

# Baptist Catholicity — What Is That? And Why Does It Matter to Baptists and Other Christians?

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## Abstract:

This article, originally presented as a lecture to the German Baptist seminary Theologische Hochschule Elstal,<sup>1</sup> offers an overview of the concept of a 'Baptist catholicity' as envisioned in the author's 2006 book *Towards Baptist Catholicity* and explains how the concept has been extended in more explicitly ecumenical directions in his subsequent work, in particular the 2016 book *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future*. The article explores the patristic antecedents of Catholic theologian Yves Congar's concept of a catholicity that is both 'quantitative' and 'qualitative', applying them to the Baptist tradition, before framing Baptist ecclesiology ecumenically in terms of a 'pilgrim church' vision in which Baptists share with other churches the pilgrim journey to a visibly united church fully under the rule of Christ.

## Keywords:

Baptists; catholicity; ecumenism; ecclesiology

## Introduction

'Baptist Catholicity — What Is That? And Why Does It Matter to Baptists and Other Christians?' This is a topic that is very near and dear to me as a Baptist ecumenical theologian. In an earlier stage of my work, I was a Baptist theologian teaching systematic theology while doing research in patristic theology, and wrestling with the tension between Baptist biblicism and the role that the tradition of the early church in its post-New Testament development plays in other Christian traditions, and in sometimes unrecognised ways in our own. That stage of my work

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article was presented as a guest lecture for the Theologische Hochschule Elstal, Elstal, Germany, 29 June 2018.

is represented by my book *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision*, published in the year 2006.<sup>2</sup> In that book I defined the catholicity towards which I believed Baptists should move in a way that includes and builds upon historic Baptist affirmations of the church as catholic. The present article offers an overview of the concept of a 'Baptist catholicity' as I envisioned it in this earlier phase of my work on the topic and explains how I have extended it in more explicitly ecumenical directions in my subsequent thought.

### **Baptist Catholicity as Quantitative and Qualitative**

Though there are many exceptions whenever one generalises about Baptists, most Baptists have no problem with a *quantitative* understanding of the church's catholicity, according to which there is a universal church to which all believers belong that transcends visible local congregations. This quantitative understanding of catholicity is explicitly affirmed in the two most significant Baptist confessions from the seventeenth century, both of which draw language from the Reformed Westminster Confession. According to the Particular Baptist *Second London Confession* published in 1689, 'The Catholick or universal Church, which [...] may be called invisible, consists of the whole number of the Elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof.' Likewise, the 1678 General Baptist confession called the *Orthodox Creed* appropriated three of the four Niceno-Constantinopolitan 'marks of the church', confessing in article 29 that 'there is one holy catholick church, consisting of, or made up of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered, in one body under Christ, the only head thereof', and in article 30, '[...] we believe the visible church of Christ on earth, is made up of several distinct congregations, which make up that one catholick church, or mystical body of Christ'.<sup>3</sup> But beyond this quantitative recognition of the universality of the church, I argued that catholicity also entails a

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<sup>2</sup> Steven R. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought, vol. 27 (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Particular Baptist *Second London Confession*, 1689, Article 26.1 (William Lumpkin, ed., *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, rev. edn (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2011), p. 283; General Baptist confession, *Orthodox Creed*, 1678, articles 29 and 30 (Lumpkin, pp. 327).

‘pattern of faith and practice that distinguished early catholic Christianity from Gnosticism, Arianism, Donatism, and all manner of other heresies and schisms’; it therefore refers also to ‘a *qualitative* fullness of faith and order’.<sup>4</sup>

The French Catholic theologian Yves Congar was arguably the most significant theological influence on the Second Vatican Council. His 1937 book *Divided Christendom* anticipated Vatican II’s ecumenical trajectory.<sup>5</sup> His later book *True and False Reform in the Church* has been credited with inspiring Pope John XXIII to convene a council that sought reform, and his posthumously published book *My Journal of the Council* is a most fascinating first-person account of what transpired publicly and behind the scenes at that council, revealing the extent to which Congar was deeply and influentially involved in what happened in the background.<sup>6</sup> In *Divided Christendom*, Congar had observed that in patristic theology quantitative catholicity — the affirmation of a universal church that includes all who belong to Christ — is usually associated with this qualitative dimension, a qualitative fullness of faith and order. Indeed, Congar insisted ‘there cannot be quantitative Catholicity without qualitative, this being the necessary cause of the former’.<sup>7</sup>

I have argued that this coinherence of quantitative and qualitative catholicity is implicit in the earliest use of the ancient Greek word *katholikē* as a descriptor of the church. In Ignatius of Antioch’s Letter to the Smyrneans he writes, ‘Wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church.’ It seems clear that a quantitative catholicity is one dimension of what Ignatius means by ‘catholic’, for his emphasis is on the Christological basis of the church’s universality. Yet this does not exclude a more narrow meaning that increasingly became associated with the later patristic use of the term ‘catholic’ to distinguish early

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<sup>4</sup> Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, p. 204.

