the Baptist tradition. Curtis Freeman has charted the shift from the Baptist conviction of freedom of conscience to the articulation of soul competency as a ‘central tenant’ of Baptist identity in the Southern states of America. The former is a protest against coercion by the state, or the king, in the area of faith. Such a conviction is rooted in the conviction that ‘spiritual and religious acts are meaningful only if they come out of sincere hearts and are the product of freely chosen obedience to God’.⁵² Soul competency, on the other hand, is the claim to ‘the competency of the individual to deal with God’.⁵³ Freeman observes that Baptists ended up enshrining in their core principles ‘a scaled down version of the unencumbered self of American democratic liberalism’.⁵⁴ Newson sums up the development of the notion of soul competency: ‘The use to which the phrase came to be put was a rugged individualism that made community secondary, if not inimical to authentic faith.’⁵⁵

Similarly, Paul Fiddes has argued that though Baptists originally gave priority to the practice of covenanting, the term covenant has become a ‘dead metaphor’ whose theological depth should be rediscovered. As he explores the history of the Baptist practice of forming congregations by ‘voluntary consent and covenant’, he points out that Baptist ecclesiology was ‘modelled thoroughly on a secular contract of mutual human obligations’.⁵⁶ As noted above, this notion of church was well articulated by John Locke, who portrayed England, and indeed the Commonwealth, as being made up of an interconnection of voluntary societies, each seeking the interest of its members. ‘Locke’s principle of market-place choice’ also had a provenance in early capitalism, in Joint Stock Companies, in which people came together to achieve common aims and to maximise profit. This model was enthusiastically taken up in the cause of mission by, among others, William

⁵¹ Katie Grimes, ‘Breaking the Body of Christ’, *Political Theology*, 18, no. 1 (February 2017): 22–43.

⁵² Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, p. 56.

⁵³ Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, p. 193.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁵⁵ Newson, *Inhabiting the World*, pp. 95–96.

⁵⁶ Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, pp. 34–35.

Carey as he founded the Baptist Missionary Society. In developing an ecclesiology, and later an apparatus for mission, that was ‘comprehensively voluntaristic’,⁵⁷ Baptists acted from theological and biblical convictions. At the same time, their convictions were expressed in a series of practices that were rooted in the emergence of early capitalism. Through engagement in these practices Baptists gradually became deaf to the theological resonances of their way of being church, such that today Fiddes urges a Baptist rediscovery of the resources of covenantal theology. It can be argued that Baptists were conditioned by their participation in the wider practices of voluntary associations to the point that many could describe the constitution of the church without reference to God’s ordaining. John Gill, for example, writing in the eighteenth century, could describe the church’s voluntary membership as being ‘like all civic societies founded [...] by consent and covenant’.⁵⁸ A century later, Joseph Angus advocated the analogy of free trade and described church as a ‘voluntary religious society for the double purpose of obtaining mutual instruction and comfort and of propagating their faith’.⁵⁹ Over two hundred years of ecclesial and civic practice had taught many Baptists to discuss the essence of the local church in pragmatic terms. This calls to mind David Bosch’s observation that when ‘the voluntary principle’ predominated within evangelicalism, ‘the operative presuppositions were those of Western democracy and the free-enterprise system’.⁶⁰

These historical examples draw attention to the fact that the borders between the church and the wider world are porous and that the direction of influence flows, on the most optimistic reading, both ways. The interlocking of these examples focuses attention on the disciplines of modernity that shaped, and still shape, Western identities, and in which the Baptist tradition was birthed and developed. That the boundary between the gathered community is porous is underlined by the sober observation that Baptist churches, and other evangelicals, in their individualism and activism bear a distinctly modern imprint. Proponents of the ecclesial turn, or of virtue ethics, claim that character is developed through the embodied practices of a traditioned community, through liturgical practices. Yet worship is not the only practice through which Christians are shaped, and the direction of formative travel between the church and the wider world is demonstrably two-way.

⁵⁷ Brackney, *Christian Voluntarism*, p. 33.

⁵⁸ Cited in Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, p. 41.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁶⁰ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 334.

Conclusion: Practices for the Dispersed Church

The porous boundary of the gathered community points to the need for increased attentiveness to the dynamics and multiple contexts of formation. This porosity also suggests the world as an unavoidable and perhaps appropriate site of Christian formation. The turn to ecclesial practices and sacramental theology has reminded Baptists of the need to engage with mediation and materiality in worship. Such an understanding of God's, always mediated, way of being in the world should also inform the church's practices of mission. Fiddes' proposal to 'extend' sacramentality and participation in God into the world, from the particular to the universal, may be pertinent here. It encourages a stance of receptivity which may be an antidote to imagining and practising mission as transmission. Particularly if we are able to extend Colwell's insight that 'we are shaped by one another and, accordingly, we are shaped by the Spirit'⁶¹ into the context of the wider world and to mission engagements with those who, as yet, have no professed faith in Jesus. Stefan Paas rightly comments that