<sup>5</sup> Yves Congar, *Chrétiens désunis: principes d’un ‘œcuménisme’ catholique*, Unum Sanctam, no. 1 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1937); English translation, *Divided Christendom: A Catholic Study of the Problem of Reunion*, trans. by M. A. Bousfield (London: Geoffrey Bles/Centenary Press, 1939).

<sup>6</sup> Yves Congar, *My Journal of the Council*, trans. by Mary John Ronayne and Mary Cecily Boulding, ed. by Denis Minns (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Congar, *Chrétiens désunis*, pp. 115–17; English trans., *Divided Christendom*, pp. 93–94.

catholic Christianity from heresy and schism.<sup>8</sup> One paragraph prior to the description of the church as ‘catholic’ in *Smyrneans* 8, Ignatius warns the church at Smyrna regarding the doctrine and practice of the Docetists, ‘They abstain from the eucharist and prayer, since they do not confess that the eucharist is the flesh of our saviour Jesus Christ, which suffered on behalf of our sins and which the Father raised in his kindness,’ and then Ignatius exhorts them to ‘flee divisions as the beginning of evils’.<sup>9</sup> It is significant that immediately prior to this section, Ignatius links the doctrinal errors of the Docetists, who lacked a truly embodied Christology, with their failures to embody the Christian way of life:

But take note of those who [are heterodox with reference to] the gracious gift of Jesus Christ that has come to us, and see how they are opposed to the mind of God. They have no interest in love, in the widow, the orphan, the oppressed, the one who is in chains or the one set free, the one who is hungry or the one who thirsts.<sup>10</sup>

For Ignatius, then, a qualitative catholicity is robustly incarnational. Because it is incarnational it is also sacramental, and because it is incarnational and sacramental it is also socially embodied and therefore concerned with social justice.<sup>11</sup>

Besides an incarnational Christology and sacramental realism, this qualitative catholicity for Ignatius included the visible unity of the church, summed up, as stated above, in his exhortation to ‘flee divisions as the beginning of evils’. It also included an embodied safeguard of unity in the ministry of episcopal oversight. In *Smyrneans* 8 Ignatius urges,

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<sup>8</sup> G. W. H. Lampe, ed., *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), s.v. ‘καθολικός’, A.2.b-c and A.3; Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), s.v. ‘catholicus’, II. For particular examples, see notes 29 and 30 below.

<sup>9</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *Smyrneans* 7.1–2 (*The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. and trans. by Bart D. Ehrman, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), vol 1, pp. 302–03).

<sup>10</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *Smyrneans* 6.2, (*The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. and trans. by Ehrman, vol. 1, p. 303 [modifications in brackets]).

<sup>11</sup> While a speculative suggestion, I wonder if it is not merely coincidental that these connections also manifested themselves in the nineteenth-century Oxford Movement in the Church of England: the recovery of an incarnational sacramentalism went hand-in-hand with the commitment of Anglo-Catholic priests to doing social ministry in the slums of inner-city England. See C. Brad Faught, *The Oxford Movement: A Thematic History of the Tractarians and Their Times* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), pp. 151–52.

All of you should follow the bishop as Jesus Christ follows the Father; and follow the [elders] as you would the apostles [...]. Let no one do anything involving the church without the bishop. Let that eucharist be considered valid that occurs under the bishop or the one to whom he entrusts it. Let the congregation be wherever the bishop is; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there also is the [catholic] church.<sup>12</sup>

The precise nature of the office of bishop in Ignatius is much disputed. On the one hand, there are indications of something approaching a monepiscopate; on the other hand, the bishop and the elders collegially share a ministry of oversight. Regardless of how one reads the role of the bishop in these letters, for Ignatius the episcopate serves to guard the church against various threats to catholic wholeness.

These four marks of qualitative catholicity — incarnational Christology, sacramental realism, visible unity, and the ministry of oversight — are by no means restricted to *Smyrneans* 6–8; they are interwoven with the anti-Docetic polemic that is a central theological concern of the Ignatian corpus. Whatever else may have been involved in Ignatius’s concept of the church as catholic, his understanding of catholicity in qualitative as well as quantitative terms coheres with later patristic uses of *katholikē*. By the fourth century Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius, and Epiphanius employed the adjective to denote the orthodoxy of the church’s faith,<sup>13</sup> and in his catechetical lectures Cyril of Jerusalem offered an expanded definition of catholicity that is both quantitative and qualitative.<sup>14</sup> It is this sort of traditioned catholicity,

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<sup>12</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *Smyrneans* 8.1–2 (*The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. and trans. by Ehrman, vol. 1, p. 305 [modifications in brackets]).

<sup>13</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 7.30.16 (PG 20:716), in contrast to heterodoxy, and 10.6.1 (PG 20:892), in contrast to schism; Athanasius, *Adversus Arianos* 1.4 (PG 26:20); Epiphanius, *Panarion* 73.21 (PG 42:414).

<sup>14</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catecheses* 18.23 (PG 33:1047; English translation, *The Works of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem*, trans. by Leo P. McCauley and Anthony A. Stephenson, *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 64 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1970), vol. 2, p. 132). In the Latin West, the same fuller sense of catholicity is reflected in the hymn on the passion of Hippolytus of Rome by the poet Prudentius (d. after 405) in the *Peristephanon* 11.23–32: ‘Nor is it strange that the aged man who once was an apostate / Should be endowed with the rich boon of the Catholic faith. / When, triumphant and joyful in spirit, he was being conducted / By the unmerciful foe onward to death of the flesh, / He was attended by loving throngs of his faithful adherents. / Thus he replied when they asked whether his doctrine was sound: / “Leave, O unhappy souls, the infernal schism of Novatus; / Rally again to the true fold of the Catholic Church. / Let the one faith of ancient times in our temples now flourish, / Doctrines by Paul

qualitative as well as quantitative, that I commended in *Towards Baptist Catholicity*.

## **Baptist Catholicity as Ecumenical Pilgrimage**

But where is the church that is qualitatively catholic? Where is qualitative catholicity exemplified, so that a community that perceives its own catholic deficiencies might emulate it? In the primitive church? In the early church in its patristic maturation? In a church of historical continuity in which the catholic church subsists? These are questions I addressed in my most recent book, *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future*, which is something of a sequel to *Towards Baptist Catholicity*.<sup>15</sup> The earlier book was about how Baptists can not only recognise and consider themselves part of the quantitatively catholic church, but also recognise in the larger Christian tradition that preceded them some of resources they need for the renewal of Baptist life toward a more qualitative catholicity. The recent book is about how Baptists and the whole church can become more qualitatively catholic together through Baptist participation in the modern ecumenical movement, which makes possible the mutual exchange of the ecclesial gifts dispersed throughout the whole church without which neither a particular church nor the whole church can become most fully catholic. Among the proposals I make in *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future* is this: that one of the distinctive ecclesial gifts that Baptists have to share with the rest of the church is the way they do theology as a relentlessly pilgrim community that resists all overly-realised eschatologies of the church.<sup>16</sup> Their ecclesial ideal is the church that is fully under the rule of Christ, which they locate somewhere ahead of them rather than in any past or present instantiation of the church. Baptists are relentlessly dissatisfied with the

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and the high chair of Peter maintained?." (PL 60:534-36; *Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina*, vol. 126, *Aurelii Prudentii Clementis Carmina*, ed. by Maurice P. Cunningham (Turnhout: Brepols, 1966), pp. 370-71; ET, *The Poems of Prudentius*, trans. by M. Clement Eagan, Fathers of the Church, vol. 43 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1962), pp. 242-43.)

<sup>15</sup> Steven R. Harmon, *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future: Story, Tradition, and the Recovery of Community* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Harmon, *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future*, pp. 224-42.

present state of the church in their pilgrim journey toward the community that will be fully under the reign of Christ.

I propose that we conceive of the catholicity of the church in terms of this pilgrim church vision. If catholicity is merely quantitative, this would be an unnecessary move, for the quantitatively catholic church is already the church that includes all who belong to Christ. But if catholicity is also qualitative, then it has an eschatological orientation that locates the earthly church on a pilgrim journey towards the full realisation of its catholicity.