Christians should accept that through mission they are not only teaching others how to be disciples, but they are learning as well. More precisely, there is a theological order here, in which receptivity precedes purpose, power and action. "What do you have that you did not receive."⁶²

Keith Jones's proposal of 'porous worship' provides a means of overcoming the strong sense of boundary between the church and the wider world. He notes that the Early Church met in a variety of domestic settings, and that continental Anabaptists 'did not inherit the great cathedrals and town churches that existed, but rather utilised homes, bakeries, warehouses and the open fields to gather for worship'.⁶³ He urges Baptists to appropriate the domestic setting for worship, with a meal as the focus, as a means of enabling those he terms seekers to 'taste and see' something of the life of faith and worship of 'a core of covenanted believers'.

These are positive proposals for overcoming the sense of the gathered community as bounded, and for discerning God as active in the wider world. They still, however, grant a primacy to worship in relation to both formation and witness that this article is calling into question. Fiddes and Jones extend and displace worship respectively into the wider world. Mission, though, where it is not understood as coterminous with worship, is still viewed as a second step. It may be necessary to go further and to note that, as often occurs in the book of Acts, Christians are formed by encounter with the Holy Spirit through witness in the wider world, and bring back insights and virtues that

⁶¹ Colwell, *Living the Christian Story*, p. 162.

⁶² Stefan Paas, *Pilgrims and Priests: Christian Mission in a Post-Christian Society* (London: SCM Press, 2019), p. 16.

⁶³ Jones, 'Mission Models', p. 8.

transform worship. If this is so, it is surely legitimate and necessary to enquire whether there are practices of the dispersed church that find their natural setting in the context of witness or mission, and which participate in a sacramental dynamic. Christopher Ellis is right to call Baptists to move beyond preoccupation with the gathered community and to develop ‘a missional understanding of dispersal’ that ‘places sufficient importance on the dispersed mode of ecclesial being and activity’.⁶⁴

The practice of hospitality may fit the bill. Hospitality is clearly central to the gospel story, would qualify as an ordinance and, in terms of being a practice rooted in gospel promises, may well be theologically considered as sacramental. In the episodes of Jesus and Zacchaeus, the Emmaus Road, and Cornelius and Peter, there is evidence of hospitality mediating the presence of the kingdom and of Christ through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The practice of hospitality may well be presented in a dynamic similar to Colwell’s sacramental understanding of a double indwelling of the gospel story. That is, a practice through which Christians indwell the formative narrative of the gospel, while also being indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Amos Yong, the American-Malaysian Pentecostal theologian, views Luke’s portrayal of the hospitality of Jesus and the church in this light.

The presentation of the life of Christ and the lives of the earliest Christians is not only descriptive but also normative: his readers are informed about the Holy Spirit’s empowering Jesus and the early Christians so as to be invited also to extend the story of the hospitality of God to the ends of the earth and to the end of the ages.⁶⁵

Like worship, hospitality has receptivity as its essential stance, as there is always slippage between the roles and functions of hosts, guests, and strangers. There is always a ‘two-way’ form to hospitality. Yong recalls that, from the annunciation onwards, it is often ‘precisely in his role as guest that Jesus announces and enacts, through the Holy Spirit, the hospitality of God’.⁶⁶ Unlike worship, hospitality as a gospel practice requires the presence of the stranger, and views witness as a form of pathos in which each participant may ‘suffer divine things’. This moves mission away from transmission to genuine reciprocity where, as in the episode of Cornelius and Peter, all those involved receive the Spirit and are instrumental agents of each other’s transformation. Also, unlike worship, hospitality requires believers to obey Christ and to disperse as well as gather; to go as guests into the world trusting in Christ’s promise to go ahead of them and be with them.

⁶⁴ Ellis, *Spirituality in Mission*, p. 179.

⁶⁵ Amos Yong, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices and the Neighbour* (New York: Orbis Books, 2008), p. 106.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

Practices such as hospitality enable us to imagine witness as enacting the gospel story and being drawn into it, along with others, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. There are other practices to explore, such as peacebuilding, that also may be rooted in divine promises and constitute forms of indwelling the gospel with people who do not, as yet, attend church. Such practices may form a feel for the world as accessible to God's grace and the Spirit's ministry. This embodied engagement in the gospel would also be an advance on, or a supplement to, presenting a message and seeking assent from others. Such an understanding of mission would go beyond the individualism of the autonomous subject and towards a missional appropriation of an ontology of participation.

The turn to ecclesial practices has led Baptists to a re-evaluation of how God works through worship and given oxygen to a conversation about the relationship between liturgy, sacraments and mission. A next step will be to recognise that there are graced practices of the church which find their rightful place in the context of witness in the world, the church dispersed, and there is a sacramentality that can only be indwelt, through the activity of the Spirit, by leaving the gathered community.

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