The christocentricity of Ignatius of Antioch's concept of catholicity carries with it some possibilities for development in terms of this pilgrim church vision — which I should point out is by no means limited to Baptists. It is reflected in the early monastic communities and later religious orders. Avery Dulles observed that Augustine's characterisation of the earthly church as a 'society of pilgrims'<sup>17</sup> was representative of patristic as well as medieval thought in its distinction between an imperfect earthly church and a perfected heavenly church towards which the church journeys as a pilgrim community.<sup>18</sup> Thus Martin Luther had precedent in the tradition when he advocated in his preface to the 1526 'German Mass and Order of Service' a form of covenanted ecclesial community that would embrace a pilgrim vision of the church as its organising principle (though it was never realised in practice).<sup>19</sup>

The pilgrim church vision belongs not only to free church communities with roots in the Radical Reformation, but also to the Catholic Church. The Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* gives attention to 'The Eschatological Nature of the Pilgrim Church and Her Union with the Heavenly Church', the title of one of its chapters. *Lumen Gentium* insists that the church 'will receive its

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<sup>17</sup> Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 29.17.

<sup>18</sup> Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, expanded edn (New York: Doubleday, 1987), pp. 104–5 and 111. Significantly, Dulles treats patristic, medieval, and modern variants of the pilgrim church vision in a chapter on 'The Church and Eschatology' (pp. 103–22).

<sup>19</sup> Martin Luther, 'German Mass and Order of Service', in *Luther's Works*, vol. 53, *Hymns and Liturgy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), pp. 61–90 (pp. 63–64).

perfection only in the glory of heaven'.<sup>20</sup> But until then, 'the pilgrim church, in its sacraments and institutions, which belong to this present age, carries the mark of this world which will pass, and she herself takes her place among the creatures which groan and travail yet and await the revelation of the children of God'.<sup>21</sup> *Lumen Gentium* invokes the pilgrim image explicitly six times. One instance is especially germane to my constructive proposals to follow: 'On earth, still as pilgrims in a strange land, following in trial and in oppression the paths [Christ] trod, we are associated with his sufferings as the body with its head, suffering with him, that with him we may be glorified.'<sup>22</sup> Yves Congar published an essay entitled 'Moving Towards a Pilgrim Church', reflecting on the ecclesiological developments of Vatican II, in which he wrote the following: 'This reborn Church is not the only form that a Pilgrim Church can take [...]. That pilgrim way has been open in principle since the Son of God became man and sent us, from the Father, the Spirit who makes us proclaim God's glory in every human language.'<sup>23</sup>

As both a gift that the Baptist tradition may offer to the rest of the church and a perspective that is ecumenically shared, this pilgrim vision can suggest a constructive ecclesiology that relates the mark of catholicity to the church's pilgrim character. I propose as a somewhat unusual entrée to a pilgrim church ecclesiology the Christology of the late Baptist theologian James Wm McClendon, Jr. It is unusual partly because of its stance toward what many might regard as a doctrine essential to qualitative catholicity, and yet that stance also exemplifies the pilgrim church theological orientation in its Baptist expression.

In *Doctrine*, the second volume of McClendon's three-volume systematic theology, he surveys three rival Christological models — the pre-Nicene Logos model, the two-natures model of the trajectory from

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<sup>20</sup> Second Vatican Council, 'Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 21 November 1964', § 48, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. by Austin Flannery, rev. edn (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1992), p. 407.

<sup>21</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, § 48 (*Vatican Council II*, ed. Flannery, p. 408).

<sup>22</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, § 7 (*Vatican Council II*, ed. Flannery, p. 356).

<sup>23</sup> Yves Congar, 'Moving Towards a Pilgrim Church', trans. by David Smith, in *Vatican II Revisited: By Those Who Were There*, ed. by Alberic Stacpoole (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1986), pp. 129–52 (p. 148). These developments were also treated at length by Catholic ecumenist George H. Tavard in his book *The Pilgrim Church* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967).

Nicaea through Chalcedon, and the historical model influenced by the modern quest for the historical Jesus — to which he addresses three ‘persistent questions’ intended to probe their adequacy: first, ‘what right has Jesus Christ to absolute Lordship — the Lordship that Scripture assigns to God alone?’; second, ‘How can monotheists [...] tell the Jesus story as their own?’; and third, ‘how Christ-like [...] are disciples’ lives to be?’ McClendon finds the culmination of the two-natures trajectory in the Chalcedonian definition deficient especially in regard to the third question, asking whether that Jesus provides a paradigm for discipleship that disciples can really put into practice. Later he concludes, ‘Two-natures Christology has had its day, and we need not return to it save as a monument to what has gone before. All honor to Athanasius and Basil and Leontius, but they did not write Scripture, and it is to Scripture that we must return in fashioning our convictions.’<sup>24</sup>

Seemingly as a replacement for two-natures Christology, McClendon proposes a ‘two-narrative Christology’.<sup>25</sup> In this account, one’s identity is located not in one’s classification according to abstract categories of ‘natures’, but rather in one’s story. A person’s story in its totality and particularity is the thickest possible description one can offer of a person’s identity. For Christ, this narrative identity is both twofold and singular. We might summarise McClendon’s proposal like this: *The story of Christ fully encompasses and discloses the story of the Triune God, which is God’s identity. At the same time the story of Christ fully encompasses and discloses the story of humanity, which is our identity. Yet these two distinguishable stories, these two identities, are in Jesus Christ one indivisible narrative identity.* That was my characterisation of what McClendon proposes; here is McClendon’s summary of his proposal in his own words:

Therefore we have these two stories, of divine self-expense and human investment, of God reaching to people even before people reach to God, of a God who gives in order to be able to receive, and a humanity that receives so that it shall be able to give. Together, they constitute the biblical story in its fullness. *And now the capstone word is this: these two stories are at last indivisible one.* We can separate them for analysis, but we cannot divide them; there is

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<sup>24</sup> McClendon, *Doctrine*, p. 276.

<sup>25</sup> McClendon, *Doctrine*, pp. 263–79.

but one story there to be told. Finally, this story becomes gospel, becomes good news, when we discover that it is our own. (emphasis original)<sup>26</sup>

Notwithstanding McClendon's declaration that 'two-natures Christology has had its day, and we need not return to it', I see his two-narrative alternative not as a replacement for Chalcedon but as an extension and enrichment of its strengths, teased out by re-reading the Council's insights in light of a new set of questions and categories that belong to a context other than the Hellenism of late antiquity. McClendon's qualifications correspond to those of the Chalcedonian Definition: the two narrative identities may be separated for analysis ('without confusion'), but they cannot be divided ('without division or separation'). It is true that 'to the objection that all this talk of twoness and oneness in narrative does not correspond very well to classic two-nature-in-one-being Christology', McClendon himself replied, 'it does not'. Yet there is good ecumenical precedent for considering them compatible. The Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio* allowed that differing doctrinal formulations, including the relation of Chalcedonian Christology to the Christologies of the non-Chalcedonian churches of the East, may be 'mutually complementary rather than conflicting'.<sup>27</sup> John Paul II's encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* likewise posited the essential unity of 'different ways of looking at the same reality', exemplified by the common declarations on Christology signed by Catholic popes and patriarchs of non-Chalcedonian churches.<sup>28</sup> The progress made in bilateral dialogues between the non-Chalcedonian churches of the East and Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches shows what a pilgrim church stance toward the theological formulations of one's own communion can make possible ecumenically, in addition to opening up the possibility that McClendon's non-Chalcedonian Christology could escape anathema as well.

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<sup>26</sup> McClendon, *Doctrine*, pp. 276–77.

<sup>27</sup> Second Vatican Council, 'Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 21 November 1964', § 17, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. by Norman P. Tanner, vol. 2, *Trent to Vatican II* (London: Sheed & Ward; Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), p. 917. In context, the reference to 'mutually complementary rather than conflicting' theological formulations has in mind ecumenical relations with the Eastern Orthodox churches.

<sup>28</sup> John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, encyclical on Commitment to Ecumenism, Vatican website, 25 May 1995, § 38, <[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25051995\\_ut-unum-sint\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint_en.html)> [accessed 21 November 2021].

While McClendon's willingness to revisit and revise the outcome of the Council of Chalcedon does exemplify the pilgrim approach to doing theology that I have identified as one of the Baptist tradition's ecclesial gifts, that is not the primary reason I introduced his novel Christological proposal. In the course of elaborating his two-narrative proposal, McClendon drops but does not develop the tantalising hint that features of his Christology may be extended ecclesiologically. He writes, '*In resurrection light*, apostolic Christianity can be construed as the continuation of the Jesus story already begun.'<sup>29</sup> In *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future*, I suggest that this narrative approach to Christology has unexplored implications for a Christological approach to ecclesiology that may help us re-envision the whole church as a community on pilgrimage to the ecumenical future as the body of Christ that embodies the story of Jesus in catholic fullness.

The New Testament offers a Christological approach to a pilgrim ecclesiology, epitomised by Ephesians 4:15: 'We must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.' A Christological ecclesiology rooted in a narrative Christology in which the church continues the story of Jesus, growing toward Christ its head, has implications for the church's pilgrim journey toward full realisation of its catholicity. In one of the chapters of *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future* I proposed the following seven theses regarding what it might mean for the church to embody the story of Jesus as a pilgrim people.<sup>30</sup>

*First thesis: The church's identity is the identity of Christ*

If the church is identified with the whole Christ as the body of Christ, the church's identity can be nothing other than Christ's identity. The divided church is a church separated from the fullness of its common identity in Christ. Its pilgrim journey to its catholic future progressively recovers this identity.

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<sup>29</sup> McClendon, *Doctrine*, p. 272 (emphasis original).

<sup>30</sup> While this article does not interact with his proposals, George Lindbeck has offered a narrative account of ecclesiology in his essay 'The Story-Shaped Church: Critical Exegesis and Theological Interpretation', in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, ed. by Garrett Green (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), pp. 161–78.

*Second thesis: The church's identity is the identity of Christ, which is the story of Christ*

If Christ's identity is most fully described in terms of his story, and the church derives its identity from Christ, then unless head and body are severed, Christ's story is the church's story, and thus its identity. The divided church is a church that has lost its unifying story. Its pilgrim journey to the catholic future entails a recovery of Christ's story as its own — as the narrative world in and out of which it lives, in light of which it understands the world to which it bears witness.

*Third thesis: The church's identity is the identity of Christ, which is the story of Christ, which is the story of our baptism*

It is in baptism that Christ's identity becomes the church's identity, and it is baptism that discloses this identity as the story of Christ. According to Romans 6:3–11, in baptism the story of Jesus's death and resurrection becomes our story (Rom 6:3–11), making us participants in a new story in which characters have new roles: because we have taken on Christ's story in baptism, 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus,' as Paul insists in Galatians 3:27–28. The origin of the ancient rule of faith in baptismal confession underscores baptism's conferral of narrative identity. The baptismal creeds rehearse in brief the story of Christ told in full by the Bible. In baptism we embrace this narrative identity as ours, and it embraces us. The divided church is a church that has not fully recognised this baptismal identity as one baptism into the one body of Christ. Its pilgrim journey to the catholic future must involve mutual recognition of one another's baptisms, for not to recognise a person's baptism 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' is to deny Christ and his story as that person's identity.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Two documents offered to the churches as the fruit of decades of multilateral dialogue through the World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order have proposed possible pathways to convergence in mutual baptismal recognition: World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982); World Council of Churches, *One Baptism: Toward Mutual Recognition. A Study Text*, Faith and Order Paper No. 210 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2011). For a Baptist perspective on the proposals of the latter document, see Steven R. Harmon, "'One Baptism':

*Fourth thesis: The church's identity is the identity of Christ, which is the story of Christ, which is the story of the Triune God*

The divine story that is the story of Christ is not the story of generic, abstract divinity, but the inescapably triadic story of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who has taken on flesh in Jesus Christ and given God's Spirit to the church in Pentecost. The story of the Triune God is the story that we embrace and that embraces us in our tripartite baptismal confession. Yet there is a proper distinction between the story of the creator and the story of the creature.<sup>32</sup> For the church as God's creature, Christ is the key to this distinction. As the one in whom 'all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell' according to Colossians 1:19, Christ's story is directly the story of the Triune God. As the body that has Christ as head according to the preceding verse in Colossians, the church's story is derivatively the story of the Triune God. By virtue of our *koinonia*, our participation, in Christ as Christ's body, we have a participation in the life of the Triune God that gives the church its Trinitarian identity. The divided church has an attenuated Trinitarian identity because it is bodily diminished in relationship to its head. Its pilgrim journey to the catholic future requires taking up ecclesial practices that draw us into deeper participation in the life of the Triune God. As we participate more fully in the life of the Triune God, the mutuality of the Triune God's oneness-in-distinct-otherness becomes more fully manifest in our ecclesial life. A catholicity that is both quantitative and qualitative is among the fruit it yields.

*Fifth thesis: The church's identity is the identity of Christ, which is the story of Christ, which is the story of our humanity*

Here the emphasis is on *our* humanity. McClendon's insistence that the story of Christ fully encompasses and discloses the story of humanity means that in Christ's humanity is the story of humanity as it ought to be — seen in the New Testament emphasis on the sinlessness of Jesus, or positively expressed as his 'full faithfulness'<sup>33</sup> — as well as the story of humanity in opposition to God's intentions for human life. In regard

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A Study Text for Baptists?, *Baptist World: A Magazine of the Baptist World Alliance* 58, no. 1, January/March 2011, pp. 9–10.

<sup>32</sup> A distinction McClendon makes in *Doctrine*, p. 275.

<sup>33</sup> McClendon, *Doctrine*, p. 273.

to the latter, McClendon seems to suggest that the humanity which Jesus embraces is not unfallen humanity but our humanity inclined toward sin — an inclination that Jesus shared in his solidarity with our human condition but which Jesus faithfully resisted at every stage in his human moral development.<sup>34</sup> When Christ's story as the story of our humanity becomes the church's story, it is in this twofold sense. It discloses the church as it ought to be — the spotless bride of Christ, the church that is fully qualitatively catholic. But it also exposes the church's distance from that in its existence in the eschatological tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet'. The church is a pilgrim community because of its earthly distance from its not-yet-realised goal — a distance that includes what Catholic theologian Karl Rahner named as ecclesial sin.<sup>35</sup> Certainly the church's divisions and refusals to overcome them are among these ecclesial sins. The pilgrim church, whose narrative identity is that of Christ, shares especially in the story of our sin-inclined humanity that Jesus's story encompasses. The church's pilgrim journey to the catholic future therefore involves owning its temporal identity as a penitential community, called to repentance for sins of division and its perpetuation.<sup>36</sup>

*Sixth thesis: The church's identity is the identity of Christ, which is the story of Christ, which is the story of all the members of Christ's body*

The way to the catholic future entails the recovery of the common narrative-Christological identity the church receives in baptism, but that

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<sup>34</sup> McClendon, *Doctrine*, pp. 262 and 273. Karl Barth, whose anticipations of a narrative Christology McClendon applauded, had also insisted that it is this sort of sinful humanity that Christ assumed in *Church Dogmatics*, I.2, trans. by G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), pp. 151–55.

<sup>35</sup> Karl Rahner, 'The Sinful Church in the Decrees of Vatican II', in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, *Concerning Vatican Council II*, trans. by Karl-H. Kruger and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1969), pp. 270–94. See also Rahner, 'The Church of Sinners', in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, pp. 253–69; these two essays, along with a chapter on 'The Church and the Parousia of Christ' (*Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, pp. 295–312), belong to a section of this volume of the *Theological Investigations* entitled 'The Pilgrim Church'. In this connection, it is significant that in the essay 'Justified and Sinner at the Same Time', placed two chapters prior to this section (*Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, pp. 218–30), Rahner offers a qualified Catholic affirmation of Luther's formula in the sense that the person who is justified 'remains a pilgrim', who in this pilgrim state is properly regarded as *simil justus et peccator* (pp. 229–30).

<sup>36</sup> This point is forcefully argued by Ephraim Radner, *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998).

does not require the relinquishing of the stories of our divided communities in their historic and ongoing journeys. While our denominational stories are in part stories of ecclesial sin, they also serve as bearers of the distinctive ecclesial gifts that are distributed throughout the divided church and that no one church completely possesses. The story of Christ includes such particular stories, for Christ is present in them. And if these stories belong to the story of Christ, they are our stories, too. The church's pilgrim journey to the ecumenical future involves the sharing of the particular stories that belong to the story of the whole church — as acts of confession, repentance, and reconciliation, and as acts of receptive ecumenism that receive as gifts from one another the missing pieces of our qualitative catholic wholeness.

*Seventh thesis: The church's identity is the identity of Christ, which is the story of Christ, which is the story of the eschatological community*

Story is inherently eschatological; a story goes somewhere. A story has a plot, driven by conflict and resolution. Jesus himself discloses a dimension of the conclusion to the church's story in John 17 when he prays for the visible unity of those who follow him. The story's plot is driven in part by the conflict of division, introduced already in the New Testament chapter of the story. The church's pilgrim journey to the catholic future takes place in the tension between the present conflict of division and the future resolution of visible unity that includes qualitative as well as quantitative wholeness. But because the church knows the story's conclusion, the church undertakes this journey in hope, no matter how dismal the present prospects may seem. Our confession that we believe in the 'catholic' church is both an acknowledgement of our present distance from that goal and a prayer that it be realised on earth, as it will be in heaven.

### **Baptist Catholicity, Ecumenical Pilgrimage, and the Pursuit of Justice**

Baptist catholicity as pilgrim catholicity is thus not a call for Baptists to come 'home to Rome' and be received into the Roman Catholic Church, though it seeks the visible unity of a church fully under the rule of Christ

with oneness as its mark. It is not a summons to imitate the Roman Catholic Church in particular, though in the mutually receptive exchange of ecclesial gifts we may discover gifts of Roman Catholic faith and practice that we can in good conscience receive into our own Baptist patterns of faith and practice in ways that help us become more faithful communities of followers of Jesus Christ.<sup>37</sup> Nor is it a set of doctrines and practices that automatically make a Baptist community which takes them up more faithful. McClendon rightly insisted that the powerful practices that have the capacity to form the faithful may also fail to do so, and they are always in need of conversion.<sup>38</sup>

For Ignatius of Antioch, qualitative catholicity was inseparable from practices of seeking social justice, but not all who have affirmed orthodox doctrines of the incarnation have sought justice for people on the margins of society. When Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously declared that ‘only those who cry out for the Jews may sing Gregorian chants’, he had in mind the ‘Berneuchener Movement’ in mid-twentieth century German Lutheranism that advocated the retrieval of liturgical catholicity but seemed indifferent to the injustices of the day.<sup>39</sup> The report from Phase II of the international Baptist-Catholic ecumenical conversations emphasised the need for catholicity in biblical interpretation — that is, reading the Bible in community, in community with the local church and in community with the church in its catholicity — but it also insisted that catholicity in the reading of scripture cannot be separated from the proper Christian conduct of the community that reads scripture together with the whole church.<sup>40</sup> Much of American Christianity in my

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<sup>37</sup> I develop this assertion more fully in Steven R. Harmon, ‘How Baptists Receive the Gifts of Catholics and Other Christians’, *Ecumenical Trends* 39, no. 6 (June 2010), pp. 1/81–5/85.

<sup>38</sup> McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 222; idem, *Doctrine*, p. 28.

<sup>39</sup> Recollection of Hellmut Traub in *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reminiscences by His Friends*, ed. by Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann and Ronald Gregor Smith, trans. by Käthe Gregor Smith (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 156, quoted in Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, trans. by Eric Mosbacher, rev. edn (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 441.

<sup>40</sup> Baptist World Alliance and Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, ‘The Word of God in the Life of the Church: A Report of International Conversations between the Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance 2006-2010’, published in *American Baptist Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2012): pp. 28–122 and in *Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity Information Service* 142 (2013), pp. 20–65; also published online by the PCPCU <<http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/alleanza-battista-mondiale/dialogo-internazionale-tra-la-chiesa-cattolica-e-l-alleanza-batt/>

own context, including many Baptists, has failed in this regard, as evidenced by the widespread and well-known support of evangelical Christians in the United States for the 2016 and 2021 presidential candidacies of Donald Trump, and for policies proposed and enacted by his presidential administration that are contrary to the way taught and modelled by Jesus Christ.<sup>41</sup>

All of this is to say that Baptist catholicity as a pilgrim catholicity must resist the temptation to look for its orientation to idealised and distorted visions of a Christian past that never really was what we might idealise it to be. I conclude by paraphrasing Bonhoeffer very loosely: ‘Only those Baptists who cry out for the immigrant and the refugee may claim catholicity in faith and practice.’ Baptist catholicity matters in no small measure because it can help us make progress in the pilgrim journey towards a church whose inclusive catholic wholeness includes justice for all.

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documenti-di-dialogo/testo-del-documento-in-inglese.html> [accessed 21 November 2021] (§§ 51–53).

<sup>41</sup> On the support of American evangelicals, in particular white evangelicals, for Trump during the 2016 election and subsequent approval of his job as president, see Gregory A. Smith, ‘Among white evangelicals, regular churchgoers are the most supportive of Trump’, *Pew Research Center Fact Tank: News in the Numbers* (April 26, 2017), <<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/26/among-white-evangelicals-regular-churchgoers-are-the-most-supportive-of-trump/>> [accessed 21 November 2021]. Initial analysis of exit polling data from the 2020 election revealed similar patterns: see Frank Newport, ‘Religious Group Voting and the 2020 Election’, *Gallup News* (November, 2020), <<https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/324410/religious-group-voting-2020-election.aspx>> [accessed 21 November 2020].